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A literature review of the secondary school experiences of trans youth

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ABSTRACT

In this article I review 83 empirical studies that provide insight into the secondary school experiences of trans youth. The studies show that while some trans youth have affirming experiences, the majority are exposed to institutionalized cisnormativity that makes them vulnerable to macroaggressions, microaggressions and violence within school settings. Trans youth's exposure to institutionalized cisnormativity was found to intersect with multiple vectors of social power, which subject some trans youth to multiple forms of disadvantage, while affording others degrees of privilege. In conclusion, the findings show that trans youth's educational experiences reflect broader structural inequalities yet defy essentialising explanations.

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Introduction

Transgender, or trans, youth are increasingly visible in school settings (Burgess, 1999; Meyer & Leonardi, 2018; Pusch, 2005). Historically, the educational experiences of trans youth have been examined under the rubric of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) educational research. Educational researchers have consistently evidenced school environments to be hostile toward LGBT youth due to peer victimization and staff rejection, which has been shown to increase the likelihood LGBT youth will experience push-out, emotional and psychological distress, and suicidal ideation (Meyer, 2015). More recently, researchers have begun to focus on the specific educational experiences of trans youth. This emerging body of research has documented transphobia to be prevalent in school settings, investigated how this exposes trans youth to bullying and harassment, and explored resistance enacted by trans youth in response (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, & Airton, 2016). The educational disadvantages trans youth face has been linked to cisnormativity (Miller, 2016), a social hierarchy premised on gender anatomy-identity congruence and the binary

division of male and female. However, to date there has been limited analysis of school-based regimes of cisnormativity and their impact on trans youth (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2018). Furthermore, at the time of writing no comprehensive review of research investigating the educational experiences of trans youth has been published in an academic journal.

In this article I present findings of a review of literature exploring the empirical experiences of trans youth in secondary schools. The review had three aims: (1) to analyze the state of the field; (2) to examine how cisnormativity impacts trans youth's educational experiences; and, (3) to investigate dynamics of privilege/disadvantage among trans youth. Using an analytical framework of critical intersectionality I provide insight into how multiple vectors of social power interface with cisnormativity to expose some trans youth to a range of educational inequalities that make them vulnerable to extreme marginalization; while providing others with opportunities that enable them to circumnavigate the excesses of cisnormativity.

I begin the article with definitions of key terms and a theoretical discussion of cisnormativity within educational settings. I then describe the search method used and process of data analysis undertaken. Following this I present the results in descriptive form to outline consistencies and discrepancies in the empirical evidence. This evidence provides the background for a discussion on the state of the field, cisnormative school regimes, and the intersectionality of trans youth's secondary school experiences.

Theoretical framework

Transgender, or trans, is used here to describe youth who do not identify with their assigned birth gender and/or defy binary gender norms (Enke, 2012; Meyer & Leonardi, 2018; Stryker, 2008). This includes youth who transition from their birth assigned gender to their self-determined gender identity, e.g., trans men (who have transitioned from female-to-male, or FTM) and trans women (who have transitioned from male-to-female, or MTF). Trans women and men may, or may not identify, as transsexual (see Serano, 2016); while others may not identify with a trans identity at all. Trans also includes people with nonbinary gender identities, such as agender, gender creative, gender fluid, and gender queer (Cruz, 2014; Meyer et al., 2016; Nicolazzo, 2016). Non-binary identified youth do not identify singularly as either female or male, yet, it is important to recognize that their experiences as non-binary will be shaped by being assigned female at birth (AFAB) or male at birth (AMAB). Trans is thus used here to encapsulate a continuum of evolving self-identifications that disrupts a binary understanding of gender (Miller, 2016). However, when reporting

on the literature I use the language and concepts employed by the authors, which have typically been developed by clinicians, researchers, and academics (Serano, 2016).

The embodied experiences of trans youth are inherently distinct from those of cisgender youth. This is because cisgender youth experience congruence between their sexed anatomy and gender identity from birth, i.e., a baby is noted as having a vulva/penis, is labeled a girl/boy, and comes to identify as female/male (Simmons & White, 2014). Consequently, cisgender, or cis, is used here to describe youth who identify with their assigned birth gender and who are non-trans (Aultman, 2014; see Enke, 2013 for an in-depth discussion on cis terminology). It is important to bear in mind that gender identity development is independent from sexual orientation. Therefore, both trans and cis youth may identify with any sexual orientation, including lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) or heterosexual (Stryker, 2008). Yet, trans youth whether they identify as LGB or heterosexual are exposed to educational inequalities and injustices, which cisgender youth are not, due to their gender identity.

Research has established schools to be hostile environments for queer/LGBT youth (Meyer & Stader, 2009), with the pervasive bullying and physical harassment of trans youth a well-documented trend (Meyer et al., 2016). Trans theory suggests that the prejudice and marginalization trans youth face in school settings is underpinned by gendered privileges and disadvantages formed under cisnormativity (Miller, 2016).

Cisnormativity is a social hierarchy founded on the binary division of male/female and the presumed immutability of sexed anatomy/gender identity congruence (Simmons & White, 2014). Rooted in oppositional sexism (or genderism), cisnormativity assumes that male/female identity is fixed at birth and corresponds with mutually exclusive sets of attributes, aptitudes, abilities, and desires (Serano, 2016). Cisnormativity privileges cis people as 'normal' and stigmatizes trans bodies, identities and expressions as illegitimate and inferior (Serano, 2016). Within schools it has been argued that cisnormativity unconsciously reinforces conservative and biased beliefs about gender identity, which fosters educational climates that are hostile toward trans youth (Miller, 2016; Miller, Mayo, & Lugg, 2018). Cisnormativity is thus an organizing system within secondary school settings that governs all students' lives, but which has a particularly acute impact on trans youth.

Through everyday repetition, gender norms are entrenched in institutional settings to the point that they appear commonsensical, factual, and natural (Butler, 1999). This process of institutionalization leads school policies, practices, norms and cultures to unintentionally promote rigid adherence to the cisgender binary roles and render trans lives invisible

(Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Sansfaçon, Robichaud, & Dumais-Michaud, 2015). Institutionalized cisnormativity within schools encourages educator bias against trans youth and situates trans youth at the margins of school life (Meyer et al., 2016). Trans youth who disrupt cisgender norms are exposed to injustices and reprisals (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2018; Meyer et al., 2016; Spencer & Patterson, 2017), including macroaggressions, microaggressions and violence.

