

Gender Variant Students

For teachers dealing with transgender students

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Transgender people are arguably the least understood and most maligned of all minority groups. A fixed concept of gender is perhaps the most basic assumption in our culture and contradictions to that assumption are often extremely confronting. Sigmund Freud, observed in his writings in "Femininity":

When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is male or female – and you are accustomed to make the distinction with unhesitating certainty."

Perhaps everyone will have at some time asked the question, "is that a boy or a girl", when they have been unable to make the distinction. Even when there is no direct interaction with the individual concerned there is often an irrational need to know the answer. Certainly it is the common first question asked of parents of a newborn baby.

Culturally then, there is enormous pressure for all individuals to adopt the expected gender behaviours associated with being male or female. What then are the implications for individuals whose sense of gender is contrary to their physical maleness or femaleness? Sadly there are many.

Before addressing these it might be useful to give some background on transgender identity. A transgender person, according to the definition adopted by the N.S.W. Anti-Discrimination Board, is:

"anyone who lives, has lived, or wants to live as a member of the opposite gender (sex) to their birth sex."

According to medical models, in children, it is someone who:

- repeatedly states a desire to be, or insistence that s/he is, the other sex;
- preference for the clothing of the other sex;
- strong and persistent preferences for cross-sex roles in make believe play;
- intense desire to participate in the stereotypical games and pastimes of being the other sex;
- strong preference for playmates of the other sex.

Both definitions carry limitations.

The transgender community itself allows for a far more multi coloured umbrella definition that is inclusive of anyone who transgresses gender norms. However the "feminine" boy or the "masculine" girl are not providing guaranteed clues of transgenderism. A transgender child cannot always be readily identified by their behaviour. Indeed, it could well be the most masculine behaving, least likely boy on the block, is actually transgender. Because transgender children carry the same gender conditioning as others, their true feelings, and their own fear of them, will often be hidden under outwardly appropriate birth gender behaviour.

It is probable then that only a small percentage of transgender children will necessarily be identified within the school system. However, once identified, they are likely to be subjected to duress at many levels. Many of these children who present as a disappointment to the expectations of their parents will find themselves at risk in their own homes. This can range from overt or covert disapproval from parents, siblings and relatives to emotional and sometimes physical abuse. Too often such children are ostracised in the very environment that should afford them protection.

They are even more likely to meet with ostracism, abuse and violence in the school community. Certainly, peer groups can be extremely cruel when dealing with those who exhibit any form of difference. Unfortunately, this can also be true of teachers, so the transgender child is frequently left without any source of support. In the face of this it is common for the child to become withdrawn, untrusting and isolated. If, as has been common in the past, the child's predicament is ignored the long term impact on their quality of life, ability to socialise and access to equitable education can be severely impeded. The transgender community in general suffers excessively high suicide/attempted suicide rates, systemic discrimination, unemployment, lack of equity in access, limited opportunity, low levels of self worth/esteem and dignity, high incidence of verbal and physical abuse and difficulties in establishing and maintaining relationships.

Ironically, the dilemma facing those who identify as transgender stems from society's incapacity to address gender issues in general. The inequities that continue to exist between male and female in a system that polarises gender and affords male supremacy within that dichotomy, have a direct impact on transgender people. In a perfect, gender egalitarian world, it is hard to imagine that anyone would care if someone born male chose to be a woman or someone born female chose to be a man. Unfortunately, and despite the progress that feminism has achieved, we are still culturally bound to rigid expectations of gender behaviour that continue to insist that "biology is destiny" for men, women and the rest of us. It is here that the main work still needs to be done. We all have a vested interest in rejecting those self appointed guardians of gender, (often ourselves as products of our conditioning), who would have us believe that human potential is determined by genitals.

For teachers dealing with transgender or gender variant children there are some simple guidelines that can make a world of difference.

Firstly, under N.S.W. Anti-Discrimination legislation, transgender people have a right to equality in education. The responsibility for ensuring this occurs rests with the institution and its staff. It is incumbent on staff to ensure that such students are not subject to harassment from other students or from anyone else in the school community. This means that teachers must take an active role in eliminating behaviours that threaten the rights of the transgender student.

Secondly, afford the transgender student the same level of respect and courtesy as you would afford anyone else and would expect for yourself. If you are confronted by their behaviour or sense of identity it is only a reflection of your own gender expectations. Keep uppermost in your thoughts that every human being is deserving of respect and your own discomfort will quickly dissipate. Be prepared to defend the dignity of the student, listen to their views and be open to expanding your own understanding. Our capacity to learn from those who are different in the world is greater than from those who apparently share our commonality. Be an educator of others as you increasingly educate yourself. If necessary advocate for the student where there is a need, including potentially their parents.

Finally, if the student is fully transitioned and attending school as a member of their chosen gender, then facilitate their access to activities specifically designated for that gender, respect their identity by referring to them by chosen name and appropriate gender references and acknowledge their right to access toilets and change rooms appropriate to their gender identity. For the most part the transgender student simply wants to be acknowledged and treated in the same way as any other member of their chosen sex.

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