
FEATURES

Understanding Gender Identity in K-12 Schools

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ABSTRACT. Educators concerned with diversity, equity, and human rights in schools share their personal and professional narratives as impetus

Gayle Roberts started her teaching career in 1969 at Gladstone Secondary School in Vancouver, British Columbia. In 1980, she took a three-year leave of absence to teach physics at the United World College of South East Asia in Singapore. Afterward, the Vancouver School Board assigned her to Lord Byng Secondary School, where she taught General Science and Physics and was the Science Department Head for many years, both before and after her transition in 1996. She retired in June 2002, and is the author of the article "Transitioning in the School System" in *One Teacher in 10*. She is the chair of Vancouver Coastal Health Authority's Advisory Group to the Trans Health Program (E-mail: roberts_gayle@hotmail.com).

Carol Allan, a transsexual male-to-female, has been teaching with Edmonton Public Schools for over 20 years. She has experience in elementary, junior high and adult upgrading. During a sabbatical in 2003/2004, Carol completed a Masters of Education in Instructional Technology at the University of Alberta. She taught as a male for her first 12 years and as a female for almost two decades (E-mail: c3dawn@telusplanet.net).

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for developing suggestions and strategies designed to help teachers, students, and administrators deepen their understandings of gender identity educational issues in an effort to support transitioning teachers in K-12 schools. doi:10.1300/J367v04n04_08 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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This article emerged out of a series of discussions between Gayle, Carol, and Kris, who are all public school educators concerned with issues of diversity, equity, and human rights in K-12 schools. We recognize that over the past decade, at least in Canada, sexual orientation has achieved growing recognition in inclusive school policy development, curricular resources, and teacher professional development. However, despite this notable progress, the health and safety needs and concerns of trans-identified¹ students and teachers have been largely ignored.²

Gayle and Carol present narratives from their lived and learned experiences as transsexual teachers who seek to account for the educational silences and pedagogical absences in official school discourse that often marginalize and render trans-identified students and teachers invisible in their classrooms and schools. We follow these personal reflections with a series of suggestions and strategies designed to assist transitioning teachers to anticipate and negotiate a wide variety of personal and professional responses to his or her transition. Importantly, we also recognize the role that teacher colleagues, administrators, and school district-level personnel can play in working to help or hinder teachers in making a successful transition. As a result, we have also developed suggestions to help the concerned educators become allies who can help support teachers undertake a healthy and successful transition.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON GROWING UP TRANSSEXUAL

Gayle Roberts

During the past half century, the public has gradually become more aware of transsexual people in society. The most famous transsexual

person during this period was undoubtedly Christine Jorgensen.³ The fact that she was an American GI in a very male-dominated culture prior to her transition, in 1952, was most likely the impetus that made her such a provocative and well-known public figure. Christine was the first person who publicly forced society to see transsexual people as other than perverts or freaks. Society instead had to address some fundamental questions: What is sex, what is gender, what causes transsexualism, why would anyone possibly wish to transition from one sex to another, and how should society deal with the increasing number of people who self-identify as transsexual?

As a 12-year-old, I read numerous newspaper articles and viewed many newsreels about Christine's transition. I envied her. My earliest memories of difference were feeling, at my very core being, the overwhelming desire to be a girl. Through my child eyes, I saw that what was possible for Christine Jorgensen would be impossible for me. I was born into a culture, which made it very clear that the feelings I had were completely unacceptable. As I strived to internalize these overpowering male sex-role expectations, I increasingly felt a sense of shame and worthlessness, which made it impossible to initially reveal my feelings to others about my gender, and as I became older, about my sexuality. Through my adult eyes, I now see that no child or adult should ever have to experience the shame and pain that so many transsexual people have had to bear.

As I became a teenager and matured into a young adult, I found that the only way I could escape my increasing desire to be a woman was to immerse myself in academe and engage in what I perceived as stereotypically male pursuits (for the late sixties and early seventies) such as becoming a ski patroller, a leader of outdoor education activities, proficient at martial arts, and eventually a scuba diving instructor. I tried until I was in my mid-fifties to bury my inner female core identity by taking on many extra-curricular activities within my school and, in my free time, keeping myself constantly occupied with such activities as backpacking, canoeing, and wildlife photography. However, the mounting mental anguish (which I later understood to be gender dysphoria⁴) eventually intensified to the point where I could no longer function—even as a successful and highly respected teacher. I knew that I had to ultimately transition for myself and for my peace of mind.

