The Big Freak Out: Educator Fear in Response to the Presence of Transgender Elementary School Students

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Increased visibility of transgender children requires elementary school professionals to take on issues of gender diversity, sex and sexuality, which are considered taboo in elementary school spaces. School professionals who have worked with transgender children were interviewed about their experience with these students, perceptions of their school’s success in supporting them, and recommendations for information and resources needed by schools to provide support. Findings indicate that fear and anxiety are common educator responses to the presence of a transgender child and the disruption of the gender binary, and these emotions are limiting the possibilities for schools to affirm transgender identity.

KEYWORDS transgender, elementary schools, teacher education, fear, LGBTQ

In 2009, the Reduction of Stigma in Schools (RSIS) program was approached by two schools in different northeastern districts with reports of teachers “freaking out” over the presence of transgender students in their classrooms. These reports came from elementary schools where school professionals expressed high levels of fear and anxiety over effectively educating these children and the community’s potential response to their providing a supportive environment for these students. In short, the schools were “panicked” and asked us to come in and “fix” the situation. At that time, our trainings and workshops were targeted primarily at middle and high school educators.

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and, reflecting the pattern in the research literature, included little information about the specific experiences of transgender students (see Payne & Smith [2011] for RSIS description). In an effort to provide research-based responses to the needs expressed by these schools, we began to interview school professionals who had experience with transgender students to better understand the fear they experienced. This article represents data on educators’ early responses to the news that a transgender child would be attending their elementary schools, explores possibilities for the roots of their fear, and examines the limitations such fear of “the Other” places on the possibilities for supporting and affirming these students.

Lack of Preparation

Research has documented that if lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) topics are present in educator preparation at all, they receive significantly less attention than other areas of diversity (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006; Athanases & Larrabee, 2003) and that few professional development opportunities are provided to practicing teachers to gain knowledge about the LGBTQ student experience (Payne & Smith, 2011). Though LGBTQ people comprise a significant minority within the U.S. population, cutting across ethnic, racial, cultural, ability, and language groups (Gates, 2010), one study found that 72.5% of teacher preparation programs surveyed ranked sexual orientation as either their lowest or an absent priority in addressing issues of diversity (Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). In preparation programs that did provide education on LGBTQ issues, the content was usually isolated in social foundations courses while other forms of diversity were more widely integrated across the curriculum. Social foundations of education textbooks typically exclude LGBTQ content or reinforce “negative or stereotypical representations” (MacGillivray & Jennings, 2008, p. 171). LGBTQ identities are often placed in text sections on suicide, depression, or sexually transmitted disease, which narrowly defines these students as victims or at-risk youth in need of protection or therapeutic intervention. Jennings and Macgillivray’s 2011 analysis of multicultural education textbooks produced almost identical results to their 2008 foundations text analysis—they found that the 12 most popular multicultural education textbooks were deeply entrenched in the victim discourse. Many texts conflated or provided incorrect definitions for sexual orientation and gender identity, and only one text explicitly “linked gender identity with transgender identities and explained what it means to be transgender” (p. 54). The absence of transgender identities from these texts is particularly significant to this study given the fear experienced by our participants upon learning that they would be educating a transgender child.

If and how LGBTQ people and issues are addressed in Schools of Education varies by geography, accreditation agency requirements, and the expertise and values of the education faculty (Payne & Smith, 2012). Wickens
and Sandlin (2010) argue that, although Schools of Education “potentially have significant opportunities to intervene and interrupt . . . heterosexism” (p. 652), heteronormative discourse and local campus culture play significant roles in the degree to which LGBTQ issues are addressed. Akiba et al.’s (2010) analysis of teacher certification requirements for education on “diversity” in the U.S. revealed that while most states have some sort of requirement, they are either reflective of or identical to accreditation boards’ (i.e., NCATE) “ambiguous” requirements for teacher education programs—leaving programs free to “interpret the ambiguous wording in the standards in various ways” (p. 459). Furthermore, state requirements are often written in ways “that can be easily interpreted as an option” (p. 460) rather than a requirement. Finally, most states define the “diversity” requirements in terms of “human relations” or serving “exceptional or culturally different” children—neither of which “speak[s] to the need for teacher candidates to understand the reality and impact of inequality or to take action to equalize learning opportunities provided to all students” (p. 460). Given the lack of clarity and the reliance on deficit frameworks at the level of state education policy, it is unsurprising that research consistently confirms that LGBTQ topics receive less attention than other areas of diversity or are ignored altogether (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Jennings & Macgillivray, 2011; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). Future school professionals have few opportunities in their training programs to reflect on the likelihood that at some point, they will be working with LGBTQ or gender nonconforming children or parents. Elementary educators may feel particularly insulated from the likelihood of having to address these issues in their schools and classrooms, framing them as something that “happens” at the older grade levels (Allan et al., 2008; DePalma & Atkinson, 2006).

