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Running head: EVERYONE KNOWS ME AS THE WEIRD KID

**‘Everyone Knows Me as the Weird Kid’  
Being Bisexual, Genderfluid and Fifteen**

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**Forthcoming in *Qualitative Inquiry***

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## Abstract

*Everyone Knows Me as the Weird Kid* is a performance text created from collaborative narrative interviews between the first author and a 15-year-old participant named Max who identifies as bisexual and genderfluid. The performance explores how Max negotiates a range of challenges – including homophobia, transphobia, bullying and harassment – on a day-to-day basis. It offers evocative insights into life as a young person with an intersecting identity across school, community, online and family contexts. By choosing to represent Max's experiences as a performance text, we offer a living, breathing resource that can be performed in educational settings not only *to* young people, but also *by* young people. We share *Everybody Knows Me as the Weird Kid* as a resource to help others respond to sexual and gender-related bullying and discrimination in their own lives.

**Keywords:** bullying, collaborative research, genderfluidity, LGBT experience, performance text, physical education

## **‘Everyone Knows Me as the Weird Kid’**

### **Being Bisexual, Genderfluid and Fifteen**

I receive an email from Kate and Tamara:

David,

Please can you let Max know by text message or email before you call, so he is aware that you will be conducting the interview with him. Max was informed of this project through the transgender support group, Mermaids. Max (15) has been sent the relevant project information and a consent form, which he can hand to you at the start of the interview [...]

*Friday, 4.15pm.* After exchanging a couple of emails, I call Max. There’s no answer. I leave a voicemail.

*Tuesday, 5.45pm.* I make a follow up call. His voicemail kicks in again. On the spur of the moment, I decide not to leave another message. I don’t want to pressure him. I pause to think. What should I do? It’s 2017 – how would a 15-year-old today want to be contacted? Maybe a phone call is not the best way? Maybe he doesn’t have enough minutes on his contract to call me back? Maybe he’d prefer to use his minutes to talk with friends? Perhaps a text message would be better?

*5.56pm.* I send a text message: Hi Max. David from the university here – I left a message on your voicemail on Friday about the interview you kindly agreed to do. Thank you! With holidays coming up, later in April might be best for the interview. How does that sound? Would it be helpful if we posted you the forms so you don’t have to print them yourself? All the best, David.

*5.57pm.* Max replies: Yes that would be helpful if you could post them and sure late April is fine, I did listen to the voicemail but didn’t get the chance to reply. Thank you.

*5.58pm.* Perfect! What address should we send them to?

No response. I start to worry. I am exchanging text messages with a 15-year-old who I do not know and who does not know me. His parents do not know me and I do not know them. And now I have just asked him for his address. From the outside, it could look

inappropriate: an out queer man messaging a 15-year-old who may be trans. It *shouldn't* make any difference if Max is trans. It *shouldn't* make any difference that I am queer. I try to resist it, but decades of homophobic bigotry – queer men portrayed as perverts and paedophiles – lives on in me as a tiny, blackened spur of shame. How would it look if Max tells someone that this man, who he doesn't know, just asked him for his address?

6.45pm. Max replies, giving an address. Immediately, I am relieved that he is back in contact. My worries were unfounded. But I'm surprised at the address he has given as I assumed all the participants were local. I enter his postcode into Google Maps. It is 240 miles away. Maybe he has given a mailing address to avoid sharing his home address? The address of the Mermaids support group, perhaps, to act as a point of contact? Well, that's OK, I can work with whatever works for him.

6.49pm. I reply: Thanks Max. We will post them to you ASAP. If you have any questions feel free to email or call. Best wishes, David.

7.10pm. Thank you, I shall do if I have any questions.

Sunday, 12.56pm. After more missed calls and unanswered emails, Max and I finally speak on the phone. His Mum is there, and I speak with her too. I'm relieved to be able to do so – I feel this contact with one of Max's parents is important, it legitimizes my communication with Max. It makes me feel safer – a parent knowing about the research and knowing about me. Max's mum promises to email me the signed consent form. We arrange a first interview via Skype on Friday at 5pm.