Macroaggressions are systemic modes of discrimination that manifest both materially and symbolically to exclude particular identities and/or experiences from institutional life. Macroaggressions can be read as cisnormative if they operate to delegitimise the reality of trans embodiment and inhibit trans youth's safety, autonomy and self-determination (see Miller, 2015). Within school settings, cisnormative macroaggressions include alienating and oppressive administrative processes, a lack of trans specific policies, gendered architecture and non-inclusive curricula (see Meyer, 2015; Meyer, Taylor, & Peter, 2015; Miller, 2015; Spade, 2015). Through administrative policies of non-recognition and institutional norms of non-representation, cisnormative macroaggressions erase trans embodiment and make trans youth invisible within secondary school settings.

Microaggressions, on the other hand, are subtle interpersonal forms of bias that shape the daily lived experiences of marginalized social groups (Ong & Burrow, 2017; Pierce, Carew, Peirce-Gonzales, & Willis, 1978; Sue, 2010). In this vein, "transgender microaggression" has been coined to explain the everyday prejudice trans people face (Nadal, Rivera, & Corpus, 2010). Likewise, "gender non-conforming microaggression" has been defined to describe the bias experienced by people who transgress gender roles and norms, but who do not necessarily identify with a different gender other than the one assigned at birth (Caraves, 2018). The analysis of transgender and gender non-conforming microaggressions has helped draw attention to the ways in which unconscious messages are embedded in everyday patterns of verbal and non-verbal interaction to: "communicate disgust, dismissal, apprehension, confusion, shock, surprise, skepticism, disbelief, agitation, and other discomfort" (Nordmarken, 2014, p. 131) about gender transgressions or trans identities.

Yet, just as the concept of transgender microaggressions has been critiqued for assuming all gender nonconforming individuals identify as transgender (Caraves, 2018), gender non-conforming microaggressions is limited by its negative conceptualization and emphasis on individual behavior. Instead, it is preferable to name the vector of power underpinning unintentional disregard for those who transgress binary gender norms. I suggest *cisnormative microaggressions* be used to describe unconscious patterns of communication that assume the naturalness of cisgender embodiment and

deny the reality or validity of trans embodiment. This definition includes involuntary insults that demean trans identities as well as unwitting invalidations that negate the status of trans people as an oppressed group (see Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). It also includes gender stereotyping and labeling (Miller, 2015). Cisnormative microaggressions, when embedded in everyday interactions, stigmatize trans embodiment as abnormal, pathological and/or deviant.

Violence can include name-calling, damage to property, threatening behavior, physical and sexual assaults and sustained bullying. Cisnormative violence is motivated by prejudicial attitudes toward trans identities and perceptions of gender transgression. This conscious bias has been labeled transphobia (Hill & Willoughby, 2005; Spade, 2015). Cisnormative violence differs from cisnormative macroaggressions and microaggressions since it is enacted with deliberate intent to do harm. The enactment of cisnormative violence has been linked to unacceptance of trans identities and the anxiety around reading the gender of others (Miller, 2015). Experiencing cisnormative violence can be traumatic and cause emotional distress (Nadal et al., 2011). Cisnormative violence is thus explicitly regulatory, since it intentionally aims to police trans youth and punish students who disrupt cisgender binary gender norms.

Although trans youth share a common exposure to institutionalized cisnormativity in school settings, they are a diverse group with multifaceted identities. This necessitates that trans youth's educational experiences be considered through a lens of intersectionality in order to understand how institutionalized cisnormativity converges with other vectors of power to produce unique harms for particular groups of trans youth (Crenshaw, 1991; Spade, 2015). Cisnormativity is inflected by sexism, which denigrates femininity and situates women as inferior to masculinity and men, and is wedded to heteronormativity, which assumes the naturalness and universality of heterosexuality between cisgender men and women (see Miller, 2015). Cisnormativity has also been shown to intersect with other social hierarchies, including (dis)ability, class, 'race', and sexuality in complex ways (see Chávez, 2010; Ericsson, 2017; Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2002; Meyer et al., 2015; Nair, 2011; Worthen, 2016). Consequently, some trans youth are exposed to multiple, reinforcing forms of oppression; while others may experience privileges simultaneously to stigmatization (Johnson, 2013).

Within the emerging field of trans educational research there has been limited analysis of cisnormative school regimes and how they impact trans youth (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2018). By reviewing the available empirical evidence through a lens of critical intersectionality I aim to draw attention to the processes through which cisnormativity exposes trans

youth to injustices within educational settings as well as the ways in which cisnormativity interlocks with other vectors of power in the educational lives of trans youth. The framework of critical intersectionality ensures emphasis is placed on the social barriers that generate educational disadvantage for all trans youth, while advancing consideration of the inequality among trans youth due to socio-historical forces, such as sexism, racism, classism, and ableism. By employing a lens of critical intersectionality I aim to render visible the overlapping structural forces that converge to shape trans youth's educational experiences and life chances in complex ways.

Methodology

The review method was developed using the tenants of a scoping review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Ehrich, Freeman, Richards, Robinson, & Shepperd, 2002). A broad research question was developed to guide the literature review: *what are the specific secondary school experiences of trans youth?* This research question provided the roadmap for the three subsequent stages of the review: (1) developing selection criteria, (2) study selection, and (3) thematic analysis/critical interpretation.

Selection criteria

Criteria were developed to delineate the population, setting, and context (Peters et al., 2015) as well as the study types, research methods, and data sources/sampling (Sperka & Enright, 2017) to be included in the review. Five inclusion criteria were formulated from the specifics of the stated research question. Included studies had to: (1) be empirical and have at least one trans participant in the study sample; (2) have an explicit analytical focus on the specific secondary school experiences of trans youth; (3) be published in a peer-review academic journal; (4) be written in English; and, (5) be published before 2019.

Criteria (1) ensured the review focused on the specific educational experiences of trans youth and excluded studies that were theoretical, conceptual or based on a literature review. Criteria (2) was due to the review being part of a larger qualitative project focused on trans youth's secondary school experiences and excluded studies that focus on primary school experiences or outcomes of therapeutic interventions. Criteria (3) guaranteed high-quality empirical research studies were included in the review. Criteria (4) was necessary due to budgetary constraints. Criteria (5) was required to create a final cutoff point in light of when the final search was conducted (January 2019). Each of these criteria ensured the review remained focused

on the research question set out, and in so doing place limitations on its scope (discussed below).

