

Exploring the Source of Transphobia Challenges and Strategies for Transgender Students in Australian Secondary School

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ABSTRACT

Though growing public awareness of human rights and social justice has boosted discussion about transgender students on social media, topic of gender identity, in most countries, is still considered sensitive or even taboo. This requires more spotlight to be directed on the basic rights and physical and mental wellbeing of transgender and gender diverse students, which poses challenges to educational leaders. Addressing on Australian secondary schools, this article discusses about controversial issues on gender identity, the source of transphobia, and challenges transgender students may face. It further provides empirical solutions based on real case ‘Bendigo Senior Secondary College’ to educational leaders.

Keywords: *LGBTIAQ+, Gender identity, Gender diverse, Transgender students, Educational leaders, Sexual Discrimination, Heterosexual structure, Social justice.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In light of the research conducted by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Australia has the 3rd most unequal education system among 41 wealthiest countries across the globe, in which all members belong to OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) and/or EU (European Union) [1]. In other words, Australian students are more likely to be positioned disadvantageously in the education system and would eventually lag behind their peers [2]. If there are no educational policies and practices intervening, it may cause negative outcomes such as crime, diminished health, unemployment, teenage pregnancy and social exclusion [2]. This article starts by an introduction to common social inequalities in Australian educational settings that lead to contentious gender identity issue. Following that, it also explores the source of transphobia and the existing challenges that transgender students encounter in their daily life. In the end, some empirical solutions are proposed for educational leaders in an attempt to guarantee transgender students’ basic rights as well as their health.

2. SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN AUSTRALIA

Social justice is considered as one of the most discussed topics in 21st century. Within educational context, it can be explained as eradicating the oppression and discrimination towards marginalized individuals or groups on race, color, disability, religions, gender, sexual orientation, financial background and so forth [3]. For example, students with low socio-economic backgrounds have less access to high-quality education resources. In Australia, approximately two-thirds (65.4%) of students enrolled in government-funded public schools [4]. However, most public schools could only provide substandard curriculum, equipment, facilities and an environment lack of peer pressure [2]. In recent decades, the Australian government funding for public school education has declined proportionally and been further diverted into labor market programs to boost employment rate [2] [4]. This has forced middle- and upper- class families to transfer their children to private schools for meeting their higher educational goals, which, however, exacerbates education gap as other one-third of students in private schools can accumulate advantages by interacting with their peers from well-educated and affluent families [4]. As the trend goes on, a vicious circle

between low-, middle- and upper-class students has already been formed [4].

Another worldwide educational issue about discrimination towards diversity of sexual orientation has started to dominate public discourse. Sexual orientation covers heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality, and asexuality. Even though Australia is ranked as the 10th most LGBT-friendly country (2021) in the world (among 202 countries) [5], bullying, hate speech and oppression directed at LGBTIAQ+ students are still rampant. Compared to mainstream Australian population, LGBTIAQ+ Australians (age 16-17) possibly have 3 times of suicide, 4 times of self-harm and 6 times of depression [6]. In addition, about four-fifths (79%) of LGBTIQ people have reported experiencing verbal & physical bullying behaviors. Among these cases, 80% happened at school [7].

Controversy about gender identity is always highly related to sexual orientation but being intentionally ignored in educational theories, practices or policies. Gender identity refers to the personal sense of one's own gender that can match or differ from the gender assigned to a person at birth [8]. In this case, transgender people are defined as people born with stereotypical male or female anatomy that differs from the inherent gender expression they identify with. There are three typologies of transgender people including transgender (umbrella term), transvestite (cross-dresser) and transsexual (people after gender reassignment surgery) [8]. In the last thirty years, more and more domestic policies have been promulgated in Australia to protect transgender people's basic rights. In 1987, the first 'legal transsexual' was officially registered with the Births, Deaths and Marriages Department of New South Wales (NSW) [9]. Since then, Australian jurisdictions started to recognize the affirmed sex of a person after gender reassignment surgery [9]. Nevertheless, despite all the effort (e.g. anti-discrimination law) made to protect the basic human rights of transgender people, their existence is still being constantly defamed and demonized by some conservative religious groups. Invisible social oppression limits their public exposure, as the transgender community is often referred to as "LGBTIAQ+" or "sexual minority" in the media [9]. When it comes to education, social stigma and stereotype keep them away from quality education. 90% of transgender students have experienced bullying after the intentional or accidental disclosure of their gender identity, while one-fifth end up dropping out of school [9] [10], leading to a high rate of illiteracy, unemployment, poverty and homelessness. In order to secure subsistence, many transgender people have to rely on sex trade. The stigmatization of sex work further exacerbates the discrimination and the stereotype that they already have in daily life [9]. Unwillingly or voluntarily, the majority of transgender people choose to remain unnoticeable [9].

