
Transgendered Children in Schools: a critical review of *Homophobic Bullying: safe to learn – embedding anti-bullying work in schools*

NATACHA KENNEDY

ABSTRACT The author argues that the interests of transgendered children are being ignored by the Department for Children, Schools and Families and that the publication of guidance on homophobic bullying only serves to highlight deficiencies in the way these children are excluded within the education system.

Introduction

The Government has apparently been keen to promote the 'Every Child Matters' agenda in schools, yet the question remains as to whether every child matters equally in terms of policy. The publication of the guidance to schools on homophobic bullying, produced by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) is to be welcomed as a positive step for children who suffer from homophobic bullying in schools. However the very brief mention of transgendered (TG) children in this document would only seem to reinforce the view that transgendered children are not considered a priority, at least compared with certain groups specified in Every Child Matters documentation. In this article I intend to argue that existing advice for school staff on dealing with TG children is inadequate and is contributing to these children's substantial underachievement in schools. I will also argue that schools have their part to play in educating the population about TG people as this is vital for the continued well-being of these children both in school and subsequently. Finally I will argue that the inclusion of TG issues when dealing with homophobic bullying is likely to make it more effective.

Initially I will examine the guidance and how it refers to TG children and issues, then I will look at definitions and issues surrounding transgenderism and finally I will present and discuss evidence of issues relating to the education of TG children.

The DCSF Guidance

Although this document runs to more than 100 pages on the subject of homophobic bullying only one short section of this refers to TG children:

5. What about transgender people?

Gender identity and sexual orientation are two different things.

Gender identity describes a person's gender. Sexual orientation describes whether a person is heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual. The description of someone as transgendered refers to their gender identity.

Some young people come to realise that their biological gender is not the same as the gender with which they identify, that is, they are born a girl but feel like a boy, or a born a boy and feel like a girl.

Some Trans young people can be heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual, but like all pupils can experience homophobic bullying and should be protected from it.

Trans pupils may not conform to accepted gender norms and roles and therefore may experience homophobic bullying as a result. It is therefore important to be alert to the unique sort of bullying they may experience and protect them accordingly. (p. 69)

Whilst this is to be welcomed as a positive step forward for TG children, there are many reasons why this is inadequate in so far as issues relating specifically to TG children are concerned. In particular, when compared with all the teaching resources and suggestions in the document for use with lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) children, there is nothing at all relating to TG issues. The publication of this short passage, albeit better than nothing, effectively demonstrates Burgess's (2000) view that transgendered children constitute one of the most misunderstood and neglected groups in society.

LGB and T

The element in the document which seems to demonstrate most vividly DCSF attitudes to TG children seems to be the way the T is left out of 'LGBT' throughout the document. This appears to be a deliberate misrepresentation of the way the majority of the LGBT community in the UK perceives itself. It also serves to reinforce the arguments of Namaste (2000) and Bornstein (1995) that TG people are being deliberately excluded or erased from society.

This exclusion or erasure appears to have become deliberate on the part of those who compiled this document on homophobic bullying. The text

constantly refers to 'LGB' organisations which are listed in the appendix – excluding the 'T'. Yet an analysis of these organisations, which the document lists in its appendix (see Figures 1 and 2) reveals that 8 out of 16 (with 2 not specifying) are 'LGBT' as opposed to LGB. So, although only 6 out of 16 organisations describe themselves as 'LGB' as opposed to 'LGBT' the writers have decided to use the former description to cover all of them. The only conclusion the TG reader of this document can come to is that the producers of the guidance intended deliberately to exclude TGs as far as possible.

	Name	Type
1	London Lesbian & Gay switchboard	LGBT
2	LGBT Consortium	LGBT
3	LGBT History Month	LGBT
4	PACE	LGBT
5	Queery	LGBT
6	School' s Out	LGBT
7	Channel 4 LGB Teens	LGB
8	Naz Project London	LGB
9	Stonewall	LGB
10	Educational action challenging Homophobia	Does not say
11	Terrence Higgins Trust	Does not specify

Figure 1. LGBT voluntary organisations with no religious affiliation

1	YWCA	LGB
2	Safra Project	LGBT
3	Lesbian & Gay Christian Movement	LGB
4	Jewish Lesbian & Gay Group	LGB
5	Imaan (Islamic LGBT Group)	LGBT