Search and selection procedures

Four electronic databases were searched: Educational Research Abstracts Online, Education Research Information Center (ERIC), Science Direct, and Web of Science. Searches were conducted using paired key words: transgender* and school*. Additional key words were also searched, e.g., “nonbinary” and “gender queer”. However, these proved to be unproductive. The identified literature was subjected to a review process whereby the title, abstract, and, if necessary, full text were screened against the inclusion/exclusion criteria (Pham et al., 2014). Additionally, researcher expertise was employed to identify articles that were not retrieved during database searches (Fairchild, Skewes, McFerran, & Thompson, 2017; McFerran, Garrido, & Saarikallio, 2013).

Thematic analysis and critical interpretation

The included studies were then analyzed using a three-stage approach. First, I conducted a basic analysis of the included literature. This entailed developing a timeline of publications, determining their geographical spread, and categorizing types of study design. Second, key findings were mapped to determine consistent as well as variable themes (Davies, 2004). In so doing, the parameters of the evidence base were identified as well as gaps within it (Armstrong, Hall, Doyle, & Waters, 2011). Third, a critical interpretation of the empirical findings was undertaken in order to develop deeper meaning and broader implications of the body of literature. Drawing on critical intersectionality, the analysis sought to understand the secondary school experiences of trans youth as relational to institutional power dynamics and their operation through processes of privilege/disadvantage (Hooks, 2003; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Morrow & Brown, 1994).

Results

The search produced a total of 1,072 articles of which 284 were duplicates. Of the 788 unique studies 77 met the inclusion criteria. An additional two were studies included based on researcher expertise and a further four based on advice from reviewers (none of which were retrieved in the study search). A total of 83 studies were reviewed. Of the 83 studies over half (56%) were published between 2016 and 2018, a third were published between 2011 and 2015 and just 10% were published in 2010 or before (see

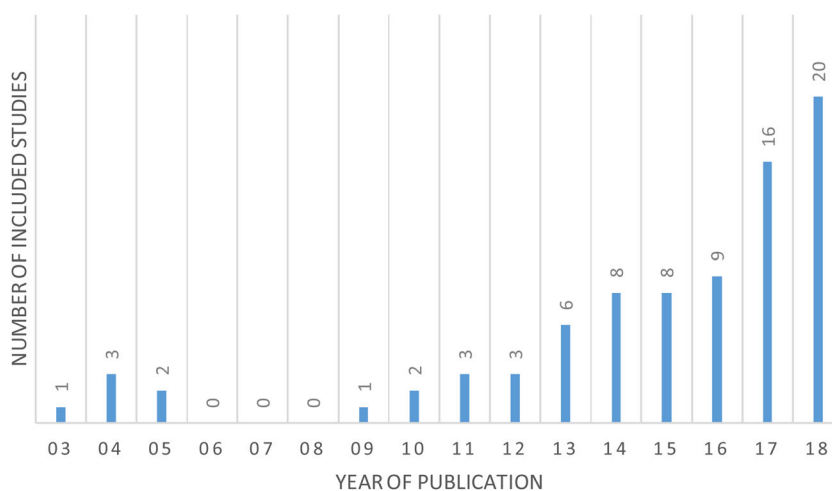


Figure 1. Included studies per year of publication.

Figure 1). Summary details regarding the geographic location, methodology, sample size and discipline of the studies is presented in Table 1.

Analysis revealed a limited number of empirical studies that detail examples of trans youth who had *affirming school experiences*. The majority of studies, however, indicate school environments to be hostile settings that expose trans youth to *institutional macroaggressions*, *institutional microaggressions*, and *cisnormative violence*. The literature also revealed *intersectional differences* among trans youth, which relate to ability, age, class, gender, geography, ‘race’, and sexual orientation. The evidence thus suggests that all trans youth face educational vulnerabilities due to cisnormative school regimes, yet intersecting vectors of power converge to produce continua of privilege/disadvantage among trans youth.

Affirming school experiences

The literature revealed some trans youth have secondary school experiences that are satisfactory and even ‘affirmative’. A New Zealand based health and wellbeing survey found three quarters of the 96 transgender high school students who participated reported that school was ‘okay’ (Clark et al., 2014). McCormack’s (2012) ethnographic study of LGBT students in a Christian sixth form college in the south of England highlighted the experience of one female-to-male trans student who received favorable reactions to coming out initially as lesbian, and then later as trans. The young person reported receiving no harassment from peers, support from staff, and use of his self-determined name and pronoun. McCormack (2012) linked this affirmative experience to decreasing homophobic and transphobic attitudes among peers and staff. Shelton and Lester’s (2018)

Table 1. Key features of included studies.

Feature	Variable	Number
Study location	U.S	52
	U.K.	8
	Australia	6
	Canada	5
	Iceland	3
	New Zealand	2
	Spain	2
	Mexico	2
	India	1
	Fiji	1
	Multisited*	1
Methods used	Qualitative	43
	Quantitative	33
	Mixed methods	7
Sample size	1-10	34
	11-100	19
	101-1000	12
	1000+	12
	Not stated	6
Discipline	Education	33
	Health sciences	26
	Psychology	12
	Sociology	7
	Social work	3
	Cultural studies	1
	Ethnology	1

*Multisited study included Canada, New Zealand, U.K. and the U.S.

autoethnographic account of schooling in a Southern U.S. school shows affirmative experiences to be connected to peers and staff being prepared to think outside established margins and appreciate ways of being and thinking that break from established norms. These findings suggest affirming educational experiences to be shaped by acceptance and validation of a trans youth's identity at the interpersonal level.

McBride and Schubotz (2017) provide an example of an affirmative experience in the north of Ireland, which was characterized by proactive school engagement and ongoing dialogue between the youth, parents, school staff and health professionals. Proactivity enabled staff to preemptively resolve an incident of transphobic bullying. Johnson, Singh, and Gonzalez (2014) also provide an example from the U.S where school personnel responding quickly to a transphobic assault by expelling the assailant, which was perceived favorably by the trans youth involved. These findings indicate that affirming educational experiences are characterized by proactive engagement and support at the institutional level.

