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Transgender students in post-compulsory education: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

Students identifying on the transgender spectrum are significantly under-researched and under-reported in the education literature. Long term detrimental effects of gender-identity based discrimination and violence requires us to find more inclusive ways of supporting students with transgender identities. We report findings from a systematic review of the international research on transgender students in post-compulsory education. A standardised review protocol was used to synthesise findings from twenty empirical studies to: 1) describe the complexities of gender identities within education; 2) situate the importance of targeting equality issues for transgender students, and; 3) highlight emerging innovations and the need for further research. We recommend more critical engagement and dialogue with transgender issues to challenge institutional policies, processes in education with those involved

1. Introduction

Transgender people are increasingly visible in public life and by sharing their personal stories have embedded transgender issues into popular culture. Nevertheless, gender-identity is one of the least discussed and under-researched phenomenon within post-compulsory education (Dilley, 2004). Scholarship in diversity and equality has failed to adequately address lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender and intersex (LGBQTI) issues within education (Dilley, 2004; Equality Challenge Unit, 2009; Renn, 2010). Historically the academy has been a primary source of queer theory (Tierney & Dilley, 1998) and feminist, critical, and multicultural pedagogies (Renn, 2000). Alexander and Wallace (2009) suggest identity as a useful tool for students and teachers to analyse the sociocultural and historical nature of culture and individual agency in their commitment to inclusion. Responding to transgender issues is more than individual given the institutional discrimination faced (Ellis, Bailey, & McNeil, 2015) requiring dialogue which engages both grassroots and strategic action in meeting transgender students' needs.

This paper reports findings from a systematic review of published empirical research on transgender students in education. It focuses on college and university education which follows compulsory schooling. If not inclusive and supportive, post-compulsory education can have long term detrimental effects on students from the transgender community (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011). The rationale for this review came from interest in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues in education (Cocker & Hafford-Letchfield, 2010; Hafford-Letchfield 2010; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2010) and the lack of guidance for transgender students. The needs and experiences of students identifying on the transgender spectrum are under-reported in the literature (Garvey & Rankin, 2015) and

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tends to be conceptual in nature (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012). This scarcity of research on transgender issues extends across the educational system and reflects a context of societal transphobia. Students whose gender differs from the dominant norm may not only lack information but also the language to name their experiences and feelings or to reveal their transgender identities (Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2013). These conundrums informed our approach to scoping the empirical evidence with the following questions:

- What are the complexities around gender and its related concepts within the setting of post-compulsory education and how do transgender students experience these?
- What might be the theoretical basis for examining and promoting transgender inclusion in post-compulsory education?
- Which policies, processes, and structures for engagement can be identified to work more inclusively with transgender issues including those included under the broader LGBTIQI banner?
- What are the priorities for further research and how can existing innovations be promoted or new initiatives generated?

2. Background

2.1. Terminology

Transgender is an umbrella term for a person whose gender identity, and gender expression does not conform to that normatively associated with the gender they were assigned at birth and to persons who are gender transgressive. Gender identity refers to a person's internal sense of being a man, a woman or something else. Gender expression refers to the way a person communicates their gender identity to others through behaviour and/or appearance. "Trans" or "trans*" with an asterisk can be used as shorthand to reflect the full spectrum but is not exclusive to: transgender, transfeminine; transmaculine; transsexual; transvestite; genderqueer; genderfluid; non-binary; genderfuck; genderless; agender; non-gendered; third gender; two-spirit; bigender; androgynous and gender nonconforming. In summary, transgender activists acknowledge the complexity of the area and the difficulties in negotiating through a vast range of terms (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Beemyn, 2003, 2005; Butler, 1988; Feinberg, 1999; Valentine, 2007).

Going beyond defining and understanding the variety of identities under the transgender umbrella should help to search for and support the implementation of more inclusive ways of conceptualizing, listening and supporting students with transgender identities (Boucher, 2011). Dominant discourse assumes culturally produced linear links between biological sex, gender and sexuality (being straight, gay, bisexual and other). Presuming a natural progression between sex and gender identity and the need to bracket different identities has been challenged by transgender and gender non-conforming activists (Feinberg, 1999; Valentine, 2007). Appreciating that cisgender or cissexual individuals whose 'identity and presentation match their physical morphology and mirror normative behavioural, cultural and psychological traits typically associated with their sex' (Seelman, 2014, p5) is key to understanding the oppression of transgender people and the benefits for cis populations. Typically, transgender issues are framed as identity "problems" situated within psychological pathology rather than as systemic and institutional manifestations of educational communities (Boucher, 2011). As our knowledge and understanding increases, there has been a critical analytical shift regarding the conceptual frameworks typically used to represent, define, and address "transgender issues" and the impact on transgender people within educational systems (Boucher, 2011; Mintz, 2011).

2.2. Student issues and concerns

The literature on transgender students reports high rates of bullying, abuse and violence (Wyss, 2005). Approximately 38% of transgender and gender nonconforming students, faculty staff and administrators have experienced harassment on campus, a rate significantly higher compared with the 20% experienced by their (non-transgender) lesbian, gay and bisexual counterparts (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). High profile situations such as the death of student Tyler Clementi in 2010 at Rutgers University in the USA highlighted the seriousness of such targeted violence. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) young people report higher levels of depression (Westerfeld, Maples, Buford, & Taylor, 2001) and substance abuse (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002) both associated with suicidality (Russell & Joyner, 2001). Transgender youth have been less studied than their LGB peers. Grossman and D'Augelli's (2007) study of transgender youth found that almost half of their participants had seriously considered suicide with one fourth attempting suicide. A larger study of mental health issues and sexual orientation (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011) noted that environmental responses were major contributing factors. Risk factors for suicide in transgender individuals, include; self-reported depression; having a history of substance abuse; being under twenty-five years old; being forced into sex; feeling victimized and; discrimination based on gender identity (Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006). Risk factors shared with LGB students include: parental rejection; substance abuse; peer victimization, and family violence (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). Other academics have however challenged underlying assumptions or beliefs that people who are not transgender or gender non-conforming are more 'normal', 'healthy', and 'real' (Seelman, 2014, p619-20).

Identity development is a dynamic process for many transgender students. They may be of any age, ethnicity, race, class, or sexual orientation. Some use the opportunity of going to college or university to start living in their desired identities for the first time. Others may come out or transition during this period or may never even use the term 'transgender' to describe their identities. These choices may also depend on the degree to which they have established support systems beforehand (Bilodeau, 2005; Singh et al., 2013). More progressive colleges and universities have addressed physical, social structures and binary gender systems in their institutions (Beemyn, 2005). Beemyn, Dominguez, Pettitt, and Smith (2005) identified areas where transgender students experience discrimination because of gender-exclusive policies and practices. These included: health care; student accommodation, bathrooms

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