Figure 2. LGBT voluntary organisations with religious affiliation

Numbers and Definitions

Collecting any kind of data on numbers of TG people is extremely difficult and estimates of their numbers vary. The Gender Identity Research and Education Society (GIREs), probably the most respected research organisation specialising in TG issues, estimates that the proportion of the UK population which is transgendered is around 1%, or 600,000. Of this number, it estimates that around 10,000 will undergo gender reassignment surgery as transsexuals (although to date only around 2200 have officially applied for recognition in their new gender [1]); the rest may have varying degrees of gender discomfort or dysphoria and include people who strongly identify with the opposite sex, those who may vary between two gender roles and those who may consider themselves to an extent androgynous.

To put this into context; the numbers of transgendered (TG) children in schools should be around the same as the number of children of Caribbean heritage and more than double the number children of Bangladeshi heritage.[2]

Transsexual and Transgender

It is notable that, as with the DCSF guidance, in much of the literature about transgenderism advising teachers, parents and the children themselves, the tendency is towards a description of transsexualism almost as if it were the logical conclusion to a process, and little or no attention is given to other TG people. An example of this is the GIRES information leaflet on transgendered children, aimed at schools and teenagers.[3] This effectively talks about transsexuals rather than all types of transgendered people. This seems to reflect society's apparent inability to accept individuals who do not fit into the tightly prescribed gender roles of masculine and feminine. The tendency appears to be for any organisation which has to refer to transgendered people to actually describe transsexuals, who, it appears, represent quite a small minority of transgendered people. Again, unlike other TGs, transsexuals do not challenge the binary gender system; they merely want to change from one group to the other.

It may be that this is because of the perception that it is actually 'easier' to solve the problems of transsexuals, because their transgenderism can be solved on an individual basis, by 'corrective' surgery, whereas the problems of other TGs can only be solved by changing social attitudes. As medical treatments such as sex-change and other plastic surgery techniques become more easily available, there may be very real problems. The concern has been expressed that TG people may find themselves pushed or encouraged to take the surgical or medical option when that is not right for them. Namaste (2000) argues that this is because society appears to want to make TG people invisible. This happens when TG people's problems are pathologised; a medical or psychological solution is sought and thus TG people who are not transsexual may be led to believe that surgery or psychological treatment is the solution to their problems. Indeed, if TG people perceive that they themselves are the problem, rather than the social system as Benjamin (1954) considers, then they may be more likely to seek some kind of solution which might involve surgery. It would appear that society would rather avoid its responsibility and blame TG people for having some kind of psychological or medical problem.

A more effective solution to TG people's problems is described in the next section and, unlike medical or psychological 'solutions' over which schools can have no influence, this is one where education can play a vital role.

Social Treatment

One of the early medical practitioners to study transgenderism in depth was Harry Benjamin. His 1954 article on this subject came to the conclusion,

regarding TG people who were not transsexual, that they could not be 'cured' in themselves, as transsexuals can with surgery and hormone treatment or psychiatric intervention. He argued that transgenderism 'can only be treated by treating society'. This contrasts with the attitude towards transgenderism which often seeks to pathologise TG people. Society's response to the phenomenon of transgenderism has tended towards considering that the individual TG person is where the problem lies, rather than there actually being something at fault within society.

It is important to regard TG children not as the problem in some way, but rather, as victims of a social system which artificially ascribes particular expectations onto each gender. TG children and adults exist as living evidence that many of the roles, preferences and behaviours currently attached to males or females are not necessarily innate but the result of social expectations. So boys and girls who demonstrate preferences which are normally associated by society with the opposite sex, may simply be expressing something which comes naturally to them, rather than actually exhibiting any problematic behaviour. Simply doing something which is different from society's expectations is not necessarily problematic in itself; in the case of TG children there are arguments to suggest that it is society which presents the problems to them rather than the individual children themselves presenting any problems for society.

Western society seems to find it difficult to accept more than two genders, possibly because of Bornstein's argument that there are vested interests who do not want their status within that system to be challenged. There are other societies, however, where more than two genders are recognised and where TGs have a special status. For example, in Polynesia, Samoa and Hawaii, 'Mahu' or Fa'afafine [4] are boys brought up as girls who have a unique status as a third sex. The Chukchi people of Siberia, who recognise nine different genders altogether, were documented by Bogoras (1937).