Elementary School: “Innocent” Space

Despite the pervasive celebration of heterosexuality in early childhood and elementary classroom activities (e.g., pretend weddings, gendered play areas—kitchen and dress-up corner vs. the building-block center) and stories of princesses awaiting princely kisses, elementary educators often reject that they engage with issues of sexuality (Allan et al., 2008; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Surtees, 2005). Reflecting the notion of childhood as innocent and asexual, they assert that it is “not their role” to discuss sex, sexuality, and gender with their students (Surtees, 2005). Indeed, discussing these can be professionally risky for teachers in any educational space, but it is especially so at the elementary level (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009), where the silence around the “forbidden subject of sexualities” (Allan et al., 2008, p. 322) is a “powerful force” (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, p. 8) and parents can “freak out” over the mere suggestion that their child might have any sexuality—hetero or not (Gunn, 2011, p. 285). LGBTQ identities are particularly taboo in this environment where “the hyper-sexualization of gay and lesbian sexualities
clashes strongly with [the] widespread myth in primary schools of the asexual and naïve child” (De Palma & Jennett, 2010, p. 19). Here, “the implicit conceptual links between sexual orientation and sexual activity” (p. 19) and LGB sexual orientation and gender transgression (De Palma & Jennett, 2010; Youdell, 2009) have led teachers to avoid addressing these topics altogether. Additionally, “the discourse of recruitment to a gay lifestyle and the alignment of teaching about [LGBTQ] people as being about teaching gay sex or pedophilia” (Curran et al., 2009, p. 165) puts teachers who choose to mention or affirm LGBTQ people in a positive context at risk for having their own character and intentions questioned (Youdell, 2009).

The “complex constellations” of sex, gender, and sexuality function in school to create strict parameters for who students are allowed to “be” in educational spaces—and those who do not conform are either invisible or marked as threatening the social order of the school (Youdell, 2005). Likewise, “gender, sex and sexuality are conflated in the process of constructing ‘appropriate’ gendered behaviors” for children or “appropriate” conversations for elementary school spaces so “that sexism, homophobia and transphobia are all deployed” (DePalma & Aktinson, 2009, p. 1) in the regulation of acceptable elementary-classroom practice. This means that—in order to totally exclude sexuality from “innocent” elementary school spaces—“schooling [must] be obsessed with the exclusion of the body, [and] its explicit introduction is highly threatening” (Allan et al., 2008, p. 324, using Paechter). Transgender children introduce the body—and, implicitly, sexuality—into the classroom. Teachers faced with having to address these issues in classroom contexts experience anxiety and fears, including “reprisals from parents” (DePalma & Jennett, 2010, p. 20) “and wider public reaction, as well as specific concerns around how to appropriately introduce sexuality as a classroom subject” (Allan et al., 2008, p. 322). Some teachers fear objecting parents could “go public” and call media attention to the work in school, making it harder to teach anything at all, much less diverse genders and sexualities (Allan et al., 2008, p. 319). Teachers also fear that being seen as LGBT or Ally could put them at risk for personal violence and therefore often choose to keep any supportive work they do “invisible” (Allan et al., 2008). These fears have been “influenced by the explicit notion that schools are havens of childhood ‘innocence’” (p. 322) where children are “untouched” by the “sex” and “sexuality” concerns of the adult world (Allan et al., 2008, p. 320). To discuss gender transgression is to—by association—discuss sex. And to discuss sex in elementary school is strictly taboo (De Palma & Jennett, 2010).

Fear

Fear has been described as “an emotional reaction” to an identifiable threat, while anxiety has been described as the “tense anticipation of a threatening but vague event” or a “feeling of uneasy suspense” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 64,
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using Rachman). Both have a future orientation, a dread of what lies ahead. Discourses of fear establish “the other” as a danger to oneself and to one’s very life and existence—they work to justify hostility and resistance toward “the other” by joining with narratives of preservation and defense of the self, “us” and “life as we know it” (p. 64). The role of fear is central to the “conservation of power,” as “narratives of crisis work to secure social norms in the present” (p. 64) and resist movement toward progressive change and an expanded tolerance of difference in the future (Ahmed, 2004). Fear and anxiety accompany cultural shifts and increased visibility of previously invisible “others.” These rapid shifts lead to feelings of “loss of control” and “loss of certainty” (p. 72), which require the reiteration of “us” and “them” through a narration of what is to be feared. Applying Ahmed’s (2004) theory, Zembylas (2009) argues that fear constructs “boundary formations” (p. 192) between “the Other” and the dominant group, and it “instructs students in what they ought to fear and how they ought to fear it” (p. 193). “To announce a crisis” is to acknowledge the presence of a threat to social and moral order, and it “produce[s] the moral and political justification for maintaining ‘what is’” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 77).