## **Background to the Research**

In November 2016 we began working on a collaborative interdisciplinary project with the acronym F-COSTE – *Facilitating Conversations On Sexual Topics in Education*. The

purpose of the project was to undertake fieldwork to explore with young people, teachers, pastoral staff and school decision-makers barriers to communication on sexual topics and the potential for creative methods to facilitate sex and relationships education. A central aspect of our work, therefore, is to learn about young people's experiences of bullying, discrimination and harassment as a result of sex, sexuality and/or gender. Another aspect is our use of creative (artistic and/or technological) ways of sharing what we learn in ways that young people, teachers and youth workers find accessible, engaging and informative. In short, we are motivated to create 'products' or 'outputs' from our research which our stakeholders find useable and will positively impact young people's development. To date, we have produced films which combine storytelling, moving image and music (Douglas et al, in press; Douglas & Carless, 2017a, 2017b).

The issues the project addresses are sensitive and challenging, particularly when it comes to the experiences of LGBT youth. Research shows that young people who fall into one or more of these identity categories face increased levels of bullying, discrimination and harassment. For example, Grossman and colleagues (2009) report figures from the Massachusetts 2003 Youth Risk behavior Survey which found lesbian, gay and bisexual students were more likely than their heterosexual peers to have been bullied (42% vs. 21%), threatened or injured (22% vs. 5%), have skipped school because they felt unsafe (15% vs. 4%), and experienced dating violence (30% vs. 9%) or sexual contact against their will (41% vs. 8%). These authors write: "LGBT youth who have had a visible presence in schools, with or without concurrent gender nonconformity, often reported daily experiences with school violence emanating from homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia" (p. 25). "For many," they suggest, "relentless verbal abuse and other forms of harassment were part of their normal daily routine" (p. 26). Johnson, Singh and Gonzalez (2014) conclude: "To say schools and

other youth programs continue to be unsafe for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) students is an understatement” (p. 420).

Unsafe school environments adversely affect students’ wellbeing and experiences of homophobic or transphobic bullying increase the likelihood of depression, self-harm and/or suicide attempts (McNamee, Lloyd & Schubotz, 2008; Whigmore, Sherriff & Bogen-Johnson, 2009). Nodin and colleagues (2015) report statistics showing lesbian, gay and bisexual young people are twice as likely to attempt suicide and to self-harm than heterosexual peers. In their study, 34% made at least one attempt during their lives. Among trans young people, this figure rose to 48%. In relation to this, Zeeman and colleagues (2017) argue that “trans people experience significantly higher rates of bullying and marginalisation, they feel socially isolated more often, or have a decreased sense of connectedness to their communities” (p. 385). Despite the heightened challenges facing transgender, queer and questioning (TQQ) youth, Johnson and colleagues (2014) suggest that researchers have tended to focus “more on sexual orientation than gender identity/expression, thereby rendering the experiences of TQQ students virtually non-existent” (p. 421). On this basis, they advocate for “innovative and collaborative methodologies that highlight the voices of TQQ youth, who often have multiple marginalized identities” (p. 422).

It is within this high-stakes personal-social-political context that we created a performance text titled *Everyone Knows Me as the Weird Kid* with the intention of it being performed in educational settings not only *to* young people, but also *by* young people. The performance focuses on the experiences of Max, a 15-year-old who identifies as bisexual and genderfluid. As in some of our previous performative work (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2010, 2017; Douglas & Carless, 2015; in press), we created the performance and the response that follows from collaborative narrative interviews between participant and researcher.

## **‘Everyone Knows Me as the Weird Kid’: A Performance Text**

*[Max and David are seated. Their chairs are at a 45-degree angle to each other and the audience. At the beginning of each Scene, Max stands and directly addresses the audience through a short poem, before returning to his seat.]*

*Max:* My name is Max. I’m 15 years old.

*David:* And my name is David. I’m 47 years old.

### **Scene 1: Being Bisexual**

*Max:*

Even in my family

I’m the weird one

“A Unique Butterfly”

In my family everyone’s just...

*I’ve got such a nice family*

*David:* Max, if you imagined your life as a book, where would your story would start?

*Max:* There’s two places I’d say – the two big decisions in my life. The first was coming to terms with being bisexual – a year or two ago. The second was coming to terms with being genderfluid – just a few months ago.

*David:* Those are big things. At any age. Can you tell me about coming to terms with being bisexual?



*Max:* I was 13, 14. Just starting to get a grasp of the world. It was constant confusion. It's still confusing! It was one of my best friends who I felt weirdly about. Still do. Took a good month until I decided to tell someone. I told my mum first.

