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Transgendered Children in schools

Mark Hellen

Introduction

This article is intended to provide evidence to suggest that information for teachers regarding transgendered children does not represent an adequate picture of transgendered children in schools and that primary schools need to be made more aware of how to deal with transgendered children, even if these children do not make themselves known to staff. It will argue that this is probably a contributing factor in transgendered children's underachievement in school. The implications of this research will also suggest that findings of some psychiatric and psychology professionals are open to reinterpretation. I will additionally suggest that the inclusion of transgendered issues when dealing with homophobic bullying and work on gender stereotyping is likely to make combating homophobic bullying and gender discrimination more effective.

Guidance currently available for parents and teachers

Advice currently available for UK parents and teachers of transgendered children is very limited. The Department for Children, Schools and Families' guidance on homophobic bullying available to every UK school on the UK teachers' support website "Teachernet" contains only a few short sentences regarding transgendered children including this description:

Some young people come to realise that their biological gender is not the same as the gender with which they identify, that is, they are born a girl but feel like a boy, or are born a boy and feel like a girl.¹

¹ Teachernet 2007.

http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/behaviour/tacklingbullying/homophobicbullying/faqs/Transgender_people/ (accessed 25 April 2009).

This description is only relevant to those children who identify as transsexual and not for other transgendered children. These children might simply feel that they do not fit into current expectations of their assigned gender, they might feel both male and female, they might feel neither, or they might have a fluid gender identity. Indeed this small amount of information may be problematic if it is the only information a school, a teacher or a parent initially has access to when trying to understand the situation of a transgendered child. Until recently this was similar to other sources of information about transgendered children. GIRES (2006) previously published information on transphobic bullying tended towards the description of transgendered children as transsexual only, and transgendered children who are not transsexual were almost entirely omitted. However this information may not find its way to teachers or parents despite being available online. The tendency appears to be for any organisation which has to refer to transgendered people to actually describe *transsexuals*, who, it appears, represent quite a small minority of transgendered people (GIRES 2008) (2).

One can speculate here that the reason for this omission could be that it is, from a social point of view less problematic to conceive of transsexuals, since, in a sense they still have a gender identity which can be recognised by most people, whereas those who do not fit into the gender binary system may be more difficult to understand and interact with. Namaste (2000: 51) argues that society appears to want to make transgendered people invisible, possibly because no established rules or conventions exist for social interaction with people who do not consider themselves as either 100% male or 100% female. It would appear that in many cases society would rather avoid this completely and characterise transgendered people as having some kind of problem, rather than the reverse.

Transgenderism in children

Studies by some mental health professionals (Green 1987, Zucker 1985) suggest that transgenderism in children is largely a manifestation of homosexuality and that the majority of such children do not grow up to be transgendered adults. In direct

contradiction to these studies, evidence from Brown's (1988) study of male-to-female transgendered personnel in the US military is particularly relevant. His study represents strong evidence that it is social pressures which force male-to-female transgendered children to hide their real transgenderism, with particular examples of how some engage in what he describes as a flight into "hypermasculinity".

the gender-disordered child has, at most, an awareness of the self as different from the societal dictates of his anatomy. He does not know what a transsexual is and feels confused about his identity/role [...] the pre-transsexual adolescent does not possess the ego strength to withstand social ostracization and ridicule of adopting the cross-gender role. Furthermore he cannot tolerate his growing awareness of the mismatch between his anatomy and sense of self. In the prevailing adolescent atmosphere of individualized conformity, "fitting in" is the means of securing psychological supplies and bolstering flagging self-esteem. (Brown 1988: 531)²

