

A Rights Perspective on Parent Advocacy for their  
Transgender Children in Aotearoa New Zealand  
School Settings

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore parent advocacy for their transgender children in New Zealand Aotearoa secondary schools and to determine if any changes had taken place as a result of this advocacy. A rights perspective was brought to the research based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) (1989). Literature examining the experiences of transgender children in schools, parent advocacy in schools for their transgender children, and an overview of children's rights related to the issues of education and transgender children was used to inform the research.

A case study design was employed in this research study with five participants partaking part in an online focus group. In addition, two of the five participants took part in an online semi-structured interview. Participants were parents recruited from a parent support Facebook page and had advocated for their transgender children in secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

This study found that parents advocated for their transgender children in middle and secondary schools in New Zealand. The findings show that this advocacy is similar to that undertaken by parents in other international contexts. The participants perceived that some schools were under-prepared for transgender students and did not have appropriate bathroom facilities in place or processes to facilitate changes, such as names and pronouns on their systems; that teachers were sometimes unsupportive and misgendered their children; that establishing relationships was important to facilitate their child's social transition; and that bullying, such as misgendering and harassment, was evident. Some of the outcomes observed in schools, such as new gender neutral toilets and including pronouns on school rolls, were thought, by parents, to be related to parent advocacy. Some of these changes appeared to be accommodating for the individual child rather than involving systemic change, such as special passes for bathrooms. A rights perspective suggests that the parents' advocacy in the study was consistent with a children's rights approach. The issues, that prompted their advocacy, were found to be violations of children's rights as enshrined in UNCROC, suggesting that some schools are not upholding their obligations under UNCROC or the Human Rights Act 1993.

This dissertation contributes to the literature on parents' advocacy for their transgender children in New Zealand Aotearoa school settings. The study highlights the potential of parent advocacy using a children's rights approach to bring about change in schools for all transgender children, but also highlights the existing cisnormative environments of schools in Aotearoa New Zealand and the work that is needed to ensure schools understand and enact their obligations under UNCROC.

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## **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: Janette Howe

Date: 9 October 2022



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## Chapter One: Introduction

When we're growing up there are all sorts of people telling us what to do when really what we need is space to work out who to be.

– Elliot Page (Transgender Actor, *The Umbrella Academy*) (Our Mindful Life, 2022)

Transgender<sup>1</sup> children are increasingly visible and accepted in our society, epitomised by the transgender actor Elliot Page's onscreen character Vanya transitioning to Viktor in the *Umbrella Academy* Netflix series. However, transgender children still face considerable challenges in a world that is geared to the gender binary. The experience of transgender children in education is often framed by media stories coming from the USA around state policies such as the signing of a “bathroom bill” in Oklahoma, which requires students in public schools to use the bathroom which aligns with the sex on their birth certificate (Associated Press, 2022).

Such policy changes in the USA are alarming when viewed as the parent of a transgender teen, even from the distance of Aotearoa New Zealand (used interchangeably with New Zealand). Only recently has legislation to ban conversion therapy been adopted in New Zealand with the Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022, incorporated in the Human Rights Act 1993 in Section 63A. At this point in time, the Human Rights Act 1993 does not include gender identity as a specific category for protection against discrimination. Nonetheless, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) “has interpreted the Act to include gender identity since at least 2005” (Human Rights Commission [HRC], 2020).

My own child disclosing their gender identity and the courage it took for them to turn up to school in their uniform of choice has shaped me in a way that will be familiar to other affirming parents on this journey. My child was consulted before undertaking the research and the findings will be shared with them. The international media headlines raise the possibility that my child's safety, and that of other transgender students in this country, is not guaranteed and that the tide of public opinion and political support could turn against them. As someone who affirms their child's gender identity, I am conducting this research to build on the knowledge and understanding of parents of transgender children, schools and the wider community of the role of parent advocacy in addressing issues experienced by their transgender children. In doing so, I acknowledge my privilege as a Pākehā

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<sup>1</sup> “Transgender” is used here as an umbrella term for “gender diverse” young people including non-binary, gender queer, intersex, takātapui and other diverse cultural gender identities (Kerekere, 2017).

woman with the resources to advocate for my child and to articulate my advocacy through a dissertation. I acknowledge that not all affirming parents begin from the same position regarding their knowledge or understanding, and that not all parents affirm their transgender child. I also acknowledge my understanding of gender diversity is limited by my perspective as a cisgender woman.

## **Context**

The experience of transgender students in schools is increasingly being studied as distinct from the wider rainbow<sup>2</sup> school community. Secondary schools are chosen as a context because this is where I began my advocacy when my child socially transitioned, and as stated by Clark et al. (2014) “Adolescence is a time when a number of young people are making sense of their gender” (p. 97). Studies in New Zealand revealing transgender student experiences in schools have also focused on high school environments (Clark et al., 2014, Fenaughty et. al., 2021).

The role of parents in facilitating their social transition in schools is also a growing area of research. Some parents who take an affirming parenting approach to their gender diverse child have been found to embark on their own journey of discovery about gender diversity, which often starts when their child comes out (Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015). De Bres (2022) traces the literature from a range of disciplines researching parents of gender-diverse children and found a shift from a “pathologizing” approach to gender diversity to an affirming one that “relocates the problem from gender-diverse children themselves to the society surrounding them” (de Bres, 2022, p. 1).

Large-scale surveys and studies in different countries have revealed the harm that transgender students face in school environments and the adverse impact on their mental health and wellbeing (Clark et al., 2014; Fenaughty et al., 2021; Greytak et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2012, 2016, 2020).

Studies are beginning to explore how some parents help their child negotiate their gender transition with family, friends and in environments such as schools (Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017; Leonardi et al., 2021; Schlehofer et al., 2021). It should be noted that not all parents affirm their child’s gender identity (de Bres, 2022). Affirming my child has been my own journey as the parent of a transgender teen. As I supported their social transition, advocacy quickly followed around issues such as access to support groups, participation in sports and misgendering by teachers. As the member of a peer

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<sup>2</sup> “An umbrella term, like LGBTQIA+, describing people of diverse sexualities, genders, and variations of sex characteristics” (InsideOUT, 2020, glossary)

support Facebook page for parents of transgender children, and based on my own experience, it became apparent that other affirming parents, like myself, are advocating for their transgender children in schools in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The experience of parents who advocate for their transgender children and the outcomes they perceive in secondary schools as a result are explored in this research from a rights perspective, specifically, children's right to education as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) (1989). Recognition of the need to specifically address transgender children and their right to education is growing in human rights jurisprudence such as in the General Comments and Concluding Observations issued by the Committee on the Rights of the Child ("the CRC Committee") (Sandberg, 2015). UNCROC is considered a "strong instrument" due to its wide uptake globally and with States assessed on their progress in upholding the convention in reviews by the CRC Committee (Sandberg, 2015, p. 338).

Given the paradigm shift from pathologising to affirming transgender children, the next shift needs to happen in the cisnormative environments and systems transgender children experience. Children's rights as enshrined in UNCROC are therefore considered as a possible framework for strengthening parent advocacy for their transgender children in secondary schools.

### **Purpose of the Study**

As a parent of a transgender teen I have my own experience of advocating for my transgender teen in secondary school settings. As a member of a support group for parents on Facebook, it became evident that parents were open to sharing information about their activities advocating for their transgender children in schools.

The literature examined here mainly encompasses international research from the last 10 years (from 2012), as attitudes towards transgender children have changed from a pathologising approach to an affirming approach to gender diversity and as studies have increasingly focussed on transgender students' experience within the rainbow umbrella. International studies have emerged that focus on transgender students' unique experiences and have found that transgender children contend with high levels of discrimination and bullying in school environments (McBride, 2021). This adverse environment and transphobia-based violence is also reported by transgender students in New Zealand who report higher rates of bullying and feeling unsafe than their peers (Clark et al., 2014; Fenaughty et al., 2019, 2021; Human Rights Commission [HRC], 2020; Roy et al., 2021; Veale et al., 2019).

The research to date shows that institutional barriers in education for gender diverse students include school records that do not reflect their gender identity, a lack of access to gender-neutral uniforms and bathrooms, as well as challenging phys-ed (PE) and sports environments (Clark et al., 2014; HRC, 2008, 2020).

Studies are beginning to examine the role of some parents in advocating for their transgender children in settings such as schools. Recent small-scale international studies have considered the role of parents as advocates for their transgender children (Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017; Davy & Cordoba, 2020; Neary, 2021; Schlehofer et al., 2021). In schools, parents have been found to advocate on issues such as name changes, pronouns, uniforms and bathrooms in support of their child (Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017; Davy & Cordoba, 2020; Neary, 2021; Schlehofer et al., 2021). Parent advocacy can result in changes within schools (Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017; Neary, 2021). In the USA, Birnkrant and Przeworski (2017) found that “increased parent advocacy at school was associated with increased support from school personnel ...” (p. 148).

There are several limitations to the current literature. For example, most research to date on parent advocacy involves small interview-based or mixed methods studies in the northern hemisphere with mainly white, middle-class parents. To my knowledge, the studies concerning transgender children in New Zealand have not considered parent advocacy in schools. The purpose of this study is therefore to investigate parent advocacy in Aotearoa New Zealand within schools to understand the work that is being done by parents and the subsequent outcomes they perceive in schools. It is my understanding that previous international studies on parent advocacy in this context have not undertaken an explicit children’s rights-based perspective. A rights perspective is therefore brought to contribute to an understanding of whether parents are advancing their children’s rights in education settings in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## **Significance and Value**

The aim of this research is to contribute to awareness and the understanding of the role of parents who advocate for their transgender child in education and to explore whether changes are perceived as a result. It is acknowledged that not all parents are in a position to advocate or do not advocate for their transgender children. A rights perspective aims to determine whether an understanding of children’s rights as set out in UNCROC could strengthen parent advocacy.

Other parents of transgender children may benefit from insights gained from the research, including what advocacy is being undertaken and whether it can advance the rights of transgender children in

education. Some transgender children may benefit as issues within their education experience are highlighted and some parents become more knowledgeable as advocates.

Schools could gain an awareness and possible understanding of the advocacy work that some parents of transgender children undertake and implement changes to facilitate both the experience of all transgender students (including those without parent advocates) and the process of parent advocacy. The wider community (the parent community, policy makers) could gain an awareness and possible understanding of the advocacy work that some parents of gender diverse children undertake, the issues being faced by gender diverse children in schools, and what changes could be made.

The issues being faced by transgender children in schools may be better understood as children's rights issues, which schools have a responsibility to uphold. Schools may consider what changes need to be made to ensure that there is significant and lasting change that upholds those rights for all transgender children.

### ***Research Questions***

To explore the advocacy of parents for their transgender children in schools, two research questions were considered:

1. What is the experience of parents who advocate for their children in Aotearoa New Zealand schools?
2. What changes, if any, have resulted from parental advocacy for transgender children in secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand?

These questions are considered in the context of children's rights as provided in UNCROC.

To explore these research questions, a case study design was chosen as it is appropriate for an in-depth study examining a real life situation, in this case, advocacy by parents for their transgender children (Yin, 2009). A focus group was the research method chosen for collecting data. Advocating for a gender diverse child could bring up sensitive issues and a focus group has been found to enable people to be more open to sharing information when others are sharing similar experiences as well as potentially allowing for deeper insights to emerge (Liamputtong, 2020; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

## Key Terms

It is acknowledged that the terms used here to describe gender diversity are evolving. “As words can be contested between groups and individuals, there is no single correct way [to] describe such diversity” (HRC, 2020, p. 6).

In this dissertation, the term “transgender” is used as an umbrella term to encompass children and young people whose gender identity is different to the sex assigned at birth (Baum et al., 2013; Gender Minorities Aotearoa, 2020; InsideOUT, 2021). This definition includes young people who have transitioned male to female (MTF), or female to male (FTM) and those who identify as non-binary or other identities such as gender queer or gender fluid (McBride, 2021). However, it needs to be acknowledged that “not all non-binary or gender diverse people would describe themselves as transgender” (InsideOUT, 2021).

In an Aotearoa New Zealand context, transgender also encompasses takātapui and other diverse cultural gender identities (Kerekere, 2017). It is acknowledged that “transgender” as an umbrella term has limitations: “there are increasingly diverse understandings of gender that have been unrecognized by adults and the institutions serving these youth” (Baum et al., 2013).

“Gender diverse” is used as an umbrella term in this dissertation interchangeably with “transgender”. It is acknowledged that gender diverse as a term “especially relates to those whose gender identities are situated outside of the binary of men and women, but who may not use the term ‘transgender’ or ‘trans’ to describe themselves, although it can also encompass those who do” (InsideOUT, 2021). Some research uses the term “transgender and gender diverse (TGD)”.

LGBT refers to both sexuality and gender identities (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) and has been expanded to include queer, intersex and other identities (LGBTQI+). In this dissertation, acronyms will be used according to the studies referenced.

“Rainbow” is “an umbrella term, like LGBTQIA+, describing people of diverse sexualities, genders, and variations of sex characteristics” (InsideOUT, 2020, glossary)

SOGIESC – encompasses “people with a diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics” (HRC, 2020).

Gender identity “refers to each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical,



surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms” (HRC, 2020, p. 61).

“Coming out” is “The process through which a person discloses their gender, sexuality, or sex characteristics. Most people first come out to themselves before sharing this information with others. Coming out is a lifelong process for many rainbow people, rather than a one-off event.” (InsideOUT, 2021).

Social transition is a process undertaken by transgender people to “live in their gender which may include social, legal, or medical aspects. A social transition may include changing clothes, hair, pronouns, or name...” (HRC, 2020, p. 62). There is no one way to social transition (Gender Minorities Aotearoa, 2020).

Cisgender is someone whose sense of gender identity aligns “more or less” with their sex at birth (Gender Minorities Aotearoa, 2020).

Heteronormative refers to “a dominant mode of social organisation based on: a foundational division of boys/men from girls/women; and the institutionalisation of heterosexuality as natural and normal” (McBride & Schubotz, 2017, p. 293).

Cisnormative is an approach that upholds the position that gender is a binary and based on assigned sex at birth (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021).

“Children” or “child” refers to anyone under the age of 18 as defined by UNCROC (Art. 1).

Advocacy is defined here as any act by a parent in support of their child in school, including meetings, emails, phone calls.

## **Structure of the Dissertation**

This dissertation comprises five chapters as follows:

**Chapter 1:** This introductory chapter outlines the background and context of this research, the purpose of the study, the research questions, its significance and value and the key terms.

**Chapter 2:** This chapter comprises a literature review of three areas pertinent to the current study: transgender children’s experience within education (with a focus on secondary schools), parent advocacy for transgender children within schools, and transgender rights with a focus on children’s rights as enshrined in UNCROC.

**Chapter 3:** This methodology chapter presents the case study research design, the focus group method, the selection and recruitment of participants and data collection. The data analysis using reflexive thematic analysis is discussed.

**Chapter 4:** The findings are grouped into themes: becoming advocates; child involvement in parent advocacy; access to education; level of school support; the advocacy experience; outcomes; and understanding children's rights.

**Chapter 5:** The discussion considers the significant themes that emerged in the thematic analysis in answer to the research questions in terms of the experiences of parents and the outcomes they perceive from advocating for their transgender children. A children's rights perspective is used to consider parent advocacy and to examine the rights associated with the issues which prompt advocacy. Limitations of the research, further study and recommendations for changes based on the findings are discussed.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has given the context for the research, its purpose, significance and value, the research questions, key terms and the structure of the dissertation.

The following chapter considers the current literature and provides an overview of the three main concepts explored in the dissertation: transgender children's experience within education (with a focus on secondary schools), parent advocacy for transgender children in secondary schools, and transgender rights within the children's rights framework enshrined in UNCROC.

## **Chapter Two: Literature review**

This chapter reviews recent literature and provides an overview of the three main concepts being explored in the study: transgender children's experience within education (with a focus on secondary schools), parent advocacy for transgender children in secondary schools, and transgender rights within the children's rights framework enshrined in UNCROC. The review begins with literature which considers the experience of transgender children in secondary schools in different countries and also within New Zealand to provide background to the issues that might prompt parent advocacy. Studies which reveal the role that parents are playing in advocating for their children in these educational settings are then considered. The final section provides an overview of rights relating to transgender children and their access to education within the human rights framework, and, in particular, UNCROC.

### **Transgender Children and Secondary School Experiences**

The LGBTQI+ umbrella has been more closely examined in recent studies to reveal the particular experiences of transgender children, who must negotiate their gender identity and expression within a cisnormative world, as distinct from the experience of cisgender students. The findings from both large-scale surveys and in-depth qualitative studies have also begun to reveal the nuances and diversity within the experiences of transgender children in schools. The themes that emerged in the review of this literature on the school experiences for transgender children, and which are of particular relevance to this study, encompassed the harm experienced by transgender students in school environments, mental health outcomes, school environments, protective factors, education outcomes, and intersectionality, as discussed in turn below.

#### ***Experiencing Harm***

In recent years, considerable evidence has brought to light the adverse experiences of transgender children in school environments. In a ground-breaking US report, Greytak et al. (2009) specifically studied transgender students with a view to understanding their particular experience in schools. The findings showed a "hostile school environment" for transgender students, encompassing higher levels of victimisation (such as physical harassment or assault) than for their cisgender LGB peers, worse educational outcomes, and lower levels of school belonging (Greytak et al., 2009, p. xiii). These findings have been supported by subsequent US National School Climate Surveys of LGBT students which analyse transgender and gender queer and/or non-binary students' experiences in the data to reveal higher levels of victimisation and lack of safety compared to cisgender LGB students (Kosciw et

al., 2014, 2016, 2020). In a representative sample (generalisable to a larger population) of high school students from California, USA, Day et al. (2018) concluded that compared to non-transgender youth, “transgender youth had over two times greater odds of experiencing sexual orientation and gender-based bullying” (p. 1739).

Studies outside the USA also reveal that higher rates of bullying and other abuses are experienced by transgender youth compared to non-transgender students in schools (Jones et al., 2016; McBride & Schubotz, 2017). In their international literature review, McBride (2021) concluded that the harassment of transgender youth makes “secondary school life unbearable and unlivable for many trans youth” (p. 116).

It is now established from a number of studies and surveys that transgender students experience considerable harm in New Zealand school settings compared to their cisgender peers as found internationally. In a large-scale survey of the health and wellbeing of transgender and non-binary people in New Zealand (*Counting Ourselves*), over a third of transgender and non-binary secondary school students reported discrimination in school environments (Veale et al., 2019, p. 62). In their influential study based on data from the national *Youth’12* survey, Clark et al. (2014) analysed the experience of transgender youth (14–19 years) in high schools in New Zealand and highlighted that incidents of bullying, being afraid of harm and being physically hurt were higher for those students who identified as transgender compared to non-transgender youth at school. Over half of students in *Counting Ourselves* who had been bullied attributed it to their gender identity or gender expression (Veale et al., 2019, p. 62). Bullying, assault and feeling marginalised were also reported by participants attending a boys’ faith-based high school in a small, qualitative study of fa’afāfine (Samoan), and fakaleiti (Tongan) students who were assigned male at birth but expressed feminine gender identities (Howell & Allen, 2020).

The preliminary findings from the *Youth19* survey in New Zealand show that, while the majority of transgender and diverse gender students felt connected to their school, nearly a quarter (23%) reported incidents of being bullied weekly or more often during the past year compared to 5% reported by cisgender students (Fenaughty et al., 2021).

The findings of studies in a specific location cannot always be considered applicable to other environments. The influence of “colonial histories, political discourses, legal provisions and policy frameworks in a given national context” on the experience of trans and gender diverse youth in schools is evident across studies (McBride, 2021, p. 119). This is reflected in the few studies that have considered the transgender student experience in Aotearoa New Zealand. In an ethnographic study in a New Zealand secondary school, for Pasifika students who attended a queer support group

“ethnicity and culture were as important as being trans” (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 250). Kerekere (2017) explored takatāpui wellbeing and identity and found “that takatāpui identity is predicated on Māori identity with a spiritual connection to takatāpui tūpuna (ancestors) that is crucial in addressing the discrimination they may face within their whānau and culture” (p. 5).

Emerging studies show that students with different gender identities have different school experiences. A recent study analysed the experiences of students with different gender identities in UK schools and reported that students with non-binary identities faced more discrimination than those identifying as “binary-trans” (Bower-Brown et al., 2021, p. 15). In a Spanish study comparing cisgender, transgender and non-binary young people, transgender and non-binary students experienced a similar level of verbal attacks in school but this was nearly double that of their cisgender peers (Aparicio-García et al., 2018). While transgender students reported higher levels of physical violence, cyber-bullying was higher for non-binary participants, suggesting that the experience of students with different gender identities needs to be examined (Aparicio-García et al., 2018). McBride (2021) concludes: “Gender identity, beyond the distinction of trans/cis, was found to be an important factor shaping trans youth’s educational experiences” (p. 117).

### ***Mental Health Outcomes***

The high level of harm experienced by transgender students in school environments has been shown to undermine their mental health and wellbeing. Studies, including in Aotearoa New Zealand, have demonstrated that gender diverse youth in school report poor wellbeing or adverse mental health outcomes, such as self-harm or suicidality at alarming levels (Eisenberg et al., 2017; Fenaughty et al., 2021; Jones & Hillier, 2013; Veale et al., 2017). These poor outcomes have been attributed to the distress caused by ongoing harms experienced by sexuality and gender diverse students, known as the “minority stress model” (Meyer, 2003, as cited in Fenaughty et al., 2019, pp. 1883–1884). In the *Youth19* brief findings, the mental health outcomes reveal that 56.6% of transgender youth reported depressive symptoms compared to 22.6% of cisgender students, with similar results for self-harm; and over a quarter (26.4%) of transgender students reported a suicide attempt compared to 5.9% of cisgender students (Fenaughty et al., 2021). These stark findings confirm that the level of harm experienced by transgender students internationally is also prevalent in New Zealand school settings.

Roy et al. (2021) considered intersectional identity groups in New Zealand based on the *Youth19* survey and found that rainbow rangatahi Māori reported poorer mental health than students who were Māori and not rainbow, and that rainbow youth with a disability faced “very much poorer

mental health” than other groups (rainbow young people with no disability or chronic condition or non-Rainbow young people with a disability or chronic condition) (p. 7).

The link between harm and wellbeing was explored in an Australian study which found that 27.2% of “trans-spectrum” youth reported attempting suicide due to transphobia or homophobia (Jones & Hillier, 2013, p. 299). In another Australian study, most of the transgender or gender diverse participants who suffered physical abuse (90%), including in school, reported suicidal thoughts (Jones et al., 2016, p. 165). In a UK study, reported mental health or self-harm differed based on the sex assigned at birth (SAAB) for both binary and non-binary participants, highlighting the need to investigate issues for different gender identities and their SAAB (Rimes et al., 2019).