The discomfort with and defensiveness against the feared “other” reinforces the comfort and acceptance of those who are the same, familiar, loved, like “us,” and thus the way things “should” be (Ahmed, 2004). Discourses of fear and anxiety provide an allowable expression of discomfort with “the other,” difference, and change while affirming core membership in the “normal” and the “safe.” One area of anxiety-producing “change” that is bringing school personnel into increased contact with “the other” is the heightened awareness and visibility of transgender children and the increased frequency with which they are transitioning in elementary schools. “Because we live in a patriarchal culture where particular forms of masculinity are deeply aligned with power and dominance, any disruption causes fear and anxiety” and “any gender variance or gender non-conformity is a threat to societal notions” (Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2009, p. 209) of the “rightness” and “naturalness” of the binary gender system that is at the core of our social structure. The presence of transgender children in elementary school contexts indeed causes this kind of fear and anxiety, as this article illustrates.

METHODS

Purpose

The initial purpose of this study was to increase understanding of the “fear” expressed by education professionals when faced with educating a transgender elementary school child in order to (1) better design professional development opportunities that would meet the needs of these school professionals; and (2) better respond to the call from schools to provide
them support in addressing the needs of a transgender child. A secondary purpose was to contribute to the research literature on educator experiences with transgender students, which—at the time we began this study—was virtually nonexistent. This study was covered by IRB.

Participants

The data set includes nine individual interviews and one group interview for a total of 12 participants. The participants include district-level administrators, school principals, student support professionals, and classroom teachers from five different schools—both urban and suburban. All participants were directly involved in the support and education of a transgender student. At two schools, participants were recruited through recommendations of the school professional who requested the RSIS transgender training. At two additional schools, RSIS transgender training attendees were asked to provide their e-mail addresses to the researchers if they were interested in being interviewed. Through work with the family of a transitioned transgender child, the researchers were aware of a fifth school and contacted that school to request participation in the research and to offer training. The researchers had no prior contact with any of the research participants before beginning the RSIS work in support of transgender students in their schools. All participants were school professionals within a single region in the northeastern United States.

Data Collection and Analysis

All data were collected via semistructured interview (Carspecken, 1996; Patton, 2001). Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to two hours with questions focused on the educator’s personal experience with transgender students, their perceptions of their school’s success in supporting a transgender child, and their recommendations for information educators need to receive in their training to feel prepared to support a transgender child in their school. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Initial data analysis has utilized an emergent coding process reflective of Carspecken’s (1996) critical qualitative method. Peer debriefing was employed to confirm the consistency and reliability of the coding system. Horizon analysis was performed within all key emergent themes (Carspecken, 1996).

Educator Fear

For most participants in this study, the initial reaction to the presence of a transgender student can be summarized as *fear*. Words participants most
frequently used to describe their own response—and to characterize the responses of their colleagues—include “freak out”; “panic”; “crisis”; “fear”; “unprepared.” The fear manifested in several distinct areas. First, because this was a new experience for each school, the lack of preparation and protocol represented one type of fear: literally not knowing what to “do.” Another fear was that the school or staff would be seen as supporting or “endorsing” homosexuality or transgender identity, which might be unacceptable to the community. We believe that the presence of the transgender child is challenging educators’ worldview and sense of competence as professionals. They do not know how to “be” in their professional spaces when what they “know” about teaching boys and girls has been shaken. This article focuses on the dominant fear messages shared by school professionals as they reflected on this new, unfamiliar professional experience.

“I Never Learned About This”: Lack of Preparation

Many of the participants emphasized that the “newness” of the “issue” was a core reason why they and their colleagues felt anxious and uncertain about working with a transgender child. They often connected their unawareness to the failure of university programs to teach them about the gender binary, gender enculturation, gender identity, gender fluidity, or the needs of transgender students. In short, they had not been trained on how to work with these students, and this lack of training left them feeling stressed, anxious, and incompetent when faced with “the problem” of creating accommodations for a transgender child. Ngo (2003) argued that when faced with the task of recognizing or supporting LGBTQ students, educators fall back on a discourse of “good teaching,” which “cite[s] iterations that tell us that in order to address LGB[T]Q issues well in the classroom, we need first to have ‘proven’ methods . . . of teaching such issues” (p. 120). This construction of the “good teacher” implies that educators are expected to operate from positions of competence and authority (Smith, in press). Facing an unfamiliar problem shakes this position and incites anxiety about their professional capabilities.