Research from the U.S. and Australia, meanwhile, has highlighted how a single member of school staff can, through advocacy, pragmatic support and/or mentorship, provide invaluable support to trans students (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Mulcahy, Dalton, Kolbert, & Crothers, 2016; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018; Ullman, 2017). Additionally, school based peer support groups, such as gay-straight alliances (GSAs), have been found

to provide trans youth with safe spaces to explore their gender identity, discuss gender issues, develop friendships, gain a sense of community, receive emotional support, and undertake activism (Bopp, Juday, & Charters, 2004; Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Hutcheson & Tieso, 2014; Iskander & Shabtay, 2018; Ma'ayan, 2011; McGuire et al., 2010; Porta et al., 2017; Poteat, Calzo, & Yoshikawa, 2018; Poteat, Calzo, Yoshikawa, Miller, et al., 2018; Poteat, Heck, Yoshikawa, & Calzo, 2016; Woolley, 2017). Trans-specific anti-bullying policies and trans-inclusive curricula have been found to foster supportive school climates and improve the learning and well-being of trans students (Greytak et al., 2013; Kahn & Lindstrom, 2015; Peter, Taylor, & Campbell, 2016; Snapp, Burdige, Licon, Moody, & Russell, 2015). These findings suggest that trans-specific policies, supportive staff, inclusive curricula and peer-support groups are key resources that contribute to trans youth having affirming educational experiences. Yet, research suggests trans youth rarely have access to all, if any, of these resources.

A survey of 409 transgender youth (aged 13–21) conducted by Greytak et al. (2013) found that while most had access to a supportive educator (92%), only half of respondents (52%) had access to a peer support group and even fewer attended schools with comprehensive bullying policies (19%) or LGBT inclusive curriculum (12%). Others have found that trans youth have limited access to GSAs (Iskander & Shabtay, 2018; Peter et al., 2016). These findings indicate that only a minority of schools have the resources in place to ensure gender diversity is valued and characterised trans students provided with the supports they request. However, the majority of the research suggests that schools are hostile environments for trans youth and that trans youth's educational lives are shaped by institutional macroaggressions, interpersonal microaggressions and cisnormative violence.

Institutional macroaggressions

The literature showed how trans youth are commonly exposed to cisnormative macroaggressions in secondary school settings. In the U.K., O'Flynn (2016) shows how single sex, or sex segregated, schooling results in exclusionary practices that can make it impossible for trans youth to remain in school. In both sex segregated and co-educational settings administration procedures result in trans youth having their self-determined name and gender designations omitted from official records (McBride & Schubotz, 2017; Sausa, 2005). School rules have been found to codify binary gender expectations in ways that police the gendered appearance and expression of all students, but particularly trans youth (Jones et al., 2016; Ma'ayan, 2003). Binary gender uniform policies are particularly problematic, since they

serve to deny trans youth freedom of gender expression and lead some to be formally punished for breaking rules (Caudwell, 2014; Jones et al., 2016; Ma'ayan, 2003; Palkki & Caldwell, 2018; Ullman, 2014).

The architectural design of secondary schools often include school spaces/facilities designed around the gender binary. Single sex toilets and changing rooms are especially challenging for trans youth, who often avoid such spaces out of discomfort or fear (Cheney et al., 2017; Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada, PérezSamaniego, & Fuentes-Miguel, 2018; Ingrey, 2018; Johnson et al., 2014; Nichols, 2013; Peter et al., 2016; Wernick, Kulick, & Chin, 2017; Woolley, 2017). School curricula that are not inclusive fail to include information about trans embodiment or positive representations of diverse gender expressions (Ma'ayan, 2003; Peter et al., 2016; Sausa, 2005; Ullman, 2014). Trans youth have been found to experience exclusion and erasure acutely in overtly gendered subject areas, such as physical education (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Hargie, Mitchell, & Somerville, 2017; Ma'ayan, 2003), and sex education (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). These findings indicate that cisnormative macroaggressions are embedded in the administrative practices, architectural formations and pedagogical curricula of secondary schools. Combined, cisnormative macroaggressions erase the existence of trans embodiment, silence discussion about trans identities and situate trans students as aberrations within secondary schools.

Hostile school environments: interpersonal microaggressions

The review showed that trans youth routinely experience unconscious bias within their interpersonal interactions within secondary schools (Jones et al., 2016; Nichols, 2013; Rivers, Gonzalez, Nodin, Peel, & Tyler, 2018; Woolley, 2017; Wozolek, Wootton, & Demlow, 2017). Cisnormative interpersonal microaggressions were found to be perpetrated by both school staff and peers. School staff were found to commonly assume that the gender identity of students naturally aligns with distinct binary gender presentations, enforce rigid gender norms, disavow gender fluidity, and misgender trans students (Jones & Hillier, 2013; Krishna, 2018; Ma'ayan, 2003; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; McGuire et al., 2010; Sausa, 2005; Ullman, 2017; White, 2005). McGuire et al. (2010) found that trans youth in the U.S. were more likely to hear negative comments by school personnel than experience them stopping others from making negative comments (31% vs. 25%). Jones and Hillier (2013) found that trans youth in Australia are more likely to report being rejected by school staff following disclosure of their identity than cisgender LGB students. Likewise, Ullman (2017) found that Australian gender diverse students are more likely than their cis

LGB peers to report lower levels of teacher positivity and to feel unaccepted by staff. These findings indicate that many secondary school teachers hold an unconscious bias toward trans youth, which is communicated through insensitivity and rudeness.

The peers of trans youth were found to uphold gender expectations, disaffirm trans identities and enforce binary norms in daily interactions through peer pressure and shaming (Caudwell, 2014; Cheney et al., 2017; Kjaran & Jóhannesson, 2013; Ma'ayan, 2003; McGuire et al., 2010; Pedro & Esqueda, 2017; Pollock & Eyre, 2012; Sterzing, Ratliff, Gartner, McGeough, & Johnson, 2017; Ullman, 2014). Peter et al. (2016) highlight how in the Canadian context 81.3% of transgender identified students report hearing “that’s so gay” (pejoratively) in school on a daily basis. Additionally, 79% of transgender participants report hearing derogatory comments regarding male students not acting masculine enough and 62% of transgender respondents report hearing girls not acting feminine enough on a daily or weekly basis (Peter et al., 2016). Likewise, a study in the U.S. found approximately 80% of the 68 transgender identified students who participated reported hearing negative comments directed at others based on gender presentation (McGuire et al., 2010). These findings show how everyday peer interactions within secondary environments are often underpinned by normalized homophobia and transphobia that devalues and denigrates trans identities.