### ***School Environments***

The nature of school environments themselves has been examined as a factor affecting the poor mental health and educational outcomes of transgender students. Recent studies have drawn attention to factors or “macroaggressions” arising from cisnormative school settings which negatively impact the experience of transgender young people (McBride, 2021). In their review of the international literature, McBride (2021) found that school environments impact negatively on transgender students by restricting their gender expression, arising from issues such as record keeping, uniforms, single sex toilets and in subject areas such as PE and sex education.

In US national school climate surveys, transgender students, compared to their cisgender peers, were more likely to face discrimination, defined as lack of access to preferred bathrooms, changing rooms and not being able to use a chosen name and preferred pronouns (Kosciw et al., 2016, 2020). A study of LGBTQ youth in Canada also found that negative school climates manifested in transphobic language, unsafe spaces, victimisation and low school attachment (Peter et al., 2016). The conclusion from these studies is that gender diverse students experience a lack of access to education due to being restricted within the school environment:

... transgender and nonbinary students have less access to education than their peers — not only because they feel more unsafe and experience more victimization, but also because they often have restricted access within the school environment itself, specifically, a lack of access to gender segregated spaces”. (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. 105)

Transgender students are found to be marginalised in most aspects of school life. In Australia, over a third of transgender students reported a lack of access to appropriate toilets and changing rooms in their school (Jones et al., 2016). A report on transgender people’s experiences found that updating school records, appropriate uniform options, safety and sports were all areas of concern that constituted barriers to education in New Zealand (HRC, 2008). In Veale et al (2019), transgender and

non-binary students reported that support from schools varied, while the majority said there was a safe place to meet at school and they could bring the partner of any gender to a school dance, only half reported having a choice of uniform or were able to change their name on school records, and only close to a third said they could change their gender marker on records (p. 63).

Access to safe bathroom facilities is also an issue in schools in New Zealand. Veale et al. (2019) revealed that 59% of trans and non-binary students in New Zealand reported it was unsafe to use a toilet or changing room consistent with their gender, and less than 50% had access to a unisex toilet (p. 62–3). Fa’afāfine and fakaleiti participants discussed “being harassed or asked for sexual favours by other students when they went to the bathroom alone”, feeling unsafe and having to make excuses to access toilets in the nurses’ office when attending an all-boys school (Howell & Allen, 2020, p. 8).

The literature reveals that PE is a particularly difficult environment for transgender students and can result in bullying and exclusion (Day et al., 2018). In recalling school PE in a Spanish study, participants reflected on being prevented from participating in their preferred gender group, being bullied, a lack of privacy in changing rooms and the complicity of teachers in reinforcing the heteronormative environment (Devís-Devís et al., 2018). In New Zealand, most trans and non-binary students did not know whether school policies permitted them to play social or competitive sport consistent with their gender, but just over half did have the option of a gender-neutral sports uniform (Veale et al., 2019, p. 63). Fa’afāfine and fakaleiti participants expressed their anxiety over the challenging environment of PE and stopped participating as a result (Howell & Allen, 2020). Landi (2019) concluded that the collection of gendered experiences associated with PE was not conducive to “identity development” for LGBTQ students in their New Zealand study (p. 134).

### ***School Outcomes***

The educational outcomes for transgender students has been the focus of a number of international studies looking at outcome measures such as levels of concentration, lower marks, absenteeism and dropping out (Day et al., 2018; Jones & Hillier, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2012). Day et al. (2018) concluded that, compared to their cisgender school peers, transgender students were more likely to be truant (due to factors such as depression, feeling unsafe, engaging in substance abuse or from being suspended); more likely to experience victimisation; have lower grades and also have a more negative view of school. In an Australian study, Ullman (2015) concluded there was “a complex relationship amongst reported school climate, school wellbeing and academic outcomes for sexuality and gender diverse students” (p. 40).

McBride et al. (2020) describe transgender or gender diverse youth in Ireland being effectively “pushed out” of their school after their social transition:

And I see such a huge difference between schools that get it right, it changes a whole young person’s life. And the school that gets it wrong and their level of stress, and the kids aren’t turning up to school. I’ve got so many [Transgender and Gender Diverse (TGD)] kids who just aren’t going to school, just don’t turn up, because it’s just too fucking hard, it’s too stressful. (Grace, stakeholder, youth organisation, p. 39)

These experiences are supported by findings that nearly a third of transgender young people in a study of LGBT young people in Scotland reported they left school as a result of transphobia, homophobia or biphobia compared with less than 10 per cent of the wider LGBT group (Lough Dannel et al., 2018). Fenaulty et al. (2019) found that gender minority students in New Zealand who identified as “achieving” were less likely to intend to enrol for further education than other groups (heterosexual and sexual minority students) (p. 1893).

### ***Intersectionality***

The complexity and compounding effects of inequalities such as racism are also evident as studies examine intersectionality and “challenge assumptions that all people from a particular group face the same circumstances. People who have several marginalised identities might face extra challenges” (Roy et al., 2021, p. 2). Roy et al. (2021), found that rainbow Māori youth reported worse school environments and less positivity about the future than youth who were Māori and not rainbow; Pacific rainbow youth had more difficulties on a number of family and health indicators and “faced inequities across a greater range of areas” than non-rainbow Pacific youth, despite “positive family and school connections” (p. 6). Rainbow youth with a disability or chronic condition “faced a *greater number and higher* inequities than either Rainbow young people with no disability or chronic condition or non-Rainbow young people with a disability or chronic condition” (Roy et al., 2021, p. 7). McBride (2021) concludes in their international review that: “Ability, age, class, gender, geography, ‘race’, and sexual orientation were thus identified to be vectors of power that impact how institutionalized cisnormativity is experienced by different subpopulations of trans youth” (p. 119). These findings suggest that more research and understanding is needed of priority groups and intersectionality in Aotearoa New Zealand school settings.

### ***Protective Factors***

Given the poor wellbeing outcomes, studies have examined protective factors for transgender youth within schools, with support from the people around them as a significant factor. In a Canadian study, Veale et al. (2017) found that the support of family, friends and schools may reduce the



impact of negative experiences such as harassment and bullying and was associated with more favourable mental health outcomes for transgender youth (p. 216). Having supportive friends was associated with wellbeing for US transgender youth (13–21 years) (Weinhardt et al., 2019) and, similarly, supportive peers in school reduced adverse experiences and was key to improving outcomes for Australian transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students (Jones et al., 2016). Supportive schools, teachers who were supportive of sexuality and gender diversity, and inclusive school policy were related to more positive school wellbeing (Ullman, 2015). McBride (2021) concludes that both teacher and peer interactions positively impact on transgender students and their wellbeing and sense of belonging in schools.

Family support was associated with transgender youth reporting reduced mental health issues (Weinhardt et al., 2019), but high parental support was not found to reduce the disparities in school achievement for sexual minority and gender minority students in New Zealand (Fenaughty et al., 2019). This finding suggests that parent support alone is not sufficient to mitigate other factors such as victimisation of transgender students in New Zealand school settings.

Teacher support has been found to be key to improving outcomes, but in New Zealand, although 58% of trans and non-binary students reported some support, 24% said teachers and other adults at school did not care about them at all (Veale et al., 2019). Teacher expectations and school belonging were found to be protective factors for school achievement in New Zealand for gender minority students (Fenaughty et al., 2019). Jones et al. (2016) revealed that transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students in Australia who did not have any teacher support were “over four times more likely to leave school” (p. 165). Students who reported that teachers misgendered them or inappropriately used their name or identity were more likely to experience poor concentration, lower marks or to drop out of school (Jones et al., 2016, p. 165).

Safe spaces have been shown to be protective factors. Increased engagement with school for both gender and sexual minority students was predicted by having access to a support group within the school (Hazel et al., 2019). In a study from New Zealand, over 80% of 230 secondary school students who attended a gender diversity workshop thought it would reduce bullying (Burford et al., 2017). However, Fenaughty et al. (2019) concluded that supportive school structures designed for sexual minority students did not improve school achievement for gender minority students so that “simply mitigating institutional homophobia in particular does not adequately address the effects of transphobia and cisnormativity...” (p. 1894).

### ***Student Voice***

Transgender students becoming activists within schools to change the environment and reduce the harms they experience is a positive finding in some recent studies. More than half of transgender and gender diverse who engaged in activism felt more positive about their gender identity, had fun and felt more included, with about a third reporting higher feelings of resilience, lower levels of depression, and fewer thoughts of self-harm and suicidality (Jones et al., 2016, p. 166). A recent study examined resistance to cisnormativity in schools by transgender students, such as wearing their uniform of choice and establishing support groups, and revealed that such action had the potential to disrupt the system but also exposed vulnerable students to further harm (McBride & Neary, 2021). In a study from New Zealand, LGBTQ students “actively challenged the heteronorms of their school”, increasing their visibility in the school but this “also created tensions as students grappled with their identities and the public space of school” (p. 485). The literature suggests that gender diverse students do undertake their own activism but that this has potential risks.

The evidence suggests that transgender students experience more harm in the school environment than their peers. However, the complexities of these experiences are only just being revealed as studies also consider the experiences of students who identify as different gender identities or are gender questioning. Local contexts, such as the country where the study is undertaken, are also important in considering findings given the different policies and histories within which student experiences are embedded. Studies across these contexts though have found that transgender students also have lower health and wellbeing outcomes and lower school achievement. There is growing evidence that factors such as supportive teachers can provide better outcomes. The high rates of victimisation and poor outcomes suggest that action on multiple fronts needs to be taken to reverse these findings. Students themselves can become advocates, but this is not without risk. As discussed below, studies are beginning to explore how parents take on an advocacy role to facilitate their transgender children’s social transition in schools.

### **Parents Advocating for Transgender Children in School**

This section considers the role of the parent as an advocate for their transgender child in school environments. A brief introduction to the model of parents who affirm their child’s gender identity is given to provide context for the emerging literature studying parents as advocates in schools. The literature is discussed under the themes of an affirming model, parent motivations, parents’ experience of advocacy in schools, advocacy and the school environment, and privilege and transformation.

### ***An Affirming Model***

There is an increasing focus on parents as advocates for their transgender children in recent literature. Parents who advocate in support of their transgender children have been characterised as “affirming” their transgender child’s social transition (de Bres, 2022; Neary, 2021a; Schlehofer et al., 2021). Ehrensaft (2016) describes the shift towards an affirming parenting approach to gender diversity as a “sea change” that started with a move away from a medical model viewing gender diversity as a disorder and in particular the removal of “gender identity disorder” from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 2013 (p. 4). However, it is evident that the acceptance of gender diversity by parents still occurs within the context of a society built around the gender binary from the day children are born and assigned their gender (Ehrensaft, 2016). De Bres (2022) reviewed literature considering parents of transgender children and traces the evolution from studies which view gender diversity as a problem (Ceglie and Thummel, 2006; Field and Mattson, 2016; Gregor et al. 2015, as cited in de Bres, 2022), to those which affirm the child and conceptualise the environment as the issue (Meadow, 2018; Abreu et al., 2021, Neary, 2019; Manning, 2017; Schlehofer et al., 2021, as cited in de Bres, 2022). Brill and Pepper (2008) consider parenting a transgender child, for most affirming parents, as being a journey of discovery about gender diversity when a child discloses their gender identity, to information seeking and advocacy. The process of affirming a child’s gender identity through this lens becomes a reconceptualising of the world as a place that is restrictive and bound by the gender binary and thus energises parents to become activists (Brill & Pepper, 2008). In a US study of transgender youth, the youth themselves expressed that parents moving from acceptance of their gender identity to taking actions to support them was important “...to help them navigate accessing services in a society that stigmatized them” (Weinhardt et al., 2019, p. 319).

In the context of parents who affirm their child’s gender identity, studies are now revealing how some of these parents bring their understanding of gender diversity into schools (Ramirez, 2017; Birnkrant & Prseworksi, 2017; Leonardi et al. 2021).

### ***Parent Motivations***

Studies show that parents’ reasons for undertaking advocacy ranged from protection to making change, not only for their child but also for others. Parents cite reasons for advocacy including protecting their children from potential harm in school and possible consequences such as suicide (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015); making schools safe (Ramirez, 2017); overcoming their own sense of isolation (Gray et al., 2016), social justice (Ramirez, 2017; Schlehofer et al., 2021) and equal rights for their child and others (Ramirez, 2017). Perceiving barriers to a positive future for their transgender

children motivated caregivers to advocate and engage in activism, with one participant hoping to normalise the experience of gender diversity for their child's classmates (Katz-Wise et al., 2017). Gray et al (2016) found parents identified advocacy as striving "for a more tolerant world" in both school and extended family settings (p. 123).

The nature of their advocacy was defined from parents' own perspective in one study and included the very act of affirming their transgender child and giving support and talking to schools about ensuring "child's rights, protections, and equal treatment" (Schlehofer et al., 2021, p. 459). Birnkrant and Przeworski (2017) described different levels of advocacy by parents for their child in school from "some advocacy", such as contacting the school to find out policies, to "strong" levels of advocacy, such as having discussions in schools, with a third of parents not indicating any advocacy (p. 142). Some parents set expectations for schools about their child's inclusion, for example, which bathrooms they would be using (Alegría, 2018). In some studies, parents described advocacy as educating school personnel, including teachers, about gender diversity (Alegría, 2018; Gray et al., 2016).

### ***Parent-Child Relationships***

From the time of their child's coming out, affirming parents in the studies engaged in discussions with their children about their gender identity and about how best to support their social transition in school (Gray et al., 2016, p. 135). Ramirez (2017) found parents gained "insight and inspiration from their child" which bolstered their advocacy (p. 109). In their UK study of 23 parents, Davy and Cordoba (2020) found that parents had conversations with their child after their gender identity disclosure about their social transition (such as pronouns and clothing) and about changes needed in the school.

In a study of the parents of transgender adolescents, a participant saw themselves as acting for their child and ensuring they gave them a voice but refraining if their child did not want to pursue issues (Martello-Gill, 2019). The complex issue of balancing needs dependent on the age of the child is highlighted in Schlehofer et al. (2021) where two parents did not disclose their advocacy to their young child to protect them from any feeling of being "different" (p. 464). Schlehofer et al. (2021) concluded that for most participants, advocacy was an essential part of parenting a transgender child and also demonstrated behaviour which their children could emulate.

### ***Parents' Experience of Advocacy in Schools***

Advocacy in schools for transgender children can be a fraught process that involves gathering resources, educating teachers and facing unsupportive school environments. Parents found advocacy to be “an exhausting array of negotiations that were an ambivalent mix of decisiveness, compromise and second-guessing as they sought to educate educators and other parents, find resources, manage relations and boundaries” in the face of judgement from others (Neary, 2021, p. 519).

Advocating in schools by the parents studied was likened to being “at the forefront of negotiating the gendered conditions at the school” (Davy & Cordoba, 2020, p. 358). Ramirez (2017) described how some parents sought reliable information on LGBTQ issues before advocacy. According to Davy and Cordoba (2020), some informed themselves before advocating in schools, although parents were often not equipped with the best information (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018) or up to date with current policies or research (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). In contrast, Leonardi et al. (2021) argued, in their US study, that parents of transgender children were potentially well-informed and articulate “informants” who could reveal systemic issues and how to successfully navigate them.

The shift from viewing gender identity as an issue to perceiving the environment as the problem is reflected in Neary (2021) who found that parents simply had no choice but to advocate in the face of schools that were not prepared for gender diverse students. The desire of parents to make changes for their transgender child in schools is argued to be the result of a loss of “invisible privileges” that cisgender children enjoy (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018, p. 70). Neary (2021), on the other hand, found that parents in Ireland worked in schools to bring about changes even at the risk of outing their own child and could potentially disrupt cisnormative systems in schools.

Barriers to being able to support their transgender child included the difficulties of negotiating systems in schools and school personnel’s lack of knowledge (Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017; Matsuno et al., 2021; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015). Parents encountered educational systems which were not designed or ready to meet their child’s needs (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015; Schlehofer et al., 2021). The ongoing and overwhelming nature of advocacy or “advocacy fatigue” was also found to be a barrier to supporting their child (Matsuno et al., 2021), with Ramirez (2017) finding parents having to “choose their battles” in their advocacy (p. 113).

### ***Advocacy and the School Environment***

Parents encounter schools which vary in their level of preparedness for transgender students, which in turn impacts the parent’s level of advocacy and the issues which needed to be addressed. Parents

felt that “fulfilling their parental duty of care” was problematic when schools were unprepared or lacked the knowledge to address the issues (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015, p. 53). Leonardi et al. (2021) found that the majority of parents of transgender and non-binary students encountered schools that were supportive of their child’s social transition, but that schools were less likely to be prepared for matters such as using correct pronouns, and even less prepared for having safe environments, appropriate bathrooms, name changes or for providing plans for students to support their transition or additional resources (p. 16). There were differences in support related to gender identities, such as the correct use of pronouns in school being less likely to be supported for non-binary and trans female/female students (Leonardi et al., 2021). In some cases, the lack of preparedness was attributed to being “the first” gender diverse students (Leonardi et al., 2021); similarly, where schools had already supported transgender students, the school personnel and school environment were found to be more prepared, such as having appropriate facilities (Davy & Cordoba, 2020).

Birnkrant & Przeworski (2017) reported that less than a third of parents in their study found that the school was accepting and supportive when their child transitioned, but the school’s support was perceived to increase over time. Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018) also described schools that took the initiative in their inclusion of transgender children, addressing issues such as toilets and uniforms proactively. In some cases, parents were considered the experts and were asked to support teachers facilitate their child’s transition, which was viewed as positive “acceptance” (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018).

How responsive a school might be to change potentially influences parent advocacy. Baldwin (2015) found that the level of a school’s inclusiveness impacted on parents’ experiences of advocacy, with “gender inclusive” schools meaning less need for interventions, “gender evolving” schools which were open to change being the most responsive to advocacy, and “gender exclusive” schools requiring the most intervention (Baldwin, 2015, p. 42).

Studies have considered teachers’ understanding and level of support for gender diversity and how these might impact on parent advocacy. Teachers or other school personnel lacking an understanding of gender diversity could be a challenge for parents advocating in schools, with one issue being a lack of understanding of the difference between “gender identity and sexual orientation” (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015, p. 53). Some teachers were found to be supportive, but they lacked knowledge about gender diversity and the overall response was seen as reactive (Davy & Cordoba, 2020; Leonardi et al., 2021). Parents reported that there was a shift in teachers’ attitudes after discussions to more positive and accepting behaviour (Davy & Cordoba, 2020). Birnkrant and

Przeworski (2017) reported that some parents identified at least one unsupportive member of staff, but nearly twice as many noted supportive staff (Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017), which reduced parents' need to advocate (Martello-Gill, 2019). Baldwin (2015) also highlights the importance of supportive teachers in creating an inclusive environment for gender diverse children regardless of the school's policy.

Parents have both positive and negative experiences of advocacy related to whether their advocacy was effective in making changes in either the short or long-term. The level of parent advocacy was found to be related to the level of support from school personnel with higher levels of advocacy found to be associated with increased support (Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017, p. 148). However, Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018) found that advocacy could be a negative experience if it was not successful in changing school policies or averting harmful behaviour such as bullying or exclusion. Parents reported negative experiences such as having to be constantly vigilant, feeling excluded as a parent from schools or the school community, and being the educator to teachers and school personnel (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). The idea of "educating the educator" could be a double-edged sword, placing the onus on parents to educate schools about gender diversity and inclusion and shifting the burden onto the parent for their child to be included in school (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018, pp. 78–9). The process of working with schools was considered time consuming but construed positively in that it encouraged schools to make changes to ensure students had equal rights and, in some cases, resulting in individual accommodations (Davy & Cordoba, 2020), consistent with Leonardi et al.'s (2021) analysis that the lack of preparedness by schools contributes to the upholding of gender norms. In the Pullen and Sansfaçon (2015) study, parents were part of a long-term action research project and over the time of the study realised that addressing gender identity specifically in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Canada<sup>3</sup>, part of the Canadian Constitution, was part of the wider changes needed to improve outcomes for their children (p. 55).

### ***Privilege and Transformation***

Recent studies of parents of transgender children have privileged the experience of white, educated middle class parents who are supportive of their transgender child (de Bres, 2022). While parent advocates recruited in studies are often privileged in terms of their ethnicity, social class and have

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/how-rights-protected/guide-canadian-charter-rights-freedoms.html>

resources such as time, participants often demonstrate an understanding of this advantage (Schlehofer et al., 2021). Being cisgender was recognised as affording a privileged position by parent advocates with one parent consciously utilising their position to advocate for others (Schlehofer et al., 2021). Neary (2021) considered the social capital that Irish parents brought to their advocacy and found that those parents recognised they were in a privileged position to negotiate with schools on behalf of their child.

In a study of parent advocates for LGBTQ children, parents started as allies and became active advocates, which in turn gave them insights into the injustices experienced by the LGBTQ community (Ramirez, 2017). Parents perceived their advocacy as progressing from advocating for their own child to actions that could benefit the wider community of transgender children and youth (Schlehofer et al., 2021). Manning (2017) talking from a Canadian perspective, proposes that affirming parenting has created space for cisgender mothers to advocate for more diverse gender spaces and continues the gendered and emotional work of being a “good mother” but that this definition is not necessarily applied to “visibly queer, poor and/or racialized parent” highlighting the privilege inherent in those who have resources to advocate. While some parents are seen to advocate for their individual child as an extension of engaging in affirmative parenting, this is often geared towards changing the systems for all gender diverse children and could be transformative (Neary, 2021).

Parent advocacy for their transgender children is an emerging area of study. Some of the parents in these studies who affirmed their child’s gender then supported their child’s social transition in schools. Parents often advocate on a number of fronts such as calling schools, arranging meetings and engaging in some level of advocacy on behalf of their children, motivated in some cases by fear of future negative outcomes for their transgender child or for social justice reasons. Parents encountered different levels of support in schools, with one finding that they could make the most difference in schools which were supportive and open to being inclusive, but felt a sense of responsibility to advocate in hostile school environments. The studies found parents had to gather information and often educate teachers about gender diversity. Advocacy is shown to require persistence in the face of embedded cisnormativity and unprepared schools, but there is the potential for these parents to create change for all transgender children. The studies on the experience of parent advocates for transgender children to date has been limited to the perspectives of those recruited, usually white, middle class and educated mothers, suggesting more research is needed to understand the experiences of all parent advocates. Studies to date have focused on transgender children without further investigating whether the changes to facilitate the transition of transgender children will also follow for non-binary children (Davy & Cordoba, 2020).



There were no studies discovered which examine the role of parent advocates in Aotearoa New Zealand and whether they encounter the same responses from schools and teachers as found in international contexts.