This directly challenges much of the research conducted by psychologists such as Green and Zucker. Their approach, seemingly based on the positivistic methodology of pure science (Cohen & Mannion 1980) fails to take account of the social environment in which these children are growing up. The children's own perceptions and feelings of their situation are apparently not accounted for, neither is the possibility that they might feel the need to conceal their transgenderism from others, including their parents and especially other adults such as psychiatric or psychology professionals. Indeed having ones behaviour characterised as problematic by parents, teachers and mental health professionals may lead some children deliberately to conceal their transgenderism and suppress it. These actions would in many ways be an entirely rational approach to the circumstances in which their transgenderism may well be the source of bullying, torment and scorn, These children might even experience bullying from their own families and is likely to result in them appearing to have been 'cured' by the interventions of psychology or psychiatric professionals. Being under pressure from both family and mental health professionals is likely to result in many children trying to conform to their expectations, or at least to appear to do so. It is this failure, on the part of some psychiatrists and psychologists to conceive of transgendered children as having their own thoughts, feelings and opinions about their treatment and to account for the fact that they are individuals who are capable of exercising human agency and making

decisions about how to act in the situation in which they find themselves. These considerations may seriously reduce the validity of claims made by this research. The implication of this is that there are potentially two types of male-to-female transgendered children; those who become known as transgendered from an early age, and those who try to conceal their transgenderism, which I shall characterise as “apparent” and “non-apparent” transgendered children respectively. Many factors could contribute to this situation including the social environment in which the children find themselves, their ability to express themselves, their relationships with siblings, with parents, their parents’ ‘political’, social or religious opinions, the culture of their immediate geographical environment and the attitude of the school attended. There is no evidence to suggest that either type may be more or less ‘deserving’ of support than the other, and indeed they may not differ substantially in terms of their basic needs and condition.

It would appear, then, that as transgendered children become more aware of how socially unacceptable they may be, the more likely it will be that, rightly or wrongly, they will suppress or at least conceal their gender identities. Lee (2004), through her long involvement with transgendered communities in London and around the world, describes how they tend to hide their gender identities throughout their teen years and their twenties likening the situation to a ‘pressure cooker’, deliberately suppressing that side of themselves only for it to surface later in life. As evidenced in the next section, despite the fact that transgendered children mostly become aware of their different gender identities at a very young age, the average age at which transsexuals in the UK have gender reassignment surgery has remained at 42 for many years (GIRES 2008: 2).

Age of Self-awareness

Determining the age at which most transgendered children become aware of their transgenderism is therefore crucial. The Department for Schools, Children and Families (DSCF) guidance on homophobic bullying includes a small amount of information for teachers regarding transgendered children (DSCF 2007: 70). It seems apparent from its

inclusion in a document, which mostly deals with homophobic bullying and is clearly largely aimed at secondary school teachers, that there is a perception that children realising that they are transgendered is the same sort of process and timing of realisation as that of lesbian, gay or bisexual children. The evidence is that lesbians, gay males and bisexuals are most likely to become aware that their sexuality may be different during or after puberty. Although there may be some who might consider themselves to be lesbian, gay or bisexual earlier than that it is arguable that until puberty and sexual awareness is developed, it will be impossible to tell for certain what a child's sexuality will be. This is confirmed by the findings of the Outproud/Oasis survey of 1,960 young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people between the ages of 10 and 25³ that at the age of 10, only 21% were aware of their sexuality, and only 2% had accepted the fact, yet by the age of 16, 93% were aware of their sexuality, and 54% had accepted it.

The following online study was carried out in an attempt to find out what age transgendered people remember becoming aware of their transgenderism, and to obtain some kind of understanding of the course of action they took as a result of that realisation.

Ethical issues and methodology

While there are ethical considerations which are likely to make it difficult to obtain data directly from transgendered children these do not apply to adult transgendered people in the same way. Investigating memories of adult transgendered people through examining online sources is an underused and potentially very fruitful way of accessing information about transgendered people.

Herring (1996) argues that these forums represent public information and that as such they are legitimate sources of important data for researchers. The Association of Internet Researchers Ethical guidelines (Association of Internet Researchers 2002)

³ <http://www.coastkid.org/si-ssas.html> (accessed 25 April 2007) .

