

# Inclusion of the Gender Diverse Child in the Classroom: Some Significant Issues

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**Abstract** *The vision of twenty first century education is to foster a diverse responsive environment which aims to not only celebrate the uniqueness of each individual, but also to do away with the multiplicity of stereotypes currently existing in our society. From the moment we are born, the binary world of gender categorizes us into boys and girls leaving almost no room or empathy for the gender diverse. The landmark judgment given by the supreme court of India in 2013 “allowing “ the transgendered into the school system is a much awaited step towards inclusion but needless to say requires much systemic readiness and preparation before it can become a reality. The present paper seeks to delve into the various psycho social issues of the transgender community, the discrimination and rejection faced and the highly sensitive yet instrumental role of education in empowering and enabling this community to facilitate their social inclusion and rightful existence.*

**KEYWORDS** *gender diverse, transgender, gender identity, educational inclusion, strategies for mainstreaming*

## How being Transgender unfolds in society

The gender diverse childhood is characterized by an array of traumatic experiences, rejection often leading to abandonment which gradually translate into a difficult and stressful adolescence, all resulting from a limited and an insensitive attitude of people around us. Contrary to the explicitly stated emphasis on social equality and diversity inclusion in the schooling system, much needs to be done effectively in order to bring about true equity and social justice.

Our gender identity is considered sacrosanct from the moment we are born. We're either a boy or a girl. Gender organizes our world into pink or blue. As we grow up, most of us naturally fit into the pre existing gender roles showcased by the society in which we live. Girls wear frilly dresses and play with dolls. For boys, it's trousers and trucks but the gender diverse child who is considered abnormal and a natural disaster ends up leading a traumatic, harrowing life due to his/her gender incongruence that is, an asynchronous relationship between

his/her biological sex and perceived gender orientation. Such a child, experiences a harsh invalidation of his gender expression. There is tremendous pressure on him to conform to the traditional gender structure leading to inner turmoil which often leads the child to resort to escape mechanisms, seek gender affirming communities and engage in high - risk behavior.

Seldom, does our society care to realize the trauma, agony and pain which the members of Transgender community undergo. They are often ridiculed and abused in public places like railway stations, bus stands, schools, workplaces, malls, theatres, hospitals. They are at times, sidelined and treated as untouchables. They usually have no access to education and are also denied medical and healthcare benefits. As a result, they seldom get jobs with a dignified source of income, forcing them to indulge in activities like sex work, human trafficking and begging. They are usually disowned by their families and start living with a community of persons similar to them.



### Locating Transgender Persons Socially and Historically

Historically, transgenders or hijras were highly respected and were a part of mainstream Indian society. They worked as cooks, entertainers, beauticians etc but the criminal tribes act 1871 propounded by the British shunned them and since then, they have been feared, excluded and marginalized. However, despite this heritage, transgender people in India, today, face intolerance, stigma, discrimination and violence.

At present, post-modern frames challenge the essentialist notions of identity (male, female, gay, straight or otherwise) and posit gender as culturally constructed. The disharmony created between the mind and the body, creates a social as well as psychological imbalance, playing havoc with the transgender individual's subjective sense of self and identity. It often leads to an identity crisis which forces some to undertake surgical and other procedures to alter their bodies and physical appearance, so that they acquire gender characteristics of the sex which conform to their perception of gender. All this is done in an effort to synchronize the mind with the body, to end the intrapersonal conflicts and to reduce the exclusion, discrimination and humiliation that come with the territory.

For many years the medical community had pathologized being transgender. For decades they imposed on transgender people the so-called diagnosis of "gender identity disorder." Now with the advent of DSM V, GID or gender identity disorder is replaced as gender "dysphoria," meaning that one is necessarily afflicted with discomfort with one's body when in fact being transgender is an identity, not a disorder. (Erhenshaft,2012) The inability to 'be' as culturally or societally determined, is actually a violation of one's human rights. In the words of Ban –Ki –Moon (2012; Human Rights Council), "where there is tension between cultural attitudes and universal human rights, rights must carry the day." However, this seems to be easier said than done. The actual percentage of people who are transexual (or intersex) with ambiguous genitalia is very small, between 0.1% and 0.2%. These are minor congenital abnormalities which can be surgically or otherwise treated, but due to the lack of awareness and social stigmatization, parents and

family often feel the need to discard such children.