None of the participants in this study had heard any mention of transgender students in their professional training programs. A fourth grade teacher felt at such a loss in supporting her transgender student that she did not know what questions to ask in order to receive useful information and feel more confident. She commented:

I feel like there is something that I should be able to do to help, but I don’t know what it is. I don’t . . . I don’t know (laughs). I really know that I don’t know! . . . I just know that there’s something I should be doing [to support the transgender student]. At least I feel there is. And I’m not doing it.
This teacher reported feeling “very unprepared” and “confused” as to how to “deal” with the child and wished she had education and training on “what to do.”

An urban school social worker described her exposure to LGBTQ topics in her preparation program as “null and void.”

There wasn’t that, um, time [in her social work preparation] that I had to really focus on them [LGBTQ people], about their social, about their emotional, what their feelings are about being found out, so to speak . . .

This school social worker had since taken it upon herself to seek out professional development after this experience—some provided by the researchers and another presented by an area student Gay Straight Alliance. She reported that the workshops:

. . . showed [me] we, we are, all of us, we’re human beings first, and whatever our gender is, um, our relationship with people should really be the same, but it’s the mindset or the social [rules], it’s what society dictates and you have to remove yourself from that . . . and not pass judgment. Because that’s the first thing we, we do. We judge.

She describes her “values” as “accepting others” but admits that she was initially judgmental of the parents’ request for the school to recognize the transition of their child from female to male. While she feels she was able to not look “shocked” and respond professionally, she lacked “awareness” and felt she did not initially have the “information” she needed to “think right” about it. Another social worker in an urban elementary school used unawareness to “explain” what she felt were some mistakes she and her colleagues had made in previous months:

It’s so new. I mean it’s so, it’s just a, I’m learning so much, I’ve learned so much from [the researchers] just in talking about how, in a lot of different cultures, it’s not just the gender, we don’t just have two genders, there are, a few, sort of, right? And, um, I mean it’s just amazing to me that that exists. It’s nothing that anybody ever talks about in graduate school . . . This is huge to me. And it’s just, maybe, a taboo subject for some people and look how many kids [are impacted] . . .

Failure of preparation programs to provide adequate training on meeting the needs of LGBTQ students is well documented (Jennings & Macgillivray, 2011; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008), and participants’ stories point to the consequences of these patterns. Lack of information left them and their colleagues without tools to form practical, child-centered, equity-oriented strategies for meeting the needs and affirming the identity of a transgender child.
One participant in this study did not express the same kind of fear and anxiety experienced by others, though she did directly state that the “diversity” component of her professional training did not prepare her for working with transgender students:

I remember taking a class called Race, Class, and Gender . . . [and there was] very little on gender. It was a lot of, you know, if you’re teaching preschool, boys can play with dolls and girls can play with trucks and it has no bearing on who they become [referencing the cultural association between ‘cross-gender’ behavior and homosexuality].

This suburban school counselor was identified by a district-level administrator as the person in her district who had the highest knowledge and skill level around issues of gender and sexual diversity, but in her interview she explained that she had “much greater exposure and sensitivity” due to knowledge about LGBTQ people’s experiences gained through her familial and social networks. Research indicates that educators’ personal history plays a significant role in their willingness to address diversity issues in school spaces (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Garmon, 2005). Unlike other participants, whose initial thoughts were fears about things like student safety and district liability, this participant focused her attention on the needs of this child:

I remember my initial thought being ‘Oh boy! This is huge’, you know? This is something I know nobody in this room has ever dealt with before and certainly this child has never dealt with before, you know, and I felt like, okay, deep breath, let’s think about how we can work with this. But I knew there were other people in the room going (gasps), you know?

It was her personal experience outside of school contexts that enabled her to take that deep breath and create a strategy for supporting a transitioning student. Clearly, there is no guarantee that there will be educators with similar personal experiences in every school building.

Lack of education about addressing the needs of transgender students, as well as lack of awareness of the existence and experience of transgender students, poses significant impediments to educators responding in a professional and effective way. A school nurse insightfully commented that though “no one has enough training on this,” she did not think sufficient training would be forthcoming because “there’s no number on transgender education for teachers”—stressing that the focus of professional development was on raising test scores, not addressing the needs of diverse groups of children. Indeed, none of the school districts represented in this research currently have professional development plans to address the experience
of transgender students, and none have district-level policies on supporting transgender students.