The binary gender system is made clearer when the relative situation in the UK of transsexuals and TG people who are not transsexual is compared. Transsexuals are protected from discrimination by law. However, this protection does not extend to other TG people; transvestites, for example, are not protected from discrimination and, at the time of writing, the Government proposes to continue this exclusion, this time on a deliberate basis, in the Single Equality Bill. The Green Paper for this entitled 'Framework for Fairness' [5] proposes deliberately to exclude transgendered people who are not transsexual from its protection. This again may reflect Western society's inability or unwillingness to accept the concept of more than two genders.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is that whilst transsexuals are viewed as still fitting into the binary gender system, they are simply perceived as having crossed from one to the other; TG people who are not transsexual are outside this system and as such cannot be placed in either gender. This falls outside society's apparent ability to comprehend.

Benjamin's idea that society needs to change rather than the individual as the only 'treatment' for the majority of transgendered people is significant. One of the most important ways society could change is in recognising that there are individuals who fall outside the binary gender system, and present positive images of these people, particularly in schools. This is something lacking in the DCSF document. There are resources for classroom use for LGB issues but not TG issues. Resources are available, such as the story of Natale Morea [6] or Christine Burns's teaching materials about gender identity based on the Chukchi people of Siberia [7] or indeed, the story of Joan of Arc, for example.

Now that background information regarding the document and a description of issues relating to TG people in general in the United Kingdom and beyond have been examined, the following section deals with issues specifically relating to the position of TG children in schools. There are two main issues here; the age of self-awareness of TG children and social non-acceptance relating to their identities.

Transgendered Children in Schools

Age of Self-awareness

The sudden or gradual realisation of a child that he or she is transgendered is something which is apparently often assumed to be the same sort of process as that of coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual. The evidence is that lesbians, gay males and bisexuals are most likely to become aware of their sexuality during or after puberty. Although there may be some who might consider themselves to be lesbian, gay or bisexual earlier than that it is arguable that until puberty and sexual awareness is developed, it will be impossible to tell for certain what a child's sexuality will be. This is confirmed by the findings of the Outproud/Oasis survey of 1960 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people between the ages of 10 and 25 [8] that at the age of 10, only 21% were aware of their sexuality, and only 2% had accepted the fact, yet by the age of 16, 93% were aware of their sexuality, and 54% had accepted the fact.

However the evidence is that the experience of TG children is substantially different. GIRES estimates that most TG children become aware that they are different from others at quite a young age; however, as with everything related to TG issues this has been very difficult to support with any kind of hard evidence. The Engendered Penalties survey (2006) supports this view but has the drawback of being carried out mostly through Press for Change, the membership of which is drawn disproportionately from the transsexual community.

Looking for data from alternative sources may prove more constructive. While TG people may be unwilling to answer questionnaires or surveys, transgendered people have become accustomed to being more open on the Internet.

An examination of online communities such as Facebook, MySpace and the many and varied blogs and discussion forums on the Internet shows how there is now a culture of sharing quite intimate personal details and feelings in such online spaces. The affordance of anonymity provided by these spaces as well as the ability to generate a community amongst a geographically dispersed population is the cause of this. In this context, TG people can retain their anonymity while exchanging information and contributing to online discussions, so there is little to stop them from opening up and revealing personal details which they might never tell even their close friends or family. Indeed it could be argued that the culture of such online groups is one of honesty behind a mask of anonymity. Herring (1996) argues that these forums represent public information and that as such they are important and legitimate sources of information to researchers.

So referring to an online artefact from a forum for TGs called 'Cross-dressers.com', one would expect to find transgendered people discussing honestly their thoughts, feelings and life experiences. One such discussion thread, started on 28 May 2005 and which has its most recent post (at the time of writing) on 1 October 2007, comprised responses to the question:

First fem[ale] thing worn ... What attracted you to it and made you wear it?[9]

This prompted 224 responses in total (although some people contributed more than once), of which 110 gave the exact, or a close approximation (for example, '5 or 6'), of the age the respondent was when s/he first tried on female clothing, make-up or footwear. This is significant because the respondents were *not actually asked* for their age, so the information was given as additional to the main subject of the discussion. As such there would seem to be little to suggest that any of this information may be inaccurate or deliberately distorted, for example, by any kind of competitiveness to appear younger or older than others. In addition, the responses of many others, who did not give an exact age, demonstrated that they had clearly become aware of being transgendered when they were young; this sort of response was typical:

my older sisters cheerleader outfit. Maybe it was a majorette outfit. I can't really remember now. Just recall the short pleated skirt, sleeveless fitted top and pom poms![10]

An analysis of these responses is set out in numerical form in Figures 3 and 4.