*David:* How was your mum with it?

*Max:* Oh, she was fine. My uncle's gay so my whole family are really cool about things.

*David:* Were you worried about telling her?

*Max:* I was worried about telling *anyone*. Coz once you say something, it's true, as it were. I worried that if I changed my mind, it would be hard to take back.

*David:* Did you feel that you needed to keep it quiet at school?

*Max:* Well we – him and me – are in the same school so that made it harder-slash-easier, depending on your perspective. For a while I didn't want them to know. Then I went with the philosophy of I'm not gonna tell but if someone asks I'll say yes. That's how I came out in school: someone asked me a question and I just gave an answer.

*David:* By 14! I really respect you for that. How is it being out at school?

*Max:* Well the main thing back then was questions. A lot of people were like, 'Oh, so what's this thing?' Just curious. 'So you like all men?' 'No, only some.'

*David:* Have there been times where you've felt you needed to keep quiet or hide at school?

*Max:* It depends on the time period. With the whole sexuality thing, it's not too bad. I'm just bisexual. A lot of people don't get it, but no-one's actively violent.

## **Scene 2: Being Genderfluid**

*Max:*

I've got a small friendship group  
Coz I'm the weird kid  
Everyone knows me as the weird kid  
I'm fine with being that way, it's just how I am  
*Cool – in my own way*

*David:* How have people at school responded to your genderfluidity?

*Max:* I haven't actually opened up at school about that. And I don't think I'm going to. There's people I *really* don't want knowing because I'm worried about their reaction.

*David:* What's led you to be worried?

*Max:* Just the way they react to normal learning! I've already got people who have a deep hatred for me – just because I'm open and a bit flamboyant.

*David:* Could you describe a time when something's happened that's made you aware of their hatred?

*Max:* Oh yeah, I can tell you tons! There's one kid, he always used to be quite aggressive around me. I'm in his PE class, shamefully. Whenever we do PE – like we were doing dodge ball the other day – he'll throw the ball normally at most people but when he throws the ball at me, he'll like throw it really *hard-ly*. And he tries to deck me in the hallways and stuff.

*David:* That's not very nice Max. How do you deal with that?

*Max:* I usually go to my pastoral<sup>1</sup>. They do try to help. And I just avoid him.

*David:* So you have got people at school you can talk to?

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<sup>1</sup>“I usually go to my pastoral” is an abbreviated way for Max to say he consults the designated school staff member who is first point of contact regarding a student's personal and social wellbeing

*Max:* Being the weird kid, I only have a select group of friends. Which has its benefits because they're actually very close friends. I've got friends who I trust – a group who know about my genderfluidity and are just fine with it.

### Scene 3: Being Bullied

*Max:*

There have been times he tries to deck me

But I'm good at staying on my feet

Got a game with my friends called '*The Deckenings*'

Where we deck each other up

It's only gone wrong once – where I was in hospital!

But apart from that I haven't lost one

Yeah, it's weird, it's really weird

*Like I said – I'm weird*

*David:* When did the bullying start, Max?

*Max:* My first incident of bullying was in year seven. I had a very high-pitched voice. It's a lot lower now than it was – this is my voice now, it used to be *up there* [mimics high voice]. So, obviously, you can see something going wrong straight away. It started with one of my friends, which was shocking. I don't know what happened but he became – as I define it – *a nob*. People made jokes before, but he started rallying the jokes, as it were. And I got the nickname 'Miss Piggy'. That went for about a year before I told anybody about it. It was *really* quite depressing actually. I felt outcast. I don't mind people calling me names coz

that's just gonna happen in life. It was mostly the fact that it was a person who I believed to be a friend – and then he wasn't.

*David:* Hmm. So the bullying was verbal?

*Max:* Mostly. There was a few incidences of, like, a shove. Which still happens today, but nothing so violent that I was scared for my safety. No, that came a lot later in life.

*David:* When you've been scared for your safety?

*Max:* Yes, it's actually this year I've been a bit scared for my safety. A fair few times. The person I mentioned before, he's the one I'm scared around because he *is* physically violent. He hasn't done anything crazy but he has done things where I've got injured and had to go off school.

*David:* That's horrible. Max, are you OK talking about all this?

*Max:* Yeah, yeah it's fine.

*David:* It sounds like the bullying is happening in PE and sport?