“We Were Just at a Loss for What to Do”: Lack of Policy and Procedure

The novelty and unexpectedness of the enrollment of a transgender student and the complete lack of preparation for responding to the issue were central to the “crisis” experienced by school staff at all levels. Participants felt fearful in addressing the unfamiliar situation and looked upward in the administrative hierarchy for guidance. Regardless of the participants’ position within that hierarchy, each was frustrated by the lack of information and protocol made available to them. A district-level administrator framed the situation this way: “When I say ‘crisis mode,’ it’s generated through fear. Fear and there’s not a protocol in place to handle this. So what do we do? . . . So if we can’t move forward . . . or move in some direction that is a positive direction, that really was the crisis piece.”

The words and actions of the school districts and their personnel indicate a belief that supporting a transgender child is dangerous territory. Conversations around sexuality or gender identity were often conflated with conversations about sex—which is taboo and must be strictly avoided. Participants expressed fear that a response might be “wrong” or touch on “inappropriate” topics for elementary school children, and we posit that this is a result of heteronormative discourses that frame the gender transgressing body as hypersexualized (Payne, 2011). Students who fall outside the heteronormative alignment of biological sex, normative gender, and heterosexual orientation are hyper-visible and often perceived as dangerous and hypersexual. In elementary school contexts, where childhood innocence is strictly defined and strictly protected (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Youdell, 2009), gender transgressions pose a significant threat to the taken-for-granted institutional order.

District-wide policies and protocols provide security for educators because following protocol means they are representing “official” positions and will have “backup” if anything goes wrong. Thus, the lack of protocol or clear directives made it difficult for schools and the educators in them to respond confidently. Having never encountered this situation before, one suburban school district responded to the transition of a transgender child by seeking information and guidance from those they presumed to be positioned to help them: the school district physician and attorney. Neither was able to offer support, and their lack of knowledge frustrated the administrator who had been charged with gathering information.

I was asked to call the school physician and . . . the attorneys. So I call the school physician and I explain the situation . . . the school physician
did not have the reaction I thought he would have. It was very negative! (laughs) And I'm like, man, he's not helpful. And his reaction was, 'This child is way too young to be expressing this.' Um, and so, I didn't feel he was informed . . . So, I call the attorney and the attorney was like dead silence on the other end, and so, I'm like, okay . . . and I'm goin' on and he's like, 'I don't even know what to tell you.' And I said, 'Well, can you, why don't you check case law for me . . . ' and he's like, 'I don't think there is any case law.'

In looking to understand the school district's role and responsibility in supporting a transitioning transgender child, the district's “experts” had neither accurate nor useful information and seemed resistant to providing objective professional support. Similarly, an urban school principal said her initial response was to contact the district to see what guidelines were in place, as she assumed that she could not be the only principal to have faced this situation. She felt uncomfortable making decisions about handling the student’s transition and wanted to know that her response was “within” the district’s expectations:

I really wanted to . . . see what has happened in the district, what is the approach, that I'm within the guidelines that I'm, there may be some guidelines that I don't know . . . I was sure I, that couldn't be the only child, you know, and it's just that we didn't talk about that and [school principals] never had, really, training.³

In a suburban school, a school psychologist marked the requested gender transition of a child as “abnormal.” She consulted the school director of special education but did not consult with her own director, other district psychologists, or the district student support services administrator. The administrator who supervised her and her program, frustrated by this response, felt that it could have been better handled, but “there was no protocol.”

I said, ‘Why didn’t you go to your director?’ [She responded,] ‘Well, I was just so flustered, I didn’t know what to do!’ I mean there was a sense of, um, you know, that ‘We just never had this before’ . . . And I was like, “Okay, well, what about just talking about it with other people, you know, and what we could have formed a team or something.”

As school professionals tried to make decisions to accommodate transitioning children, the lack of protocol repeatedly heightened their anxiety and concern over doing the “right” thing. In the absence of knowledge or protocol for addressing the needs of transgender students, schools relied on
the pervasive school “safety” discourse and professional obligation to “pro-
tect” marginalized children (Payne & Smith, 2012). Educators were making
decisions from positions of uncertainty and fear, and solutions aligned with
their obligation to preserve a safe school environment were also politically
and professionally “safe.” For example, one school moved a transgender
child to a new classroom to “protect” the child from ridicule in the original
classroom and to “protect” the other children from the discomfort of the gen-
der transgression. They wanted to avoid discussion of the change in gender
pronoun in the original classroom: “If now we were all going to start calling
Casey a girl, wouldn’t that be confusing [to the other students] and wouldn’t
that be setting Casey up for ridicule from the original classroom?” The child’s
move from one classroom to another and the attendant pronoun shift was
never mentioned in either classroom. This example illustrates how the fear
and safety discourses function to “protect” the transgender child from harass-
ment and “protect” the other children (and their teachers) from what might
be considered “inappropriate” conversations about sex, gender, and sexual-
ity. Schools are expected to be “safe” for every child, so making decisions
in terms of this responsibility is less controversial and is defensible if any
opposition should occur.