### **A Children's Rights Approach**

The research questions consider the experiences of parents advocating for transgender children in schools in New Zealand and the outcomes that they perceive. A children's rights lens is applied given that the issues relating to advocacy concern transgender children's right to education (Arts. 28, 29). Parents are well positioned to ensure their children's rights are advanced. Article 18 of UNCROC provides for parents' responsibilities for their children's upbringing and upholding their rights in accordance with their best interests. Article 5 of UNCROC provides for parents to give guidance to their children in exercising their rights according to the child's evolving capacities.

This dissertation cannot provide a full analysis of human rights and even children's rights, but it seeks to clarify the position of transgender rights in education from a children's rights perspective. Some key UN treaties and conventions related to education are discussed, the obligation of schools to uphold rights for transgender children in Aotearoa New Zealand schools is considered, as well as parents' responsibilities to act in their children's best interests. A brief overview of relevant children's rights provisions is given and the attention being given to transgender children in recent human rights documentation is outlined.

### ***Key UN Treaties and Conventions Upholding the Right to Education***

Obligations to ensure that all children have equal access to quality education in a safe environment are clear in international human rights documents that the New Zealand government and its agents, in this case, schools, have obligations to uphold.

The fundamental right to education, "accessible to all on an equal basis" and aimed at the full development of the person, has been enshrined in various United Nations (UN) treaties and conventions (Cornu, 2016; HRC, 2020, p. 48). Lundy and Tobin (2019) emphasise that "it is widely accepted that the right to education functions 'as a multiplier, enhancing all rights and freedoms when it is guaranteed while jeopardizing them all when it is violated'" (Tomasevski, 2012, as cited in Lundy & Tobin, 2019, p. 1117). The harm and discrimination experienced by transgender children in schools undermines the right to education (Cornu, 2016; HRC, 2020).

The Council of Europe (2018) considers that while gender identity is not specifically addressed in UN treaties and conventions, "the principles of universality and non-discrimination" are foundational (p.

25). The general principle of non-discrimination is enshrined in key human rights documents (Besson & Kleber, 2019)

The non-exhaustive list below highlights the key provisions in key human rights documents relating to the right to education that the New Zealand government has obligations to uphold:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) upholds the right to education (Art. 16, 7, UNCHR, 1948). The universality of this document is emphasised in its preamble and in Article 1: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (UNCHR, 1948).
- The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) ratified by New Zealand in 1963 incorporated the UDHR declaration of education for all and established discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference” including on the basis of sex (Art 1) (Convention against Discrimination in Education, 1960).
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1966) is a binding international treaty ratified by New Zealand which further protects the right to education for all (Article 13). In Article 2 (2), there are stated prohibited grounds of discrimination of “race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”, but the “nature of discrimination varies according to context and evolves over time” therefore a flexible approach is required to interpret additional grounds in “other status” (Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2009, para.15, 27). General Comment No. 20 recognises “gender identity” as a prohibited ground for discrimination encapsulated in the phrase “other status” and notes the “harassment” experienced by transgender children in school settings (Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, 2009, para. 32).
- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) (1989) covers rights for all children, defined as being under 18, and is therefore relevant when considering the rights of transgender students in New Zealand (Art. 1). The right to education is provided in Article 28, the right to education, and Article 29, the aims of education.

### ***UNCROC and Aotearoa New Zealand Education***

UNCROC consists of 54 articles which set out children’s rights, the obligations of States and also parent responsibilities. UNCROC is viewed as significant (Tobin, 2019) and a “powerful advocacy tool” (Cornu, 2016, p. 11) due to its wide international support and influence, having been ratified by 196 countries at the time of writing. Having ratified UNCROC in 1993, New Zealand has obligations to

uphold all of the rights in UNCROC, including the rights to education (Art 28, 29), and to implement measures to uphold them (Art. 4).

Article 2 states that the rights in UNCROC apply to any child “without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth, or other status”. The CRC Committee has interpreted “other status” widely, such as to include sexual orientation, and “also emphasized that discrimination is often based on more than one ground and that specific attention should be paid to these forms of multiple discrimination” (Besson & Kleber, 2019, p. 62).

The CRC Committee, which monitors the implementation of the rights set out in UNCROC by States parties, have increasingly made explicit mention of sexual orientation and gender identity to ensure that specific action is taken to affirm these rights in domestic law (UNESCO, 2016). General Comments “interpret the content of the human rights provisions” (UNESCO, 2016, p. 57). The CRC Committee stated in General Comment No. 4 that the grounds for non-discrimination include sexual orientation (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003a) and in General Comment No. 13 included specific reference to “lesbian, gay, transgender or transsexual” children as a group vulnerable to violence and therefore requiring States to address discrimination (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011a, para. 72).

States are periodically examined on their progress incorporating UNCROC into their domestic laws and how effectively they address children’s rights issues (Cornu, 2016; Sandberg, 2015). The CRC Committee makes Concluding Observations to States on their progress in implementing UNCROC, which can be considered “jurisprudence” and build on the original text of UNCROC (Cornu, 2016; UNESCO, 2016, p. 57). A number of Concluding Observations have included reference to protection of rights in UNCROC against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (Cornu, 2016).

### ***General Principles***

Four general principles that underscore a children’s rights perspective: to ensure rights without discrimination (Art. 2); that the best interests of children is a primary consideration (Art. 3); the right to life, survival and development (Art. 6) and the right to express views and have them given due weight (Art. 12) (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003b). These general principles have “a role to play in the interpretation and implementation of all other crc [UNCROC] provisions” (Hanson & Lundy, 2017, p. 302).

### ***Domestic Laws and Measures***

Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand have an obligation to provide safe environments free from discrimination. The NZ Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) (2017) produced guidelines for secondary school principals, board of trustees and teachers on making schools safer and more inclusive for LGBTQI+ students. The guidelines emphasise that as “school boards of trustees are crown entities, they are subject to the state’s international human rights obligations” (New Zealand Post Primary Teachers’ Association [PPTA], 2017, p. 4).

In New Zealand, some of these international obligations are set out in the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 which includes “the right to freedom from discrimination on the grounds of discrimination in the Human Rights Act 1993” (Art. 19/1). The Human Rights Act 1993 prohibited grounds for discrimination does not specify gender identity. However, PPTA (2017) highlight the opinion from the Crown Law Office in 2006, “that discrimination on the ground of gender identity would come within the category of sex discrimination” (p. 5). The PPTA (2017) are unequivocal that a school directly discriminating against a student because of their gender identity is in breach of the Human Rights Act 1993. They also point out that a school may be in breach of that Act:

...by allowing an environment to develop within a school which is hostile to gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender persons. It is likely also to be deemed a breach of a school’s legal duty of care for a board of trustees to fail to take reasonable steps to prevent the harassment, by pupils, of other pupils who are perceived to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. (New Zealand Post Primary Teachers’ Association [PPTA], 2017, p. 5)

The Human Rights Commission interprets the Human Rights Act 1993 to include gender identity in the grounds upon which discrimination is unlawful, however, the continued harm experienced by transgender people has led to further calls to specifically include gender identity in Section 21 of the Act (HRC, 2020).

HRC (2020) states that in Aotearoa New Zealand the right to education for SOGIESC youth is not upheld as education is not accessible on an equal basis due to the perceived lack of safety and lack of visibility of gender diversity in the curriculum. Unsupportive school environments are in breach of human rights obligations, therefore policies are needed to ensure full participation of children in education, respect for gender diversity and environments free from violence and bullying (HRC, 2020).

### ***UNCROC (1989) Key Articles***

UNCROC articles also considered here are of particular relevance to parent advocacy and issues that are evident in the literature on transgender children's experience in schools: Article 2, non-discrimination, Article 3, best interests, Article 5, parental guidance; Article 12, the right to be heard, Article 16, the right to privacy; Article 18, parental responsibilities; Article 19, freedom from violence; Article 24, the right to health, Article 28, right to education and Article 29, the aims of education. While these particular rights are discussed below, the "interdependent and interrelated" nature of children's rights is acknowledged (Committee on the Rights of the Child, (2003b(I)).

#### ***Article 2 – Non-Discrimination***

Article 2 of UNCROC provides for States parties to give effect to all rights in UNCROC "without discrimination". This article also contains a duty to protect children from discrimination including through laws, but beyond this, "Socially internalized forms of discrimination and the media are indeed at the origins of many forms of discrimination and should be targeted directly (Besson & Kleber, 2019, p. 51).

Article 2 (1) sets out a list of grounds which do not justify discrimination which have been discussed above. Concluding Observations by the CRC Committee have included specific reference to discrimination against transgender children, including their access to education (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016c, 2017a, 2017b). In their 2011 and 2016 concluding observations, the CRC Committee called on the New Zealand government to increase awareness and prevent discrimination against groups of vulnerable children, including transgender children, and to take affirmative action (Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 2016, 2011b).

#### ***Article 3: Best Interests***

Article 3 is a general principle of UNCROC and requires that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration in all actions that affect them (Eekelaar & Tobin, 2019) and the "full and effective enjoyment of all rights recognized in the Convention and the holistic development of the child" (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013, para. 4). The CRC Committee states "Although parents are not explicitly mentioned in article 3, paragraph 1, the best interests of the child 'will be their basic concern'" (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013a, para. 25) and this is provided for in Article 18. One of the issues is that children do not always have agency to define or realise their best interests for themselves and can face competing interests from the structures they are part of, such as family and schools (Eekelaar & Tobin, 2019). In determining a child's best interests, the CRC

Committee has called for an individualised approach which takes into account the child's views, identity and right to education among other factors, with the aim that the child enjoys all their rights (Eekelaar & Tobin, 2019, p. 88).

### ***Article 5: Parental Guidance***

Under Article 5, UNCROC sets out the right of the child to be guided by their parents in the exercise of their rights according to the child's evolving capacities (Tobin & Varadan, 2019). This principle can be envisaged as a sliding scale so that, as the child becomes more capable, the parents' guidance is adjusted and should recognise the child's own capacity for decision making and determining their best interests (Tobin & Varadan, 2019). The CRC Committee considers adolescent health and development in General Comment No. 20 and "acknowledges the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents" to give guidance to assist their adolescent children's exercise of their rights consistent with their evolving capacities and to recognise their "capacity to become full and responsible citizens" (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016b, para. 7). Determining the level of guidance should be exercised in a child-centred way, allowing children's views to be heard and taken into account and explaining any decisions (Tobin & Varadan, 2019). Tobin and Varadan (2019) note that there are instances when parents are the decision makers, when they make decisions collaboratively with their child, and when the child is themselves the decision-maker.

### ***Article 8: Identity***

UNCROC Article 8 (1) concerns the child's right to "preserve his or her identity including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference". Sandberg (2015) considers Article 8 to encompass gender identity and applies the common understanding of identity as "the person's feeling of self and distinguishing the person from others" (p. 343). Cornu (2016) also points to the importance of Article 8 as relevant to the rights of transgender children in school settings where the incorrect use of name and pronouns and a gendered uniform can "out" students.

Tobin and Todres (2019) argue that identity is both a product of historical circumstances and future development, which give a child the basis "of where they have come from, who they are, and the right to decide who they will become" and includes evolving characteristics such as gender identity (p. 285). As prescribed in Article 12, the views of the child should also be taken into account in the process of developing identity, emphasising the internal and non-fixed aspects of identity outside of the usual external markers such as nationality (Tobin & Todres, 2019). Tobin and Todres (2019) state:

"...if a child identifies as being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, states would be required to take effective measures to ensure that the child is able to express and enjoy

their sexual orientation or gender identity without fear of discrimination or violence.” (p. 295)

#### ***Article 12: The Right to Have Views Given Due Weight***

Article 12 “The right of the child to be heard” sets out the right of all children to express their views freely in all matters that affect them and to have those views given due weight according to their age and maturity. This article is transformational in children’s rights in that it recognises children’s capacity for agency in decisions that affect them (Lundy et al., 2019). The child is a rights holder, able to shape their own life, further to the rights of protection and provision. Article 12 is a right but also a general principle which (with the other general principles) “guide the interpretation and implementation of the rest of the Convention” (Hanson & Lundy, 2017, p. 286).

#### ***Article 16: The Right to Protection of Privacy***

Article 16 provides for protection from “arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy including attacks on their honour and reputation”. Sandberg (2015) discusses the right to privacy in the context of a child being able to determine their own gender identity as a private matter and to preserve the privacy of that gender identity. Cornu (2016) points to “unlawful interference with his or her privacy” including incorrect names and pronouns and issues such as a lack of uniform choices for transgender children.

#### ***Article 18: Parental Responsibilities***

In Article 18, children's upbringing and development is the primary responsibility of parents and that "the best interests of the child will be their basic concern" (Art. 18(1)). These responsibilities can be interpreted as being consistent with the other principles of UNCROC, such as the right for children to have their views heard (Art. 12) and freedom from violence (Art. 19) (Tobin & Seow, 2019). As argued in Tobin and Seow (2019), what constitutes “best interests” should be determined in accordance with Article 12 and therefore the child’s views considered appropriate to their age and maturity (p. 666).

#### ***Article 19: Freedom from Violence***

Article 19 is the right to protection against all forms of violence “while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has care of the child” (Art. 19). Tobin and Cashmore (2019) set out the parameters of children “in the care of” to include education, school and early childhood personnel (...) and sports coaches...” (Tobin & Cashmore, 2019, p. 704).

The definition of all forms of violence includes both physical and mental, and this violence does not need to meet a threshold (Tobin & Cashmore, 2019). The definition is broad and includes:

... the mere exposure of a child to practices, threatened or actual, whether intentional or otherwise, by an individual or group, that either result in or have the capacity to harm a child's physical, mental, and emotional health and development or dignity. (Tobin & Cashmore, 2019, p. 696)

The CRC Committee includes violence by perpetuated by peers, children themselves (self-harm) and both physical and non-physical acts such as insults and bullying (including cyberbullying) in their overview of forms of violence (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011). In General Comment 13 (2011), transgender children are included as a group "in potentially vulnerable situations" likely to experience violence (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011, para. (VI)(72)(g)).

UNESCO (2016) discusses the different forms of violence experienced by transgender children in schools and includes "bullying" such as verbal insults, exclusion, being subject to gossip and rumours (UNESCO, 2016, p. 25). UNESCO (2016) defines explicit transphobic violence as behaviour that ranges from making the target feel uncomfortable to intimidation, and which is normalised when staff and peers fail to intervene. Implicit or "institutional" violence as a concept is also discussed:

... pervasive representations or attitudes that sometimes feel harmless or natural to the school community, but that allow or encourage homophobia and transphobia, including perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Policies and guidelines can reinforce or embed these representations or attitudes, whether in an individual institution or across an entire education sector. (UNESCO, 2016, p. 26)

Examples of implicit violence include not being able to wear a uniform that aligns to a student's gender identity, school records with incorrect names/pronouns, single-sex bathrooms and facilities (UNESCO, 2016, p. 82).

General Comment No. 20 called on States to protect LGBTQI youth from "all forms of violence, discrimination or bullying by raising public awareness and implementing safety and support measures" (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016, para. 34).

#### ***Article 24: Right to Health***

The right to health in Article 24 includes the right to "the highest attainable standard of health" and facilities. The right to health for transgender students specifically in education settings is considered here. Transgender students experience adverse mental health outcomes in New Zealand (Kosciw et al., 2020; Veale et al., 2019). Mental health is included in the understanding of health in General Comment No. 15, "States have agreed to regard health as a state of complete physical, mental and



social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013b).

### ***Article 28: Right to Education***

Article 28 addresses the right to access education . The right to education enshrined in UNCROC needs to be seen in the context of other rights, such as article 2 (the right to non-discrimination) and article 12 (the right for children to have their views given due weight) (Courtis & Tobin, 2019). Article 28 and the right to education is described as “a multiplier right, given its role in enabling the enjoyment of so many other rights” (Courtis & Tobin, 2019, p. 1058).

The framework adopted to assess education rights is known as the 4AS, which says that education should be “available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable” (Courtis & Tobin, 2019, p. 1064), suggesting that schools must adapt to ensure the rights of transgender children are upheld. Cornu (2016) points to the three dimensions of the right to education promoted by UNESCO being access (without discrimination), quality (including curriculum) and respect (including freedom from violence, respect for identity) which are threatened by transphobic bullying amongst other things.

### ***Article 29: The Aims of Education***

Article 29 is concerned with the content and the aims of education. Education is to be directed to “the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” (para. 1(a)), developing respect for human rights, freedoms and principles (para. 1(b)), respect for their parents, their “own cultural identity, language and values” and for the values of the country in which they live, may originate from and for different civilizations (para. 1(c)), the environment (para. 1(e)) and to prepare them for “responsible life” based on the values of “understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin” (Art. 29, para. (1)(d)).

Lundy and Tobin (2019) note that “school culture and school environment must also reflect the freedom and the spirit of understanding called for in article 29” (p. 1143). Lundy and Tobin (2019) argue that the principles of “peace, tolerance and friendship must be extended to all persons and peoples”, in line with article 2 of UNCROC, and especially given the proliferation of bullying and exclusion based on homophobic behaviour:

... schools have an important role to play in addressing this particular form of intolerance and securing the right to education for all children and young people in a safe environment. It is for this reason that the CRC Committee has rightly drawn attention to education

practices that undermine the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered young people. (p. 1144)

The following table summarises the Articles in UNCROC that have been addressed in this dissertation as relevant to parent advocacy for their transgender children in school settings.

**Table 1**

*Key Articles from UNCROC (1989) relating to Parent Advocacy for Transgender Children*

| UNCROC (1989) Articles                                 | Description   |
|--|---|
| Article 2: non-discrimination                          | All children's rights are upheld without any discrimination on the basis of "the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status." |
| Article 3: best interests                              | The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in actions which concern them  |
| Article 5: guidance according to evolving capacities   | Parents and caregivers provide guidance to children on exercising their rights in a way that accounts for their child's "evolving capacities"   |
| Article 8: right to identity                           | Children have a right to an identity, including their gender identity   |
| Article 12: views given due weight                     | The child should be given the opportunity and means to express their views freely and have them given due weight based on their "age and maturity"  |
| Article 16: right to privacy                           | Children have the right to privacy and protection against attacks on their honour and reputation  |
| Article 18: parental responsibilities                  | Parents have a responsibility for raising their children in accordance with their children's best interests   |
| Article 19: freedom from violence (including implicit) | Protection from all forms of mental and physical violence, and can be seen as encompassing implicit violence.   |
| Article 24: the right to health                        | Children have the right to the highest attainable standard of health, encompassing physical, mental and emotional health  |
| Article 28: right to education                         | Children have a right to education  |
| Article 29: aims of education                          | Children have the right to education which develops them  |

## ***Recognition of Transgender Children in Human Rights***

There are increasing calls for action by the UN and its agencies (OHCHR, 2015; UNESCO, 2016; UN General Assembly, 2019; UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2019b; Secretary-General, 2022) that highlight the extent of discrimination experienced by the LGBTQ+ community globally since the 2011 *Rio Statement* that called on States to eliminate discrimination against LGBT students through actions such as ensuring safe schools, providing inclusive information, ensuring teachers and staff are supportive, and setting up mechanisms for review (Jones, 2016; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2012).

It is evident that while prohibited grounds for discrimination are understood to encompass gender identity in New Zealand, schools are failing in their obligations to uphold rights for transgender children given the level of harm they experience. Parents have a responsibility to act in their children's best interests and to provide guidance appropriate to their children's evolving capacities, therefore parents are empowered as advocates to advance their children's rights in schools.

## **Conclusion**

Literature to date has uncovered the adverse experiences of transgender students in secondary schools both internationally and in New Zealand. Hostile environments and poor mental health outcomes have been found to be ameliorated by protective factors such as supportive teachers, family and friends, but this has not been found to overcome the overall negative impact of cisnormative school environments. More research is needed to unpack gender identities, intersectionality and how protective factors can be harnessed, and in different contexts, including in Aotearoa New Zealand. Transgender students have demonstrated their own resistance to the systems they face but this potentially exposes them to further harm.

Given the scale of harm for this group of students, it is not surprising that the role of parents as advocates has become a topic of recent research. Affirming parents are on the frontline, from the time their child discloses their gender identity they gather knowledge to facilitate their child's social transition in schools, in what is described as an exhausting endeavour. Some studies have explored some of the actions of supportive parents who advocate for their transgender children in schools in international contexts. These are mostly small-scale studies where the findings are often contingent on the policies within the schools and countries. The research suggests that parents are encountering both supportive and unsupportive schools and personnel when they advocate for their transgender child and that, in one study, the level of advocacy was related to the level of change. The limited research to date suggests that this advocacy does have benefits and can result in accommodations

for their child in the first instance, especially if the school is receptive. It is also evident that these parents want to create wider change in schools and society and could help to break down gender norms through their advocacy.

There are several limitations to the current literature. For example, research to date involves small interview-based or mixed methods studies in the northern hemisphere with mainly white, middle-class parents. Previous international studies on parent advocacy have not been undertaken using an explicit child rights-based perspective. To my knowledge, studies concerning transgender children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand have not considered parental advocacy. The aim of this study is therefore to investigate parent advocacy in Aotearoa New Zealand within schools to understand the work that is being done by parents to advance their transgender children's rights and the subsequent outcomes.

It is clear that human rights and in particular children's rights as set out in UNCROC provide a framework that can be used to advocate for the rights of transgender children in education. Cornu (2016) addresses UNCROC as a potential framework to counter bullying of LGBT children in schools. The growing body of General Comments and Concluding Observations specifically addressing the harm experienced by LGBTQI+ children, and transgender children in particular, support this conclusion. UNCROC also contains provisions related to parental responsibility based on advancing a child's best interests (Art. 18) and providing parental guidance consistent with a child's evolving capacities (Art. 5) therefore supporting parents' actions on behalf of their children in affirming their child's gender identity and supporting their social transition. There is no literature found in this review which examines rights in the context of parent advocacy and this research therefore offers a new lens on how transgender children's rights can be upheld by parents who are acting in accordance with their children's best interests.

## Chapter Three: Research Methodology and Methods

The purpose of this research is to explore parent advocacy for transgender children in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary school settings and to consider the advocacy experience of parents and whether this work done by parents in schools creates change.

The research questions are: What is the experience of parents who advocate for their children in Aotearoa New Zealand Schools? What changes, if any, have resulted from parental advocacy for transgender children in secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand? These questions are then considered in the context of children's rights.

This research stems from my personal interest as a parent who has negotiated secondary school environments in support of my transgender child. The study aligns with experiential qualitative research as it explores "participants' lived experiences and sense-making, their views and perspectives, practices or behaviours" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 287).

