



Research paper

The capacity of South Australian primary school teachers and pre-service teachers to work with trans and gender diverse students



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Educators were surveyed about attitudes towards trans and gender diverse students.
- Overall educators had positive attitudes towards working with trans and gender diverse students.
- Women reported more positive attitudes and greater comfort working with trans and gender diverse students than men.
- Previous training or experience were predictive of more positive attitudes.
- Ongoing professional development and institutional support is needed to assist teachers.

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ABSTRACT

Growing numbers of young people are disclosing that they are trans or gender diverse, requiring affirming and informed responses from schools. This article reports on a survey examining attitudes towards inclusion, comfort, and confidence amongst 180 South Australian primary school teachers and pre-service teachers. The findings suggest that women held more positive attitudes and had greater comfort in working with trans and gender diverse students than men, and that awareness of programs designed to increase understanding was related to more positive attitudes, and greater comfort and confidence. The article discusses the need for further training alongside additional resourcing of initiatives aimed at facilitating inclusion.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

A growing number of children report a gender that differs from that normatively expected of their assigned sex at birth, a population group typically referred to as trans and gender diverse. Population studies suggest that between 0.5% and 1% of people are trans or gender diverse (Clark et al., 2014; Conron, Scott, Stowell, & Landers, 2012). These figures, however, are likely to be

underestimated given ongoing discrimination, difficulties in measurement, and narrow definitions of gender diversity (e.g., Bauer et al., 2009; Singh & Burnes, 2009). In particular, given the risks associated with disclosing that one is trans or gender diverse (i.e., systematic discrimination, including violence), it is likely that those who are willing to disclose constitute a relatively small proportion of the wider population.

Brill and Pepper (2008) suggest that there are three main periods when people acknowledge their gender diversity: childhood, preteen/early adolescence, and late adolescence or adulthood. A US study, for example, found that the mean age for when participants became aware of being trans or gender diverse was 5.4 years (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). For children who acknowledge, and then disclose, that they are trans or gender diverse, the likelihood of having their gender affirmed by others is shaped by societal understandings of, and attitudes towards, gender diversity. Schools

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constitute a key context in which children may disclose that they are trans or gender diverse, thus highlighting the importance of schools, and particularly educators, in providing affirming and informed responses. Educators have a duty of care to all students, and this means that they have a role to play in making school cultures more inclusive of gender diversity.

This article reports on a survey of educators in one Australian state – South Australia – which sought to assess the extent to which educators at the primary level hold inclusive attitudes towards trans and gender diverse students, and their comfort and confidence in their capacity to provide inclusive education. Before presenting the details and findings from this survey, the article first provides an overview of previous research on trans and gender diverse students, focusing on the primary/elementary years.

1.2. *Trans and gender diverse students' and their parents' experiences of schools*

Children who are trans or gender diverse often experience schools as places of marginalisation and exclusion. At the primary/elementary school level, research has documented high levels of bullying by other children (alongside a common lack of attention to trans and gender diverse children in school anti-bullying policies), lack of understanding and support from school staff, and exclusion in the form of rules relating to gender-segregated bathroom use, school uniforms, and sports participation (Johnson, Sikorski, Savage, & Woitaszewski, 2014; Kivalanka, Weiner, & Mahan, 2014; Pullen Sansfaçon, Robichaud, & Dumais-Michaud, 2015). Several studies have, however, highlighted the important role that educators can play in facilitating supportive school cultures (Luecke, 2011; Slesaransky-Poe, Ruzzi, Dimedio, & Stanley, 2013). Jones (2015) further suggests that supportive policies can help teachers create school cultures which are affirming for trans and gender diverse students.