“What About ‘the Other Kids’?: Keeping This Quiet

Another predominant concern was the need to maintain confidentiality for
the transgender student. Many of the fears about maintaining confidentiality
were resolved once each school created a strategy for managing the use of
the child’s chosen name and pronoun on school documents and in their various
information systems. However, many expressed a lingering fear about
“the other kids”—and this fear took different forms depending on if the
transgender child was “out” or not. In a school where the child was stealth,
fear of “word getting out” remained on educators’ minds throughout the
school year: “Part of the panic is we’re, you know, collectively trying to keep
this quiet. For her and at the request of the family. Which I completely under-
stand but that adds a little element of ‘Oh crap’ to our everyday.” Educators
were not comfortable with the possibility of parent or student questions or
a confidentiality breach without a protocol in place. One school principal
spoke of the tension he experienced between being prepared for the pos-
sibility of broken confidentiality and remaining faithful to the student’s and
family’s wishes to remain stealth:

So, how to respond to parent phone calls that say, ‘Hey I just heard this [a
transgender child is in the school], is it true?’ How do we do those kinds
of things in a way that maintains, um, the integrity of, of confidentiality,
but also addresses it in some way and, and our, one of our biggest ques-
tions was, what if this gets out and how are the kids gonna react to this?
Other educators framed their fears around questions about if and when parents and other students should know that a transgender child is in their school:

What happens when it gets out and other parents hear? And one thing he [the principal] said to me was, what happens, you know, if Rachel makes a friend, you know, what if she makes a friend and they decide to have a sleepover? And she’s with Sally Jones and they’re having a sleepover, you know, and they find out that she’s a boy. And I said, well, that’s not the school’s job to, to tell Sally Jones.

The schools we worked with found themselves in a conundrum: they adamantly did not want to directly address the presence of a transgender student with the school community, but they could not convince themselves that students and parents did not have a right to know that a gender transgressor was in their midst. In short, some educators were not convinced that the transgender body is non-threatening. The question at the core of these statements is one of professional responsibility and student “safety.” Educators acknowledged that they had an obligation to honor transgender students’ right to privacy, but it is significant that fears about “keeping this quiet” are not totally focused on preserving confidentiality because it is in the best interest of the student. The principal’s question about the sleepover—a “single-sex” activity—implies that there are limits to the transgender student’s right to privacy, and there is a possibility that that right should end at the moment when other students may be personally affected by a peer’s non-normative gender identity and expression. It implies that being too close to a transgender child could negatively affect—even traumatize—other kids. These fears frame transgender children as dangerous and carefully create a boundary between them and their gender-normative peers, and they incite a desire to restrict the movement of the transgender child—to keep her a safe distance from the other “normal” children (Ahmed, 2004).

Schools where the child was not stealth framed “other kids’” questions in terms of fear and anxiety over situations where the adults will possibly be forced to directly address the presence of gender variance. One teacher described her decision to bypass an annual activity because the presence of a transgender body posed complications that she wished to avoid:

I actually opted not to go swimming because I wasn’t sure where Alex would go and what to do because I was told at the time that because it’s female on the [identification] card, Alex would have to change with the girls . . . And that’s in, in my opinion, that’s a delicate situation. Here’s somebody who I felt, you know, presented himself one way, but I didn’t want to say, you can’t go here, you have to go here . . . So I opted not to go swimming. I took the wimp’s way out.
Having the student change in either same-sex locker room seemed wrong to this teacher. She did not want to challenge his gender identity or raise questions from peers who knew and accepted him as a boy by requiring him to use the girls’ locker room. Allowing him to use the boys’ locker room had been forbidden due to the “inappropriateness” of a “girl” body in a “boy” space—implying a fear of inserting heterosexual desire into a child-centered space. These threatening questions of the body (Allan et al., 2008) are questions this teacher chose to avoid altogether. She further explained her desire to “avoid” in a story about questions from students:

Um, a few months ago . . . a couple kids approached me and they were saying, ‘What’s Alex? A girl or a boy?’ . . . I said, ‘Alex is Alex and Alex is happy with who Alex is. So if Alex’s your friend, you, you know, that’s who you accept Alex as. Your friend.’ And they seemed to accept that and that made me happy. I was relieved when the children let it go. I was waiting for the other shoe to drop and it hasn’t dropped yet . . .