*Max:* Yeah, well, that's the best time to assault someone. Because you can put it off as an accident. Like with the dodge ball – he instantly put it off as an accident. It's the only time I've really felt scared for my personal safety in my life.

*David:* I'm not surprised that you don't want to go to a lesson with that person.

*Max:* I really don't like going to PE much. I usually avoid him but in PE he's there. But I don't want to switch PE classes because that means I'd have to do football - and I *really* don't like football!

#### **Scene 4: Being Amongst**

*Max:*

I went through quite a bit of mental anguish

trying to work out what I am  
left me on the bathroom floor a few times  
curled up in a ball  
didn't show it to anyone  
but I was very confused on the inside  
*I still am a little bit*

*David:* Is there any place that you don't feel weird, that you feel you're amongst...

*Max:* [interrupting] One place I feel a bit *amongst* is the Mermaids group – that place everyone's just friendly. That's one place I feel very, 'Oh, I'm just another person.'

*David:* How did you find Mermaids?

*Max:* They were the first thing that popped up when I searched 'help for confusion about gender' on Google.

*David:* So this is quite recent?

*Max:* I spent a long time, maybe a year, thinking absentmindedly about it. It was about a month ago that I decided on a label. It was a very stressful period of time because I *decided* to think about it.

*David:* That's a big thing for any of us to deal with on our own. Thinking of myself as bisexual or gay was a big thing. And then to be considering genderfluidity. At 15? Trying to deal with that? That's huge.

*Max:* Well, it sort of led to Mermaids coz I was very confused about what I am. And I still am because the fluid thing means it's constantly changing. So I was trying to find someone to talk to who's not in my family or someone I know. I saw the site and I was like: 'Oh that looks nice!' I clicked on it. It's a support group for teens, where you can talk to other teens. If there's a problem I put it on the group, then someone will talk to me about it. Or if

someone else has a problem, I talk to them about it. It's all anonymous if you want it to be. I was doing it all in private, none of my family knew, made it a bit awkward. And it was definitely a period of my life I want to forget – it was very intense.

*David:* What got you through that period Max?

*Max:* The group helped a lot – because I just saw a lot of people who were going through similar things. I don't know. I had a few more bathroom floor situations. I think it was having others around on the group to talk to. And a lot of mental anguish.

*David:* Thank you for telling me about that, it's...

*Max:* [interrupting] Mmm, yeah. None of my family know about that. I haven't talked about those moments.

*David:* Well done for getting through it. I'm in awe, Max. Good on you!

*Max:* Thanks. I made a friend on there who's genetically male but her name's Jess. She's very useful for all this stuff – someone I talk to over Facebook messenger. Finally found a use for my Facebook profile! Jess suffers from depression though. But it's nice to talk to someone directly about things. We send each other pictures of our dresses.

*David:* Brilliant.

*Max:* Yeah. We both said to each other if we ever need someone to talk to about something really personal, we can. That's our agreement.

*David:* What you're saying is so inspiring to me Max. Coz these are really big things that most people wouldn't be able to deal with, not in the way you have.

*Max:* Yeah?

*David:* You're so wise about this. I don't wanna be rude but listening to you talk I almost can't believe you're only 15.

*Max:* Oh yeah, I'm *very* mature! I listen to music from the 50's! I've got the weirdest combination of maturity and immaturity – as you can see by everything I do.

*David:* I don't think that's immaturity. I think that's being free.

### **Scene 5: Being Out**

*Max:*

I knew Dad would be cool with it

and he was

I also knew I'd have to have an hour-long psychological talk

coz that's what he does for everything!

The thing with him is he doesn't like labels

“GEN-DER-FLU-ID”

He doesn't mind what it *is*

just thinks labels pin things down

I don't mind coz it gives you something to go off

instead of having to describe it every time

*David:* What happened for you to decide to share with other people?

*Max:* I wanted to tell someone. I asked if the school had a counsellor, but it was a six-month waiting list. So that didn't run too well. After that, I arranged a meeting with Andy, a social worker who I know through our family. We met in a coffee shop and talked. The nice thing was he doesn't really know anything about it. He just asked a lot of questions.

*David:* When we've got something that's different, we have to be careful who we share it with, right? What was it about Andy that made you think that you could trust him?