emphasise the need to adhere to ethical principles of anonymity and not causing harm. The affordance of anonymity in addition to generating a community amongst a geographically dispersed population has resulted in an increasingly rich online resource. In this context, transgendered people can retain their anonymity while exchanging information and contributing to online discussions, so there is little to stop them from opening up and revealing personal details which they might never tell even their close friends or family. The AoIR guidelines (2002: 5) suggest that the greater the visibility of the site, the less obligation researchers are under to protect confidentiality and privacy. In terms of visibility of transgendered males and the website in question, www.crossdressers.com, a mostly male-to-female forum, it is arguable that it is clear about its content such that anyone posting to it would be aware that they are posting to a large audience, one which is likely to extend beyond their immediate community. It could also be considered, given its name, to be the sort of site which, for example, the media or individual members of the public would access easily in order to find information about transgendered people. Another aspect which the AoIR considers would reduce the need for informed consent would be if websites allow participants to communicate with each other in private (for example via personal messages) which this site does. This site also has private membership areas which can only be accessed by those who have joined the site. On the subject of consent however, the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social sciences and the Humanities (NESH), one of the few nationally convened research ethics organisations, clearly states that

As a general rule, researchers can freely use material from open fora without obtaining informed consent from the persons who have produced the information or from the persons the information is about.⁴

Ethical issues regarding the risk of harm being caused to those included in the study are also important. However since all the information in the study is still in the public arena the chance that any harm could be caused by its inclusion in this study is likely to be no greater than if it came from other data sources. In the case of the vast majority of forum

⁴ <http://www.etikkom.no/English/Publications/internet03> (accessed: 25 April 2009). This source has been chosen because its policies have been established by a committee of experts drawn from a wider variety of backgrounds and not merely from the community of internet researchers.

participants their identities are concealed by the use of pseudonyms and avatars which either do not show the individuals concerned or which show them in such a way as to be unrecognisable in their male identities. Indeed participants who were concerned about being recognised generally do not post images of their faces. Insofar as ethics related to using minors as subjects in research is concerned, this research deliberately used a thread which was part of a site which states that it is for over-18 year-olds only.

The methodology for this study can be characterised as integrated research, extracting data from what is effectively a piece of collective writing about adult transgendered people's experiences of having been transgendered children. Some of the data is analysed numerically, but this is triangulated with an analysis of written textual input from individuals posting on the site. The sampling has to be recognised as a type of convenience sample, based on contributions from transgendered people who were active on the forum at the time. Given that this sample does not represent, for example, a geographically based convenience sample, nor did the researcher need to use personal contacts to find subjects for study, this reduces problems with validity. On the contrary, it is possible to argue that this study potentially represents a more valid way of obtaining data about transgendered people than any other, given problems with sampling from a relatively cautious and geographically thinly dispersed population. So, although this data has not been obtained through direct contact with the respondents, there is little to suggest that it is likely to be any less reliable than any other data collected about transgendered people. Indeed, the study of this website produces data which is supported, to a large extent, by findings from the Engendered Penalties Report (Whittle et al. 2007), a large-scale study which published findings about discrimination against transgendered people in the UK.

Findings

In the forum "crossdressers.com" one thread asked individuals to recall the first female-related item they used to explore their transgenderism. These items included make-up, shoes, clothes, jeans, perfume and coats. Whilst choice of clothing is clearly not the

only element of transgender identity, for transgendered children it is likely to be a particularly significant one (Whittle et al.: 64-65). The total of 224 responses (some people contributing more than once), resulted in 110 giving the exact, or a close approximation (for example, '5 or 6'⁵), of the age the respondent was when s/he first tried on female clothing, make-up or footwear. The contributors were *not actually asked* for their age, so this information was given as additional to the main subject of the discussion. As such there would seem to be little to suggest that any of this information may be inaccurate or distorted. The responses of many others, who did not give an exact age, demonstrated that they had clearly become aware of being transgendered when they were young; typical responses referred to an item of a sister's or mothers apparel, cosmetics or footwear:

“...my older sister's cheerleader outfit. Maybe it was a majorette outfit. I can't really remember now.”

A numerical analysis of these responses is set out in graphical form in *Figures 3 and 4*. What this data quite clearly suggests is that the majority of transgendered people were aware that they were transgendered well before puberty. The average age of a male transgendered child's first time trying on any female item is eight and as we can see, more than four fifths had done this while they were still in primary school. It should also be remembered that this data represents the age at which they first took action related to their transgenderism. There are other potential factors to consider here, such as the opportunity to engage in these activities, which may well have resulted in some respondents not acting on their feelings earlier despite having known about them for some time. As such this data could possibly be viewed as representing an over-estimation, in age terms, of the actual ages at which the subjects became aware of their gender identities. Some are likely to have known they were different from a much younger age, but the opportunity to try on female make-up, clothes or shoes did not manifest itself until they were much older.