Fortunately for me, Christine Jorgensen and the many thousands of people who transitioned after her had begun to pave the way for my own journey. Unlike many transitioning teachers in the 1980s and early 1990s who were dismissed by their school boards, I was fortunate that when I transitioned in 1996, Canadian society had become increasingly more

accepting of homosexuality and transsexuality. My school board shared these more enlightened views and supported me in my transition by initially employing me as a science consultant in an emotionally safe environment at the board's main office. At the beginning of the next school year, I returned to classroom teaching in my "old" school where my colleagues, students, and their parents and guardians completely accepted me.

Even if there is support, transitioning is seldom easy for anyone. I hope the suggestions and strategies presented in this article will be useful to other transitioning educators. I also hope that they will become critical tools for everyone in the school system, including students, parents, and educators, to support transitioning individuals. Perhaps, these suggestions will also contribute to reducing or eliminating some of the fears that a small number of individuals continue to hold towards transsexual people. I also hope that by sharing parts of my own experiences that I can help future transsexual teachers make a healthy and happy transition in their schools, communities, and lives.

SURVIVING GENDER-CHANGE IN ALBERTA IN THE 1980s

Carol Allan

My professional interest in understanding gender identity stems from my own personal experiences as a transsexual public school teacher. Currently, I teach junior high school in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I am a male to female trans-woman, and have taught for the same school district in both genders. I taught my first 12 years as a male, and at this point in time, I have taught for nearly two decades as a female.

My transition from male to female occurred in 1987/1988. During that year, I taught as a male until June, and I was determined to begin teaching as a female 2 months later, in September, just in time for the start of the new school year. To accomplish my goal, I held a carefully timed meeting with school district officials at the end of the 1988 school year. I arranged for this first meeting to be held at my lawyer's office, as I was not prepared to attempt a male to female transition as a public school teacher without the persuasive power of a knowledgeable and supportive lawyer.

The school district official and board lawyer who met with us reacted to the news of my intention to transition with marked laughter. As I was about to react and speak out, my lawyer interjected and bluntly informed

the school officials that any failure to meet my personal desire and legal right to continue to teach would ultimately result in a court case that would establish a legal precedent in Canada. I sat in stunned silence as they left the room.

The ensuing summer months were spent in a barrage of negotiations where the school district offered increasingly lucrative settlements in an attempt to buy out my teaching contract. Despite these financial incentives, I was determined that I wanted to continue teaching. Finally, after much negotiation and the persuasion of my lawyer, the school board acquiesced, and I was given a new teaching position at a different school site.

After 12 years at the elementary level, however, I was now assigned to a teaching position in Adult ESL (English as a Second Language) for my first year as a female teacher. I was ecstatic over the successful negotiation that allowed me to continue in my chosen profession. I was pleased to find that the administrator, under whose charge I was placed, was very accepting and supportive. It turned out that my teaching assignment was much easier than teaching in the regular K-12 system. Teaching adult ESL meant teaching a 4-hour day, with few of the responsibilities of the K-12 teacher. I began teaching at 9:00 a.m. and finished at 1:00 p.m. each day. The adults knew little English and were often more concerned about their own lives as recent immigrants rather than focusing on any idiosyncrasies I may have exhibited as a new transwoman. In retrospect, my teaching assignment was excellent for the first year in my new gender.

Following that year, I was placed in Adult Upgrading, working with Canadian-born adults who were coming back to school for basic literacy skills. After spending 7 years teaching a wide variety of adults and subjects, I was finally transferred back into the regular K-12 system.

Once back in the mainstream school system, I was exposed to constant pressure and surveillance from my school principal who attempted to force me out of teaching all together. The principal was very open about having no fear of the teachers' association, and she saw it as her solemn duty to remove "undesirable" teachers.

I was assigned a grade four class, and I experienced some anxiousness in how the students and parents might perceive and respond to me. To my relief, the students and parents showed no sign of seeing anything unusual about my appearance or mannerisms. Sadly, my principal continued her attempts to have me removed. My desire to continue teaching, however, was stronger than her ability to dissuade me. I developed a personal mantra to fortify my strength and courage to survive. I repeated the phrase, "I will teach in a deep, dank dungeon,

next door to hell,” which helped me to survive through some very adverse conditions. Approximately a decade has passed since this principal made her best efforts to have me removed from the school, and yet today I remain teaching as a proud educator.