Frequently experiencing cisnormative microaggressions leads trans students to perceive their secondary school as a hostile environment, become fearful about discussing their trans identity, and develop anxiety about being ‘outed’ (McGuire et al., 2010; Ullman, 2017; Wernick et al., 2017). By attacking the core identity of trans youth repetitive exposure to cisnormative microaggressions can stop some from ‘coming out’ (Peter et al., 2016) and inhibits others from establishing meaningful friendships and social networks (Nichols, 2013). By iteratively invalidating trans embodiment and delegitimising trans identities, cisnormative microaggressions have a subtly pernicious impact on trans youth’s emotional well-being, social connectedness and school belonging.

Hostile school environments: cisnormative violence

Across international contexts, trans youth are targeted with verbal and physical harassment due to their gender presentation and/or identity within secondary schools (Cheney et al., 2017; Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Espelage, Merrin, & Hatchel, 2018; Johnson et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2016; Mulcahy et al., 2016; Reisner, Greytak, Parsons, & Ybarra, 2015; Snapp, Burdge, et al., 2015; Zeeman, Aranda, Sherriff, & Cocking, 2017). Clark et al. (2014)

found one in five trans students in New Zealand experience bullying at school on a weekly basis. While Ullman (2014) interviewed trans students in Australia who described homophobic and gender-based victimization as a fundamental element of their schooling. In the U.S., trans students report experiencing incessant bullying and physical victimization at school, including being pushed/shoved, attacked, and threatened with weapons (Nichols, 2013; Pedro & Esqueda, 2017). The threat of cisnormative violence can lead trans youth to transfer to a new school in 'stealth', which in turn can result in gnawing anxieties (Ehrensaft, 2013). Verbal abuse and physical harassment were the two primary forms of cisnormative violence in trans students' experience.

Trans youth routinely experience verbal abuse: 96% of trans students in the U.S. report experiencing verbal harassment at school (Sausa, 2005); 81% of transgender youth in the U.K. report sexual harassment in person or online (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Korchmaros, 2014); and 64% of trans students in Canada report being verbally harassed in the previous 12 months (Peter et al., 2016). Refusal to call a young person by their self-determined name and purposely misgendering them causes emotional distress and is considered verbal harassment (Gutierrez, 2004). Research has consistently shown that trans youth experience verbal abuse inside secondary school more frequently than their cisgender heterosexual and LGB peers (Aparicio-García, Díaz-Ramiro, Rubio-Valdehita, López-Núñez, & García-Nieto, 2018; Coulter, Bersamin, Russell, & Mair, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2014; Sterzing et al., 2017). The disproportionately high level of verbal abuse trans youth receive reflects that peers and staff in secondary schools feel they have a right to publically reprimand trans youth for perceived gender deviancy.

Trans youth are exposed to both physical and sexual violence in secondary school settings (Gutierrez, 2004; Wyss, 2004). An early study by Sausa (2005) found that 83% of trans respondents in the U.S. reported being physically harassed at school. More recent studies have found physical violence to be less common. Jones and Hillier (2013) suggests that 49.17% of trans-spectrum youth in Australia experience physical homophobic/cissexist abuse, of which 81.25% occurs at school; while Taliaferro, McMorris, and Eisenberg (2018) found that 51.4% of trans youth in Minnesota experience gender-based bullying and 10% experience physical bullying. Pedro and Esqueda (2017), meanwhile, found that 20.7% of transgender students in California have been threatened with a weapon. When compared with cisgender heterosexual and LGB students, trans youth have been found consistently to be more likely to be physically victimized due to their gender expression/identity or sexual orientation (Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Day, Perez-Brumer, & Russell, 2018; Greytak et al., 2013; Jones & Hillier, 2013;

Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Sterzing et al., 2017). A notable exception was a Mexican study that found gay and bisexual men (74%) experienced higher levels of bullying during their school career than transgender participants (66%) (Baruch-Dominguez, Infante-Xibille, & Saloma-Zuñiga, 2016). The disproportionately high rates of physical violence experienced highlight how secondary school environments are unsafe and dangerous for many trans youth.

Experiencing verbal and physical abuse has a direct negative impact on trans youth's psychological health, life satisfaction and long-term well-being (Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Clark et al., 2014; Eisenberg et al., 2017; Gower, Rider, Coleman, et al., 2018; Graham, 2014; McGuire et al., 2010). The traumatic effects of cisnormative violence are compounded when an incident is witnessed by staff and/or students, but there is an inadequate response or no intervention at all (Gutierrez, 2004; Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore, & Giambone, 2011; Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2014). High levels of cisnormative violence against trans youth and inappropriate or nonintervention have been identified as the primary reasons for the disproportionately high levels of absenteeism, push out, eating disorders, substance misuse, self-harm and suicide attempts among trans youth (Bopp et al., 2004; Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, & Pettaway, 2015; Gower, Rider, Coleman, et al., 2018; Hatchel & Marx, 2018; Jones et al., 2016; Jones & Hillier, 2013; Krishna, 2018; Nahata, Quinn, Caltabellotta, & Tishelman, 2017; Perez-Brumer, Day, Russell, & Hatzenbuehler, 2017; Reisner et al., 2015; Rivers et al., 2018; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011; Snapp, Burdge, et al., 2015; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010; Ullman, 2017; Watson, Veale, & Saewyc, 2017; Wozolek et al., 2017; Wyss, 2004). This indicates how cisnormative violence is the greatest stressor and source of anguish trans youth face in school settings (McGuire et al., 2010). As a mode of gender policing, cisnormative violence seeks to enforce gendered conformity by punishing individual trans youth for disrupting cisgendered norms and deterring others from future disruptions. As such, cisnormative violence, and the threat of it, makes secondary school life unbearable and unlivable for many trans youth.