This data may initially come as a surprise but it must be acknowledged that gender identity is not the same as sexual orientation, as does the DCSF guidance on

⁵ In this sort of instance, the higher figure was taken.

Homophobic Bullying (DCSF 2007: 70). Whilst it is likely that sexual orientation is dependent on going through puberty, gender identity is not, and therefore is likely to become apparent at a much younger age. The majority of non-transgendered boys and girls do not wait until puberty until they begin to adopt gender-specific behaviour.

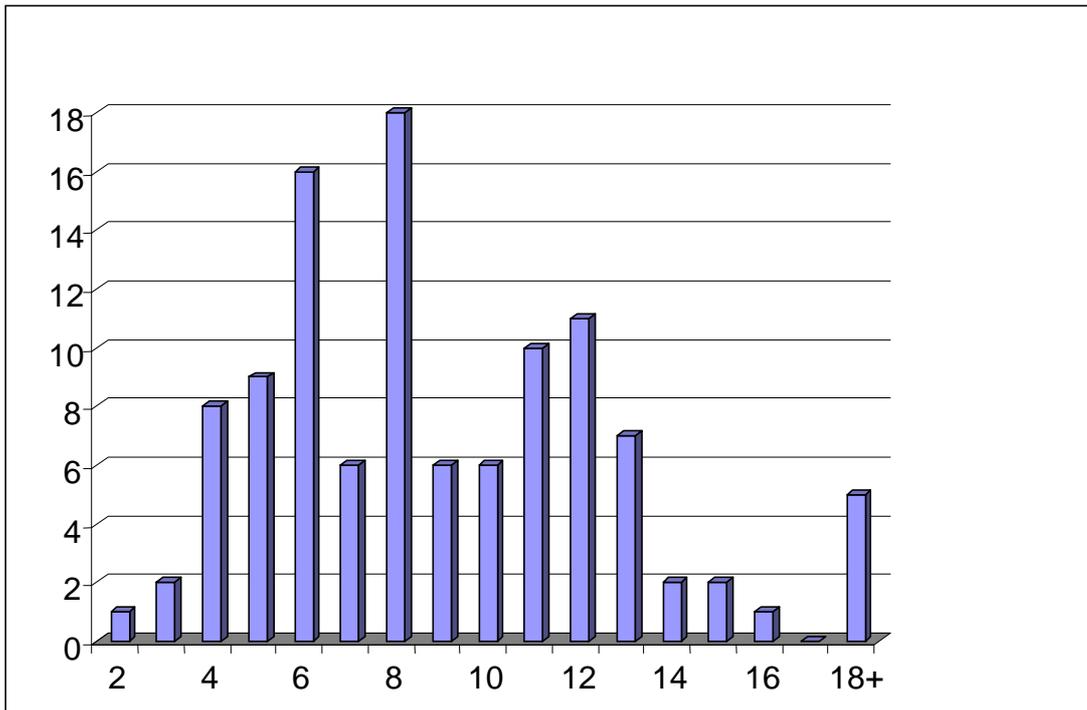


Figure 3. Graphic showing the age when transgendered people remember becoming aware of being transgendered.

