

Supporting gender non-conforming and trans-identifying children in schools; safeguarding and promoting the education and well-being of girls

How we understand 'gender'

Whilst it may seem abstract, how we think about gender is important, because it determines what happens in school. Most education research supports a feminist understanding that gender is a set of social structures which shape the experiences of girls and boys from birth; gender historically maintains men's domination over women, and functions as a set of norms and cultural practices that are to some extent internalised. A more recent theory, that individuals are born with a hard-wired gender identity (a sense of themselves as male or female or both or neither) which can sometimes find itself in the wrong body, underpins the notion that children can be transgender. This view, which prevails across the gender identity lobby, is not supported by research.

The school curriculum

Where the feminist view of gender as a social construct is accepted, schools teach children and young people to critique gender stereotyping, and to develop the skills and confidence to act in counter-stereotypical ways. They seek to make it possible to be an assertive, physically-active girl, or a gentle, studious boy, and challenge assumptions about gender roles. They also seek to make non-stereotypical subject choices desirable. This is still a significant issue: in 2017 just 10% of entries for Higher Physics in Scotland were from girls, while girls made up 92% of the entries for Higher Care.

However, schools are coming under pressure to teach children and young people the idea that gender identity is inborn and innate as though it were a universally-agreed and unassailable fact rather than a fairly niche belief; moreover that any critique of such a view is necessarily bigoted or transphobic. This pressure comes from political lobby groups which have unprecedented access to policy-makers and teachers (e.g. LGBT Youth Scotland which produces guidelines promoted by most Scottish local authorities, and Stonewall which runs courses for teachers and visits schools across the UK). Books on reading lists (e.g. *I Am Jazz*) promote the notion of being born in the wrong body to children under six.

Supporting gender non-conforming and trans-identifying children in school

There is consensus that schools should listen to pupils and respond to them with compassion. There is divergence over what is known as 'unconditional affirmation': accepting at face value a child or young person's belief that they are transgender as truth.

Until recently, pre-adolescent dysphoria has resolved during puberty for most children (figures are around 80%, though this may be changing and further research is needed). There is evidence that providing 'social transition' on demand for this age group makes it harder for dysphoria to resolve. Since 2015 there has been a 4000% increase in adolescent girls presenting with gender dysphoria (source: Tavistock Clinic). The reason for this increase is unknown. We are seeing increasing numbers of young women 'de-transitioning' and explaining that their earlier feelings of discomfort around their gender were a reaction to the demands of hyper-femininity placed on girls, and/or of finding it hard to understand and accept being attracted to other girls.

It is therefore possible that a policy of 'unconditional affirmation' may be more damaging in the long run, especially to girls, as it risks putting them on a path to unnecessary medicalisation which may be lifelong. Working sympathetically with children and their parents/carers, and making changes to the environment so that all children are less constrained by gendered expectations, may be a better solution for the majority (though there are likely to still be a small number of children and young people for whom transition will eventually be the best outcome).

The key to getting this right is for schools to work together with their communities in a spirit of open-minded enquiry and dialogue. Intolerance and sloganeering, associated with the excessive influence of political lobby groups, should be curbed as it is not conducive to finding shared solutions.

Dr Shereen Benjamin, Senior Lecturer in Primary Education, University of Edinburgh