*Max:* Well, I'd known him for a little bit, he's not in the family, he's not in the school, he's an outsider. I could talk to him about talking about talking! He said he understands that

it's hard to tell others, but eventually we should try. Which is what I wanted to do anyway. So I kinda flipped the cycle: I didn't talk to my mum this time, I talked to my grandparents. They're *very* nice! Even then it took me a while to talk to them. I waited for the right occasion. My Nanna had promised to cook me some meal coz I really wanted to try it. The first thing I did when we sat round the table was taste the meal – so if something went wrong at least I'd got to try it! Then I said: 'I need to talk to you about something.' And I told them. My Nanna, she just said: 'I know'. And that's how I started, with my family, and worked from there. When I talked to my uncle he said: 'You're not abnormal, this thing's very normal, it's just letting other people know it's normal.' So I've done things in school since then to normalise it.

*David:* Can you tell me about something you've done?

*Max:* One is I always have a pack of bobby pins, which I wear in my hair. When people questioned me about it I never said anything apart from, 'They keep my hair out my eyes'. But now it's gone to always having a hair brush on me because I'm growing my hair. Having hair this short and wearing a dress doesn't work! Just today I started carrying a mirror around on me too coz *that* [messes up his hair] is annoying! I also ran a lesson about stuff. In my RE<sup>2</sup> class we covered Christian views on being gay and same-sex attraction – which was a bit intense cause some people in the class are Evangelists. My teacher said that transgenderism wasn't going to be covered so I asked her if I could run a lesson on it and she said yes. So I spent eight hours on research with my mum, on Christian views on transgenderism, which was a bit shocking. A priest – he seemed like a nice guy – said it's like a kid pretending to be a dog. And there was this horrifying video of someone calling it mental illness straight out, which wasn't so nice.

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<sup>2</sup> "RE" is an abbreviation of Religious Education



*David:* Oh god! So, Max, where you're at now, you know they're talking rubbish, right? You know that what they're saying is nonsense?

*Max:* Oh yeah. I found this one-side glossary online on transgenderism and transgender and transvestite and stuff. So I stuck genderfluid on the bottom of it because it wasn't there. So now people know!

### **Scene 6: Being Myself**

*Max:*

I'm not staying at my school 'til sixth form

I'm looking for another school

So I can make a fresh start

Where I can make a different impression

*and that is how they'll see me*

*David:* Can you talk some more, Max, about being genderfluid?

*Max:* With the genderfluidity, like you can see by my dress, the majority of the time I'm female. That's my thing – 70 to 80% of the time. Sometimes I don't really think I was born the right genetic gender.

*David:* Are you thinking about transitioning?

*Max:* Yeah. But I've decided to leave any big decisions to the end of year eleven. That way it shouldn't affect my studies.

*David:* That sounds wise. You said 70 to 80% of the time you feel female and, as you said, you're wearing a dress now [Max makes flowing movements with his arms]. Very nice!

*Max:* It's a really nice material, it's like silk or something.

*David:* It looks good on you!

*Max:* [striking a pose] Ta-daaa!

*David:* When you're at school do you have to wear a uniform?

*Max:* Yes.

*David:* How is it having to wear a uniform every day?

*Max:* Because I'm not open in my school I'm restrained to male, which I don't mind. I'm a person who doesn't like to 'type' clothing. Like cross-dressing – I don't see it as cross-dressing, I just see it as dressing. But a uniform is annoying because I'm a big believer in expression. That's what I was saying about a fresh start so I could be more open. I'm looking into a private school where I could wear my own stuff. You have to be very formal but there's no uniform. But I think everything looks better with a smart suit on!

*David:* You said then you'd be able to wear your own stuff. What would...

*Max:* [interrupting] I'm thinking of wearing a female outfit on the first day. I guess as a statement. I'd have two wardrobes – which is beginning already. I've already got three dresses. There goes all my wardrobe space!

### **Scene 7: Being Normal**

*Max:*

As well as coming to terms with yourself

there's others coming to terms with you

*Now isn't that a classic movie line?*

*David:* It sounds like you've needed help at times Max – like we all do. Happily, you got the help you needed. What would you say to other people struggling with similar experiences?

*Max:* Well, there's always hope. There *is* always someone out there who will care. As hard as it is to see, there *is* always something. There's always someone, who might be right next to you, who cares about you. But you're just not seeing it.

*David:* Is there anything that you would have liked somebody to have said or done for you?