### Methodology

#### *Case Study Design*

A case study design has been chosen as it is appropriate for an in-depth study examining a real life situation, in this case, advocacy by parents for their transgender children (Yin, 2009). The phenomenon or case being studied is the advocacy experience of parents of transgender children, bound by the context of secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand and the period following their child's gender identity disclosure (Hancock et al., 2016). The education setting is an essential part of understanding the experience of parent advocates and the outcomes they perceive (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Hancock (2021) describes case study research as "richly descriptive" because it allows for the complexity of the real world case to be explored, which is appropriate in this study of advocacy experiences (p. 25). The aim of this study is to understand the advocacy parents undertake in a rights framework and therefore aligns to an instrumental case study research design which sets out to deepen understanding (Hancock et al., 2016) and "provide insight into an issue" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 549).

Access is an important aspect of case study design, which in this study was facilitated by being a member of a Facebook parent support group and receiving support from the moderator to recruit participants from the site (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

One strength of a case study design according to Baxter and Jack (2008) is the potential to use multiple data sources to contribute to the “holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied” and in this research a focus group was used together with a follow-up interview to obtain further in-depth information on the experience of parent advocates (p. 554)

### ***Focus Group***

A focus group was chosen as an appropriate data collection method for an exploratory case study which is concerned with understanding people’s experiences, in this case, advocacy in schools (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011; Wilkinson, 1998). The interaction possible within a focus group was also an important consideration as this offers a similar experience to the interaction in the Facebook parent group where parents were recruited from and where they share experiences via Facebook posts and comments (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011).

Conducting a focus group enables people to be more open to sharing their views and allows for deeper insights to emerge (Liamputtong, 2020; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The focus group allows for a more equal power dynamic between researcher and participants than a one-on-one interview, with participants given the opportunity to direct the discussion to areas they choose based on their experience (Bryman, 2012; Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011). This allows the discussion to develop organically without high levels of moderation (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011).

Kitzinger and Barbour (2018) suggest that while sensitive topics may be difficult within a focus group, the method can also allow participants to give reassurance and feedback to each other during the course of the discussion.

Ethics approval was obtained for a focus group with up to five participants recruited from an advertisement posted in the Facebook parent support group offering peer support for parents of transgender children. It was not possible to ensure diversity in the focus group due to the small sample size, so recruitment was based on a “first come” basis (Kitzinger & Barbour, 2011).

An online focus group using Microsoft Teams was chosen because it enabled participants to be part of the group from anywhere in New Zealand, thus overcoming one of the limitations of in-person focus groups having a set place which can incur travel costs (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). The online focus group also suited “time poor” participants, such as the parents involved (Boland et al., 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic was also a consideration in choosing to use an online focus group as lockdowns or isolation requirements could restrict participation in an in-person group.

Greenspan et al (2021 ) reviewed qualitative studies using Zoom and Skype, similar videoconferencing tools to Microsoft Teams, and identified challenges including the potential for technical problems, ensuring adequate planning, establishing rapport with participants, privacy and equity. Technical issues can be mitigated by preparing ahead. To ensure everyone participating was familiar with Microsoft Teams (including myself) and to limit potential technological issues at the time of the focus group, I invited participants to one-on-one practice meetings to test the technology, which was successful in allowing all participants in the current study to test their ability to join the Microsoft Teams meeting (Greenspan et al., 2021).

### **Positionality**

This research is approached from the positionality of being the parent of a transgender child and the issues around being an insider researcher are acknowledged. As a parent who is on a journey with my transgender child as they transition, I have access to the private Facebook group which allows parents to discuss issues that arise from parenting their transgender children and offers support, insights and information. This group of parents come from a position of affirming their child's gender identity as stated in the group's kaupapa (code of conduct), but parents have different parenting experiences and are at different stages of learning about gender diversity and how best to support their child. Access to this group was an important consideration in developing the research.

Greene (2014) points to the pros and cons of insider research and suggests tools to mitigate the experience of shifting between identities of researcher and participant, including the practice of reflexivity which was incorporated in the research method by using a focus group and led to the adoption of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### **Participants**

The participants were five parents (two of whom were parents of the same child) of transgender children recruited from the Facebook parent support group which provides peer support to parents of transgender children.

The selection criteria for participants:

- Parent or caregiver who has a transgender child
- and who is a member of the private Facebook group "Support for parents or caregivers of gender diverse children"
- and who has advocated for their transgender child on issues arising from their child's gender identity or transition in a New Zealand secondary school.

## ***Recruitment***

The initial contact was via an advertisement posted to the private Facebook group inviting members of that group who met the selection criteria to participate in the research. Potential participants were asked to contact the researcher by mail or direct message on Facebook.

AUTEC required the comments on the advertisement post to be disabled. Initially placing the advertisement in the Facebook page as a single post without comments enabled had limited responses. It was quickly lost in the “newsfeed” as parents posted about issues they wished to discuss and engaged on posts. After discussion with AUTEC, it was agreed that the recruitment advertisement could be posted multiple times which kept it in the view of those coming onto the page. The advertisement was posted three times over 10 days. The moderator of the Facebook group also posted to alert members to the advertisement and “pinned” it in notices. The visibility of the advertisement improved and interested participants emailed or messaged me via Facebook to indicate interest in the research. One participant arranged a call via messenger to discuss the information in the advertisement further.

An information sheet and consent form were sent via email to interested participants who supplied their email address. Participants were invited to call or email the researcher if they had any further questions when they received the information sheet or to send the signed and dated consent form back if they agreed to participate or to indicate their preference for giving oral consent.

Eight members of the Facebook group expressed interest and were sent the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (see Appendix D), a PIS to share with their child (see Appendix E), and a consent form (See appendix H). Five parents were recruited based on a “first come” basis when they returned signed consent forms. One potential participant did not return the PIS, one had not advocated in the secondary school setting and was therefore excluded, and one other had a potential conflict being a teacher so, after I discussed the study with them, the PIS was not forwarded. The other participants confirmed their interest after receiving the PIS by emailing back signed and dated consent forms.

## ***The Sample***

Anonymised details of the participants, and their children, are outlined in Table 2. Participants were from different locations around New Zealand: one was from a small South Island town, one from a small North Island town, and the final participants were from different cities.



**Table 2***Focus Group Participants*

| <b>Name<br/>(Pseudonym)</b> | <b>Ethnicity (where<br/>supplied)</b>          | <b>Location</b>       | <b>Child's<br/>Gender<br/>Identity</b> | <b>Name<br/>(Pseudonym)</b> | <b>Age</b> |
|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------|--|-----------------------------|------------|
| Andrea                      | European/Pākehā                                | Town                  | Trans girl                             | Charlotte                   | 17 years   |
| Vicky                       | [not supplied]                                 | City                  | Trans boy                              | Aidan                       | 16 years   |
| Adam                        | Malaysian/Chinese<br>and NZ<br>European/pākehā | Town moved<br>to City | Trans boy<br>and non-<br>binary child  | Lachlan                     | 13 years   |
| Susan                       | NZ European/Pakeha                             |                       |  | Lux                         | -          |
| Anna                        | [not supplied]                                 | Town                  | Trans girl                             | Raine                       | 14 years   |

**Data Collection**

Participants were emailed to identify a possible time for a Microsoft Teams meeting. They were also invited to a one-on-one test meeting to minimise potential technical issues and establish rapport. All the participants accepted this invitation and short five to ten minute meetings took place.

Participants were required to give oral or written consent to participate, which included an undertaking to maintain the confidentiality of the identity of those in the focus group and the information discussed in the focus group. First names were used during the focus group. No participant chose to use a pseudonym during the focus group.

Options for a meeting time were emailed and a time and day were established. Participants were sent an invitation to join the Microsoft Teams meeting during an evening. Perhaps as a result of pre-testing, there were no significant technical issues during the focus group, although one participant rejoined using a different device to improve video quality. Rapport was established by emailing participants during the recruitment process, during the technology “check-in” and this rapport was facilitated by all being members, including myself, of the parent Facebook page (Greenspan et al., 2021). At the start of the focus group, I shared a personal anecdote to build rapport before sharing the expectations for the focus group discussion.

At the beginning of the focus group I alerted participants that the audio-visual recording was starting in addition to the alert given to participants by Microsoft Teams. One latecomer was reminded of this

audio-visual recording when they joined. As noted in the PIS, participants could attend with their video off; one participant chose this option.

In order to replicate the kaupapa of the online Facebook group I indicated that I would also share information about my experiences as the parent of a transgender child, if appropriate, during the course of the session. The importance of allowing people time to speak as well as the opportunity to engage in discussion was noted at the beginning of the session. Participants were invited to share cultural protocols but no one requested any special protocols prior to the discussion.

As the moderator, I was aware of the potential for discomfort around sensitive topics and expressed the hope at the start of the session that, like the peer support group environment, people would have shared experiences and could offer support and reassurance, and be respectful of other people's perspectives (Sim & Waterfield, 2019).

As both the moderator and a fellow parent of a transgender child I contributed my own experiences of advocating for my child, but these were removed from the transcript before analysis as my child could be identifiable in the final output.

Participants were invited to share further thoughts via email after the focus group and an invitation to do a follow-up interview was extended. This was to allow participants to share any information they had not had the time or opportunity to share in the group discussion given the time constraints.

The session was brought to a close after 100 minutes with a call for any final reflections or comments to ensure that all participants could express any thoughts they had not been able to contribute within the timeframe. One follow-up email was received and some of the comments have been included in the findings.

Adam and Susan, a married couple, accepted the invitation to participate in a follow-up interview. They were invited to expand on the stories they had shared in the focus group and there was further exploration of topics such as child-led advocacy and children's rights prompted by myself as the interviewer.

### ***Follow Up Interview***

Two participants, Adam and Vicky (a married couple) accepted an invitation to participate in a follow-up one-on-one interview after the focus group. The 85 minute in-depth interview was conducted online using Microsoft Teams.

The discussion was conducted as a semi-structured interview to follow on from the dynamic of the focus group and my position as a fellow parent/participant. The purpose of the interview was to explore the issues that had arisen during the focus group more deeply and to raise issues that had not been explicitly covered, such as their understanding of children's rights in their advocacy, so different questions were asked in the interview. As a couple, the participants provided a unique perspective and also have the experience of advocating for both a transgender son and a non-binary child. The participants reviewed the transcript to check accuracy and that there was no identifiable information such as names of people or schools before analysis. No changes were requested after the participants reviewed the transcript.

### **Data Analysis**

Given that this research started with my own journey as a parent of a transgender child it is important to acknowledge my subjectivity as a researcher. From the initial choice of research question, I focussed the lens on the parent and their actions on behalf of their transgender child. Within this framing, reflexive thematic analysis was an appropriate choice for data analysis as it highlights the role of the researcher throughout the process (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Braun and Clarke (2022) describe six phases in carrying out reflexive thematic analysis beginning with familiarisation and initial insights. My starting point for analysing the data drew on my own experience as a parent of a transgender teen and an understanding of the role of parents who affirm their child's gender identity and advocate on their behalf. As a member of the Facebook parent and caregiver support group I brought unique insights from the kaupapa of this group, the type of issues that are discussed and the way parents support each other. My analysis was also rights-focussed, considering obligations to children under UNCROC (1989). Therefore, I brought to the data analysis an understanding of the types of issues that arise, the process of advocacy and the potential barriers based on my own experiences. I also acknowledge my perspective is limited by my privilege as a white, cisgender woman and may have influenced my choice of themes and the importance I gave to particular data.

The data from both the focus group and follow-up interview were recorded and then downloaded from Microsoft Teams. The first phase of data analysis, familiarising myself with the data, involved transcribing both the focus group discussion and follow-up interview from the audio-visual recordings.

I transcribed all of the data directly from the focus group recording. For the follow-up interview recording I used the downloaded automated transcript from Microsoft Teams as a starting point and



I went through the transcript and created separate documents for each theme. During this process the initial themes (“candidate” themes) were examined according to phase four “developing and reviewing themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 35). It became apparent after a discussion with my supervisors that the themes needed more clarity to avoid capturing the same data across too many themes.

Further development of themes is considered phase five (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In line with creating a story for the data, I started with the theme “Becoming Advocates”, which captured how parents started on their advocacy journey (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The “child-centred’ theme became “Child Involvement in Advocacy” specifically due to my understanding of the children’s rights framework and analysing instances where parents and teachers discussed ways they worked in the child’s best interests, according to their evolving capacities or ensuring their views were considered (UNCROC, 1989). Other themes, “Access to Education”, captured issues experienced in schools which became the impetus for advocacy. The “Level of School Support” became a theme in its own right as the level of support from teachers and schools was found to be important in the focus group discussion and consistent with the literature. The “Advocacy Experience” theme captured parents’ advocacy work, the impact it has on them, and the resources they have available. “Outcomes” as a theme captured the changes in schools that parents perceived, and also captured changes they reflected on about themselves. The theme of “rights” emerged in the follow up interview.

Phase six, “writing up” is a process of not only writing the findings but also the other sections of this dissertation. As I write this, I reflect on the process I have gone through to develop the themes, the story that has become apparent through writing the findings, and how this is not only filling a gap in the literature but is in itself a call for change in how schools are prepared for gender diverse students.

## **Ethical Considerations**

### ***Partnership***

The principle of partnership was embedded in the decision to use a focus group whereby participants have the opportunity to contribute to the direction of the interview through the group discussion.

### ***Participation***

The focus group method gave participants the opportunity to explore their experiences in a way where they were more in control of the narrative and the interview was semi-structured to continue this approach.

### ***Protection***

The choice of a focus group was to minimise harm by creating a supportive environment of peers and to ameliorate the power imbalance between the researcher and participants.

### **Limitations**

The limits of a 60 pt dissertation meant that it was only possible to recruit a small focus group, so there was no opportunity to ensure participants represented the wider community of parents in the online peer group or the wider community of parents with gender diverse children.

The focus group was made up of parents who affirm their child's gender identity and drawn from a peer support group so the perspectives are limited to parents who are already supportive of their child's social transition and are potentially well-informed. Two of the participants were NZ European, Adam is Malaysian/Chinese and NZ European/Pākehā, and two participants did not supply information on their ethnicity. The "first-served" selection meant that it was not possible to ensure diverse representation.

Only one focus group was held due to the limits of the dissertation, which meant that the participants had limited time to discuss the issues their transgender children had experienced which led to advocacy and potential outcomes. The follow-up interview was offered to all participants in an effort to give them an opportunity to discuss any issues relating to the study in more depth.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methodology and methods used to explore the research questions. The rationale for this has been explained, and then the recruitment, data collection process and data analysis process has been discussed. Ethical considerations and limitations have been outlined. The findings from the focus group and the follow-up interview are presented in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four: Findings

The findings presented are an exploration of parent advocacy for their transgender children in Aotearoa New Zealand school settings. The research questions focused on secondary schools: What is the experience of parents who advocate for their children in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools? And, what changes, if any, have resulted from parental advocacy for transgender children in secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand? The findings include issues arising in middle school<sup>4</sup> as this is the place and time where two of the participants first started their advocacy journey.

In exploring the issues that prompted their advocacy, parents revealed how their growing understanding of their child's gender identity journey led to advocacy, how they engaged with their children in their advocacy, factors in the school environment which prompted advocacy, the level of support from schools, their experience of advocating and the outcomes they perceived as a result of advocacy. Some mental health issues or other diagnoses for their children were disclosed but these have not been included in the findings as it is beyond the scope of this study.

Parents' understanding of rights was specifically asked in the interview and is included as the final theme.

### Becoming Advocates

"I think for us, advocacy has been just a continual process since Lachlan came out" (Adam)

Over the course of the discussion parents revealed their own journey of understanding about gender diversity as they stepped up to be advocates in school. However, as one parent noted, "not all families are accepting."

Parents discussed their child's coming out or gender identity disclosure, revealing diverse experiences of this journey as parents. Education was inextricably linked to this experience, with parents also talking about children changing schools since coming out or being in single-sex schools that now did not align with their children's disclosed gender identity.

For some parents it had been several years since their child came out. In contrast, Anna described her daughter's affirmed gender identity as being new to her because she had just come out to her six to eight weeks previously. As a result, Anna was still adjusting and stated she sometimes used

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<sup>4</sup> Years 7 and 8

incorrect pronouns. Anna revealed that she had never thought about the concept of having a trans or non-binary child, but she was in the process of learning to support her child's gender identity.

ANNA: ... I never thought that we would be having a ( ... ) non-binary or trans [child], it just hadn't even occurred to me that it would be part of our experience and I hadn't even thought much about that as a concept ever...

Adam commented on how their ongoing advocacy as parents [with his wife Susan] was sparked by their children's gender identity disclosures:

ADAM: I think for us, advocacy has been just a continual process since Lachlan came out, and then because Lux was on the school roll last year as just [his birth name]...Parents'

### ***Parents' Knowledge***

Parents discussed situations where their knowledge or understanding of gender diversity influenced their advocacy efforts. Anna reflected on her first meeting at the school and how she advocated using her own personal journey of understanding and inexperience to appeal to staff:

ANNA: We had a meeting with most of the Year 10 staff, and I just stood up and said, 'This isn't just clinical, this is a family story and this is still the same child and it's been a journey for us, so we don't expect you guys to just get it right straight away either, but we do expect you to try. To misgender or misname just 'cos it's a mistake is one thing, but to not actually try is another...'

The discussion revealed that parents do not always have adequate resources or knowledge when they advocate, but that they take steps to become informed. Susan reflected on her initial lack of understanding about how to support her child's gender identity due to her lack of knowledge about gender diversity when her child came out. She recalled that she sought out information on gender diversity and joined the parents' support group on Facebook but that her lack of knowledge at the time may have contributed to making poor or uninformed decisions as a parent and an advocate:

SUSAN: I probably didn't know it [gender diversity] was really a thing until I was late 20s (...) so I had to do a lot of learning. (...) So we'd really muddled through it eh, and we didn't make the best decisions at times, and because I think we were a little bit uninformed.

Parents discussed the complex processes and systems that they needed to become familiar with before they could effectively advocate on issues, such as ensuring birth certificates were updated before trying to make changes on education systems. Vicky discussed the complicated process to ensure her child's pronouns and name were appropriately recorded in the wider education system such as on NCEA records.



## Child Involvement in Parental Advocacy

“Yeah, we’ve very much involved him in it all because it’s about him. It’s not about us...”  
(Susan)

This theme “child involvement in parental advocacy” captures data where parents discussed their children’s involvement in their advocacy efforts, encompassing instances where parents advocated on behalf of their child to child-led advocacy where parents felt they were supporting their child’s advocacy efforts. The follow-up interview with Susan and Adam specifically asked how they involved their children in their advocacy.

Parents discussed negotiating with their child about whether they were “ready” to socially transition before advocating in school. Adam and Susan recalled conversations with their transgender son leading up to their advocacy in school and his readiness, especially due to his young age (11 years). They wanted him to have a name chosen in advance and to be comfortable informing the school so that he could have a “clean break”:

SUSAN: ... At the end of May he told us ‘Yep, I’m certain’, had all those conversations and we were like, ‘Well ( ... ) would you be okay waiting to tell the school until you’ve chosen a name and you’re comfortable doing it?’...

As they started to engage with the school, Susan described offering a choice to their son about whether or not to be part of the advocacy process and whether he wanted to be in class for the teacher’s discussion about his social transition. She described the importance of involving him because it was essentially his journey. As part of this process, he was offered input into the decisions about how the school was going to share his transition:

SUSAN: He chose to come. We gave him the choice. It was, ‘You don’t have to be if you’re uncomfortable, but it’s about you’. And he had his input on what the teacher and the principal told the class, there were a couple of things where he was like, ‘No, I don’t like that’. We’ve very much involved him in it all because it’s— it’s about him. It’s not about us.

In contrast, parents revealed that some children advocated for themselves first in school before informing their parent. Anna talked about discovering that her trans daughter had already talked to teachers about using different pronouns. She then followed up with advocacy to support her daughter’s social transition in school. Anna reported how her daughter had an opportunity to advocate for herself again in a meeting with the school. The school wanted to inform all of Raine’s classes about her social transition before Raine could wear the uniform of her choice. But Raine was emphatic that she did not want to wait any longer:

ANNA: [Raine said]: 'I'm just going to wear it [the girl's uniform] and I don't mean to be rude but you've asked me to wait and I did that and I'm not going to wait another week'. (...) She said, 'It's just like being on a diving board and I just need to jump'.

Parents shared experiences where their children felt confident advocating for themselves in schools. Andrea felt her daughter was capable of advocating for herself, and that she had joined the focus group under "false pretences" because she was just trying to keep up with her daughter. However, she also revealed that her daughter, while being able to advocate, needed "handholding" at times and so still needed parental guidance or support.

Parents discussed instances where they discussed advocacy with their children and despite their child's wishes they chose to advocate on an issue to prevent adverse consequences, but this decision of whether or not to act was on a case-by-case basis.

ADAM: There have been times where our kids like more 'Nah. Can you just leave it?' And if we kind of think, 'Well, no, that's actually heading down the wrong track', then we'll do something about it. But there have been times where it's just like, 'Okay, well, if you want us to leave it, we'll just leave it. But if that happens again, then we're going to do something.'

In the follow-up interview, Susan and Adam were asked about the level of involvement their children had in their advocacy as parents and whether it was parent or child-led. The findings suggest that it is a balancing act and dependent on the situation. Susan felt it was currently parent-led as she had to step in to avoid problems escalating and poor outcomes, such as their child opting out of school, but that at other times her child had advocated for themselves on issues:

SUSAN: ... at the moment it's probably led more by me, because I don't want to let things slide and it becomes a bigger problem later on, or to accumulate and have it where the kids don't want to go to school. I'd rather address it there and then, whereas at the moment with some things they're just like 'leave it alone'. But, then there are other things we— like, Lux went and wrote to Chris Hipkins and asked if he could change legislation so that all toilets in high schools can be gender neutral [laughs] and wants to go and talk to their Dean about it (...) so— it's honestly ( ... ) a mixture a lot of the time...

Other factors such as perceptions of the community and their child's level of maturity (or evolving capacities) could affect their decision as parents to advocate on an issue. Adam felt that the way they intervened on issues as parents was affected by the possible impact on their child's experience at school, the community they lived in, and their child's own level of confidence:

ADAM: I think the biggest part for us is how it's going to affect our kids at school. Like we don't want to be these parents that come in and wrap our kids in cotton wool. And I think ( ... ) some things now that happened— if that happened when we were in [small town], we would have been ( ... ) calling people and that kind of stuff, whereas our kids have grown in confidence and, yeah. So, ( ... ) that's kind of evolved a bit.