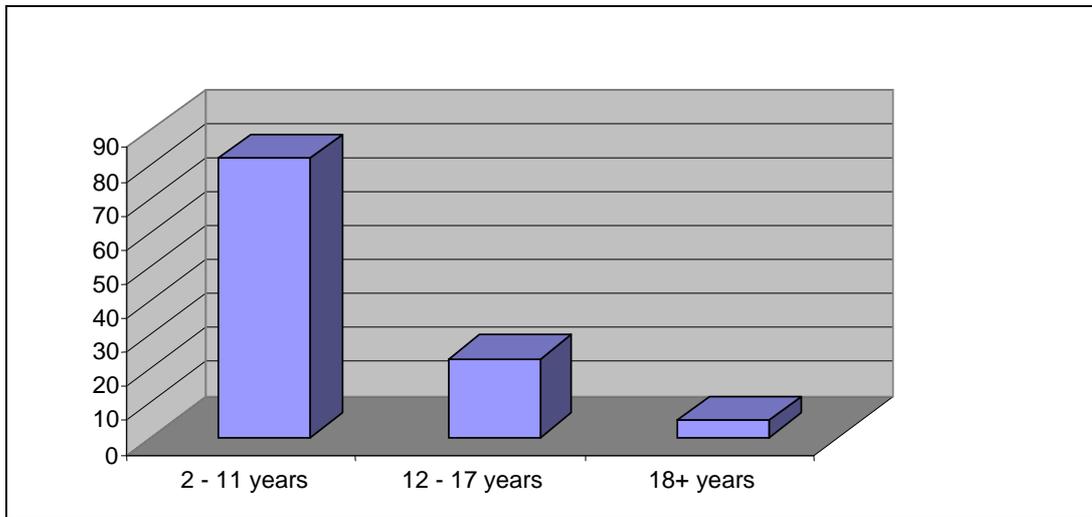


Figure 4. Frequency of initial action on transgendered feelings, organised by school phase.

Social Non-acceptance

What is apparent from those posting to the forum thread was that the activities they were engaged in were perceived by the children at the time as something about which they had to be secretive. These responses were typical:

“The first fem[inine] item I wore was my sister’s school uniform in secret when I was 7.”

“I use to sneak up in our attic and put it on.”

“I raided my mom's closet.”

“I was about 12 when I snuck into my cousin’s room ...”

“I hid them in a cupboard and would take them out whenever I was alone. Was about 5 at the time.”

It was clear from the perceptions of many of the male-to-female respondents in the Engendered Penalties report (Whittle et al. 2007) that the social environment in school led them to hide their transgendered behaviour:

“I learnt to live in stealth as a boy in order to survive. My schools were transphobic in that transness was not even remotely an option.”

“I became solitary, insular and insecure. I went to great lengths to conceal my trans characteristics.”

“I hid my trans status absolutely by being withdrawn and unsociable. I never felt I fitted in. You learn very quickly to hide who you are.”

“I had to hide my gender issues, especially in school. My life would not have been worth living.”

“I kept my transgender secret. My school was a hostile environment for many people.”

(Whittle et al. 2007: 64)

This real and perceived socially-determined need for transgendered children to conceal their gender identities from their classmates and others in schools has many consequences. Grossman & Augelli (2007) found that transgendered children demonstrated significant levels of life-threatening behaviour such as attempted suicide. The risk of this was noticeably increased when they were subjected to physical and verbal abuse from parents, often as a result of pressure to conform to ‘normal’ gender stereotype behaviour. Indeed, since younger children often feel a stronger need to please their parents than adolescents, the repression of one’s own transgender feelings would possibly be the most logical action from the point of view of a transgendered child. This is significant, as teachers may be in the position of needing to deal with children who are suffering from abuse at home as a result of their transgenderism. That this abuse is much more likely to start at a younger age when children involved are much more vulnerable, less able to defend themselves or rationalise their situation and obtain help or support from other sources. The loss of self-esteem by these children is evident in the Engendered Penalties Report (Whittle et al. 2007) and it is noted that it leads to transgendered children leaving school in disproportionate numbers, at the earliest possible opportunity.

A simple examination of some of the key words used by the contributors to this thread reveals their concern that others did not find out about their transgenderism, “Secret”, “sneak”, “snuck”, “hid”, “stealth”, “solitary”, “conceal”, “withdrawn”, “hide”.

Considerations of secrecy clearly pervaded the lives of these people when they were children, clearly most, if not all were non-apparent transgendered children.

It is clear from many of the posts that the fear of being caught was uppermost in their minds, strongly suggesting they realised either that what they were doing was ‘wrong’ or that there would be negative consequences if they were to be exposed:

“thinking Oh my God I’m going to get caught”

“I was so nervous about it, but I found an odd sense of comfort. I was fortunate enough to return the garments to the pile of laundry, as they were when I picked them up, without anyone even knowing.”

“I didn’t keep them on for long--too freaked out about being discovered.”

The continued desire to engage in an activity or even to acknowledge feelings which they believe to be wrong is clearly something which could affect children’s self-esteem. The feelings expressed by some of those describing their experiences support this:

“There was a feeling of serenity that came over me”

“I was envious of my sister!”