Now in the twilight of my teaching career, I am able to reflect back on my experiences with pride and dignity. I endured the challenges and the taunts of one difficult principal with my head held high. I fought the battle with my school board and principal, and I won a measure of self-respect, not only for myself, but also for those trans-identified teachers and students yet to come. Now I am an advocate for trans-identified, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer individuals in education and the larger community. I serve on our teachers’ association’s subcommittee on sexual orientation and gender identity, and I sit on the Edmonton Police Service’s LGBTQ Community Liaison Committee. No longer will I be silent to the forces of oppression. I now engage in a quiet and subtle form of activism. For example, I have become part of a trans-identified support group where I attempt to provide support to those who are considering transition, transitioning, and those who have recently had surgery. As part of my own journey, I am slowly identifying as a trans-woman to a few more individuals each month or two. Recently, in recognition of my activism, I publicly accepted a Trans Award during Edmonton’s Pride Week celebrations. In an effort to further increase trans visibility, I also have a short biographical narrative vignette, which describes my experiences as a trans-woman and teacher, posted on the Alberta Teachers’ Association sexual orientation and gender identity Web page.

Apart from these more public activities, I also do my best to make the 700 students in my junior high school aware that I am supportive of LGBTQ realities. Students know that I do not accept derogatory words or homophobic statements directed towards LGBTQ persons or any other individuals. Over time, each student who passes through my classroom has come to learn that this is a safe space where every child matters!

STRATEGIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION FOR A TRANSITIONING STAFF MEMBER

A transitioning staff member⁵ may wish to consider the following strategies prior to his/her transition and return to school:

1. Be flexible. Have a plan and be prepared to change the plan if circumstances warrant it. This plan may include consultation with

your teachers' association's or federation's Member Services department.

2. Remember, that it may be difficult to keep your transition a secret from others. Include this reality in your planning.
3. Be cautious, but open with others regarding your intention to transition before you begin the process. Choose your allies carefully.
4. Welcome questions about your transition and attempt to be patient with inquiries. Try to avoid angry or hostile responses. Be natural about your transition. Neither be apologetic, nor be boastful. Remember, for many individuals, this will be their first exposure to issues of gender identity.
5. Stress the medical aspects of your condition. Be knowledgeable about and be able to direct individuals to appropriate professional resources that briefly describe gender identity, gender dysphoria, and the possible causes of transsexualism.
6. Enlist the support of the district and/or school administration, counselors, and teachers. In some cases, a transitioning teacher may find minimal or no support. Be prepared to deal with the possibility that there may not be institutional support for you to rely on.
7. Depending on your stage of transition, dress appropriately in your adopted gender role. Never send out "mixed messages" regarding your gender. Be aware that as a transitioning person, you may go through an age regression or "back swing," causing you to feel much younger in your desired gender than you actually are. It may take some time before you feel age appropriate.
8. Underplay rather than overplay the "ordinariness" of your transition. Remember, it may be difficult to act age "normal" and "appropriate" in your new gender. Voice, actions, intonations, and gestures may be overdone or underdone as you reflect what you perceive to be "normal" gender role expressions.
9. Although your confidentiality should always be protected, be aware that the media may be interested in your transition. Have a plan in place to address potential media inquiries. Work with your school district; often they will have a media spokesperson. A teacher should not circumvent the appropriate school or district-based protocols and procedures.
10. Be aware that some students, parents, and/or staff members may object to your transition and continued presence within the school or district. Have a plan to deal with this possible outcome. At times, a great inner strength will be necessary to maintain your self-confidence.

11. If at all possible, schedule your transition so that you “present” for the first time in your adopted gender at the beginning of the school year. An alternative strategy would be to request a placement in a different school to take the position of a staff member who may be leaving at any time of the school year.

STRATEGIES FOR A SCHOOL STAFF

To support a staff member in his or her transition and successful return to the school system, school administrators, counselors, and teachers may wish to consider the following strategies:

1. School staff should be familiar with the above strategies or those that the individual transitioning teacher has chosen to implement.
2. School staff should always remember that they are dealing with an individual’s medical condition. Medical information is confidential and should never be discussed with anyone without the express permission of the individual concerned. Despite these confidentiality protections, information may be “spread” without the transitioning teacher’s permission. Be thoughtful about how you respond to inquiries from colleagues, parents, students, guardians, or other adults.
3. School officials should make sure that all school staff are informed about gender identity and told that transitioning is the prescribed method of treatment recommended by the medical community. Be aware of the relevant content of D.S.M.-IV-TR⁶ and The World Professional Association for Transgender Health Inc.’s (formerly the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association’s) Standards of Care. Remember, each transitioning individual’s situation will be unique. Some individuals may wish to “fly under the radar” with their new gender, without having all the staff brought “up to speed” on what transsexualism is all about.
4. Administrators and counselors should discuss with the transitioning person what his or her plans are. Both the individual and the larger district-level system should be involved in planning for a successful transition within a school or district. Negotiations may be necessary as to how this can best occur. It may be necessary for a teacher to contact his or her teachers’ association or federation for professional advice.