In fact, most hijras are not kidnapped or "converted" as folk tales claim, but in fact, being born with non-binary gender, are abandoned by their parents to die or dropped off at the nearest hijra place. The parents forget about the child and never come back to visit them, and the child's only family becomes the Hijra community. The revulsion of social agencies including the family induce feelings of unwantedness and abandonment leading to a poor self- concept and low self- esteem. Owing to this, many members join the Hijra community during their teens or adulthood, by their own choice. Most transgender children still live in the shadows, hiding from a world that sees them as freaks of nature. Currently, however, several leading clinicians (e.g., Lev2004 ;Malpas2011; Menvielle,2012) advise parents to be supportive of their transgender and gender-nonconforming children, and to follow the children's lead as they figure out how to express their true gender selves (Ehrenschaft 2012). Rejected by their families, many grow up hating their bodies, and fall victim to high rates of depression, drug abuse, violence and suicide.(Brill and Pepper,2008). Transgender and gender-nonconforming adolescents appear to have an elevated risk for negative outcomes, such as depression and suicidal ideation ( Greytek et al 2009), and family members—especially parents—are deemed to play a critical role in the well-being of these youth. In a landmark study done by Riley, et al (2011), on the needs of gender-variant children and their parents, using a survey, parents of gender-variant children were asked about their needs and experiences and those of their children. The needs were reported in themes relating to (a) identification of the gender variance; (b) parents' responses and reactions; (c) seeking emotional support; (d) dealing with negative responses from others and concerns about safety; (e) seeking medical support; and (f) political, government, and legislative support. The findings indicated that parents identified the needs of their gender-variant children as the need to be accepted, loved, and respected in their gender expression. The parents identified their own needs as the need for access to information, parenting strategies, and emotional support

More specifically, research indicates that family acceptance has a strong positive influence on



transgender youth's emotional and behavioral health, including self-esteem, substance use, and suicidal ideation (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). Much of the anxiety and distress that transgender and gender-nonconforming children exhibit is reported to dissipate immediately after the children are allowed to make a social transition (i.e., present their true gender selves to the outside world. Thus, parents, who have the power to control how their young children express gender through clothing, hairstyles, etc., may mitigate the potential negative outcomes for transgender and gender-nonconforming children through affirmation of their children's gender identities and expressions ( Ehrensaft,2012). There are no studies in the Indian context on any of these issues since till only very recently, this was a taboo area.

### **Strategies for the Inclusion of the Gender Diverse Child**

#### **Policy Imperatives**

Due to the absence of suitable legislation protecting the rights of the members of the transgender community, it is necessary to follow the International Conventions to which India is a party. It is only as recently as April 2013, that the The Supreme Court of India in its landmark judgment honored and upheld the right of transgenders to a quality life, equality and nondiscrimination in society and access to education and healthcare. Following this judgment, admissions to the third gender were opened at many premier educational institutions. A 2% quota was also earmarked for gender variant children in the capital's schools.

The real challenge however is in developing inclusive policies that acknowledge and welcome transgender and gender fluid students. Efforts will have to be made to demonstrate an institutional commitment by using inclusive language, creating spaces where transgender and gender fluid students feel free to be themselves, and developing procedures that adequately respond to acts of intolerance and/or harassment toward transgender and gender fluid students. Spaces will have to be provided for campus dialogue on gender identity and efforts for the admission and retention of

transgender persons in higher education will also have to be made.

#### **Facilitating a Gender Diverse Environment at Home**

When families support their child's gender identity and the exploration of that identity, they create an optimal environment for that child: one that lays the foundation for building the child's core sense of self. By providing an unconditional loving environment, with openness and sensitivity where the child is able to speak to them about their feelings and ask questions allows the child to blossom into a fully functioning individual ready to contribute to society.