“it was so pretty, and I felt so good in it”

“I loved that dress, it made me feel special.”

The data from this forum thread is potentially quite significant because the forum itself is clearly not directed at transsexuals but rather at transgendered males who are not transsexual, although there would also appear to be a small number of transsexuals responding to the question in the thread. Its importance stems from the fact that the majority of posters are clearly non-apparent transgendered children. These are mostly people who were children in schools that did not know that they were transgendered. What is clear from this data is that transgendered people who do not consider themselves transsexual were aware of their gender identity at a young age.

The data presented in figs 1 and 2 above relates to male-to-female transgendered children, whether the situation is similar for female-to-male transgendered children may be more difficult to establish, although the frequency of ‘tomboys’ in primary schools is well known. It may be that tomboys become aware of their differences at a different age from Male-to-Female transgendered children although there is no evidence to suggest this. The difference may be in the relative social acceptability of tomboys. These children may not view their behaviour or feelings as problematic from a social point of view until adolescence. (Whittle et al. 2007), in the Engendered Penalties Report reveal that female-to-male transgendered children report more transphobic bullying than male-to-female transgendered children in secondary school, this is possibly because male-to-female ones have learnt at an earlier age to hide their transgenderism, whereas ‘tomboys’ making the transition from primary to secondary school are likely to find that people who previously accepted them no longer do so and that consequently they are less well prepared than male-to-female transgendered children. This strongly suggests that transgendered male-to-female children learn to conceal their transgenderism from a much younger age.

Self-esteem

Low self-esteem in the current UK education system has been discovered to be a significant reason for failure at school. The Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs)–based system of high-stakes testing introduced by the Thatcher government in the late 1980s and reinforced subsequently has had a measurable effect on children with low self-esteem. EPPI (2002: 9) found that while there had been no correlation between self-esteem and achievement prior to the introduction of National Curriculum tests in England, after their introduction a clear correlation between low self-esteem and underachievement emerged. Transgendered children would appear to be potentially more likely to be failed by this system since their self-esteem is likely to be negatively affected either by bullying or by the need to repress or conceal their gender identities. If they have been hiding or suppressing their different gender identities from a very young age then this is likely to have affected their self-esteem for quite a long time. This has

implications for teachers and school managers. Teachers need to understand that transgendered children, especially males, are very likely to be non-apparent transgendered children even in primary school despite becoming aware that they are different at quite a young age. It is also evident that the low self-esteem resulting from suppressed transgenderism is very likely to result in substantial harm being done to their chances of achieving what they are capable of in school.

This paints a particularly sad, bleak and desperate picture of school life for transgendered children. The evidence is that schools, especially primary schools, may be unaware of the psychological and educational damage being caused to these children and that these issues are seemingly ignored by the Government. This is a serious indictment of UK national policies on inclusion. Policies are in place which make it part of normal school life to respect and celebrate the identities of other groups and aimed at raising their self-esteem. However there are usually no policies aimed at respecting and celebrating transgendered children's own identities. One of the main ways in which the situation for transgendered children could be improved would be if their fear of social exclusion and consequent bullying were reduced.

Bullying

Proposals which may have the potential to improve the situation of transgendered children whilst at the same time dealing with homophobic bullying of other children as well, will be elaborated on in this section. The guidance in the DCSF document (DCSF 2007) makes it quite clear that it is not only children who are LGB (Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual) that are subject to homophobic bullying and that in addition:

Homophobic bullying can affect anyone regardless of sexual orientation. Anyone who is thought to be gay, or just thought to be "different" can be called "gay" or experience homophobic abuse. (DCSF 2007: 71)

This is an important, but often overlooked clue as to the source of 'homophobic' bullying. It clearly includes transgendered children as well as children who are not LGBT (Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Transgendered) but whose behaviour or appearance may differ from those of 'normal' heterosexual children. Namaste (2000) and Harry