Whilst it may be argued that this data has not been scientifically compiled, there is little to suggest that it is likely to be any less reliable than any other data collected about transgendered people. Indeed, there is much in this artefact which would be supported by findings from the Engendered Penalties survey.

What this data quite clearly suggests is that the majority of TGs were aware that they were TGs well before puberty. The average age of male TGs' first time trying on any female garment is 8 and as we can see, more than four-fifths had done this while they were still in primary school.

Age (years)	Frequency
2	1
3	2
4	8
5	9
6	16
7	6
8	18
9	6
10	6
11	10
12	11
13	7
14	2
15	2
16	1
17	0
18+	5

Figure 3. Frequency chart showing when transgendered people remember becoming aware of being transgendered.[11]

Age group (years)	Frequency
2-11	82
12-17	23
18+	5

Figure 4. Frequency chart organised by school phase.

This data may initially come as a surprise but it must be remembered that gender identity is not the same as sexual orientation (as the extract from the DCSF document acknowledges). Whilst it is likely that sexual orientation is dependent on going through puberty, gender identity is not, and therefore is likely to become apparent at a much younger age. The majority of non-TG boys and girls do not wait until puberty before they begin to adopt gender-specific behaviour.

Social Non-acceptance

What is apparent from the forum posts is that the activities the respondents were engaged in were perceived by the children as something they had to be

quite secretive about. There are many responses which typically demonstrate this:

I was about 12 when I snuck into my cousin's room ... then I got caught wearing it.

Got Caught Many Times, Yelled At.

The first fem[inine] item I wore was my sister's school uniform in secret when I was 7

It was clear from the perceptions of many of the male-to-female respondents in the Engendered Penalties survey that the social environment in school led them to hide their TG behaviour:

I learnt to live in stealth as a boy in order to survive. My schools were transphobic in that transness was not even remotely an option.

I became solitary, insular and insecure. I went to great lengths to conceal my trans characteristics.

I hid my trans status absolutely by being withdrawn and unsociable. I never felt I fitted in. You learn very quickly to hide who you are.

I had to hide my gender issues, especially in school. My life would not have been worth living.

I kept my transgender secret. My school was a hostile environment for many People.

Whether the situation is similar for female-to-male TG children is probably more difficult to establish, although the frequency of 'tomboys' in primary schools is well known. It may be that tomboys become aware of their differences at a different age although there is nothing to suggest this. What is different is the social acceptability of tomboys. These children may not actually view their behaviour or feelings as anything out of the ordinary until adolescence. Although female-to-male TG children report more transphobic bullying than male-to-females, it may be argued that male-to-female TGs have learnt at an earlier age to hide their transgenderism, whereas 'tomboys' making the transition from primary to secondary school are likely to find that people who accepted them before no longer do so and that therefore they are, paradoxically, less well prepared than their male-to-female counterparts.

It appears, then, that as TG children become more aware of how socially unacceptable their activities are, the more likely it will be that they suppress them. Lee (2004), through her long involvement with transvestite communities in London and around the world, describes how they tend to hide their gender

identities throughout their teens and even their twenties, deliberately suppressing that side of themselves only for it to surface later in life.

Referring to the increased likelihood of life-threatening behaviour amongst LGB children, Grossman & Augelli (2007) found that transgendered children demonstrated significant amounts of life-threatening behaviour such as attempted suicide. The risk of this was noticeably increased when they were subjected to physical and verbal abuse from parents, often as a result of pressure to conform to 'normal' gender stereotype behaviour. Of the TG children and young people studied, a quarter had actually attempted suicide and a half had contemplated it.

This is significant, as teachers may be in the position of needing to deal with children who are suffering from abuse at home as a result of their transgenderism, and that, particularly in the case of male-to-female TGs this abuse is much more likely to start at a younger age when the children involved are much more vulnerable, less able to defend themselves or rationalise their situation and obtain help from other sources.