Intersectional differences

Cisnormativity was not the only vector of power found to impact trans youth's secondary school experiences. In the U.S., gender nonconforming behavior may be accepted or tolerated in primary school, but can be problematized in secondary school settings (Ma'ayan, 2003). Furthermore, younger secondary school students have been found to hear transphobic phrases more frequently (Wernick et al., 2014), while rates of victimization

appear to decrease with age (Sterzing et al., 2017). It has also been found that youth in the U.S. who realize their trans identity in adolescence are less likely to obtain a four year degree than those who realize their identity in childhood or adulthood (Wilkinson, Pearson, & Liu, 2018). Yet, increasing awareness of trans issues makes it more likely that trans youth in Australia will receive support today than in the past (Jones et al., 2016). Additionally, a generational shift appears to be taking place among Millennial trans youth in the U.S. who are now, relative to older birth cohorts, more likely to identify as non-binary/gender non-conforming, to be assigned a female sex at birth, and to identify as nonwhite (Wilkinson et al., 2018). Age therefore intersects with gender identity in complex, multifaceted ways within secondary schools.

Goldblum et al. (2012) found that socio-economic status (SES) does not impact the level of gender based violence experienced by trans youth in the U.S. However, this is contradicted by findings that suggest transgender youth with low SES and/or living in communities with high poverty levels are at greater risk of victimization (Hatchel & Marx, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2009). Furthermore, access to economic capital has been found to afford trans youth multiple forms of privileges that can, to some extent, counteract marginalization linked to gender presentation/identity (Ma'ayan, 2011). In particular, economic means allows some trans youth to 'shop around' for more inclusive school environments (Gutierrez, 2004). This suggests economically disadvantaged trans youth face greater exposure to hostile school environments and have fewer resources with which to avoid, negotiate or respond to the stigmatization they may face.

Gender identity, beyond the distinction of trans/cis, was found to be an important factor shaping trans youth's educational experiences. Male trans youth have been found to experience less violence than female trans youth (Goldblum et al., 2012; McGuire et al., 2010). Sterzing et al. (2017) found that among trans youth those who identified as genderqueer AMAB (71.5%) experienced the highest levels of polyvictimisation, followed by transgender females (63.4%), genderqueer AFAB (49.5%) and transgender males (48.9%) (Sterzing et al., 2017). Furthermore, trans youth with a non-binary identity have been found to receive the least support from family and friends, be at higher risk of cyberbullying and least likely to participate in activities within their social environment (Aparicio-García et al., 2018). While all trans youth will be under pressure to 'pass' in relation to hegemonic discourses of masculinity and femininity (see Kjaran & Kristinsdóttir, 2015), these findings suggest that trans girls/women are subjected to misogyny that does not affect trans boys/men and that youth with

non-binary identities are less understood and accepted than those with binary identities.

Although Kosciw et al. (2009) found that race/ethnicity did not impact trans youth's experiences of gender expression victimization, Wernick et al. (2014) found trans youth of color are more likely to hear transphobic language than respondents who identified as white. Likewise, Goldblum et al. (2012) found that 'multiracial' and African American transgender youth disproportionately experience higher levels of gender-based victimization compared to white transgender youth (Goldblum et al., 2012). Graham's (2014) qualitative study shows that black trans female youth in Detroit endure specific social economic hardships that nonblack and male trans youth might not experience to the same extent. Gutierrez (2004), meanwhile, has shown how trans youth of color who attend traditionally white schools are exposed to institutional racism as well as gender based victimization. Likewise, Kruse (2016) has shown how trans youth of color may experience many educational challenges due to their complex and intersecting identities. In contrast, it has been shown how 'whiteness' affords cultural capital that can be used to counteract educational gender identity-based inequalities (Ma'ayan, 2011). These findings show how institutional racism negatively impacts trans youth of color's educational experiences, while simultaneously bestowing protective privileges to white trans youth.

Trans and cis LGB youth share similar issues when coming out, but trans youth may experience additional confusion, contradictions, and challenges (Sherriff et al., 2011). White, Moeller, Ivcevic, Brackett, and Stern (2018) found that students who have both a gender *and* sexual minority identity (e.g., a lesbian trans girl) report feeling positive emotions and having positive experiences in school the least and experience bullying more frequently, when compared to students with either a gender *or* sexual minority identity. LGB trans youth are therefore exposed to homo- and biphobia that disadvantages them compared to heterosexual trans youth.

Kahn and Lindstrom (2015) have examined how disability intersects with youth's trans identity within secondary schools. Their qualitative study focused on the experiences of trans youth who identified with an intellectual/learning disability. They found that in addition to facing discrimination, physical violence and direct homophobic bullying, participants experienced additional challenges due to their disability. Particular challenges were identified in relation to participating in PE, GSAs and extra-curricular activities. These findings indicate that ableism generates barriers to participation for trans youth who are differently abled, which may serve to isolate them further from their peers and exacerbate their educational exclusion.

A number of national contexts are home to indigenous identities that are today considered under the trans umbrella, for example in Hawaii (Bopp et al., 2004), India (Krishna, 2018), Aotearoa/New Zealand (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018), and Fiji (White, 2005). In such contexts, trans youth's negotiation of their identity is shaped by histories of colonialism and nationalism (White, 2005). National governments can be overtly hostile toward LGBT people and implement exclusionary policies that constrain trans youth's agency (McCormack, 2012), or they can be sympathetic and implement inclusive policies that encourage school environments to become more supportive (De Pedro, Gilreath, Jackson, & Esqueda, 2017; Jones, 2015). Legislation may be introduced to offer trans youth legal protections from identity-based discrimination in schools (Jones, 2015; Kjaran & Jóhannesson, 2015). National policy, meanwhile, may stipulate requirements for education around LGBT issues in schools (Kjaran & Jóhannesson, 2013). Governments may establish national bodies to promote greater LGBT inclusion and deliver LGBT-specific training in schools (Jones, 2015). These findings indicate that colonial histories, political discourses, legal provisions and policy frameworks in a given national context all shape trans youth's secondary school experiences.

Within national contexts rural-urban differences may impact trans youth's educational experiences. Trans youth in rural settings can experience severe bullying while in secondary school (Mulcahy et al., 2016). In Australia Jones (2015) found that trans students from remote towns experience greater levels of isolation, social discrimination and limited access to appropriate services compared to urban trans youth. Similarly Kosciw et al. (2009) found that rural trans youth in the U.S experience greater levels of gender-based victimization than their urban and suburban peers. However, these findings are contradicted by Wernick et al. (2017) who report that trans youth in suburban and rural schools located in the Midwestern U.S. feel more safe at school than trans youth attending urban schools. Similarly, Shelton and Lester (2018) highlight how (white) trans youth may still experience safety and acceptance in school despite living in a small, conservative town. These findings suggest that life in rural communities can be extremely isolating for trans youth owing to conservatism and the lack of accessible, dedicated community services. However, white middle class trans youth might experience less rural isolation due to social mobility and liberal attitudes.