(1990) suggest that gender variant behaviour or appearance represents a better basis for predicting whether a person will be a victim of homophobic attack than their actual sexual orientation. Their evidence shows that gay men who appear effeminate and lesbians who appear 'butch' are more likely to be attacked than gays and lesbians who are very masculine or feminine respectively and the likelihood of assault on gay men who describe themselves as 'very masculine' is less than half that of those who consider themselves to behave in a more effeminate way (Namaste 2000: 141). Indeed Harry (1990) suggests that the only way lesbian victims of assault were able to explain why they had been attacked was with reference to their gender appearance rather than their sexual orientation. It may be reasonable to argue then that homophobic bullying in schools, especially primary schools, is a result, not of a child's sexual orientation, but of a child's appearance or mannerisms in relation to gender. Indeed it is probable that the only way a potential homophobic bully would have of singling out a victim would be with reference to gender variant appearance or behaviour, so those lesbian, gay and bisexual (but not transgendered) children who still conform to the normative expectations of their gender probably run a greatly reduced risk of homophobic bullying whilst others who are not lesbian, gay or bisexual may suffer from it considerably.

If this is the case the DCSF document may actually be less effective in guiding teachers when dealing with homophobic bullying as well as transphobic bullying. An additional focus on gender variant behaviour may well be more effective; it would serve to include transgendered children within its scope whilst also targeting the sort of bullying which would include LGB children and those children who are neither LGB nor transgendered but who nevertheless suffer from 'homophobic' bullying.

Teachers and schools need to be equipped to deal with this sort of bullying and use anti-bullying strategies which help legitimise behaviour which is neither gender specific nor stereotyped and target the bullying of children, whose behaviour does not conform to stereotypical gender expectations, whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Conclusions

It is apparent that schools need to understand that transgendered children usually become aware of their different gender identities at a very young age, and that most will be aware of this before they leave primary school. Transgendered issues should be part of inclusion policies in all schools, particularly primary schools, especially since it is highly likely that there will be non-apparent transgendered children on roll. There should be two aims of including transgendered issues in diversity education for children. Firstly to tackle what Harry Benjamin (1954: 52) described as the need to 'treat society'. For the majority of transgendered people their 'cure' is changing social attitudes so that society accepts that there are individuals who do not fit into the binary gender system. Making the rest of society more aware of transgendered people and their varied gender identities would be similar to work schools do on anti-racism for example. This could be included in teaching which is aimed at challenging sexual stereotypes where, for example, all genders can be encouraged to aspire to roles or careers other than those normally traditionally associated with their gender.

This could also be linked to more effective ways of dealing with homophobic bullying. Addressing this issue, at least in part, from the point of view of gender variant behaviour and appearance needs to be very seriously considered. This is potentially a more effective way of presenting such issues to children and of benefiting a wider range of children.

However one of the key considerations must be the inclusion of elements within the curriculum which convey to children that being transgendered is acceptable and to help transgendered children develop their self-esteem; for example, looking at the lives of transgendered people who do respected jobs like scientists, musicians, pilots, politicians and writers as well as transgendered people in history. Schools need to consider addressing this even if they do not know if there are any transgendered children in the school. This is because transgendered children, for a variety of reasons outlined above, are likely to conceal their transgenderism. There is a precedent for this in the UK at

least with teachers being instructed to have a “dyslexia-friendly” classroom despite the fact that there may be no diagnosed dyslexic children in the class. In this way any transgendered children will receive the message that their gender identity is not a problem and that they may not need to conceal their gender identity, at least in school. Indeed, even if they do continue to conceal it this could still have a significant impact on their self-esteem and consequently their academic performance and their life-chances. As such it is argued that schools need to be much more pro-active in dealing with both apparent and non-apparent transgendered children.

There is evidence that transgendered people are becoming more accepted – the election last year of a transgendered mayor in Cambridge – being an example of this, as has been the election of transgendered MPs to the Italian and New Zealand parliaments, transgendered politicians in Hawaii and laws prohibiting discrimination against transgendered people now in force in places as diverse as Sweden, Ecuador, Nepal and 14 US states. However, it would appear that official UK government attitudes towards transgendered people, especially those who are not transsexual, have not undergone the same change. This is to the detriment, in particular, of transgendered children. This needs to change if ‘Every Child Matters’ is to have any meaning beyond that of an empty slogan for transgendered children.

Whilst this study is still of a relatively small order, the overwhelming nature of the data presented above would suggest that there is a need for further study of transgendered children, even if that means obtaining that data from transgendered adults.

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