The loss of self-esteem by these children is evident in the Engendered Penalties research and this leads to TG children leaving school in disproportionate numbers, at the earliest possible opportunity. Low self-esteem has been discovered to be a significant reason for failure at school by children in our current educational system. The Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs)-based system of high-stakes testing introduced by the Thatcher government in the late 1980s and reinforced by subsequent governments has had a measurable effect on children with low self-esteem. The EPPI (2002) study, *A Systematic Review of the Impact of Summative Assessment and Tests on Students' Motivation for Learning*, found that whilst there had been no correlation between self-esteem and achievement prior to the introduction of National Curriculum tests in England, now there is a clear correlation between low self-esteem and underachievement in education. TG children would seem to be amongst the biggest losers from this system.

This also has implications for teachers who deal with TG children. Teachers need to understand that TG children, especially genetic males, are very likely to conceal their TG nature even in primary school. It is also evident that the low self-esteem resulting from suppressed transgenderism is very likely to result in substantial harm being done to their chances of achieving what they are capable of in school.

This paints a particularly sad, bleak and desperate picture of life for TG children. The evidence is that the psychological and educational damage being caused to these children seems not to be apparent to schools, and is seemingly being ignored or repressed by the Government. This is a serious indictment of national policies on inclusion. Policies are in place relating to respecting the identities of other groups and aimed at raising their self-esteem but there are none which support TG children's own identities.

Clearly one of the main ways in which the situation for TG children could be improved would be if their fear of bullying were reduced. Proposals which

may have the potential to improve the situation of TG children whilst at the same time dealing with homophobic bullying of other children as well, are put forward in the next section. This approach has the possibility of being more effective in dealing with both kinds of bullying

Gender Variance

The Engendered Penalties report shows a substantial amount of suffering of TG young people and children. The report reserves some of its strongest language to refer to the situation in schools. It describes transphobic bullying as being 'rife' in schools and that school staff are responsible for it as well as other children. Some 64 % of female-to-male TG children and 44% of male-to-female children in their survey reported transphobic bullying, which is a higher proportion than many studies have shown even for gay and lesbian children.

The guidance in the DCSF document makes it quite clear that it is not only children who are LGB that are subject to homophobic bullying and that in addition:

Young people who are thought to be lesbian, gay or bisexual

And

Young people who are different in some way – they may not act like the other boys or girls.

This is an important, but often overlooked clue as to the source of 'homophobic' bullying. It clearly includes TG children as well as children who are not LGBT at all but whose behaviour or appearance may differ from those of 'normal' heterosexual children. Namaste (2000) and Bornstein (1995) suggest that gender variant behaviour or appearance is a better basis for predicting whether someone will be a victim of homophobic attack than their actual sexual orientation. They point out that gay men who appear effeminate and lesbians who appear 'butch' are more likely to be attacked than gays and lesbians who are very masculine or feminine respectively. When a gay man is accompanied by a woman, for example, the likelihood of homophobic assault in the street is diminished to almost zero. The likelihood of assault on gay men who described themselves as 'very masculine' is less than half that of those who considered themselves to behave in a more effeminate way (Namaste, 2000).

Indeed Harry (1990) suggests that the only way lesbian victims of assault were able to explain why they had been assaulted was with reference to their gender appearance rather than their sexual orientation.

It may be reasonable to argue then that homophobic bullying in schools, especially primary schools, is a result, not of a child's sexual orientation, but of a child's appearance or mannerisms. Indeed it is probable that the only way a potential homophobic bully would have of identifying a victim would be because of gender variant appearance or behaviour, so those LGB children who still conform to the normative expectations of their gender probably run a greatly reduced risk of homophobic bullying. If this is the case the DCSF

document will actually be less effective in guiding teachers to deal with homophobic bullying as well as transphobic bullying. A focus on gender variant behaviour may well be more effective, particularly in primary school, where children are probably more likely to comprehend TG issues more readily than LGB issues. This would serve to include TG children within its scope whilst targeting the sort of bullying which would include LGB children and those children who are neither but who suffer from 'homophobic' bullying.

Teachers and schools need to be equipped to deal with this sort of bullying and use anti-bullying strategies which help legitimise a range of behaviour which is not gender specific or stereotyped and target the bullying of children whose behaviour does not conform to stereotypical gender expectations.