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. This points to the diverse and complex ways institutionalized cisnormativity meshes with other vectors of social power to generate contextualized

educational obstacles/supports for trans youth. Some trans youth are subjected to multiple, overlapping identity-based disadvantages that expose them to significant vulnerability and deny them access to their basic educational needs; while others experience identity-based privileges that provide them with relative security and enhance their educational opportunities.

Discussion

State of the field

Of the 83 included studies reviewed just seven were published before 2010. These early investigations were predominately located in the U.S., qualitative in design, and, theoretically critical (e.g., Gutierrez, 2004; Ma'ayan, 2003; Wyss, 2004). Founded in post-structural feminist and queer theory, these studies considered gender roles and norms to be social constructs; and acknowledged gender identification to be ambiguous, fluid and self-determined, rather than fixed to sexed anatomy. These studies showed how the heterosexual matrix and processes of pathologisation serve to marginalize and stigmatize trans students. Secondary schools were proven to unconsciously reproduce gender norms that subtly cajole gender performance as well as legitimize conscious acts of gender policing that punish gender difference. Within hostile school environments, trans youth were shown to be resistive actors contesting the normative parameters of gendered schooling.

Only one of the included studies published pre-2010 used a survey methodology (Kosciw et al., 2009). This study sought to dissect the demographic, locational, community-level and school district-level variables that influence trans youth victimization. In their analysis, the authors show how factors of race/ethnicity, community poverty levels, and geographical location of the school impact the safety of LGBT youth. Post-2010 there has been a notable rise in the volume of trans educational researchers drawing on secondary data of large school-based surveys. Seven included studies analyzed data from the California Healthy Kids Survey and four from the Minnesota Student Survey (all published between 2016 and 2018). Secondary analysis of school-based survey data has uniformly focused on the links between high levels of emotional distress, substance use, self-harm and suicide among trans youth and the disproportionate levels of victimization they experienced due to their 'minority status'. As such these studies suggest trans youth are 'at-risk' subjects who experience educational disadvantage due to the individual perpetration of discrimination, exclusion, and violence. In so doing, these studies obfuscate the role of socio-historical hierarchies in structuring and reproducing the stigma and violence trans youth face in secondary schools (see Spade, 2015).

Nevertheless, a considerable proportion of included studies published post-2010 have continued to employ a critical approach (see Austin, 2016; Caudwell, 2014; Kjaran & Jóhannesson, 2013; McBride & Schubotz, 2017; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). This body of critical scholarship has evidenced how alongside individual acts of discrimination and violence, restrictive gender norms operate at institutional, social and cultural levels to generate educational inequalities for trans youth. Critical educational researchers have thus elucidated how the educational disadvantage trans youth experience is not individualized, but structural and systemic (see Spade, 2015). Furthermore, alongside narratives of injustice and hostile school environments critical educational researchers have also presented celebratory narratives of resistance, which show how trans youth negotiate power in secondary school settings, as well as examples of affirming school experiences, which offer glimmers of hope that schools can be accepting of gender diversity. In this way critical educational researchers have drawn attention to the complexity and variation of experience among trans youth in secondary schools.

Cisnormative school regimes

This review has reflected this diversity of experience. Yet, across the 83 included studies only a handful provided examples of affirmative experiences and open school environments. Affirmative experiences were characterized by staff and peers recognizing trans identities as valid and accepting a young person's self-determined gender identity. For trans youth, open school environments are liberating and enhance their sense of school belonging. Open school environments were typified by trans-specific policies, inclusive curricula, supportive staff and the availability of a peer-support group. However, while many trans youth are able to identify a supportive member of staff far fewer encounter trans-specific policies, trans-inclusive subject material, or a LGBT youth group in their secondary school. Each of the examples of affirmative experiences/open school environments were drawn from research conducted in high income, global north settings. This implies affirmative and open schooling is an uncommon privilege among trans youth that, at present, only a small minority have access to.

Across national contexts, the review showed that the majority of trans youth's secondary schooling is marred by structural erasures and interpersonal invalidations as well as purposeful violence. These findings affirm the view that cisnormativity is institutionalized within secondary school environments (Goldberg & Kuvallanka, 2018) and that regimes of

institutionalized cisnormativity expose trans youth to educational inequalities and personal harm (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2018; Miller, 2016).

Cisnormative macroaggressions were identified to be institutional features that unintentionally erase trans identities in secondary schools. Administrative procedures, uniform rules, bathroom layouts, and curricula were all identified as having the potential, if not the intention, to expunge reference to anything other than embodied gender congruence and binary gender identities. This subtly pressures trans youth to represent themselves in incomplete ways, live inauthentic lives, and conform to gender binary norms (Catalano, 2015; Dickey, 2016; Miller, 2016). Cisnormative macroaggressions thus structurally deny trans youth recognition, generate an informational deficit regarding trans embodiment and censor representations of trans people in secondary schools. This, in turn, can stimulate internalized shame among trans youth and reproduces social stigma against trans identities.

Cisnormative microaggressions were identified as verbal and non-verbal modes of communication that unconsciously marginalize and denigrate trans people. Examples of cisnormative microaggressions included school staff and peers: using gender normative terminology; endorsing the gender binary and the universality of sex-gender congruency; sexualizing or pathologising trans people; expressing discomfort with trans embodiment; and, denying that trans youth face prejudice and discrimination. Cisnormative microaggressions signal that trans embodiment in secondary school is unacceptable, abnormal and/or undesirable. Correspondingly, experiencing cisnormative microaggressions throughout the school day is emotionally and cognitively exhausting (Miller, 2016). This negatively impacts trans youth's desire to disclose their gender identity, and generates considerable anxiety about being 'outed' (Nadal et al., 2011). Cisnormative microaggressions thus violate trans youth by invalidating their core sense of self and provoking feelings of otherness.

Cisnormative violence was found to include verbal, physical and online forms abuse that target youth because of their gender identity or non-binary presentation. The literature showed cisnormative violence to be widespread across national contexts. Trans youth experience greater levels of gendered harassment than their cisgender peers, and, as a result, experience disproportionately high levels of push out, substance use, self-harm and suicidal ideation. The review thus confirmed the common assumption that trans youth are among the most vulnerable populations in school communities (Meyer & Leonardi, 2018; Miller, 2016). The active policing of trans students in secondary schools speaks to how students and teachers consciously enforce the boundaries of gendered acceptability through disciplinary violence. The purposeful punishing of students who disrupt cisgender

norms aims to exorcize trans youth from secondary schools by making their school life unlivable.