Parents discussed times when their children successfully advocated on issues, such as informing the school about their gender identity, wearing their uniform of choice, helping to set up a pride group in the school or changing records to reflect their names and pronouns. Andrea revealed her daughter had advocated for herself on different issues a number of times:

ANDREA: ...she sorted out when she was at [TOWN] College, she sorted out with them the name change on the roll, she sorted out (...) getting all the teachers to use her correct pronouns, she got her email address, talked to the IT people and got her email address changed and, in fact multiple times, because when she was non-binary she had a different name.

Transgender children were not always in a position to speak up about issues. One of the factors that influenced whether their child was able to advocate for themselves was privacy and not wanting to be “out”. Adam and Susan felt there were instances when their children were not able to advocate for themselves due to a lack of confidence or because they were fearful of the consequences and so, as parents, they felt the need to advocate:

SUSAN: ... like Andrea you were saying that your daughter will (...) advocate for herself, our children do a little bit, but they don't like to ever get in trouble, and they feel like a lot of this stuff, so even just correcting pronouns, they feel like it's annoying the teachers or getting into trouble and so it's made it where we've had to push for things...

Despite being ready to advocate for their children, the parents envisaged that their children would become their own advocates in schools. Anna had strategies to build her child's confidence to advocate for herself. Susan also expressed hope that their advocacy as parents would be a model for their children to follow:

SUSAN: To be fair though, our kids have seen us doing it. Because we tell them (...), 'We're going in for this' and then we tell them about it afterwards and I think for them, they've seen that that means it's OK for them to speak up...

## **Access to Education**

Parents identified issues that had arisen for their children in schools and led to their advocacy. These included issues such as ensuring names and pronouns were correct, access to preferred bathrooms, uniforms and clothing, PE and sports, and bullying that negatively impacted on their children's access to education and are captured in this theme of “access to education”.

Adam expressed frustration over the overwhelmingly gendered education system which manifested in multiple issues for transgender students which are examined in more depth below:

ADAM: I think one of the big things that we've have come up against just in the education system in general (...) it's not something you ever think about until you have a gender diverse child, you know how gendered literally everything is, 'Line up outside class', and

‘C’mon boys over here girls over here’, and testing and PE and cross country and swimming and uniforms and toilets...

### ***Establishing a Name***

One of the first advocacy issues that parents raised in the discussion was supporting their child’s affirmed gender identity by establishing their child’s chosen name at school and on the school roll.

Trying to establish a new name and pronouns revealed systemic issues that needed to be tackled from school reports “using inappropriate pronouns and gendered language throughout” (Vicky), external systems such as NCEA and supplying documentation to change names on internal systems:

VICKY: There’s even things like the kids’ emails at schools (...) how quickly they can be changed or how long they have to— so it’s the IT systems catching up with what people are trying to do, so I think there’s a lot around names and pronouns definitely for us...

Parents had different experiences of establishing their child’s name and ensuring they had the documentation required by the school. Susan found that she still had to rely on the support of the new middle school when an updated birth certificate was delayed to make sure her son was enrolled with his chosen name at the start of the school year.

### ***Access to Preferred Bathrooms***

A lack of access to appropriate toilet facilities was an issue brought up by most of the parents in the discussion. Parents reported how some schools relied on “workarounds” such as allowing their children to use staff toilets, needing a special key to access staff or disabled toilets, or having to use toilets situated across campus. These individual accommodations were described as “barriers” to being able to access facilities by Vicky. Some parents reported their children avoiding using the toilets because they didn’t know where the gender neutral toilet was situated. In one instance, a parent revealed distressing consequences when their child wet themselves in class after being challenged and denied their special access to a staff bathroom.

Some schools were reported to have gender neutral facilities, but these were not necessarily easily accessible to students. Some schools were more prepared. Andrea noted that she had not needed to advocate on issues related to bathrooms because the school had already consulted with a queer student group about toilets and made changes as a result:

ANDREA: The school (...) has got quite a lot of non-binary and trans boys at the school and they’d just (...) refurbished all their toilets and had talked to the (...) group of queer students at school (...) and they’d said ‘Don’t put “girls” on the toilets, make all the toilets gender neutral’.

## ***Uniforms/Clothing***

The importance of students having a choice over which uniform to wear or having a gender neutral option was discussed, although this was not an issue parents reported advocating about. Parents felt that students did not always want a gender neutral uniform option with Andrea revealing that Charlotte “was adamant that she was going to wear a girls’ uniform, she wasn’t going to wear the trousers.” However, the value of a gender neutral uniform, which her son had chosen from the outset in an all girl’s school, was discussed by Vicky.

Concerns about clothing were not restricted to uniforms. Knowing the school had a rigid gendered dress code for a school ball had already caused concern for Susan in the case of her non-binary child, and knowing that her transgender child would have to face this issue in the future:

SUSAN: ... they did a year eight dance at the end of the year and (...) Lux wasn't out as non-binary in year eight, but they wanted to wear like a suit and the school said, 'Absolutely not. That's not OK'. There was a very strict dress code and it was by gender. It wasn't, 'Well, you could wear either or' and we were very aware of that once Lachlan was in year eight...[there would be an issue].

## ***PE and Sports***

PE was a particular area of concern and prompted advocacy within the school environment because it brought up a number of issues related to gendered activities. Issues such as students wearing binders<sup>5</sup> and needing extra time to change for PE or not wanting to participate on a given day because of this were also raised. Andrea expressed relief that her daughter was in year 12 and therefore did not have to do PE and this was echoed by Vicky. Sports such as swimming were of particular concern because they had the potential to “out” their transgender children if participation was compulsory:

SUSAN: ...specifically in regards to PE, they’ve been great about changing rooms, but having gendered activities, all the time, and like Lachlan being told you have to join in with swimming, and I was (...) ‘That’s actually outing him to other students if you’re going to make him do that’.

The challenging nature of some activities or subjects meant that transgender children might not want to participate, impacting on their education. Susan discussed how she felt their children were missing out on schooling:

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<sup>5</sup> Close-fitting under-garment worn to flatten a chest

SUSAN: ... there are still are things at school educationally that the kids don't always want to join in on, which (...) obviously affects your education just because Lachlan's like 'I don't want everyone to know that I'm trans.'

The cisnormative environment of PE and sports manifested in areas such as testing. Fitness testing and being measured against gendered norms in PE were perceived as problematic by Adam and Susan and prompted specific advocacy around how the assessment standards based on binary gender standards were going to applied to their transgender son and then to their non-binary child:

ADAM: ... and I was interested in how they would approach it [fitness testing] with Lachlan, because I hadn't really been able to take the temperature of how they were handling things. And, I'd come out right and said, 'You know, look, are you going to assess Lachlan against the boys' things or the girls'? 'Cause he would prefer to be assessed against the boys' category' ... 'Also it's a bit of a concern for me because we have a child who's non-binary and we would like to know what you're going to do for *them*'...

Adam reflected on his understanding that it was the gender-based systems in sports that needed to change and not their children:

ADAM: ... you've got boys and girls that actually want to compete, ok fine, whatever, why not just have a mixed race for everyone else, and say 'Look, (...) just go, you just have to finish the course', (...) but like that's still a workaround, why not just change the system – why do we need genders in sports anyway?

School sports was also raised as an issue that could prompt advocacy, with Adam indicating that as parents they just avoided having to advocate around issues connected with sports teams. The fear of community pushback in sports was a deterrent for participation and advocacy. Anna was reluctant to let her daughter play in a sports team, despite her liking a number of sports, due to the potential for controversy about transgender athletes competing.

### ***Bullying***

Parents discussed various forms of bullying which negatively impacted their children's school experience and led to their advocacy. Misgendering (not using preferred pronouns or not using language that aligns with preferred gender) was found to be ignored or trivialised by teachers, with Adam reporting that one teacher responded to a complaint by saying, "Boys will be boys". Bullying was not confined to peers, with parents also discussing incidents where teachers misgendered students and one incident of a slur being used by a teacher which prompted a meeting with the principal:

SUSAN: We had a meeting with the kids' current principal at the high school. One of Lux's teachers had used the "f" slur in class and then tried to defend it, saying 'Well, it means a pile of sticks'. And I was like, 'You don't use that word ever. That's not okay...'

The bullying reported by parents included aggressive or violent behaviour which was so upsetting that it contributed to Adam and Susan's decision to change schools and move to a larger city to ensure a more supportive environment for their children:

SUSAN: ...they decided to do a little pride parade (...) They had kids throwing stuff at them... and taking their flags and ripping them and drawing on them and that was really the start of, we can't, we personally couldn't do it [stay in the town].

Adam and Susan also discussed the different levels of bullying they perceived for their children, with their perception that more bullying was experienced by their transgender child compared to their non-binary child.

Violence was not confined to the school grounds. One incident was described by a parent where their child was sexually harassed on a bus on the way to school.

Most parents referenced misgendering by both peers and teachers, and especially by relievers. For Susan, the issues were so pervasive she felt that she was constantly fighting for her children who felt powerless to respond. The issues tended to arise from unforeseen circumstances, such as a teacher being away and a relief teacher misgendering her child, forcing Susan to act:

SUSAN: ...at the moment it does feel a lot like it's an uphill battle. And it's— I never know, day to day what the kids are going to come home and tell me has happened in regards to the teacher has either gendered Lux and they've not felt like they can speak up and say, 'That's not who I am', or someone's misgendered Lachlan or— Well, you know, there's been an activity where he's been grouped with some cis boys who are homophobic (...)

The level of bullying led to the perception of an unsafe environment at school for their children for some parents. Adam recalled that he acted when teachers failed to adequately address bullying which had made the school environment seem unsafe:

ADAM: I remember being in a spare room at my office, just like bollocking this dude and being like, 'This is unacceptable. You know, you need to do better to make sure that my child is safe at school. It's not a safe environment for him. He's (...) come to you. What are you going to do about this? Because this is, you know, unacceptable'.

### **Level of School Support**

This theme encompasses the perceived level of preparedness of schools, support parents encountered from the school, the value of information to facilitate change, the teachers and leadership team, and the perception of community pushback.

There was discussion about the level of preparedness of schools for gender diverse students with it being evident that schools did not always have plans in place to facilitate their social transition or to

ensure a positive experience in school. When they first advocated, Susan found the school had not been through the process of supporting social transition for a transgender student before: “It was quite a new thing. What is this?” (Susan). Two parents discussed the situation that their child was the “first” transgender girl in a school, suggesting that these schools were not prepared for all gender diverse students. There was some evidence that schools were prepared or in the process of making changes. One single-sex girls’ school reportedly had experiences with non-binary and trans boys attending and had put in place gender neutral toilet facilities.

In some cases, parents tried to gauge the school’s preparedness. Andrea discussed meeting with the school principal to assess the “vibe”. In calling around schools to assess their level of support prior to enrolling his children, Adam found that there was a general lack of preparedness in schools:

ADAM: ... I think that one of the things that we found in those conversations is that there are a lot of schools that are sorely underprepared (...) for gender diverse children and it would be something as simple as ‘Do you have a unisex toilet or how are you going to handle changing for PE?’ You know, and it’s like, ‘Oh well, maybe they could use the toilet in the staffroom’, but that’s at the other end of the school...

Parents acknowledged some schools had taken steps to provide safe spaces and initiatives for gender diverse students. Adam and Susan found a difference between the intermediate and high school in the level of visibility of LGBTQ+ students, such as having pride days and library displays, which positively impacted on their son’s experience of the school.

### ***Facilitating Change***

Proactively bringing outside experts in to support their advocacy, especially when schools were unprepared, was found to be an effective strategy. Adam recalled contacting InsideOUT Kōaro, an advocacy organisation for rainbow youth, to provide the relevant information to the school who had no apparent experience with gender diversity when their child first transitioned. Having an expert discussing issues with the school led to a positive response from the deputy principal:

ADAM: The regional representative for InsideOUT spoke quite extensively with one of the deputy principals... and she [the deputy principal] was calling us on the weekend and working on the information that she was going to share with Lachlan’s class after he came out at school, or for when he came out at school...

Anna was asked to supply information to the counsellor to support her child’s social transition, which was shared with the school board. However, when Adam and Susan went into the school armed with information over issues in PE, the school personnel had not appeared to have read it:



ADAM: There was one chapter in there that covered specifically the problematic nature of phys-ed in schools (...) I came prepared, we'd actually emailed it through to the dean and he'd passed it on to the principal so they've already seen it.

SUSAN: They hadn't read (...) [it] though.

### ***Teachers and Leadership Team***

Parents found that the school personnel's levels of acceptance of their child's transition impacted on their need to advocate. Adam and Susan reported the leadership team at the middle school their children attended was supportive and so initial changes, such as changing their name on the roll, happened quickly:

ADAM: I think when Lachlan came out, [town] middle school were pretty helpful (...) there was a couple of deputy principals who (...) got on board pretty quickly and (...) got things like Lachlan's name changed on the roll.

Anna was frustrated that a teacher's negative change in attitude once her child transitioned was implied through "veiled" behaviour and tone, meaning that it was below a threshold where she felt she could take any action. Some teachers were reported to misgender their children, suggesting some teachers' lack of knowledge or understanding of gender diversity. The importance of having a supportive dean as they were a key contact within the school was discussed by some parents. A supportive dean was considered to be an ally in facilitating change:

ADAM: ... Lux's dean was just wonderful, he was like, 'Look, as soon as you want it to happen we can change everything that will be all good, it's no problem', whereas Lachlan's dean is less communicative.

This is in contrast to Adam and Susan discussing a general lack of understanding of non-binary children as illustrated by a teacher's suggestion that their non-binary child could choose which gender to be assessed against in PE fitness testing:

SUSAN: ... he was like 'We will make non-binary students choose which gender they most closely affiliate with' [general reaction] and we were like, 'That's not what non-binary is, that doesn't work'...

Parents were sometimes faced with problematic situations simply because teachers didn't know their child's history. The underlying cisnormativity of the system meant that this knowledge was essential to prevent problems from surfacing, such as incorrect pronouns on school rolls or reports. The importance of a teacher understanding and supporting a student's affirmed gender identity was highlighted by the issues parents experienced with relievers and other teachers who didn't have direct knowledge of their child:

VICKY: ... it's how teachers are using that name and pronouns which can be influenced by how well they know the kid, and relief teachers brings in a whole kind of new aspect of that.

### ***School Transitions***

School transitions, such as starting at a new school, led to the need to advocate. Susan and Adam found that their child's birth name (which had legally been changed) was printed on a form handed to their child at the start of their high school year. Changing schools was perceived as a stressful situation for their child which was exacerbated by Covid-19 lockdowns:

SUSAN: ... I think one of the things we had just over the holiday period at the start of the year was this massive sense of anxiety that Lachlan was dealing with and going from intermediate to high school (...) because of the fact that (...) parents weren't allowed to go into schools, we literally weren't allowed on school grounds (...) because of all of this stuff [Covid] going on...

### ***Perceptions of Community Pushback***

Parents felt that potential hostility from the wider parent community was a factor which impacted on their child's acceptance in schools. In one instance, Andrea found the school took a stance on ensuring that any pushback from other parents would be dealt with. In contrast, Adam and Susan recalled a conversation in which the school had experienced pushback from the community in the past about unisex uniforms and the puberty health unit. The indication was that the school would not be able to make some changes because of the potential for negative community reactions:

SUSAN: So, when we met with them, I think the puberty unit was coming up quite soon after that. And I was like well, 'Can you be mindful of the fact that, yes, he's Lachlan, he's a boy, but he doesn't have cis male genitalia'. Or, you know, 'There are going to be other kids that feel the same, can you incorporate that into the programme?' And they were like (...) 'We would love to, but we've tried to introduce similar things in the past and it's just not been [possible]' ...

The perception of a hostile community prevented some parents from advocating in some instances. Anna was fearful of pushback from the community if her trans daughter participated in a sports team:

ANNA: ... I'm scared too, so if Raine is allowed to play on the girls' team, with all the controversy at the moment about trans women in sport, I'm quite frightened for them ... about what sort of pushback there will be....

The conservative nature of the community in the small town where they lived was one driving factor in Adam and Susan moving to a larger city to find a safer and more diverse community:

ADAM: And so we were looking at [city A] and [city B] and it was because of the fact (...) we wanted our kids to be in a place where they would be able to be themselves.

In contrast, the perception of a positive community through visible signs such as progress crossings, pride parades and in school library displays and other initiatives in schools contributed to an inclusive environment:

VICKY: All of those things [in the community] right that are visible recognition that you are valued and you're accepted and, it goes beyond acknowledgement and into acceptance.

### **The Advocacy Experience**

...it's almost like ghosts in the system (...) especially with names and pronouns, it just feels like you kind of address one system and it pops up somewhere else... (Vicky)

The "advocacy experience" theme captures discussion about parents' perception of advocacy, advocacy methods, relationships, communication channels, how parents perceived their advocacy and the impact on them as parents, issues such as privacy, and the resources needed to undertake advocacy.

Advocacy was felt to be ongoing and characterised as a "job" (Susan) and a "responsibility" (Anna) reflecting the considerable personal resources needed to undertake advocacy in schools. One of the issues was the wellbeing of their children and trying to ensure that issues did not escalate. Parents described their children being anxious when issues were not resolved before the weekend. Susan felt that the advocacy she undertook for her transgender and non-binary children was more intense or "on steroids" due to her perception of a hostile environment and the need to create a safe space for her children at school compared to her advocacy in schools before her children came out as transgender and non-binary:

SUSAN: So it's— as a mum, like advocating (...) for them before they came out, like I did a lot of that. But it's like on steroids now (...) I really am aware that the world is not often a kind place for gender diverse people so I need to do what I can to make sure, at least, you know, the little bubble at school is safe for them and I get pretty worked up about it.

All of the parents discussed engaging with schools directly on issues via emails, phone calls and setting up meetings with the leadership team and teachers. The process was often drawn out and meant parents had to be prepared to engage with schools on a number of fronts to ensure their child's access to education:

SUSAN ... so at first the school wouldn't give out emails for teachers (...), but there's been a lot of emails to the dean, some phone calls [sighs] and it (...) wasn't being resolved, to our satisfaction, which resulted with meeting with the principal, and just, I got really, really mad

in the meeting, and I said to him, 'It's our job to advocate for our children, that's why we're here – we're not trying to be dicks about it, but this is our job'.

The complexity of advocating and deciding when to step in due to privacy concerns was highlighted by Adam who referred to an incident when the dean was going to speak to his son's peers. As Susan noted, their son was not "out" at high school so, when the dean indicated he would act on a bullying incident, the fear was that in calling it out as transphobia he was potentially going to "out" their son:

SUSAN: It was a very, 'Omigosh, please don't out Lachlan (...) when you're talking to these boys don't mention anything like that [transphobia] cos that's not your place to do so'...

### ***Relationships***

Meetings were a positive way of educating staff or having a dialogue about issues such as how to assist their child's social transition. Anna described standing up in the staffroom and making a plea for teachers to understand her child holistically. Andrea reflected on the importance of face-to-face meetings because of the opportunity to build relationships and share concerns. Andrea described how listening to the discussion in the focus group helped her to realise the importance of meetings, and reflected on a time when the school was proactive in meeting with parents and gender diverse students to identify positive areas and areas of concern:

ANDREA: One thing I took away from the evening [the focus group session] is the importance of face-to-face time with teachers/staff – the deans at [College] met with us before the kids started at the school so we could get to know each other, the kids could identify what they were worried about and looking forward to, and we could identify where they might need extra help. [Comment provided in follow-up email]

The importance of building positive relationships with staff became apparent in the focus group with parents discussing how their relationships with teachers, counsellors or the school leadership team impacted on their ability or need to advocate. Having a single point of contact in the school was viewed as a positive initiative because it meant there was someone who could facilitate and co-ordinate their child's social transition within the school:

ANNA: So the counsellor there became the person that [we] would meet, the person who coordinated everything and she was really lovely and really respectful, and so first we met with her and ( ... ) she sat with Raine and I, and just, we put a plan together of how we would let the rest of the school know...

Establishing positive relationships with teachers and other personnel took time and effort, but it enabled Vicky to know whom to approach when issues arose and also meant she and her child had advocates within the school so that their advocacy could be amplified:

VICKY: ... we already had very strong relationships with some key people in the school, so when things would go wrong you know I could quickly email or pick up the phone and I knew who to talk to and I knew who would also advocate within the school for him and who wouldn't (...) so it wasn't just me advocating, it was also us as a team choosing our internal advocates who were going to make a difference...

As well as their own relationships with teachers, parents recalled incidents when teacher-student relationships positively or negatively affected their child's experience in school. One participant found that her daughter's relationship with her teacher deteriorated after she socially transitioned, but it was subtle and therefore did not reach the threshold for advocacy. Andrea noted that a teacher with a non-binary child had a positive relationship with her child. The advantage of being "liked" by teachers was also noted by Andrea who found that this positively impacted on her child's experience in school.

The impact of Covid-19 related lockdowns meant limited access to teachers which Vicky described as a "disconnect" and highlighted the importance of parent-teacher relationships and being able to meet teachers face to face:

VICKY: I think that that challenge that we've had over the last few years of just not being able to form those more personal relationships with teachers, with deans, with principals, whoever, has probably had quite an impact I think on [our] ability to quickly advocate within the schools.

### ***Communication Channels***

Some parents discussed the frustration of ineffective communication channels between parents and school personnel. Delayed responses could have adverse impacts on their children, such as levels of anxiety, as described by one parent. Adam and Susan described a situation where they had to email the principal's secretary who decided what would be forwarded on; who was described as acting as a "gatekeeper" (Anna) and potentially raising "privacy issues" (Vicky). This gatekeeping meant that they weren't aware of what information was being passed on and whether it had even been considered:

ADAM: ... when we met with the principal (...) we were talking about this stuff like it was going to be new information to him, not having known that all of this stuff had been passed up the foodchain and he'd been aware of all these things...

Susan discussed experiencing pushback from the school over the number of emails she sent due to a lack of communication from the school:

SUSAN: ...a lot of the response we got [this] year, with Lachlan starting and Lux starting as non-binary this year, it's been, 'Well, you do understand that we have hundreds of parents emailing us a day?'.

### ***Unexpected Issues and “Whackamole”***

Parents found that they needed to be vigilant because issues kept popping up or resurfacing unexpectedly. This could be due to unexpected changes in teaching personnel, such as relievers, changing classes due to a teacher being away, receiving children’s school reports with incorrect pronouns or other issues that hadn’t been foreseen. After discussing my own child’s unexpected negative experience at athletics day, Vicky described advocacy as playing “whackamole” where she felt she had to be ready for anything the system threw at her:

VICKY: ...it’s almost like ghosts in the system (...) especially with names and pronouns, it just feels like you kind of address one system and it pops up somewhere else, and it’s just like a kind of ‘whackamole’ right, and you’re continually trying to predict ahead of time where the wrong name might appear next...