*Max:* Yeah. It would have been nice for someone to say, 'It's okay.' Just those two words have a lot of power behind them. Someone saying: 'It's okay, this is only a period of time.' Like, my genderfluidity – it's only a period of time being stuck in high school wanting to keep it secret. In another period of my life it might just be a fact of my life. I'm not saying everything's going to be alright – because sometimes it's not. But the line 'It's okay' – there *is* always a positive.

*David:* That's very powerful. It *is* very meaningful to hear those words if you're thinking things *aren't* okay. Is there anything else that you would have liked for people to have said or done?

*Max:* Well it's just to have someone there for you. Eventually I found Mermaids. But previous times in my life – like when I was being bullied quite badly – there was no one there actively trying to help. Even if you yourself are not going through physical or psychological trauma, but someone else is, *just be there for them!* Even if you don't know them. Be there for them! Even if they've done something terrible. They still need help.

*David:* Yeah, someone who's there for us. And the help would be...

*Max:* [interrupting] Someone who knows what you're going through. Someone who knows the struggles you face. Someone you can talk to freely. You don't have to describe all

the issues, they just *know*. Like my friend Jess – she used to be genderfluid but after about four months being female she decided that’s just what she is. So she knows what I’m going through.

*David:* Earlier on you were saying about being the weird kid and kind of embracing it – like it’s okay to be the weird one. But with Jess, you’re not the weird one, are you?

*Max:* No. We’re just two friends.

### **Coda**

*Max:*

Nothing’s abnormal

Everything is normal

It’s just other people not seeing it that way

Me – being genderfluid

that’s *totally* normal

In my friendship group

all of us are weird

*To us it’s normal.*

### **Response from Max**

Some months later, Max and I schedule a Skype call so I can share the 20-minute performance with him. After the last line – ‘*To us it’s normal*’ – there’s a moment of quiet. I ask Max, ‘What are your feelings hearing that as a piece?’

*Max:* I really enjoyed it, the way you’ve done it. I really like it. It’s almost weird to hear a narration of my life.

*David:* They are the words we said during the interview.

*Max:* Yeah, I know that. It's my sort of wording of life.

*David:* Is there anything that you wouldn't want sharing with other people?

*Max:* That's all fine I would say. I really like the whole thing.

*David:* I find it quite emotional reading it. Was it emotional for you listening back?

*Max:* Yeah. It was very strange coz a lot of things have changed. But yeah, I could feel the emotion in the piece.

*David:* So, things have changed? What's been happening?

*Max:* The bobby pins have stopped. I think I lost them. I still have the hairbrush! I mentioned in the previous interview I did a sponsored walk in a dress. We do it each year. The year before I even really did anything with gender, I did it in a dress. Then, after accepting my gender a bit more, I raised over £200 coz I did it in a *wedding* dress.

*David:* Brilliant! How was the experience of doing that?

*Max:* Really nice. Like, obviously, it all sort of comes across as a joke. It does whenever you walk 10 miles in a wedding dress! But it's always nice to find excuses to wear a dress in public. And I'm doing Prom in a dress. I've been hyping it up throughout the year so that way it becomes normal. And now if I *didn't* do it in a dress I'd actually be more likely to be beaten up – that's my logic. I try to not take too much of a risk. Its best to normalise it before it happens. And some people have been quite supportive. This person, Sam, said last year her sister bought two dresses and I can have the other one. She just gave it to me to use for Prom. And it fits, which is good!

*David:* Perfect! You've given me an insight actually Max. When I perform this, I'll read your part and someone else will be me. And I did think: *when we did the interview, you were wearing a dress, should I do that too?* And that would be really hard for me to do that. So it made me appreciate again what a big thing you do. How brave it is.

*Max:* Yeah. It *is* tough. Even with all the gender stuff it's still tough just to go out to a family event sometimes. Sometimes I'm wearing a dress at home and I'm, like: *Should I get changed before I go to my uncle's or should I stick with this?* I try to stick with the dress but sometimes I get changed.

*David:* Hmm. Has anything else changed since we spoke?

*Max:* I went to the Houses of Parliament for a conference-thing. It was an LBGTIQ+ conference. I think I was wearing a suit when I went to it. Do you know Lord Chapman?

*David:* I've heard of him, yes.

*Max:* He was the first openly gay Lord. He said he got given the nickname 'Gaylord' – he finds it amusing as well!