Analysis thus revealed macroaggressions, microaggressions and violence to be discrete facets of institutionalized cisnormativity in school settings that interlock to produce mutual reinforcing effects. Cisnormative macroaggressions and microaggressions combine to place trans identities beyond the margins of gendered perceptibility, acceptability, and desirability within secondary schools. This impacts trans youth by: (1) inhibiting disclosure and encouraging inauthentic forms of self-representation; (2) reducing peer connectedness, teacher positivity, and school belonging; and, (3) fostering internalized shame and emotional distress. Cisnormative macro- and microaggressions thus result in trans youth undertaking self-regulation in order to conform to cisgendered norms of embodiment. These less direct forms of control are bolstered by looming threats of violence and actual corporal violence enacted on those who do not conform to cisnormative standards of behavior.

The dovetailing of cisnormative macroaggressions, microaggressions and violence is perhaps most evident in situations of nonintervention. Nonintervention entails a witness of cisnormative violence remaining silent, failing to intervene and/or take responsibility for challenging the injustice experienced by trans students. Nonintervention indicates that (on a macro-level) a school has not provided clear frameworks and expectations for intervention; and that (on a micro-level) the witness(es) are unable to recognize or process an enactment of cisnormative violence as an illegitimate mode of identity-based bullying (Meyer et al., 2016). Experiencing nonintervention causes additional harm on the top of the trauma of the violence itself (Baricevic & Kashubeck-West, 2019), since it negates the reality of the cisnormative violence taking place and, in so doing, invalidates the individual and collective harm trans youth experience (see Sue et al., 2007). Nonintervention thus exemplifies how institutionalized cisnormativity generates organizational structures that conceal the reality of violence against trans youth and encourages behavior that is complicit with its perpetration.

Intersecting vectors of power

The review revealed how cisnormativity intersects with other social hierarchies to generate different types of educational obstacles and opportunities for trans students. Gender nonbinary identities were found to be perceived as more transgressive and less favorable than trans binary identities in secondary schools. As a result trans youth who undergo social transition to live as a (trans) male/female may benefit from *binary privilege*; so, although their identity as male/female is denigrated as less valuable or real than cis

male/female, it is at least comprehensible within the established binary dichotomy of male/female (Serano, 2016). Trans male and non-binary AFAB youth were found to benefit from male privilege (Nordmarken, 2014), while trans females and non-binary AMAB youth face sexism and misogyny (Serano, 2016). Trans youth of color are exposed to institutional racism and ethnocentric white educators (Meyer et al., 2016), while white privilege affords unjust enrichment and spared injustice to white trans youth (see Bloom, 2008). Class privileges afford middle and upper class trans youth economic flexibility and the ability to 'shop around' for a safe school environment (Meyer et al., 2016), while trans youth of lower socioeconomic means have reduced autonomy and heightened exposure to hostile secondary school environments. LGB trans youth experience homophobic prejudice, while heterosexual trans youth may benefit from an increased sense of public safety due to heterosexual privilege (particularly if white, male and middle class). Trans youth with a disability will be exposed to greater levels of surveillance, infantilisation, segregation, victim blaming, impaired autonomy and reduced self-determination compared to those with able-bodied and neurotypical privileges. Growing older infers trans youth adult privileges. Geographic contexts mean some trans youth will benefit from 'first-world' privileges of inclusive policy environments and legal protections as well as urban privileges of anonymity and accessible services.

Ultimately, these findings highlight how some trans youth will experience multiple, intersecting forms of domination in secondary schools (Miller, 2015) that exacerbate the impact of institutionalized cisnormativity on their secondary schooling; while others are afforded status-based privileges that counteract, and perhaps nullify, their exposure to institutionalized cisnormativity. As a result, trans youth who experience multiple identity-based exclusions are likely to be exposed to extreme educational inequalities that limit their ability to obtain educational resources, access safe spaces and avail of peer support. In contrast, the social status of others will safeguard them from the excesses of cisnormativity and enhance their capacity to circumnavigate educational obstacles they face.

Limitations

In this comprehensive literature review I have focused explicitly on what could be learned from the empirical findings presented in the literature. I have therefore not expanded upon the broader political and geopolitical factors surrounding and affecting educational research into the lives of trans students. Nor have I elaborated upon the historical trends in the methods used to generate the data in great detail. Furthermore, while this

review set out to be as comprehensive as possible, limitations of the method employed means some relevant literature may not have been identified/included. In particular the focus on the term 'transgender', which emanates from the U.S., and the criteria of English-language only publications, may have meant salient literature was missed.

Conclusion

Educational research into the secondary school experiences of trans students is an emerging field, one which has experienced exponential growth in the past five years due to the increasing visibility of trans youth in secondary school settings. Trends in the literature suggest that the field is dominated by U.S.-based research and increasingly by secondary data analysis of school-based survey data. In order to ensure the field develops into a diverse and dynamic scholarly project it is essential that critical qualitative investigations continue to be undertaken, especially within the global south. Furthermore, researchers should purposively seek out examples of affirmative school experiences and open school environments. Such studies should address issues of trans youth agency and resistance as well as the cultural specificities of cisnormative school regimes. In addition, consideration should also be given to reviewing the empirical literature pertaining to trans children in primary schools as well as to the experiences of educators working with trans students.

By reviewing the empirical data presented in 83 included studies through a lens of critical intersectionality I have argued that when cisnormativity is embedded materially and symbolically within secondary school environments it shapes staff practices and student relations to the detriment of trans students. I have shown how apparently innocuous administrative processes and unconscious patterns of communication coalesce with prejudicial violence to subtly burden and aggressively discipline trans students in secondary schools. Yet, I have also shown that trans youth's secondary school experiences are not homogeneous. They are shaped by vectors of privilege/disadvantage associated with (dis)ability, age, (non)binary gender, class geography, 'race' and sexuality. These findings demand that future research considers how cisnormative school regimes interface with racism, sexism, classism, ableism and other forms of oppression to create patterns of educational disadvantage/privilege among trans youth that reflects broader structures of social inequality.

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