Parents revealed the intensity of advocating. It was evident that advocacy was an emotional journey, “... about three night ago I cried my eyes out” (Anna). The constant nature of issues surfacing could have an adverse impact on parents as well as on their children, especially in the face of little or no progress in schools:

VICKY: So I think things like that, you know, that need to, I guess have everything buttoned down, you know not leaving anything to chance, sometimes when things sort of happen ad hoc and you think it’s sorted, but like what you were just saying [name], you think it’s sorted out, and then it’s not, and the impact of that can be so intense.

### ***Resources***

Advocacy took considerable resources, such as time, effort and access to information. The participants were all in a position to advocate, such as being able to attend meetings, make phone calls, and in one instance choosing rental housing close to a new school. Adam described taking time to make phone calls and question schools about their policies and approach to gender diverse students before enrolling his children in a new school:

ADAM: ... we took the time to call all the schools that were close by to where I was working, and we spoke to the leadership and said, ‘Ok we’ve got a trans son and you know what’s your situation with toilets?’, and ‘Have you had trans students before?’ and ‘What’s your, you know, stance on this?’, ‘How are you going to take care of our kid?’, and you know, we were lucky in the fact that we were able to choose schools based on that.

The value of having resources to be able to meet face to face with school personnel and advocate was viewed as an advantage to a child’s social transition in school:

ANNA: ... I think that the parents coming in and actually having the opportunity to talk to the staff that will be largely working with your kid is a great way to start the ball rolling, that

if you can have the opportunity to speak on behalf of your child at the very beginning that's a real advantage...

Andrea acknowledged the privilege of being a white, educated person with resources to advocate:

ANDREA: And I have to acknowledge that we have a lot of (rich, white, educated) privilege, which does make things easier for us – I can take two hours to drive into school for a meeting without worrying about work. [Comment provided in follow-up email]

## **Outcomes**

“Things move quite slowly around here. We take a long time to make changes.” (Principal as quoted by Adam)

### ***School Outcomes***

Parents discussed different outcomes in schools which they perceived as resulting from their advocacy. They also expressed frustration at the lack of outcomes. The outcomes captured in this theme are considered below as reactive (in response to advocacy) or proactive (schools making changes without known advocacy), and whether they are changes made to address the needs of a particular child (individual accommodation) or suggestive of more systemic change (so that all transgender students would benefit).

Advocacy did not always lead to systemic change even if schools were responsive. Some changes were evident for Vicky, but these were as a result of advocacy on each particular issue meaning that she had to ensure she had covered all the possible ways the issue could manifest:

VICKY: I think the changes come, actually we get a very good response from schools, I do see you know, corrections to names and corrections to pronouns in each place when it's raised, it's just about getting around all the places is the challenge.

Some outcomes could be viewed as school-wide. Susan discussed the school's intention to add children's preferred pronouns on the electronic roll to offset relievers' misgendering children. Partly in response to Andrea and her daughter's advocacy, the school was introducing a new programme aimed at long-term culture change:

ANDREA: ...[college] is implementing a programme (...) working on the empathy and the respect and misogyny and transphobia and that is prevalent in the school, and it's not going to be an overnight thing, but...

Susan felt that one positive outcome was the willingness of the school to take into account the views of her non-binary child on wording for new signs for bathrooms:

SUSAN: ...the fact they pulled Lux aside to ask Lux's opinion was quite huge.

Long-term change was not yet evident for Anna. The school was building new facilities, but it was not clear whether this was as a result of her advocacy or the school was being proactive:

ANNA: ... I'm really pleased they are looking at putting in another unisex toilet in another block which is really good. We have **only** been in a girl's uniform for two weeks so the dust is yet to settle, so we'll see, the jury's out on how it is going to go long term.

Parents discussed changes that were recognised as accommodations or workarounds for an individual child rather than systemic change. Change was also seen to be mostly reactive rather than proactive. One parent discussed a pass being given to their child to facilitate bathroom access after a senior staff member had disputed the child's right to access a staff toilet:

ANON<sup>6</sup>: ...they gave [my child] an official pass which [my child] could show anyone which helped with (...) relievers and other people, teachers around the place that didn't know [them] so well, so from that a system sort of got put in place and that is great, it would just be nice if you know these awful things didn't have to happen to our kids...

Anna remarked that the school had needed to change to "accommodate a different gender diverse kid." Adam discussed the negative impact of the cisnormative environment on their children who had to navigate it within schools every day. Adam described how his newfound knowledge about the cisnormativity of school environments has opened his eyes to the need for changes to be made on a systemic level:

ADAM: ... I mean the amount of difference that you could make in making something, anything gender diverse, right, or gender inclusive [...] like if you made all bathrooms unisex and just dropped all gendered language (...) it would just be massive, like that would be huge.

Susan spoke about incidents when non-participation was offered as a short-term solution for issues such as those raised around PE or sports, which she found to be inadequate:

SUSAN: ... they [middle school] had a whole race in cross country that was for everyone, it wasn't gendered at all. Up here we asked the principal and he was like 'Oh well, your kids can just not to do it'. I was like, 'Oh great'.

There was frustration from some participants that schools did not enact policies or changes proactively. Vicky noted that while the school was responsive to issues being raised it would be ideal if they considered the issues pre-emptively but that this was unlikely in the short term:

VICKY: ... our school is good at responding when things are raised, what I would like more of is them proactively thinking through these issues and getting stuff in place before kids even

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<sup>6</sup> This child's details have been removed to further protect their identity due to the intimate nature of the data.



encounter [the issues] and so really the advocacy shouldn't be required [laughs], in a way. But anyway that's a dream world, right...

Parent advocacy was at times met with resistance. Adam reported that, in response to their advocacy, their school principal indicated the pace of change was going to be slow. The response from Adam was to point out the small changes which could easily be made to have a positive impact. He offered to supply further information or to help to facilitate a positive outcome, potentially investing more time in advocacy:

ADAM: ...[it] was (...) quite a lacklustre response. 'Things move quite slowly around here. We take a long time to make changes.' Things like that and, and so for me it was, 'Well, like look, there are actually some things that you can change that would be quite quick. They're quite small changes that would have big effects'...

The lack of response from some schools prompted some parent advocates to consider other avenues. Adam indicated that he was prepared to elevate an issue to the media or school board in order to get better outcomes. Adam perceived the lack of action to indicate a lack of pressure on schools to change, allowing them to be reactive instead of proactive in improving outcomes for their transgender students:

ADAM: ... unless it's something that is brought up [the gendered nature of schools] and becomes a big issue on the agenda for the school (...) I think it's very much just like 'We'll cross that bridge when we get to it' (...) If you don't have any gender diverse children, why would you bother to try and make your school a safe inviting environment for gender diverse children?

Parents had different perspectives on what constituted positive change. For Anna, the school was supportive of gender diversity, but the goal was celebration:

ANNA: ... I mean the school's been great, but no, you don't see any rainbow flags anywhere you don't see anything like that (...) there's certainly not a feeling of celebrating it [gender diversity] that's for sure.

Adam and Susan both expressed that school did just enough to "get us out of the office". Adam noted that the literature he had read called for more supportive environments in schools to enable children to safely express their gender identity and this was the outcome he envisaged:

ADAM: ... It's really disappointing because I think the place that we're at and the literature that we're looking at, it's all about creating an environment where children can be who they want to be and schools can be a safe place to foster that...

### ***Personal Change***

Adam and Susan were asked in the follow-up interview if the experience of advocacy had changed them personally. Adam discussed a new level of understanding about gender binary norms that has impacted his perception of issues:

ADAM: I think it's a ( ... ) process that you go through and breaking those gender norms and the way you think and the way you speak that's been the biggest change for me.

For Susan, the realisation that change could benefit the wider rainbow community had given her advocacy a larger purpose. She reflected that initially she was only looking for solutions for her children, but that this had expanded to more “collective thinking” and considering long-term impacts such as poor mental health outcomes:

SUSAN: ... I brought up with the principal as well about mental health around it. So I'm going to— trying to just have more conversations with the school around (...) ‘It's important that you do these things, not just for our kids, but for other children to (...) keep them happy and safe and their mental health okay’.

Being informed in the focus group led to change as one parent realised how other people approached issues and advocated for their children, which prompted Anna to express her determination to advocate despite her initial concerns so her daughter could participate in sports. One of her motivations was the realisation that advocacy could help other gender diverse children, so advocating for her daughter to participate was considered worth the potential risk of harm. She also discussed thinking about the future and trying to ensure changes would be made for other transgender children coming through schools:

ANNA: You’ve got a responsibility to do your best because there’s a whole generation of them coming through (...) and (...) if our battles can make it easier for the next ones, well (...) I’d thank those people for doing that.

### **Understanding Children’s Rights**

Adam and Susan were asked to discuss their understanding of how their advocacy related to children’s rights in the follow up interview. Adam expressed his understanding of rights as ensuring non-discrimination in their children’s access to education:

ADAM: We want our kids, we want our kids to be (...) treated exactly the same as any other child and we want them to have the same— we don't want them to be disadvantaged in anyway, because of the way that they identify...

Susan expressed a lack of knowledge on specific human or children's rights, but that she was advocating for the intrinsic rights she felt her children should have and equated these with wellbeing, participation and safety:

SUSAN: I don't know legally what their rights are. I just know as a parent what I think their rights should be. And that should be that they be able to participate in school and be happy and be safe. And if that isn't being met...

Adam perceived that the pervasive cisnormativity of schools creates a system that is biased against transgender students:

ADAM: I wouldn't call it active discrimination, my description of it would be something like, 'Institutional gender bias'. You know, like the education system in New Zealand is very gendered in nature, everything is just so gendered.

## **Conclusion**

The findings reveal the intense and sometimes emotionally fraught work of advocating within schools. It is shown that parents become advocates to support their children, going into schools and navigating the environments, which are often unsupportive, and sometimes dealing with personnel who lack knowledge or understanding of the issues. Relationships with teachers and the leadership team emerged as a significant factor in facilitating advocacy. Parents, in some cases, reported conversations with their children about the advocacy process, but also felt the need to step in to avoid problems escalating. The issues parents advocated on encompassed changing names and pronouns on all school systems, lack of appropriate bathrooms, PE and sports, and bullying. There were some positive outcomes, including individual accommodations and some level of systemic change was indicated.

Advocacy was perceived as a job, involving considerable time and effort, with parents informing themselves and schools about issues in schools that caused harm for their children. Parents also revealed the reactive nature of schools and the resistance from some schools such as the slow pace of change. Positive outcomes for parents meant that their children would be celebrated, schools would foster a safe environment and change would benefit all transgender children. Parents did not articulate rights explicitly in the focus group discussion. When asked about rights in the follow up interview the participants expressed their view of rights as non-discrimination, participation, happiness and safety.

These findings are discussed in the following chapter, which draws out significant themes in the context of the literature and the frame of children's rights.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

This chapter considers the findings in the context of the literature and brings a children's rights perspective, as enshrined in UNCROC. The most significant themes and the implications of these are critically discussed as they pertain to the research questions. The limitations of the study are considered, along with recommendations for future research and action.

The first question the study seeks to answer is: "What is the experience of parents who advocate for their children in Aotearoa New Zealand schools?" The second is: "What changes, if any, have resulted from parental advocacy for transgender children in secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand?" While there is a growing body of literature exploring parents' experiences of such advocacy in other jurisdictions, this is the first study to explore the advocacy experiences of parents in Aotearoa New Zealand. A children's rights perspective provided by UNCROC is then considered for parent advocacy and the issues affecting their transgender children.

The key findings are discussed below:

- In answering the first question, a key finding from the current study is that the advocacy experiences of the five parents reported here were similar in many respects to the experiences of parents in other countries.
- In answering the second question, a key finding is that some parents in the current study did perceive some changes in schools from their advocacy.
- A key finding is that while parents in the current study did not articulate an understanding of children's rights as enshrined in UNCROC their advocacy was consistent with a children's rights approach.
- The final key finding is that the issues the parents reported in this study can be aligned to rights enshrined in UNCROC and indicate that some schools are not fulfilling their obligations to uphold UNCROC.

### **What is the experience of parents who advocate for their children in Aotearoa New Zealand schools?**

In answering the first question, a key finding is that the advocacy experiences of the five parents in the current study were similar in many respects to the experiences of their counterparts in other jurisdictions.

### ***Supporting their Child's Gender Identity and Pivoting to Advocacy***

The affirming parents in this study followed a similar path of discovery about gender diversity after their child came out and progressed to advocacy to facilitate their children's social transition in schools in a manner similar to that found in other studies. They engaged in different types of advocacy from "some" advocacy by phoning schools about policies to "strong" advocacy such as arranging meetings in schools similar to participants in Birnkrant and Prseworski (2017). Parents also informed staff about gender diversity (Alegria, 2018; Gray et al., 2016) and set expectations similar to Alegria (2018), as shown by Anna asking the school to "try" to use correct pronouns and Adam and Susan's efforts to ensure the school had a plan in place before their son socially transitioned in the school.

### ***Conversations with their Children***

Just like the parents in Davy and Cordoba's (2020) study, some of the parents in the current study discussed their child's preferences for their social transition in schools with them, gauging what actions were needed in schools as a result. Building on Davy and Cordoba's (2020) findings, some of the children in the present study were given the option to be involved in meetings with schools and were able to facilitate their own social transition with support from parents. This is consistent with Martello-Gill (2019) who found that parents of transgender adolescents felt they needed to convey their teen's voice in their advocacy. In the current study, one parent described her daughter being able to self-advocate in schools. Some of the transgender students in the current study acted as activists within schools, setting up pride groups and advocating for changes to bathroom access consistent with other studies of student activism, but like these studies it was not without potential risk as parents observed that their children did not self-advocate due to a lack of confidence or fear of being outed (Jones et al., 2016; Jones & Hillier, 2013; McBride & Neary, 2021; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017).

Similar to Ramirez (2017), issues such as privacy influenced parent advocacy with Adam and Susan in the current study having to ensure their child was not unintentionally outed by a teacher. Some parents in the current study described balancing their child's wishes not to pursue issues with their own assessment of the potential consequences. Unlike the participant in Martello-Gill's (2019) study who refrained from acting in response to their child's wishes, some parents in the current study decided to act, even if their children preferred no action was taken, if they felt it was in their children's best interests. This difference could be explained by parents weighing up outcomes, such as assessing the possible consequences of not acting, leading to different courses of action by parents.

### ***Being Informed***

Consistent with other studies, the findings revealed that information for parents is critical – from understanding gender diversity to bringing in resources about changing practices that would potentially discriminate against their children. Some parents in the current study described becoming more informed about gender diversity after their child’s coming out, similar to the findings in Davy and Cordoba (2020). The parents in this current study did not always have the knowledge to advocate but sought out information and used this to educate teachers or other staff consistent with other studies (Davy & Cordoba, 2020; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). One parent admitted at times she muddled through and made mistakes similar to parents in other studies which suggests that parents are not always well equipped to advocate in schools (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018; Sansfaçon et al., 2018).

The current study showed that, in New Zealand school settings, access to expert information from InsideOUT made a positive difference by effectively engaging one of the school’s leadership team, showing the potential for parents to facilitate change by having access to expert resources. Information from InsideOUT was again used (albeit unsuccessfully) to inform about issues in PE/sports, and while not immediately successful, may be used by the school in the future. Parents are often the first advocates in schools on behalf of their transgender children, which suggests the value of connecting them early with advocacy organisations who can provide information to ensure parents who advocate in schools are articulate “informants” making social change as envisaged by Leonardi et al. (2021).

### ***Some Schools are Under-prepared and Uninformed***

In a key finding, it emerged in this study that most of the parents experienced schools that were to some extent unprepared for gender diverse students, consistent with findings in different contexts (Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017; Leonardi et al., 2021; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015). Some of the schools in this study appeared to be “catching up” to gender diverse students with little evidence of proactive policies (such as having accessible gender neutral toilets) and had a piecemeal approach to ensuring a positive experience for transgender students in schools (such as providing keys or passes to toilets), similar to the findings of “ad hoc and reactive” support from schools by some parents in Davy and Cordoba (p. 364, 2020). Similar to Leonardi et al. (2021), some parents also observed that their child was “the first” transgender male or female student and were frustrated that there was a lack of proactive measures being taken. In the current study, parents found most schools were unprepared for transgender students in areas such as bathroom access and changing names and pronouns on systems similar to Leonardi et al. (2021). The level of bullying reported by parents also

suggested that the school environments were unsafe consistent with the findings of the level of bullying experienced by transgender students in New Zealand surveys (Clark et al., 2014; Fenaughty et al., 2021; Veale et al., 2019). There was no mention of an individual plan or resources being supplied to parents or their children as discussed in Leonardi et al. (2021), which suggests that these supports were not offered to the parents in this study. There was insufficient data to analyse differences due to different gender identities in levels of school support as found in Leonardi (2021).

The potential consequence of this lack of preparedness by some schools in this study is that those schools which fail to enact inclusive policies until they have gender diverse students enrolled also potentially discourage children who are questioning their gender identity to “come out”, as suggested in Bower et al. (2021).

The lack of school preparedness and ad-hoc nature of issues impacted negatively on parents. One parent discussed the feeling of “an uphill battle”, which reflects the difficulty of changing systems in an unsupportive environment and supports Riggs and Bartholomaeus’ (2018) findings that advocacy could be a negative experience if it was not successful in changing behaviour or environments. This study reinforces Leonardi et al.’s (2021) conclusion:

Being unprepared and lacking knowledge about what it means to be trans, no doubt, contributes to the ways that educators reinforce normativity and limit their potential to disrupt oppressive systems of meaning and control (p. 16).

This current study supports Davy and Cordoba’s (2020) findings that school processes to allow for changes from one gender to another may not be set up for non-binary students, as indicated in the lack of understanding in applying gender norms to fitness testing for a non-binary student when the teacher wanted to know “which gender they aligned to”.

There was evidence of some supportive schools, with some parents in the current study discussing gender neutral toilet blocks and induction processes such as a meeting with gender diverse students to hear about issues. Parents in Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018) were asked to support teachers with information and this was found in the current study, as well as discussion of parents proactively *supplying* information to the school and, in some cases, instances where the transgender children themselves were asked to give information about how they wanted their social transition supported.

The parents in the current study expressed hope that more changes would be made over time in schools following their advocacy but “it was too early to tell”, which suggests that long-term analysis is needed to determine all outcomes as found in Birnkrant & Przeworski (2017)’s study that school support was perceived to increase over time.

Leonardi et al. (2021) found differences in school support for different students with gender identities, with more parents of non-binary and trans female/female student reporting schools being negative than parents of trans male/male students. This analysis is not possible within the size of the current study, but the finding that a teacher suggested “non-binary students choose which gender they most affiliate with...” in response to advocacy around fitness testing supports the finding that there could be different experiences according to affirmed gender identity.

The lack of preparedness of some schools in New Zealand as described by parents in the current study supports Leonardi et al.’s (2021) conclusion that this lack of readiness contributes to gender norms being upheld, even if in some cases individual accommodations or changes are made as a result of advocacy as found in Davy and Cordoba (2020).

### ***Supportive Teachers***

Successful advocacy depended on supportive teachers and leadership teams to facilitate change. The teachers who supported children’s social transition in the current study were found to be important allies consistent with international studies (Baldwin, 2015; Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017; Martello-Gill, 2019), with some parents discussing how some teachers facilitated name changes, asked questions to support the social transition and were advocates within the school. Some parents in this study encountered teachers who lacked knowledge and understanding of gender diversity and therefore both prompted and impeded advocacy consistent with findings in Pullen and Sansfaçon et al (2020). However, there was no evidence to suggest that these attitudes changed after discussions with parents as found in Davy and Cordoba (2020). Given the studies which have shown the negative consequences for transgender students of not having supportive teachers (Jones et al., 2016), more needs to be done to ensure gender diverse students have support from all teachers in their school environment in New Zealand. Ensuring inclusive school policy is a possible avenue given the positive impact on teacher support (Ullman, 2017).

In this study, for some parents, problems were exacerbated by relievers or teachers who did not know their child’s gender identity misgendering their child, leading to a sense of “ghosts in the system”, meaning that despite parent efforts to address issues they kept resurfacing. This supports Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018) findings that parents felt they had to be constantly vigilant when supporting their transgender children. The implication is that the safety and privacy of transgender children is sometimes dependent on having people who know them. Systems need to be changed to ensure that the use of chosen names and preferred pronouns is secure in all instances.



The negative impact of school-based transitions raised in the current study supports Davy and Cordoba's (2020) findings that parents of gender diverse children were concerned about the prospect of changing schools, such as from primary to high schools, which could mean issues resurfaced. In the current study, Adam rang around schools to determine their policies for gender diverse schools before enrolling, and Adam and Susan found that their child's birth name (which had legally been changed) was printed on a form handed to their child at the start of their high school year, suggesting that changing schools leads to a greater need for advocacy.

The findings revealed that bullying was a major concern for parents in schools in New Zealand and included misgendering and sexual harassment prompting advocacy. This is similar to some parents who found serious bullying directed towards their children in Davy and Cordoba (2020) and is consistent with studies which highlight the extent of bullying experienced by transgender students in New Zealand (Clark et al., 2014; Fenaughty et al., 2021; Howell & Allen, 2020; Veale et al., 2019).

A disturbing finding was the reported misgendering by teachers and the use of slurs by a teacher consistent with Bower-Brown et al (2021) findings that gender diverse participants in the UK reported bullying by teachers.

### ***The Advocacy Experience***

Advocacy was an intense experience for this sample of parents, described by one participant as being "on steroids" as she tried to ensure the school was a safe place for both her transgender child and non-binary child, supporting the description of advocacy as an "exhausting array of negotiations" observed by Neary (2021). The finding of the intense nature of advocacy was consistent with the parents in Pullen and Sansfaçon (2015) who found parents experienced emotional challenges supporting their children. Similarly, one parent in this study described advocacy as their "job". These findings showed that parents engaged in a number of advocacy methods such as emails, phone calls and meetings consistent with Davy and Cordoba's (2020) finding that parents were on the frontline, often the first in schools to advocate for their children, in their efforts to change systemic issues in schools.

The findings here align with other studies which show that parents use a range of approaches to advocate in schools and that this requires resources such as time (Neary, 2021a). However, the findings here also support the conclusion in Neary's study (2021) that parents recognised the advantage of having resources to advocate.

The findings suggest that advocacy requires commitment and determination, and those who do undertake advocacy might have to make sacrifices to "have everything buttoned down" (Vicky) so as

to ensure nothing is left to chance. Transgender children who do not have affirming parents advocating for them are potentially more disadvantaged and exposed to harm given that the level of support in schools is not consistent.

### ***Differences***

An important difference from international studies on parent advocacy was the finding in the current study that building relationships was an important factor in facilitating advocacy as described by most parents in the current study.