Notably, the teacher did not use gendered pronouns when addressing the children’s questions. She used his gender-neutral name only. (She says elsewhere: “You can’t use pronouns, I don’t use pronouns anymore.”) Furthermore, she did not mention gender at all—sidestepping the question she did not feel comfortable answering. While she did not criticize the children for asking the question, her avoidance of gender implies that they were asking something impolite, inappropriate, or taboo. The children asked the question because they were curious about something that they did not understand as “normal.” If teachers are not comfortable discussing gender difference, “unease will be quickly communicated to children, which will tend to reinforce already established negative associations” (Nixon, 2009, p. 55). Her stories of avoidance are reflective of Ahmed’s (2004) argument that fear is not about the experience of hurt or injury but about the anticipation: “Fear projects us from the present into the future,” and it “responds to what is approaching rather than what is already there” (p. 65). Her fear of students’ potential response to gender variance being visible in her classroom is ominous enough to shape her day-to-day decisions about her students’ activities and her speech choices.

“Will We Get in Trouble for Accepting It?”: Fear of Community Backlash

Another significant fear expressed by participants was fear that forces outside the school would challenge their decisions for supporting a transgender student. The possibility of parents’ opposition to the presence of a transgender child or accusations of “promoting it” made many of our participants anxious and cautious. An urban principal reported that teachers were “concerned and
said ‘well, what if parents feel that they don’t want their child around this type of child or this [issue]’ . . . The fear was that parents wanted to take their kids out of the class, but that didn’t happen.” Another teacher said there was fear in her school about “parents not wanting their children to have anything to do with [her], like she has cooties.” A school counselor described the potential for the parent problem to linger long after the child left the school:

We’re teaching a transgendered child and parents are gonna freak out, you know? . . . You can’t reason with ignorance, you can’t reason with anger, really, so . . . what happens when the [child] goes on her merry way and now we’re left with elementary parents that are livid that this whole year, their child interacted with someone that in their ignorant minds, they might feel had deceived them . . . ?

In a suburban school, one participant reported the initial response to the transgender student was the fear of parent resistance—not questions about supporting the child—which resulted in a widespread staff panic:

[The principal] was . . . very panicked. [The school staff] were all panicked, [even] the psychologist was panicked . . . [about] people finding out . . . You know, how they contain the gossip and information and um, . . . how to talk to parents . . . It’s an issue they’ve never ever dealt with before so, I think it just freaks them out.

In describing the resistance of this school principal and school psychologist to a comprehensive approach to creating an affirming environment for a transitioning student, the district-level administrator who supported such a strategy made sense of their resistance in this way:

Because it’s like, ‘will we get in trouble for accepting it,’ so to speak. And will that acceptance be interpreted as we’re promoting it or that we’re, maybe I wanna use the term ‘exposing’ their child to notions of that. Of transgenderism. Big fear there.

These statements suggest that educators were associating support for a transgender child with political activism. Their fear of “promoting” implies a belief that—in the event that a controversial issue affects a school—the school should do its best to remain politically neutral. In this context, educators were expressing fear of “promoting” a pro-LGBTQ or pro-transgender political position, which they believed to be in opposition to parents’ political commitments, religious beliefs, or to have legal consequences. Significantly, these fears were expressed around the idea of simply “accepting” the child in the school environment. Our recommendations to explore pedagogical possibilities for challenging gender norms and making LGBTQ identities
visible in the curriculum were strongly resisted. The mere presence of a transgender child challenged the “powerful force” of “silence around sexualities” in elementary schools, which implicitly threatened the perceived innocence and asexuality of the educational space and the children who inhabit it (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, p. 8). It is, therefore, unsurprising that our recommendations to make issues of gender diversity and sexuality *more* visible were quickly dismissed in favor of carefully containing knowledge of the transgender child’s presence and hoping the community would never find out.

One principal’s perspective is particularly illustrative of how fear of community reaction can dictate a school’s choices. During his interview at the end of the school year, he reflected on his concerns when he learned a transgender student would be attending his school:

I think there was a fear that somebody was gonna say something. We all predicted that before the end of the school year, this would not be a secret anymore . . . I lost that bet—at least that’s something [positive] . . . [School staff] dealt with [that fear] all the time, so, we kind of . . . said that one of the things that may happen is this may come out . . . .and therefore we’re gonna be blasted with it. So one of the pointed questions that we continued to ask ourselves was ‘how do we respond to the rest of the community if this becomes public?’

