

Research Summary

A Rights Perspective on Parent Advocacy for their Transgender Children in Aotearoa New Zealand School Settings (Short Form Summary)

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Keywords: children’s rights; parent advocacy; school; transgender

This dissertation explored parents’ advocacy for their transgender children in Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools and whether any changes have resulted from this advocacy. A rights perspective based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) (1989) informed the research. This is the first study to consider parental advocacy for transgender children in Aotearoa New Zealand school settings. The literature examined the experiences of transgender children in schools, parent advocacy in schools for their transgender children in other countries, and an overview of children’s rights related to the issues of education and transgender children.

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

The study found that parents advocated for their transgender children in middle and secondary schools in New Zealand. The findings showed that this advocacy was similar to that undertaken by parents in other international contexts. The participants perceived that some schools were under-prepared for transgender students and did not have appropriate bathroom facilities in place or processes to facilitate change, such as updating names and pronouns on their administrative systems; that teachers were sometimes unsupportive and misgendered their children; that establishing relationships with school personnel was important to facilitate their child’s social transition; and that bullying by teachers and students, such as misgendering and harassment, was evident.

Some of the outcomes observed in schools, such as new gender neutral toilets and including pronouns on school rolls, were considered by the parents to be a result of parent advocacy. Some of these changes, such as special passes for bathrooms, appeared only to be accommodating for the individual child rather than involving systemic change. Parents’ advocacy in schools was consistent with a children’s rights approach.

Parent acts as an advocate	Art. 18 parent has responsibility for upbringing consistent with best interests of the child Art. 19 children have a right to identity Art. 2 freedom from discrimination
Parents involving their children in advocacy	Art. 5 Parents give guidance for children to exercise their rights as appropriate for their child’s evolving capacities Art. 12 children’s views given due weight

Children participating in meetings/discussions	Art. 12 children's views given due weight
Parents advocating for their child to maintain their privacy	Art. 16 children's right to privacy

Table 1: Parent Advocacy and Children's Rights

The issues which prompted their advocacy were found to be in violation of children's rights as enshrined in UNCROC, suggesting that some schools are not upholding their obligations under UNCROC or the Human Rights Act 1993.

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

Table 2 Children's Rights and Issues related to Advocacy

This dissertation contributes to the literature on parents' advocacy for their transgender children by exploring Aotearoa New Zealand school settings. The study highlights the potential of parent advocacy using a children's rights approach to bring about change in schools for all transgender children.

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

Access to resources	Information about gender diversity and UNCROC for Aotearoa New Zealand contexts is available to parents Support for organisations such as InsideOUT
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Table 3 Facilitating Advocacy and Better Outcomes for Transgender Students

The dissertation also recognises the existing cisnormative school environments in Aotearoa New Zealand and the work that is needed to ensure schools understand and enact their obligations under UNCROC.

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

References

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, November 20, 1989,
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

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Biography

Janette Howe (she/her) completed a Master of Human Rights with Honours (First Class) at AUT in 2022. She has advocated for her transgender child on issues adversely impacting them at high school. This experience prompted her research exploring parent advocacy as a vehicle for advancing transgender children's rights. She has past experience as a documentary filmmaker with credits as a writer, director and producer and also completed a Master of Arts with First Class Honours in Screen Production. Janette has advocated for children in the screen sector for over ten years and established a dedicated children's film festival.