The parents in this study described how positive relationships within the school meant that parents did not need to advocate to the same level and in effect created advocates within schools. The findings also point to the value of meetings for parents to educate staff, build relationships and bring up concerns.

This study showed the negative impact of Covid-19 lockdowns on being able to form relationships with teachers and the leadership team. The importance of building relationships suggests both the fragility of support for transgender students, based on who knows and supports them, and the resources required from parents to advocate and form positive relationships, similar to the finding that some parents bring social capital to their advocacy (Neary, 2021a).

A single point of contact within the school to facilitate a child's social transition was a key finding from the study that has not to my knowledge been raised in other studies. The issue of gatekeepers and not being able to contact staff was frustrating for some parents in the current study suggesting that lines of communication need to be improved in some schools.

### ***Implications***

The similarities found in this study to different contexts internationally suggests that schools are inherently cisnormative environments which do not easily accommodate gender diverse students. The rise in affirming parenting of gender diverse children is bringing parents face to face with this reality. This is supported by the finding that parents are often battling systems such as changing names and pronouns in school records, advocating over bathroom access and in areas of schooling such as PE. It is also evident that parents have different experiences based on the level of support within an individual school environment and from individual teachers who offer support to them as advocates and facilitate their children's social transition. This suggests that more professional development and policies are potentially needed to ensure a consistent approach to affirming

gender diversity in schools consistent with obligations under UNCROC. A rights approach is considered in a section below.

### **What changes, if any, have resulted from parental advocacy for transgender children in secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand?**

A key finding is that some parents in the current study did perceive some changes in schools from their advocacy.

This current study supports the finding that parents working with schools encouraged them to make changes (Davy & Cordoba, 2020). The outcomes in schools perceived by some parents in this current study were not large in scale, but they did have the potential to positively impact the inclusiveness of the school environment, such as gender neutral pronouns on reports, a planned unisex toilet and a programme around bullying. Individual accommodations were also evident in the findings, such as special toilet passes or offering non-participation in PE.

Leonardi et al. (2021) found that some schools were responsive and made changes more than others, a finding supported in the current study with some schools making changes (such as new toilet facilities) and others seemingly resistant to change or slow to make changes due to bureaucracy, as shown when the leadership team of a school reportedly commented that the rate of change would be slow in response to a parent's advocacy efforts. This finding suggests that while schools might be aware of the issues, some schools resist changes and therefore uphold the cisnormative environment through inaction. This is a concerning response given the evidence of adverse mental health outcomes for transgender children in schools in New Zealand (Clark et al., 2014; Fenaughty et al., 2021; Veale et al., 2019).

It was recognised by parents in the current study that some of the outcomes were individual accommodations for their child and that more could be done through systemic change to ensure better outcomes for other gender diverse students, similar to Schlehofer et al. (2019) who found that parents described a change in their advocacy from working for their own child to working to benefit the wider gender diverse community. Similar to other studies which found parents were motivated by making changes for the wider transgender student community (Gray et al., 2016; Ramirez, 2017), some parents in the current study expressed that their advocacy was even more urgent when they considered the other transgender children coming through. The potential for transformation of systems in schools by the work of parents as "child-led" advocates was highlighted by Neary (p. 520, 2021) and the findings in this current study support this potential as some parents demonstrated a

new understanding of the prevailing gender norms, a responsibility for the next generation and the awareness of the need for better mental health outcomes.

### **A Children's Rights Approach**

A key finding is that while parents did not articulate an understanding of children's rights as enshrined in UNCROC their advocacy was consistent with a children's rights approach.

The concept that children are themselves rights holders has changed the narrative from one of protection and vulnerability to that of empowerment and "a growing visibility of children and stronger claims for social justice made on their behalf, or sometimes even directly made by children themselves" ('Organizations in Global Social Governance', 2022, p. 140). General Comment No. 5 states that children's rights are not a "charitable process" giving children "favours" but that a children's rights perspective involves the general principles of realising children's rights to non-discrimination; consideration of their best interests (Art. 3 (1); the right to life and development (Art. 6); and that the child is an "active participant in the promotion, protection and monitoring of his or her rights" (Art. 12); (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003b, pt. (I)).

Implementation of children's rights necessarily involves children themselves, parents and families, and non-State organisations (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003b, pt.(I)).

The findings here reveal that, while it was not articulated as such, parents followed a children's rights approach in their role as advocates. Affirming parenting can be seen as a children's rights approach, as parents seek to empower their child's realisation of their gender identity through their social transition, acting in their child's best interests to facilitate their right to identity (Art. 19). This approach supports Neary's (2021) conclusion that parents following child-led parenting, even if "informed, shaped and mediated by the restrictiveness of the gender order in families and everyday worlds" ... could be transformative in changing the cisnormative environment (Neary, 2021a, p. 521).

Some parents discussed possible responses with their children when issues in schools arose, balancing their children's best interests and other rights such as privacy (Art. 16), reflecting the "interdependence and indivisibility" of rights (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003b (I)).

A significant finding showed that some children were supported by parents to advocate for themselves, with parents only stepping in as needed consistent with providing guidance based on evolving capacities (Art. 5) and children's views being given due weight (Art. 12).

In some cases, the findings showed that children were invited to meetings about their social transition in schools and were able to give input about what would be the best approach for their

needs consistent with having their views given due weight (Art. 12). The findings also showed instances where children were not always in a position to advocate for themselves because they did not want to get in trouble or be “outed” (Art. 16) and so parents discussed stepping in as advocates, consistent with their responsibilities to act in their children’s best interests (Art. 18).

Parents balanced protection and participation for their children in their advocacy. One parent discussed listening to their children’s views about whether or not to take action over issues, but deciding to act regardless because of the fear of escalating issues, reflective of Tobin and Varadan (2019) who interpret parental guidance to include times when the parent is the decision maker. The findings also show that, despite being ready to step in for their children, some parents expressed a desire for their children to advocate for themselves, consistent with their evolving capacities (Art. 5).

The following table summarises the rights pertaining to parent advocacy from a rights’ perspective.

**Table 3**

*Parent Advocacy and Children’s Rights*

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Parent acts as an advocate                                   | Art. 18 parent has responsibility for upbringing consistent with best interests of the child<br><br>Art. 19 children have a right to identity<br><br>Art. 2 freedom from discrimination |
| Parents involving their children in advocacy                 | Art. 5 Parents give guidance for children to exercise their rights as appropriate for their child’s evolving capacities<br><br>Art. 12 children’s views given due weight                |
| Children participating in meetings/discussions               | Art. 12 children’s views given due weight   |
| Parents advocating for their child to maintain their privacy | Art. 16 children’s right to privacy   |

Parents are already adopting a children’s rights approach in their advocacy as affirming parents even if they did not articulate this in the findings. It is possible that providing parents with an understanding of UNCROC and the obligations it imposes on agents of the State such as schools has the potential to bring about transformational changes.

## **Responsibilities and Obligations under UNCROC**

The final key finding is that the issues the parents reported in this study can be aligned to rights enshrined in UNCROC suggesting that schools are not fulfilling their obligations to facilitate children's rights. This finding is discussed below in relation to UNCROC and the literature.

Obligations on State parties to uphold UNCROC means that it is an important lever for policy and legislative change. States and entities such as schools have an obligation to advance children's rights. As Robson (2015) reflects:

...for children's rights to have their desired effect of improving circumstances for children in New Zealand, those in positions of power and authority must acknowledge their existence, understand their principles and, most importantly, help to facilitate and endorse them. (p. 26)

The findings showed that the issues that prompted parent advocacy align with the rights of freedom from discrimination (Art. 2), freedom from violence (Art. 19) and rights to privacy (Art. 16), identity (Art. 18) and the right to education (Arts. 28, 29) and these are discussed below.

The issues discussed in this study were consistent with other studies which have revealed the hostile school environments for gender diverse students in New Zealand, manifesting in gendered spaces such as bathrooms, in activities such as PE and in behaviour such as bullying (Clark et al., 2014; Howell & Allen, 2020; HRC, 2008; Veale et al., 2019). These hostile environments and behaviour have been shown to have a negative impact on mental health and school achievement outcomes (Eisenberg et al., 2017; Jones & Hillier, 2013; Veale et al., 2017). The findings in this study suggest that some schools are not providing safe environments for transgender students and that parent advocacy is potentially shining a light on these failings.

It is evident that parents are facilitating their children's right to identity by advocating to ensure their preferred name and pronouns are used correctly in schools (Art. 8). The findings showed that some parents had to be vigilant to ensure correct names and pronouns were on documents, emails and other correspondence, suggesting that schools are not upholding their obligations. This suggests that changes across systems to change names and pronouns are needed within schools to ensure their processes are inclusive of gender diverse children and non-discriminatory.

Issues related to bathroom access were dealt with reactively or inappropriately by some of the schools encountered by parents consistent with Riggs and Batholomaeus (2018) and Leonardi et al. (2021). From a rights perspective, some parents revealed that their transgender children do not have access to safe and appropriate toilet facilities within schools (Art. 2). Furthermore, the findings revealed that the solutions offered by schools to bathroom access were often inadequate due to

being individual “workarounds”, such as transgender children being given special keys for access to toilets resulting in distressing consequences for the children, failing to uphold children’s rights to privacy (Art. 16) and dignity. The implicit violence of school environments is enacted in these stories (Art. 19).

This finding supports New Zealand and Australian studies which have found bathrooms are unsafe or that there is a lack of access to unisex/gender neutral toilets for gender diverse students (Howell & Allen, 2020; Jones et al., 2016; Veale et al., 2019). The current study supports Kosciw et al (2020)’s assessment that transgender students have “restricted access within the school environment itself” (p. 105), implying that some schools in New Zealand are not fulfilling their obligations under UNCROC to ensure all students have access to education that develops them (Art 28., Art 29), and that some schools are not acting in accordance with the Human Rights Act 1993.

The findings revealed that PE was also regarded as a problem by most of the parents in the study, due to the cisnormative nature of sports and the culture of PE, consistent with other literature (Day et al., 2018; Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Howell & Allen, 2020). The findings in this study highlighted issues such as swimming which parents argued could “out” their child. A significant finding was the suggestion of non-participation as a solution to issues in PE and sports, which shows that some schools may be failing to uphold transgender students’ rights to participate (Art. 2, Art. 28.)

On the question of uniforms in the findings, one parent raised concern over the dress code for a school dance for their gender diverse children and the implications of this for their children’s future participation. This reflects the findings of Ellis and Bentham (2020) who found a lack of inclusivity for LGBTIQ perspectives in New Zealand schools in practices such as school balls and in providing gender neutral uniforms. Enforcing dress codes based on a gender binary is discriminatory and violates children’s rights to identity and privacy (Art. 8, 16). Choice in uniforms would be potentially one of the small changes that could be made as by schools with potentially big impacts on the experience of transgender students as envisaged by Adam.

Bullying, discussed above, is a violation of a child’s right to be free from violence so, in advocating for their children on this issue, parents were advancing their children’s rights (Art. 19).

The findings demonstrate that parent advocacy on issues arising in school settings was consistent with a rights approach and advancing children’s rights as shown below in Table 4.

**Table 4***Children's Rights and Issues related to Advocacy*

| Issues related to advocacy | Art 28, 29 Right to education   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Establishing a name        | Art. 8, Right to identity   |
| Bathroom Access            | Art. 2, non-discrimination; Art. 19, protection from violence (implicit violence). Art. 16 right to privacy |
| School uniforms            | Art. 8, Right to Identity; Art. 16, right to privacy  |
| PE/Sports                  | Art. 2, non-discrimination, Art. 8, Right to Identity; Art. 16, right to privacy                            |
| Bullying                   | Art. 19, protection from violence   |

The PPTA (2017) outlines the responsibilities of schools to fulfil their obligations to UNCROC, domestic human rights law and to affirm diversity: “Every board and staff must ensure that their school not only recognises this diversity but affirms it so that everyone involved with the school feels welcome and valued” (p. 3) and notes that while some diversity is generally well-known, “the areas of diverse sexualities and gender identities have been less well addressed” (p. 3).

The implication of the findings is that some schools in New Zealand are failing in their duty under UNCROC and domestic laws and that parents, likewise, have a responsibility to ensure that these systems change so that their children can exercise their rights under UNCROC.

**Limitations**

This study was a small-scale exploratory study undertaken for a 60 point dissertation. The small sample size of five parents is not representative of parents who advocate for their transgender children in New Zealand. The recruitment process also meant that participants were selected on a “first in” basis which may have disadvantaged parents who were time poor or had other barriers to responding in time to be selected. Small study size has also been a limitation in international studies of parent advocacy (Birnkrant & Przeworski, 2017; Davy & Cordoba, 2020; Ramirez, 2017).

As shown in other New Zealand studies, the experiences of Māori and Pacific Island transgender young people is distinct and influenced by culture (Howell & Allen, 2020; Kerekere, 2017) and so the experiences of the mainly NZ European parents and the issues experienced by their children cannot be extended to the experiences of parents from other ethnicities. The small sample size also meant that issues of intersectionality for gender diverse children could not be explored (Fenaughty et al.,



2019; Roy et al., 2021). A larger sample size would also enable the experiences of parents of children with different gender identities to be explored to ascertain their different experiences within schools.

Due to the limits of this dissertation in conducting one focus group and one follow up interview, additional information on the experiences of school activities such as school camps, the curriculum, and other issues could not be explored. A rights perspective could have been further explored with the parents in a follow up focus group.

The findings therefore represent the experiences of five parents who have advocated for their transgender children in schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, their journeys shed light on the pressing need to find out more to support our gender diverse children in schools and the potential of a children's rights approach.

## **Recommendations**

While small in scale, this study points to a number of changes that could be made to ensure an inclusive environment for transgender students. This includes education for parents on facilitating rights for gender diverse children in school settings, and a potential children's rights campaign in schools aimed at boards and the leadership team to highlight the obligations that schools have to fulfil these rights.

Education on gender diversity in schools for all personnel is recommended to ensure that teachers are knowledgeable about gender diversity. Resources and training are already available from InsideOUT so it is hoped that more schools will prevail upon themselves to fulfil their obligations under UNCROC and upskill their staff. The PPTA (2017) also sets out the process to ensure obligations are met.

The potential for harm for gender diverse students changing schools should be understood and planned for by schools as part of their induction process for children into schools.

Resources could be compiled by schools to give to parents when they approach the school regarding social transition for their transgender child, encompassing key points of contact to facilitate social transitioning, the process for changing names and pronouns, the policy around school facilities, communication guidelines, responses to transphobic bullying among other information.

The findings revealed factors that facilitated advocacy in schools as shown in Table 5. These are outlined together with potential interventions to improve outcomes.

**Table 5***Facilitating Advocacy and Better Outcomes for Transgender Students*

| <b>Facilitators to Advocacy</b>                       | <b>Potential Interventions</b>   |
|---|--|
| High level of parent level of knowledge/understanding | Increase access to information to parents of transgender students, such as resource packs available in schools when parents (or their children) come out and start their social transition |
| Supportive school environment                         | Ensure schools have inclusive policies and staff who have undertaken professional training in supporting gender diverse students   |
| Positive teacher/Leadership and parent relationships  | Educate teachers and leadership about gender diversity and UNCROC to enable more productive relationships and outcomes   |
| Supportive community                                  | Educate the community about gender diversity and UNCROC to build more supportive and knowledgeable communities   |
| Good communication channels                           | Ensure pathways in schools are available to parents without gatekeepers<br><br>Establish single points of contact to facilitate social transitions   |
| Access to resources                                   | Information about gender diversity and UNCROC for Aotearoa New Zealand contexts is available to parents<br><br>Support for organisations such as InsideOUT                                 |

**Further Study**

Future research could build on this exploration of parent advocates in schools for their transgender children in a number of ways. A larger sample that is more representative of the population of affirming parents would potentially enable the experiences of other ethnicities, such as Māori and Pasifika gender diverse children, and intersectionality to be explored, including for disabled students, as proposed by Roy et al (2021).

The views of the gender diverse children themselves were not included in the study due to ethical considerations and the scope of the dissertation. Consistent with a rights approach, further study should aim to include the voices of transgender children and their understanding of the school environments, the issues raised, and their own advocacy experiences.

There was one child in the current study who identified as non-binary, however, a larger study that unpacked gender diversity would enable understandings of the experiences of children with different gender identities, such as non-binary and gender questioning students.

The study has focussed on secondary school settings yet gender diverse children also come out at earlier ages, meaning that parents are advocating for them in preschool, primary school and intermediate school settings (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020). To my knowledge, there are no studies in Aotearoa New Zealand that look at the experiences of this younger age group, or their parents, in these school settings.

The unpreparedness of schools suggests that study of the school environments themselves would be a productive area to research, such as school policies, teacher knowledge and understanding of gender diversity.

## **Conclusion**

While studies have examined parent advocacy for transgender children in schools in overseas settings, there is no comparable study to my knowledge in Aotearoa New Zealand. While Cornu (2016) has examined children's rights in relation to transgender children's experience in schools, the children's rights framework of UNCROC has been used here to understand how parents are advancing their children's rights in their advocacy in school environments.

The findings from this small explorative study show the intensive work that some parents undertake in schools to support their transgender children's access to education in New Zealand. The current study shows that advocacy requires information, resources, relationship building and supportive school personnel. The experience of the parents in this study was intense and ongoing as they dealt with systemic issues which kept surfacing. Some Aotearoa New Zealand schools appear to be woefully under-prepared for gender diverse students, at best, some have some plans in place, involve children in decisions and introduce changes, but at worst schools are reactive, slow to change and in some cases, unsupportive. The advocacy of the participants has revealed the entrenched cisnormative environments some parents and transgender children encounter and their different experiences based on the school's level of responsiveness and parents' relationships with teachers.

The issues that prompted advocacy were consistent with findings on the harmful environments in Aotearoa New Zealand schools for gender diverse students which suggests that this advocacy is vital. Given the poor mental health outcomes for this group of children, New Zealand schools need to do better and facilitate the social transition for gender diverse students in an inclusive environment.

Parents can be allies in this process but they need resources and good communication channels to succeed.

Parents had to gain knowledge and at times made mistakes. However, the findings also suggest that there is the possibility for transformation, as parents bring their knowledge into schools, upskill themselves, and think about long-term change for other transgender children and changing the environments they will encounter. As gender diversity is a myriad of possibilities and individual journeys, parents are well-placed to facilitate their child's social transition within schools which are welcoming and inclusive.

There was discussion about teachers and leadership who were not supportive, or who did not understand the issues that their transgender students might face. More education for teachers and the leadership is needed to ensure that transgender students are supported in every classroom and that policy is in place to ensure this.

Rights were not expressly mentioned by parents in the focus group. The parents in the follow-up interview mentioned discrimination and safety as possible rights issues when asked. However, some parents are already undertaking a children's rights approach in their advocacy and the issues that parents identified during the focus group and interview can be aligned with children's rights under UNCROC. Understanding children's rights and schools' obligations under UNCROC would give parents more certainty in their advocacy in schools to address issues, and a language to facilitate conversations and meeting with school personnel. UNCROC is ratified by New Zealand and there is an obligation on the State, and therefore schools, to respect, protect and fulfil its principles. The Human Rights Act 1993 also provides protection for gender diverse students in this country. Armed with these tools and knowledge, parents could potentially make more inroads to creating systemic change.

I hope that this small study can be part of a call to break down the gendered norms in schools and to ensure that all students regardless of their gender identity are able to access education without suffering discrimination or harm.

The potential for wider change lies with parents such as those in the current study who bring their understanding of gender diversity into schools, articulated a desire to help others, to change the environment and celebrate not just accept gender diversity. This suggests that wider outcomes are possible. This study suggests that parents are already taking a children's rights-based approach. Utilising UNCROC in the work they are already doing is a possible lever to create longer lasting change.

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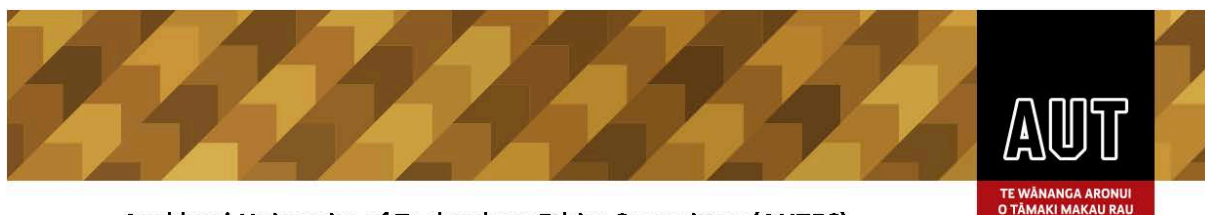
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## Appendix A: Ethics Approval



### Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology  
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ  
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316  
E: [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)  
[www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics](http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics)

4 March 2022

Kirsten Hanna  
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Kirsten

Re Ethics Application: **22/24 An exploration of parental advocacy to support their transgender<sup>1</sup> children's rights in Aotearoa school settings.**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 4 March 2025.

#### Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.
8. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

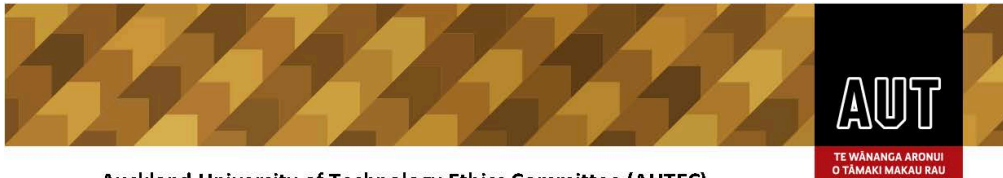
Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz). The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat  
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: [mfs5940@aut.ac.nz](mailto:mfs5940@aut.ac.nz); Camille Nakhid



## Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology  
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ  
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316  
E: [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)  
[www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics](http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics)

14 April 2022

Kirsten Hanna  
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Kirsten

Re: Ethics Application: **22/24 An exploration of parental advocacy to support their transgender1 children's rights in Aotearoa school settings.**

Thank you for your request for approval of an amendment to your ethics application.

The amendment to the data collection protocol (to conduct an interview with a couple who participated in the focus group) has been approved.

### Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

1. Please give the participants an option to review their transcripts as this would be usual practise with interviews.

Non-standard conditions must be completed before commencing your study. Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTEC before commencing your study.

### Standard Conditions of Approval.

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard.
8. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted. When the research is undertaken outside New Zealand, you need to meet all ethical, legal, and locality obligations or requirements for those jurisdictions.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz). The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat  
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: [mfs5940@autuni.ac.nz](mailto:mfs5940@autuni.ac.nz); Camille Nakhid

## Appendix B: Focus Group Indicative Questions

### Focus Group: Recording Protocol, Schedule and Indicative Questions

#### Parent Advocacy for Transgender Children in Secondary Schools

##### 90-minute online session

##### Recording Protocol

The discussion will be audiovisually recorded.