*David:* Was it a good day?

*Max:* Yes, it was really nice. Seeing different people from that community. And also, with straight people, trying to raise awareness in a Parliamentary sense.

*David:* Do you think you'll be able to go to the sixth-form college you were talking about?

*Max:* I've been given a place! There are twenty places available and they gave me a place straight after the interview.

*David:* Superb! That's really good news.

*Max:* Yes. It's six-day weeks, 12-hour days, so it's going to be very intense. But it looks *really* good. I have a trans friend who goes there. I met them when I went to Trans Pride over the summer, after Brighton Pride and London Pride, which I went to both of. It's a smaller event but it was a really nice day. In the morning we did the protest march, not with all the big vehicles, just walking. Then they'd hired a park – we all just went in. You could buy things and talk to people. Then we got struck by terrible rain! There was me running in high heels down the street to try to get to a pub! Very exciting! Then afterwards there was a

rave. I've never been to one before and I made the mistake of wearing high heels. I got into a mosh-pit with high heels and didn't fall over – it's a point of pride!

## Reflections

Arthur Frank wrote, “As actors, stories and narratives are resources for people, and they conduct people, as a conductor conducts an orchestra; they set a tempo, indicate emphases, and instigate performance options” (2010, p. 14-15). By representing Max's story of being bisexual, genderfluid and fifteen as a performance text, we offer a living, breathing resource that can be performed not only *to* but also *by* diverse groups. These groups may include young people questioning their sexual and/or gender identity. They could include peers, siblings, parents, pastoral staff or teachers of those young people. The performance text portrays experiences often missing from public discourse and it does so in a way that will likely resonate differently depending on each individual's positioning. Its meaning will shift. There is not – and should not be – a singular interpretation. Thus, we hope *Everybody Knows Me as the Weird Kid* will instigate and support a *range* of “performance options” – diverse ways in which people might respond to or engage with sexual and gender-related bullying and discrimination in the context of their own lives.

As writer-researchers, we are not able to foresee, much less control, how different individuals might interpret and respond to the performance. Although this implies an element of risk, we see the story's interpretive openness as desirable: it leaves space for diversity and invites dialogue. And we have received a variety of responses to *Everybody Knows Me as the Weird Kid*. But one response – which raises important socio-political issues – has been voiced a number of times. Several audience members have responded that Max's experiences (as portrayed in the performance) are more positive, humorous and hopeful than they were

expecting within the context of the research topic. Knowing the topic, they anticipated more trauma, more ‘bad news,’ more ‘trouble,’ more distress.

This point has surfaced in our consciousness, too, and is something we have discussed at length. In *Everybody Knows Me as the Weird Kid*, Max often comes across as funny, optimistic, intelligent and thoughtful. He portrays his extended family as accepting, liberal, informed, sensitive and loving. There are no accounts of homophobia, biphobia or transphobia within his family. The performance – and Max’s subsequent response to it – reveal Max as situated within an array of positive and supportive relationships. He is socially, culturally and politically connected. Max is informed, critical, and – at 15 – already an activist. In these ways, Max’s story of his experiences is an *affirmative* one. On balance, we share the feeling expressed by several audience members that the performance has a positive, optimistic and hopeful tone. It, too, is affirmative. And affirmative stories are sorely needed in light of a historical backdrop within which positive LGBT stories have been excluded from public discourse while negative portrayals of LGBT lives have been dominant.

Yet *Everybody Knows Me as the Weird Kid* is not a utopian story. Even with such an array of positives (e.g., a supportive family, socio-political connectedness, a supportive peer-network, considerable personal capacities), Max has suffered for his sexual and/or gender identity. He has experienced bullying, violence, discrimination and harassment as a direct consequence of being bisexual and/or genderfluid. It is *these* aspects of Max’s story that most closely mirror other research into the experiences of LGBT youth, in particular those who question their gender, perhaps identifying as trans, non-binary or genderfluid. The positive aspects of the performance should not, then, be taken to suggest everything is alright for LGBT students in schools. Existing research shows that for many it is anything but alright. Sadly, Max’s story of possibility, optimism and hope contrasts with the experiences of many LGBT youth. But this mismatch gets to the core of why an affirmative story like Max’s is



much needed: by revealing how things *are* for Max, the performance simultaneously shows how things *could be* for others.

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