

TRANSPHOBIA IN SCHOOLS

Introduction

My name is Sibusiso (S'bu) Kheswa and I work as an advocacy coordinator at Gender DynamiX, an organisation that started in 2005. Gender DynamiX's mission is to work towards creating a society where everyone is free to choose and express their own gender. Gender DynamiX has seven staff members and is located in Manenberg township in Cape Town. Although based in Cape Town we work nationally and since 2006 we extended our work beyond the borders of South Africa.

Creating an enabling environment is one of Gender DynamiX's thematic area of work and it is out of this concern that the parent support group belongs. My contribution is based on interviews with members of this support group. The group consists of parents of transgender children and the group meets once a month. At times people and schools are referred or contact us directly when they have difficulties dealing with a transgender child. We have come to realise that many people are unaware of transgender issues and very little information exists on this issue.

Let me start by defining some of the words I will be using in this presentation. At Gender DynamiX we define the word *transgender* as: when the sense of self is in conflict with the gender assigned to a person at birth, and its corresponding stereotypical role. We define a trans-woman as person who was assigned male at birth but her gender identity is that of a girl. A trans-man is a person who was assigned female at birth but his gender identity is of a boy. This presentation intends to share some of the stories that we have been collecting. So I will be looking at some of the challenges that are faced by school going transgender children.

The parents inform us that they start looking for help when they see signs of manifestation of transgenderism in their children. Ms S told me "At preschool I was called by the teacher that my child always chooses girls' attires from the fantasy corners. I was shocked as I am not girly myself. As this continued I knew it was not a gay issue and I told my friend who helped to find information from the internet. The greatest relief was when I discovered a name for it." She was relieved because she felt if it has a name then it means it is a known

thing out there. This relief may not be experienced by many parents whose vernacular vocabulary doesn't have an equivalent word for the word transgender.

Naming things seems to be important to a lot of people. My concern is when we name things wrongly. In my conversations with people I've realised that people sometimes refer to gender identity and gender expression as homosexuality. A trans girl, who was already presenting as a girl at the time, says in class his teacher would mock her and call her moffietjie, loosely translated *little faggot*, a derogatory term for homosexuals.

Most often than not, when a youngster expresses differently, it is not about sex, sexual activity, sexual attraction – but about gender. This teacher was out of line, firstly he was humiliating the child and secondly he was sexualising the child, because strictly speaking homosexuality is about sexual attraction and not about gender expression.

We live in a society that is very intolerant of people who break gender rules. Recently the LGBTI community has suffered a lot of pain. Gender non-conforming people have been targets of brutal murders and rape. Up to date those stories have been seen, reported and spoken of as hate crimes against gays and lesbians.

In 2009 the office was visited by a police officer who showed up with a girl in a school uniform and a neatly tied pony tail. The officer was there to ask the organisation to deal with girl's case as they wouldn't know what to do. According to the police officer the girl's story needed our intervention. The police met the girl when she was at the police station to open a case against her principal who pulls her hair and whip her with a stick on her legs, demanding that she must behave and dress like other boys.

It was plausible of the police to seek for our assistance but the girl was denied service as she was very aware of that her violation was unlawful.

We got in touch with her family and we discovered that she was in so much trouble at home because she was being problematic at school. Her family had no knowledge about issues of gender identity and that was not a shock to us as this is very common in under resourced communities. Families like these do not have the privilege of access to the internet as it is the case for Ms S.

So this girl's life was hard during and after school hours. She had nowhere to hide. After losing contact with her for some time, we reconnected with her. She has now found an accepting and supportive family and is now part of Sisterhood, a group of transgender women who are sex workers in Cape Town. This youngster dropped out of school early, like so many other trans-children who face similar problems/ challenges at school.

Ms S told me that she becomes a "crazy tiger and bites off the head" of anyone who gives her trans-daughter a tough time about her gender identity. She says she was called into the school by her daughter's grade 1 class teacher who advised her to "nip this thing in the bud". A couple of years later the child was told by another school teacher that she is a disgrace to the school. She then decided to take it upon herself that at the beginning of each year, she goes to the school to educate her child class-teacher about transgenderism as the principal is very unwilling to entertain the idea of giving the teachers a sensitisation workshop on sexuality and gender diversity. As a compromise, the school governing body has given permission for this child to wear track suits throughout the year as those are gender neutral, needless to say that the child overheats in summer.

Ms S is grateful of her employer's support and understanding as she had to take many hours off work addressing her trans-daughter's gender identity issues as they regularly come up at school. Ms S confesses that she taught her child to fight as she won't always be available to fight her battles. The child's father is not accepting of the child's gender identity and he regularly visits them from Johannesburg. When he is around he demands that child should be a boy.

A second person I want to talk about is Seth, a trans-boy. Seth knew he was a boy from the age of four. When he became a teenager he found it very difficult to wear a dress to school and started acting out and causing a lot of problems. His mom and his granny named him Seth as part of his social transition and later changed his names at the Department of Home Affairs. His friends started calling him Seth but his teachers wouldn't. His mom approached Seth's principal, who found the issue to be very confusing but he was willing to listen. At the end of the meeting the principal gave final response "I can't bend rules because the rules are based on the anatomy: anatomic boy - pants, anatomic girl – skirt and that is it."

Seth's mom decided to go the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) and the commission immediately felt that not allowing Seth to wear pants was a violation of his human rights. The CGE approached both the school and the department of education. After many follow-ups the CGE forced the Department of education to respond. The department suggested that Seth should rather go to a college. The department then pressured Seth to go to a college even though colleges do not offer grade eight. They were even prepared to jump him a year if he would agree to go to college. Seth says "I ended up going to a college even though the colleges are stigmatised – as a place for drop-outs, but that was my choice" Like many trans learners Seth doesn't play any sport, his only option was table tennis as it has gender neutral uniform.

Lastly let me talk about Mr. Millar, a gay principal at a public school. In our interview with him he tells us that once learners wrote on a bathroom wall: "Mr. Miller is a faggot" He responded by addressing it in assembly the next day. He reminded children that it was against school rules to write on walls. He also said to them that he was personally offended by the message because the spelling of his name is Mr. Millar is with an 'a' not an 'e'. Mr. Millar was approached by the Department of Education for allowing a transgender boy to come to the school.

Mr. Millar admits that he was totally ignorant about what transgender means he thought they were talking about an intersex child. Mr. Millar told us that days later after he admitted the child into the school, he reprimanded the child for hanging his pants low down the backside and also for his hair style, which was in accordance with the school rules. Since then they have a good relationship.

When Mr. Millar was asked if the picture was that rosy, he responded by saying "We had our normal ignorant questions. The teachers did not know what it meant either. So I called in a professional to workshop us on transgender and intersex children. The teachers know there is a transgender child at the school but they do not know who it is."

Mr. Millar recalls that one of the questions by the teachers was "*what if he kisses a girl on the field and the girls don't know that he is actually a girl?*" His response to that question was the school does not allow inappropriate contact between any children so that would not be allowed.

In closing, I have a feeling there are more Mr. Millars out there. They need to know that they are doing the right thing. I know South Africa wouldn't be the first one to integrate trans- learners into the schooling systems. I also know that South Africa has all kinds of beautiful and inclusive legislations but they all need to be transformed into reality. If we don't change this picture, trans-people's vulnerability will continue as trans-people currently rank the lowest in our society. Let us strengthen our activism to ensure that the right to education becomes a reality for trans-people too.