5. School officials should underplay rather than overplay the “ordinariness” of an individual’s transition. An individual’s transition and return to the school or district should be treated no differently than that of any other individual’s successful resolution of a medical condition and his or her return to the school. Administrators should strive to seek guidance from district-level personnel to develop a coordinated response.
6. Administrators should ensure that support is available for students, parents, guardians, and/or staff who may have difficulty coming to terms with a teacher’s transition. This support may come from the school, district, or teachers’ association/federation. Outside agencies, trans organizations, and professionals who specialize in gender identity issues may also be helpful resources.
7. Staff should be aware that the media might show interest in the transition process. Be prepared for press, radio, and television reporters. Follow your school’s or district’s media/communications plan. Remember, that Canadian and many U.S. state laws prohibit the disclosure of medical information to unauthorized third parties.
8. Administrators should be aware that some parents might object to the continued presence of a transitioning teacher in the school or district. Have a plan to deal with this possibility. Be prepared to enlist the support, if deemed necessary, of the medical community, a Trans Health Program (if your community has one), lawyers, and informed volunteers within the trans community to assist at a parent/guardian or teacher information session.
9. School administrators and/or staff may consider designating professional development in-service or classroom time to answer any questions, potential issues, or concerns around an individual transitioning within the school. Remember, misinformation often leads to stereotypes and discrimination. The amount and nature of disclosure should be considered with regard to each specific situation. A teacher may choose to “fly under the radar,” and if this is the choice made by the individual, it should be respected.
10. Everyone should always use pronouns that reflect the teacher’s adopted gender. If a teacher comes to a new school in his or her new gender role, there may be limited difficulties. If a teacher stays in his or her former school, correct pronoun usage may be an ongoing source of concern.
11. Administration and school staff should prohibit and immediately address any inappropriate behavior directed towards a transitioning teacher.

WEB RESOURCES

The following is a list of Web resources:

- <http://www.gires.org.uk> current research on gender identity and possible causes of transsexualism
- <http://www.behavenet.com/capsules/disorders/genderiddis.htm>
The American Psychiatric Association's criteria used to diagnose Gender Identity Disorder
- <http://www.wpath.org> The World Professional Association for Transgender Health Inc.'s Standards of Care.

NOTES

1. We use the terminology of trans-identified and transgender as umbrella categories that reflect a wide variety of gender variant or gender nonconforming behaviors. A transsexual person is one who lives fully in his/her adopted sex and wishes to be accepted in that gender role. To accomplish this successful transition, a transsexual teacher should never send out "mixed messages" regarding his or her sex and should try to express society's current gender role expectations/expressions. Meeting these societal gender expectations is nearly always achieved by taking hormones and having sex re-assignment surgery. However, there are instances where, for a variety of reasons, a given individual may not be medically eligible or may choose not to have sex re-assignment surgery. A major component of any successful transition is for the teacher to present his or her gender role as unambiguously as possible in his or her newly adopted sex.

2. The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) provides a notable exception. In 2003, the ATA became the first teachers' association or federation in Canada to include gender identity as a prohibited ground of discrimination in its Code of Professional Conduct.

3. For an introduction to the topic of society's changing attitudes towards transsexual people during the past 50 years and to learn more about Christine Jorgensen, Gayle recommends visiting the following Website: <http://www.transgenderzone.com/features/ChristineJorgensen.htm>. For a more detailed study of society's changing attitudes towards transsexualism see *Sex Changes* (Califia, 1997).

4. Gender dysphoria is the emotional discomfort an individual experiences owing to internalized conflicts arising from incongruity between one's birth sex and one's sense of gender identity.

5. In some cases, these suggestions could also apply to a mature student. For younger students, it will be important to work with the student's parents or guardians to develop appropriate standards of care. As well, a student may be under the care of a psychiatrist who may be working with the parent(s) or care giver(s). It will be important to ensure that there is a planned and coordinated response in place.

6. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR) is the most recent diagnostic manual published by the American

Psychiatric Association. This internationally respected manual provides medical practitioners with diagnostic criteria, descriptions, and other information to assist in the classification, diagnosis, and treatment of mental disorders. Diagnostic criteria for gender identity disorder in children (302.6) and gender identity disorder in adolescents or adults (302.85) is included in the DSM-IV-TR. Many individuals in trans communities find the term “gender identity disorder” deeply pathologizing and problematic seeing it instead as a normal variation in human behavior, which, like homosexuality, should no longer be categorized as a mental disorder.

REFERENCE

Califia, P. (1997). *Sex changes: The politics of transgenderism* (2nd edition), San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press.

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