Participants will be reminded that the session is recorded at the start of the focus group by the moderator.

Microsoft Teams also alerts participants when the recording has been started.

##### Indicative Schedule

1. The moderator will remind participants that the discussion will be recorded, and that the recording is starting.
2. The moderator will introduce herself. Participants will be invited to introduce themselves, share pronouns and observe any cultural protocols such as a mihi.
3. The moderator will cover the following points:
  - that some conversations or issues may be difficult but it is hoped that the group will provide peer support reflective of the Facebook group's kaupapa
  - ask that the group be respectful of people's perspectives and cultural practices
  - share that the aim is to ensure everyone is heard and given space to speak
  - ask whether participants have any questions before the discussion starts
  - remind participants that they can decline to answer any questions or withdraw at any time
4. The moderator will state that this research aims to explore parental advocacy: why you advocate in schools, (ie the issues that your child faces), how you go about advocating, any supports or barriers you have come across and what changes have occurred as a result.
5. Participants will be invited to share their personal experiences or story/personal anecdotes related to the topic (Stewart and Shamdasani, p. 93). Question prompts may be used as set out below.
6. Indicative Question prompts:
  - a. What issues have arisen that have prompted you to advocate for your child in school?
  - b. How have you advocated for your child at school?
  - c. What has helped you to advocate for your child in the school environment?
  - d. What makes it difficult to advocate for your child in school?
  - e. What has changed, if anything, as a result?  
For example:
    - What has changed in the school environment?
    - Have teachers or administrators changed in their attitude or behaviour?
    - Have fellow students changed in their attitude or behaviour?
  - f. Do you think your advocacy has helped (or hindered) your child's access to education?

The moderator will thank people for their participation and invite them to share any last thoughts or questions at the end of the session.

## Appendix C: Follow Up Interview Indicative Questions

### Non-Structured Interview Indicative Questions

**General Introduction:** I wanted to discuss different issues to those in the focus group if possible (but recapping might happen). Some areas of focus: the difference between small town/large city/; trans/non-binary issues; and also how you approach advocacy.

#### Advocacy process

What prompted you to first advocate in schools?

What did you have to do to be an advocate?

How does your advocacy come about? (is it prompted by issues brought up by the kids?)  
Do you discuss your advocacy with your children?

Why do you think it's important as a parent to advocate?

What barriers to advocacy have you come across? (for yourselves or within the school)

#### Differences

Can you talk about the differences between a school in a small town and one in a city?

Are the different issues you have come up against attributable to the location?

#### Non-binary /transgender identities

What issues are different for your non-binary child?

How did this change how you advocate?

You talked about schools being less understanding of non-binary – what are some examples within the school you have come up against?

#### Changes

Have you noticed any changes as a result of your advocacy?

- personnel?
- systems?
- other?

What changes do you think you can make through advocacy?

#### Rights

What is your understanding of your children's rights?

How do you think your advocacy relates to your children's rights?

#### Advocacy Approach

How do you approach advocacy as a couple? Is it shared?

How would you each characterise your advocacy?

What drives each of you to be an advocate?

Has it changed you?

# Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet



## Participant Information Sheet

### Date Information Sheet Produced:

02 March 2022

### Project Title

Parent Advocacy for Transgender Children in Secondary Schools

### An Invitation

I am the parent of a transgender teen and have been a member of the private parent peer support Facebook group for two years. I am studying for an MA in Human Rights at AUT. This research project will form the basis for my dissertation to gain my qualification.

As a fellow parent, I invite you to be part of this research project which will involve participating in an online focus group of up to five parents/caregivers to discuss your experience of advocating for your transgender child in secondary school. If you have advocated for your child on issues related to their gender identity or transition in a secondary school environment, I would love to hear from you.

### What is the purpose of this research?

The research is designed to explore the advocacy that you as parents or caregivers undertake for your transgender child in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools and what changes have resulted. The advocacy is based on issues relating to your child's gender identity or social transition, such as schools or teachers not using their preferred name and pronouns, access to appropriate facilities, issues related to sport or PE, uniforms, bullying, or attendance, or other issues that you may have encountered. This research aims to explore parental advocacy: how and why you advocate in schools, the issues that you advocate on, any supports or barriers and to find what changes have occurred as a result.

The purpose is to raise awareness of the advocacy that is being done by parents like yourself to support your transgender children in school and what changes this advocacy might bring about. Access to education is a human right and included in Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC, 1989). The research will be used to complete my dissertation for my MA qualification. The findings will also be made available to participants, other members of the Facebook group and any organisations that support LGBTQ+ children or to support transgender children such as in government and other submissions.

The findings of this research may be used for other academic publications and presentations.

### How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have been identified as a potential participant as you are a member of the private peer support Facebook group for parents and caregivers of gender diverse children and responded to an advertisement placed in this group. You are invited to participate if you have advocated for your child in a New Zealand secondary school (including Te Kura Kaupapa Māori) around issues related to your child's gender identity or transition. Only members of the Facebook group have been invited to participate.

If more than five people agree to participate, selection will be based on those who confirm they are able to attend the scheduled focus group session on a "first come" basis.

### How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you have any questions, you are welcome to phone or email me. If you wish to take part in this research, please complete and return the attached consent form to me by email. If, for any reason (cultural or other), you wish to consent orally you will be able to choose this option.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time before data analysis begins; doing so will not disadvantage you in any way. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.



**What will happen in this research?**

The research project involves taking part in an online focus group of up to 90 minutes on Microsoft Teams. There will be up to five participants. The discussion will be audio-visually recorded (so I can later transcribe it) and the focus group will be moderated by myself. I will remind you that the session is audio-visually recorded at the start of the session. It is helpful to see participants for visual cues, however, you have the option to participate with the video function turned off. You will be asked to share your advocacy experiences in the focus group. Everyone will be given an opportunity to speak without interruption, but there will also be the opportunity to engage in a general group discussion related to the research topic. I will transcribe the recording for data analysis.

**What are the discomforts and risks?**

The focus group is designed to be a supportive environment with peers to discuss advocacy that you have undertaken to assist your child's access to education. This may involve discussing your child's transition and issues that have arisen as a result and may therefore lead to discomfort or other difficult feelings.

Please consider discussing your potential participation with your child and sharing the attached "Information Sheet for children/young people" with them.

**How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

All focus group participants may be able to offer insights and reassurance as issues arise from their own experience. This reflects the kaupapa of the Facebook group that we are all part of. During the focus group you can decline to answer any question or ask for the discussion to be paused if you are experiencing discomfort. If the focus group discussion raises issues that mean you need more support as a result, AUT Student Counselling and Mental Health is able to offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support for adult participants in an AUT research project. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly as a result of participation in the research and are not for other general counselling needs. To access these services, you will need to be Auckland-based:

- drop into our centre at WB203 City Campus, email [counselling@aut.ac.nz](mailto:counselling@aut.ac.nz) or call 921 9998.
- let the receptionist know that you are a research participant, and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet.

You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling on <https://www.aut.ac.nz/student-life/student-support/counselling-and-mental-health>

If you live outside Auckland, then you will need to locate an appropriate local or online service and make any necessary arrangements. For example, Lifeline's "free community helplines (Lifeline 24/7 and Suicide Crisis Helpline), as well as our text support service HELP (4357), are answered by qualified counsellors and trained volunteers from call centres in Auckland and Christchurch" (<https://www.lifeline.org.nz/>).

**What are the benefits?**

As part of the focus group, you will be able to share your advocacy journey with other parents and possibly gain insights into your own experiences or find information that might help you going forward. As the researcher, I will be able to gain an MA qualification. The findings may assist other parents of LGBTQ+ children in their journey within the education system, teachers and others involved with the LGBTQ+ community, and also help other transgender children access education.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

All care will be taken to ensure your confidentiality. All members of the focus group are asked to sign the consent form or give oral consent to maintain the confidentiality of the focus group. A confidentiality form for the use of focus groups will sent to you prior to the focus group interview. This oral consent will be in writing or audio-visually recorded. As the Facebook community from which you have been recruited is small, it is possible that you may be identified from the information that you provide. As the researcher, I will endeavour to remove any detail that may identify you. Pseudonyms will be used for you and any recognizable information, for example names of schools or persons referred to in the interview, will be changed. You are also asked to adhere to the kaupapa of the Facebook group.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

The time commitment is up to 90 minutes for the focus group plus time to respond to emails and read the transcript. A \$50 koha provided as a voucher is offered in recognition of your time and contributions.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You have 14 days to consider this invitation. This short timeframe is due to the small nature of the study and the timing of the dissertation. Please email the signed consent form to me, or let me know if you would prefer to give oral consent, if you agree to participate.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

A one to two page summary of findings will be emailed to you once the dissertation has been examined and finalised.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Kirsten Hanna, email: [kirsten.hanna@aut.ac.nz](mailto:kirsten.hanna@aut.ac.nz) phone: +64 9 921 999, ext 8308.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

***Researcher Contact Details:***

Janette Howe, [mfs5940@autuni.ac.nz](mailto:mfs5940@autuni.ac.nz) mobile: 021 825199

***Project Supervisor Contact Details:***

Dr Kirsten Hanna, email: [kirsten.hanna@aut.ac.nz](mailto:kirsten.hanna@aut.ac.nz) phone: +64 9 921 999 ext 8308

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 04 March 2022, AUTC Reference number 22/24.

# Appendix E: Information Sheet for children/young people



## Information Sheet for children/young people

### Date Information Sheet Produced:

02 March 2022

### Project Title

Parent Advocacy for Transgender Children in Secondary Schools

### What is this about?

I am the parent of a transgender teen and I am studying for a Master's degree in Human Rights at AUT University. This research project will help me complete my Master's degree ("MA") at AUT.

I have invited your parent/caregiver to be part of this research project. The project involves your parent/caregiver taking part in an online focus group of up to five parents/caregivers to discuss their experience of advocating in a secondary school on issues that may have arisen due to gender identity or transition.

### What is the purpose of this research?

The research is designed to explore the advocacy that parents or caregivers do for their transgender child in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools and what changed as a result. The advocacy might be based on issues such as schools or teachers not using preferred names and pronouns, access to appropriate facilities, issues related to sport or PE, uniforms, bullying, attendance, or other issues that may have come up.

This research aims to explore parental/caregiver advocacy: how and why they advocate in schools, the issues that they advocate on, things that made it easy or hard to advocate, and to find out what changes have occurred as a result.

The purpose is to raise awareness of the advocacy that is being done by parents/caregivers and what changes might happen as a result of this advocacy. Access to education is a human right and included in Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC, 1989).

I will write up the research as a dissertation (a kind of research report). I will share the findings of the research with your parent/caregiver, if they take part, members of the parent peer support Facebook group and any organisations that support LGBTQ+ children, or to support transgender children such as in government and other submissions.

The findings of this research may also be used for other academic publications and presentations (like an article in an academic journal).

### What will happen in this research?

The research project involves your parent/caregiver taking part in an online focus group of up to 90 minutes. There will be up to five parents/caregivers in the focus group. I will ask your parent/caregiver to share their advocacy experiences in the focus group. All the discussion in the focus group is confidential: The parents/caregivers in the focus group can't tell anyone else who was in the group or what they said. I will record the discussion and then type it up (this typed-up version is the "transcript"). I will endeavour to remove any detail that can identify people. All care will be taken to ensure confidentiality.

### What are the discomforts and risks?

The focus group is designed to be a supportive environment with other parents/caregivers to talk about advocacy that they have done within schools. This may involve discussing issues that have led to the advocacy and things that happened as a result. During the focus group, your parent/caregiver can refuse to answer any question or ask for the discussion to stop for a while if there are any issues or topics they are not comfortable discussing.

### What are the benefits?

As part of the focus group, your parent/caregiver can share their advocacy journey with other parents/caregivers and possibly get a deeper understanding of their experiences or find information that might help them. As the researcher, I will be able to get an MA qualification. The findings may help other parents/caregivers of LGBTQ+ children in their journey within the education system, teachers and others involved with the wider queer community, and also help other transgender children access education.



**How will my privacy be protected?**

All care will be taken to ensure your parent or caregiver's confidentiality. Everyone who takes part in the focus group are asked to sign a consent form or give oral consent to maintain the confidentiality of the focus group. As the Facebook community from which your parent or caregiver has been recruited is small, it is possible that your parent (and yourself) may be identified. I will endeavour to remove any detail that may identify you from the transcript (written record). Pseudonyms will be used for people and any recognizable information, for example names of schools or other persons referred to in the interview, will be changed.

**Will my parent receive feedback on the results of this research?**

I will send your parent/caregiver a one to two page summary of findings when the dissertation has been examined and finalised.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Please talk to your parent/caregiver.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 04 March 2022, AUTEC Reference number 22/24.

## Appendix F: Recruitment Advertisement

**Calling for Research Participants:  
Parent Advocacy for Transgender Children in Secondary Schools**

**Have you had experience advocating for your transgender (gender diverse) child in secondary school?**


I am an MA student at AUT studying human rights and have been a member of this Facebook group since early 2020. As part of my MA dissertation, I am exploring parent advocacy for transgender children in secondary schools (inclusive of Te Kura Kaupapa Māori) from around Aotearoa.

Parents or caregivers from this Facebook group who have advocated for their transgender children in secondary school are invited to be part of an online focus group. The focus group will discuss advocacy on issues such as schools or teachers not using preferred name and pronouns, access to appropriate facilities, issues related to sport or PE, uniforms, bullying, or attendance.

If you have stepped up for your child in high school – I would love to hear from you.

**Through this research I hope to contribute to the understanding of parent advocacy for transgender children.**

All participants will need to give written or oral consent to take part. If you are interested or would like further information, please email me on [mfs5940@autuni.ac.nz](mailto:mfs5940@autuni.ac.nz) or contact me by direct message and I will answer any questions and send an information sheet and consent form.



Janette Howe Email: [mfs5940@autuni.ac.nz](mailto:mfs5940@autuni.ac.nz)

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on  
04 March 2022 AUTEC Reference number 22/24  
Approved by the Facebook Group administrator

## Appendix G: Access Communication

Dear Janette,

Thanks for discussing the research for your dissertation with me. I understand it is on the topic “An exploration of parental advocacy to support their transgender children's rights in Aotearoa secondary schools.” As the moderator of the private Facebook group for parents of gender diverse children, I confirm that you are able to recruit potential participants for a focus group by posting an advertisement on the site (and repeating this if necessary) to recruit participants subject to your ethics approval. I confirm I’ve reviewed a copy of the advertisement and am comfortable with the content.

Kind regards

[Facebook Group Administrator]

Email Received 20/1/22

## Appendix H: Consent Forms



### Consent Form

**Project title:** Parent Advocacy for Transgender Children in Secondary Schools

**Project Supervisor:** Dr Kirsten Hanna

**Researcher:** Janette Howe

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 02 March 2022.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that the identity of my fellow participants and our discussions in the focus group are confidential to the group and I agree to keep this information confidential.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and that it will also be audio-visually recorded and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time before data analysis without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then, while it may not be possible to destroy all records of the focus group discussion of which I was part, I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature: .....

Participant's name: .....

Participant's contact details (if appropriate):

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 04 March 2022 AUTEK Reference number 22/24**

*Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.*



## Oral Consent Protocol

**Project title:** Parent Advocacy for Transgender Children in Secondary Schools

**Project Supervisor:** Dr Kirsten Hanna

**Researcher:** Janette Howe

*The participant joins the videoconference*

☐ Do you agree to my recording your consent to participate?

*If they agree, then the record function will be activated and they will be asked the following:*

☐ Have you read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 02 March 2022?

☐ Do you have any questions about the research?

☐ Do you understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and that the focus group will also be audio-recorded and transcribed?

☐ Do you understand that the identity of your fellow participants and our discussions in the focus group are confidential to the group and you agree to keep this information confidential?

☐ Do you understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (your choice) and that you may withdraw from the study before data analysis without being disadvantaged in any way?

☐ Do you understand that if you withdraw from the study then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used? However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

☐ Do you agree to take part in this research?

☐ Do you wish to receive a summary of the research findings? (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

☐ Do you want me to send you a copy of the audiovisual recording for this consent? Yes ☐ No ☐

☐ Please confirm your name and contact details

Participant's name: .....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....

.....

.....

*I will now turn off the recording of the Consent and then will start a separate recording for the focus group.*

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 04 March 2022 AUTEK Reference number 22/24**

*Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.*

## Appendix I: Sample of Thematic Analysis

| Data  | Code   | Theme                   |
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| VICKY: probably a bit of a list for sure, I mean I think the kind of earliest issues are obviously use of name on a roll, and, that takes many different kind of forms, so you know it's on a printed roll or an electronic roll,   | Establishing a name                          | Access to education     |
| but then it's how teachers are using that name and pronouns um which can be influenced by how well they know the kid and relief teachers brings in a whole kind of new aspect of that.  | Teacher's knowledge                          | Advocacy experience     |
| So that's certainly been one for us and it flows right across, to things like we just received a report, which is, you know, using inappropriate pronouns and gendered language throughout, um, so yeah, that's kind of, that's definitely been a big one for us, is just getting a name established, | Establishing a name                          | Access to education     |
| and then you've got this sort of other layer with school with NCEA and the official kind of records and when those records can be changed, what documentation you need to supply to have that happening, so there's yeah there's quite a few,   | Establishing a name<br><br>Education systems | Access to education     |
| there's even things like the kids emails at schools, you know. How quickly they can be changed or how long they have to – so it's the IT systems catching up with what people are trying to do, so I think there's a lot around kind of names and pronouns definitely for us, a big part of it.       | Establishing a name<br><br>Education systems | Access to education     |
| ADAM: We can kind of echo that as well, I think when Lachlan came out, Y TOWN middle school were pretty helpful, with a– there was a couple of deputy principals who were just, they were pretty good, and they got on board pretty quickly   | Teachers/leader ship level of support        | Level of school support |
| and you know got things like Lachlan's name changed on the roll and his gender...   | Establishing a name                          | Access to education     |
| SUSAN: but we did have issues there with um .. is it the K-mar system, is that what it is?  | Education systems (name)                     | Access to education     |
| SUSAN: So before we got his name legally changed  | Establishing a name                          | Access to education     |
| SUSAN: it was quite a process to get it, so that none of his testing was done with his birth name, um, yeah that was, yeah, that was an issue for sure...   | Establishing a name                          | Access to education     |
| ADAM: Did we have to? We had to request that they contact the ministry of education, and get it changed on his official records?  | Parent level of knowledge                    | Becoming advocates      |

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| SUSAN: oh, they weren't able to do that until they had the birth certificate  | Parent level of knowledge                 | Becoming advocates      |
| ADAM: Yeah, that prompted us to actually go through the process of getting his name legally changed.  | Parent level of knowledge                 | Becoming advocates      |
| SUSAN: But, yeah, like for example, we had it um this year, in the first day of school, first day of high school,   | School Transitions                        | Level of School Support |
| SUSAN: um Lachlan was handed um like an information form making sure that all of the details were correct for..   | School Transitions                        |                         |
| ADAM: emergency contacts ...  | School Transitions                        | Level of school support |
| SUSAN: our phone numbers and all that stuff, and it had his birth name on it  | School Transitions                        | Level of school support |
| SUSAN: and I emailed the school and was like what the heck,   | School Transitions                        | Level of school support |
| SUSAN ...like that's legally not his name,  | School Transitions                        | Level of school support |
| SUSAN: but also why is it there and why would you give it to him?   | Teacher/leadership level of understanding | Level of school support |
| ADAM: we made special pains to make sure that when we enrolled him we didn't actually do it until we had his new birth certificate  | Establishing a name                       | Access To education     |
| SUSAN: just because enrolling him at an intermediate up here in CITY once we'd moved, um we'd gone through the process to legally change his name but we didn't have the birth certificate yet, because there was a delay,                  | Establishing a name                       | Access To education     |
| and they ended up, they were wonderful, but they kind of illegally enrolled him, so that, there wasn't, yeah they really shouldn't have done it, it was just so there was no trace of his birth name on their system at all. Which, yeah... | School support                            | Level of school support |
| SUSAN: With Lux being non binary, <i>sigh</i>   | Non-binary issues                         | Access to education     |
| ADAM and SUSAN (overlap): We have not got through that process just yet ...   | Parent level of knowledge                 | Advocacy experience     |
| SUSAN: – but it's a whole thing with relievers constantly, um misgendering both kids or gendering them, at all, <i>sigh</i> ,   | misgendering                              | Access to education     |
| PE is a massive issue   | PE/sports                                 | Access to education     |
| ADAM: at times we, Lachlan has been in ... his teacher will be away, and he will have to join in with other classes,  | Unexpected issues                         | Advocacy Experience     |
| getting other kids misgendering him,  | midgendering                              | Access to education     |

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| SUSAN: But with the advocacy part of it, like we, at Y TOWN middle school, so Lux wasn't out yet but Lachlan was, we contacted Inside Out a lot and they talked to the school a lot for us as well to help them,                   | Parent understanding<br><br>Outside resources | Becoming advocates                                 |
| because I don't think they'd actually been though the whole process before..   | unprepared                                    | Level of school support                            |
| SUSAN: it was quite a new thing for to them, what is this so   | unprepared                                    | Level of support                                   |
| ADAM: the regional representative for Inside Out spoke quite extensively with one of the deputy principals   | Outside resources                             | Level of support                                   |
| ADAM: and she was calling us on the weekend and you know, like working on the information that she was going to share with Lachlan's class after he came out at school, or for when he came out at school, and,                    | Teachers/leadership                           | Level of school support                            |
| we were quite lucky with her and in that because she asked, you know, 'Lachlan do you want to be in class, do you not want to be there, how do you want to do it?' and that was handled quite well I think, Lachlan was in year 7. | Child centred                                 | Child involvement                                  |
| ADAM: So I mean, his teacher was really wonderful  | Teacher level of support                      | Level of school support                            |
| SUSAN: – yeah, we've just met with their current school principal because they're both in high school now um,  | meetings                                      | Advocacy Experience                                |
| SUSAN: – specifically in regards to PE, they've been great about changing rooms, but having gendered activities, all the time, and like Lachlan being told you have to join in with swimming,                                      | PE/sports<br><br>Support                      | Access to education<br><br>Level of school support |
| and I was like, well that's actually outing him to other students if you're going to make him do that. And yeah, we've had a ...   | PE (privacy)                                  | Access to education                                |
| I guess like a bit of a head butting situation with the principal, a little bit around that, so, but yeah that's short... a very short summary,  | relationships                                 | Advocacy experience                                |