#### **Recognition of Gender Diversity**

Coming out and living authentically takes a lot of courage because our society still tends to be very harsh, critical and judgmental towards transgender people. Transgender children who are raised in accepting and loving communities where they are allowed to live out their gender identity authentically and are embraced for their true selves are happy and well adjusted people.

#### **Freedom of Expression to the Felt Gender**

When a child does not express a particular gender expression while growing up, he/she should not be punished nor admonished. Children who are born as male but who during their teens try female clothes and make-up could later identify themselves as transgender. These children who may later identify themselves as transgender, can become successful members of society if they receive acceptance and parental and societal support.

#### **Early Intervention and Support by Professional Experts**

To understand that gender is fluid rather than dichotomous is an urgent attitudinal need. Parents often lack the necessary awareness required to formulate an informed opinion on this matter. The role of gender specialists is very important on this regard. They can help both the gender diverse child and his/her family to anticipate and deal with the trials and tribulations faced by such a child and create familial readiness and support for the same.



### **Being Supported and Understood by the School Community**

Several meaningful measures can be taken up to make this possible

- Organizing sensitization and awareness programs: teachers and other school staff need to comprehend that in the contemporary, diverse classroom, the gender binary is replaced by a gender spectrum wherein understanding gender non-conforming students and being sensitive to their special needs is required.
- Screening films that expose children to gender diversity as a natural phenomenon. The media often encourages and is responsible for sustaining gender stereotyping. However it can equally play an effective role in creating awareness for the gender diverse and ways of their inclusion in mainstream society.
- Employing gender diverse teachers. Gender non-conformist teachers can be very useful in creating awareness and demystifying the world of transgender persons. They exemplify that if given the right opportunity, gender diverse individuals can like any other persons contribute successfully to society.
- Having trans friendly textbooks: In an inclusive classroom, everyone should be represented in what is deemed legitimate knowledge.

### **Providing Safeguards and Support to Gender Diverse Persons**

- To protect them against being bullied, harassed, blamed, shamed, or attacked. There is an acute need for the administrative authorities in schools and colleges to ensure that their campuses are safe and welcoming of all diverse persons, including transgender and intersexual children.
- Access to health literacy programs and referral to counselors and medical professionals. Counselors can intervene in the school environment by communicating with school personnel about the common challenges faced by transgender persons and

by addressing the systemic dynamics preventing them from feeling safe and respected.

- Transgender persons are becoming increasingly visible at secondary and post-secondary schools across the country and expect institutions to meet their needs. School personnel can thus no longer ignore this population. They have to as part of their preparation learn the appropriate language to describe transpeople, educate themselves on transgender histories, and seek to understand their lives and experiences. If institutions are to be welcoming to people of all genders, issues of discrimination and equal access to facilities and health care need to be addressed.
- Instituting programmes that prevent bullying and the verbal abuse of students and establishing a clearly spelt out action in case of violation.
- Creating a uniform classroom policy.
- Creating the classroom rules collaboratively and have the rules reflect wording that is inclusive of all students, including LGBT youth/children
- Inviting LGBT people to conduct classroom discussions about their jobs and family lives to students. It must be understood that schools are a subset of the larger social rubric under which they germinate, therefore the school-society continuum has to be firmly established.
- Providing the School Library with useful information about homosexuality and LGBT people. Creating a list of LGBT-themed children's literature that may be considered for purchase for the library.

### **Conclusion**

The vision of twenty first century education is to foster a diverse responsive environment which aims to not only celebrate the uniqueness of each individual, but also to do away with the multiplicity of stereotypes currently existing in our society. For a society to be truly representative, every section should have its own voice and agency. The



transgender have been marginalized, rejected for a long time. It is thus high time that society, routed through its educational institutions, shoulders the responsibility of bringing about attitudinal reconstruction and sensitization of people at large, to the special needs of gender fluid children so that they are accepted and nurtured with the warmth and dignity that they deserve.

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