From the principal’s perspective, the fear of community backlash was constantly on the minds of the team of school professionals who worked with the transgender student, and they pulled together to prevent this from happening. In his descriptions of his school’s strategies for supporting the student, he emphasized the importance of having a “monitoring system” in place:

. . . we, being, um, classroom people, besides me, school psychologist, home/school counselor, um as well as the [grade level] team, were interacting with each other on a frequent basis, in some cases, it might be a couple of times a week . . . again, just to make sure what are you seeing, what are you seeing, what’s going on, you know, do I need to contact a parent for this reason . . . [O]ne of the things that was clear was that teachers were listening. A lot more than they might otherwise do. For things that would suggest, um . . . that, uh, something was happening that we really need to pay attention to.

This principal was pleased with the watchfulness and diligence of his staff in supporting a transgender student. However, it is significant that when asked for instances when the “monitoring system” proved to be especially important, his examples related to monitoring the transgender child for containment, not for support. The system of communication allowed the
school staff to take action—call parents or refer the child to the school psychologist—when “we’d hear something from one of the kids that made us think, uh oh, is this, is this going in a direction that we didn’t an-anticipate?” In short, these educators devised a strategy to contain “the secret” and the child herself. Again, the transgender child is positioned as a threat to the order of the school, and educators’ actions are being dictated by their fears of parents’ accusations of “promoting” an agenda or “exposing” their children to something inappropriate. Framing the education of a transgender student in this way leaves very little room for pedagogical innovations that could challenge or disrupt gender norms.

CONCLUSION

For those of us who devote our professional energies to advocating for widespread affirmation of gender and sexual diversity, the resistance to a transgender child can seem irrational and extreme. It is hard to imagine how a child can incite fear in experienced professionals. The perspectives represented in this article are an opportunity to explore the nature of schools’ resistance to the presence of transgender bodies and the ways that educators make decisions about the education of these students. In the absence of meaningful knowledge about gender identity, gender variance, or transgender identity, educators framed the presence of a transgender child as a “crisis” wherein the order and civility of the school was being threatened. As argued by Ahmed (2004), fear stimulates an impulse to cling to the familiar because that is where one finds security and comfort. In these cases, the familiar includes the professional obligation to maintain a safe and civil learning environment. Educators in this study invoke narratives of professional responsibility to rationalize “accommodations” for transgender students that place them under surveillance and monitor their movement rather than affirm their identities. Their narratives beg the question: “Responsible to whom?” Many of their decisions imply they feel responsible to parents, community, or the myth of childhood innocence—not to the transgender child.

By exploring their reactions to the presence of a transgender child, it is possible to begin to identify their patterns of fear that prohibit feelings of professional competence and create resistance to creating supportive environments. We believe this research lends important implications to teacher education and professional development curricula for elementary school professionals. Without critical, theoretically sound education on sex, gender, and sexuality, “[m]ost people . . . are altogether too sure about what gender is: there are two ‘opposite’ sexes, man and woman, and gender is the inevitable categorical expression of natural sex” (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, p. 15). The presence of non-normative gender expressions and sexualities shakes what people “know” about sex, gender, and sexuality—but without adequate
education, it does so in a way that stimulates fear rather than progressive action. We argue that creating an affirming environment for a transgender child is an opportunity for schools to become critically aware of the ways that their curricula, policies, and practices are dependent on the gender binary—and how this kind of dependence creates fear of anyone who falls outside normative “boyness” or “girlness.” This article illustrates how such fear shapes educators’ decisions around supporting a transgender student and shuts down opportunities for introducing the possibility of gender fluidity or nonconformity to children’s worldview. Zembylas (2009) argues: “[It is important to consider] “how cultivation of fear of those who are different—through curricula, textbooks, and everyday school practices—organizes the social and bodily space in a pedagogic field by creating powerful affective borders” (p. 194). He advocates for an “interrogation of the ways in which explicit mobilization of fear produces social relations. Educators need to question . . . whether these social relations merely tolerate otherness . . . or really welcome the Other” (Zembylas, 2009, p. 194). To truly welcome the transgender child, we must face our own fears and acknowledge that the dichotomy on which so much of our social structure is grounded is culturally constructed and not clearly pink or blue.

NOTES

1. RSIS is a research-based professional development program that supports educators in creating affirming learning environments for LGBTQ youth (Payne & Smith, 2010, 2011) and is part of the Queering Education Research Institute (QuERI). QuERI is an independent think-tank, qualitative research and training center that aims to bridge the gap between research and practice in the teaching of LGBTQ students and the creation of LGBTQ youth-affirming schools and youth-serving programs. QuERI is currently housed in the Syracuse University School of Education.

2. Referring to RSIS content that discusses the cultural constructedness of sex and gender.

3. There were no school district guidelines for addressing the needs of transgender students.

REFERENCES