Recommendations

- Schools need to be advised that transgendered children are much more likely to become known to teachers and other staff in primary school, and that by secondary school, transgendered children (particularly male-to-females) may already have become expert at hiding their true identities.
- TG issues should be part of inclusion policies in all schools. The aim of including TG issues in diversity education for children should be to tackle what Benjamin described as the need to 'treat society'. For the majority of TG people the cure is changing social attitudes so that society accepts that there are individuals who do not fit into the binary gender system. Recognising that unlike transsexuals to an extent, other TG people cannot be treated in isolation, indeed *they* themselves cannot be treated at all, the only solution lies with the rest of society and a change in attitudes. This could be included in teaching which is aimed at challenging sexual stereotypes where, for example, girls are encouraged to aspire to roles or careers other than those normally traditionally associated with women.
- The potential of approaching LGBT bullying and discrimination from the point of view of gender variant behaviour and appearance needs to be investigated. This would probably be a more effective way of presenting such issues to children. It would also have the advantage of being of benefit to LGB children as well as other children who neither consider themselves to be gender variant nor LGB whilst also challenging gender stereotyping.
- Finally, the Government should amend the document it has sent out to schools, deleting LGB and inserting LGBT in its place. This may seem a very small change but the symbolic effects of such an omission cannot always be underestimated. As it stands the Government has left itself open to accusations of deliberately trying to exclude TG children.

Conclusion

There are specific issues which teachers need to know about when dealing with TG children, for example, that they are likely to become aware that they are different at a much earlier age, and that they are also very likely to hide their transgenerism, especially if they are genetic males. Whilst it is encouraging that schools – religious schools included – are now being clearly told to deal with homophobic bullying, the cursory mention of TG children, almost as an afterthought, and their apparent exclusion from the main thrust of the document is a cause for concern. I have argued that this exclusion of TG issues in terms of dealing with what is currently defined as ‘homophobic’ bullying is actually likely to render efforts at combating this type of bullying less effective. It would seem to fit a pattern of erasure from view of TG people. Yet it is only by changing society’s view of TG people that the situation of TG children can be improved. The positive inclusion of TG children in schools, especially primary schools where they are most likely initially to become aware of themselves as TGs, needs to be given greater priority. Further research in this area needs to be undertaken if we are to cater for the needs of TG children in schools.

There is evidence that TG people are becoming more accepted by society – the recent election of the mayor of Cambridge, who is transgendered – being an example of this – as has been the election of TG MPs to the Italian and New Zealand parliaments, transgendered politicians in Hawaii and laws prohibiting discrimination against trans people now in force in Sweden and 14 US states including California and Illinois. However, it would appear that official UK Government attitudes towards TG people, especially those who are not transsexual, have not undergone the same change. This is to the detriment, in particular, of transgendered children. This needs to change if ‘Every Child Matters’ is to have any meaning beyond that of an empty slogan.

Notes

- [1] www.pfc.org.uk. September 2007.
- [2] <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=273>
- [3] http://www.gires.org.uk/Text_Assets/Schools_teenagers.pdf
- [4] <http://www.abc.net.au/ra/pacific/people/hazy.htm>
- [5] <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/frameworkforfairnessconsultation>
- [6] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/christmas2003/story/0,,1112318,00.html>
- [7] http://www.pfc.org.uk/files/Lesson_Plan-Gender_Variance.pdf
- [8] Source: <http://www.coastkid.org/si-ssas.html>
- [9] <http://www.crossdressers.com/forums/showthread.php?t=59581> (accessed 31 January 2008).
- [10] <http://www.crossdressers.com/forums/showthread.php?t=59581&page=8>

- [11] N.B. When compiling this data, if the respondent gave a close approximation of their age, for example '5 or 6', I took the greater number (i.e. 6 in this case).

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NATACHA KENNEDY is a campaigner for the rights of transgendered people. She has more than 20 years' experience in senior management and as a class teacher in a variety of primary schools, mostly in inner cities. She is now Senior Lecturer at Goldsmiths College, University of London, with research interests in new media in education and transgender issues. *Correspondence:* natachakennedy@hotmail.co.uk

For more information on transgender issues please see <http://www.thisaboveall.co.uk>