Research with parents of young trans and gender diverse children suggests that a key barrier to inclusion relates to school staff members' understandings of gender, and whether discussions of gender diversity are viewed as taboo or are positively included within school policies and practices (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015). Studies show that a lack of knowledge amongst staff makes school experiences difficult for both parents and children (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2015), and that parents may even experience hostility from staff (Kivalanka et al., 2014; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2015). Other studies have found that parents fear for their child's safety at school (Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson, & Diamond, 2013). The significance of negative school-related experiences has led to some parents removing their children from school (Johnson et al., 2014; Kivalanka et al., 2014). The limited knowledge amongst many staff members and schools more broadly means that it is often left to parents to educate staff about gender diversity, to advocate for their child at school, and to play a role in coordinating training and drafting school policies (Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Johnson et al., 2014; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2015; Rahilly, 2015).

1.3. *Educators' capacities for supporting trans and gender diverse students*

While there is research focused on educators' and pre-service educators' experiences of working with, and attitudes towards, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) students collectively, these studies typically do not discuss trans or gender diverse students specifically (e.g. Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Larrabee & Morehead, 2008; McCabe, Rubinson, Dragowski, & Elizalde-Utnick, 2013; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). In terms of studies that

have focused specifically on educator attitudes towards trans and gender diverse students, teachers and school counsellors and psychologists have been found to hold largely positive attitudes, although men's attitudes are typically less positive than are women's (e.g. Bowers, Lewandowski, Savage, & Woitaszewski, 2015; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2015; Silveira & Goff, 2016). Furthermore, Bowers et al.'s (2015) US study with 246 school psychologists found that attitudes towards transgender students were more positive amongst participants who had 'encountered transgender issues' at work, had higher confidence in their abilities to meet the needs of transgender students, and had undertaken training relating to transgender students. Similarly, a US study with 121 school psychologists found that those who were familiar with the National Association of School Psychologists (2014) position statement related to transgender and gender diverse students had significantly higher scores on the Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward Transgender Students Survey (KATTSS) than those who were not aware of the statement (Walzer, 2015).

There is, of course, a difference between attitudes towards a particular group, and comfort or capacity for working with a particular group. This is evident in research which suggests that while on average attitudes amongst educators might be positive, this does not necessarily mean that educators are comfortable or capable of working with trans and gender diverse students. For example, a US study with over 1,000 elementary school teachers found that less than half (41%) of respondents said they would feel 'very comfortable' or 'somewhat comfortable' responding to questions from their students about transgender people (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Similarly, Payne and Smith (2014) found that educators in their US study were often fearful and anxious about the presence of transgender children, which the authors attribute to a lack of knowledge about gender diversity.

Studies with pre-service educators reflect similar findings. For example, Brant's (2014) US study developed a scale to measure the self-efficacy of pre-service teachers with regard to working with LGBTQ people, drawing on the Multicultural Efficacy Scale and the Teachers Self-Efficacy Scale. Brant found that in terms of gender non-conforming, transgender, or queer students specifically, participants were less confident in being able to identify harmful school practices (45% 'quite confident that [it] would be easy'), identify bias in teaching materials (35%), plan activities for current/future classroom to reduce prejudice (34%), analyse materials for stereotypes and prejudice (33%), or develop materials that dispel myths (22%).

1.4. *Schools and support for trans and gender diverse students*

Moving beyond individual educators to focus on the broader institutional contexts in which educators work, research has found that schools are generally not well equipped to include trans and gender diverse students, and have difficulty challenging dominant gender discourses. Frohard-Dourlent's (2016) research with mainly secondary school staff in Canada found that when discussing trans and gender-nonconforming students, staff often framed themselves as open-minded, compared to what were depicted as external institutional barriers to inclusion. Certainly, some of the participants also acknowledged their complicity with institutional barriers, however this was often framed in terms of *previous* complicity.

Research with pre-service educators has found that some experience difficulty in challenging normative understandings of gender in schools, including that gender is a binary (Ingrey, 2014). Parsons (2016) argues that education students need to be given the tools to question and critique social norms rather than just being made aware that some people are trans or gender diverse.

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