Under this circumstance, the wellbeing of transgender people is supposed to be concerned most. In comparison to mainstream Australian population, transgender teenagers (around age 18) have 15 times more possibility to attempt suicide [6]. This begs the question: What have transgender people done wrong to deserve the hatred from the world?

3. THE SOURCE OF TRANSPHOBIA

Before addressing the question, we need to know more about the society. Our society is grounded in a deeply-rooted hierarchical and patriarchal framework. That is to say, we live in a social system where men hold absolute authority in key fields (e.g. politics, economy, education and etc.) [11]. In recent days, the concept of patriarchy has been extended by feminists to hetero-patriarchy, which means that cisgender and heterosexual men subjugate not only cisgender women but also people with diverse gender identities or sexual orientations [11]. To maintain the gender system that considers women as inferior to men, hetero-patriarchal society requires a binary sex system, in which heterosexuality and gender identity adhere to the function of genitalia producing heteronormativity [12]. So, back to the question, it makes more sense that transgender people receive relentless discrimination more than other sexual minorities. In general, those who live in and benefit from hetero-patriarchal structure reiterate and reinforce heterosexuality or normative expectations on males and females, i.e. males are obliged to 'be masculine' and be dominant while females are forced to 'be feminine' and in a sense, submissive [12]. The existence of transgender people is a huge liability to this millennial hetero-patriarchal structure, as they are able to legally swing between masculinity or femininity without following their genitalia assigned at birth. They have the potential to challenge and change the system [12]. However, it might be still too early to say that. Even for transgender community, they are still being influenced by the institutionalized misogynistic culture. Ironically, harassment and criticism of transgender people depends on the degree of masculinity, i.e. transgender people (female-to-male, also known as FTM) are treated comparatively better than transgender women (male-to-female, also known as MTF) simply because they have adopted masculine superiority [12].

4. SECONDARY SCHOOL: THE HOTBED OF TRANSPHOBIA

Besides abovementioned factors, transgender people often experience extra discrimination based on their additional identities (e.g. religion, race, nationality and etc.), which could exert multiple pressures on them. For students who are not fully grown-up, these pressures could be devastating. According to the report from Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), the

transition from primary to tertiary education is instrumental for transgender students to develop positive attitudes and a healthy worldview [13].

Secondary education is mandatory in Australia. Australian secondary schools are required to provide excellent curriculum, advanced equipment, competent teachers as well as an inclusive and supportive environment where every student, regardless of their identity, deserves an equal opportunity and be protected from discrimination, harassment, libel, and unfairness. However, the educational inequality in Australian secondary schools unexpectedly reaches to 8th among the 38 richest countries in the world [1]. Rampant and normalized discrimination ceaselessly thwart the basic rights of transgender students and also cause irreversible trauma to them.

4.1. The Usage of Bathroom and Restroom

One of the most contentious debate is about whether to allow transgender students to utilize bathroom and restroom that match their gender identity. This debate seems to focus on the usage of bathroom and restroom, but more profoundly, it reflects lack of acceptance of transgender people by the whole society [13]. In most cases, transgender students are instructed that they could only utilize separate bathroom and restroom. Based on a survey with 189 transgender students, over 40% are reported that they feel isolated from cisgender students [9]. ‘Separate but equal’ is, indeed, still separate, yet it has been mostly implemented by schools [9].

4.2. Miscalled Name and Pronouns

It could be humiliating and disrespectful to intentionally call student’s names or pronouns that do not match their gender identity. In some schools, lack of proper training to some extent result in less empathy in teachers, staffs and peers towards transgender community. Their ‘miscalled’ or ‘misacting’ could be perceived by transgender students as a sign of unacceptance of their gender identity. It is empirically proven that being called correct pronouns contributes to positive wellbeing and healthy mentality of transgender students [8]

4.3. Uniform/Dress Code

Australian secondary schools’ uniform/dress code is strongly gendered and has been criticized for impeding the free expression of gender identity. In response, Queensland, New South Wales (NSW), Western Australia (WA), and Victoria enacted explicit policies to make sure that girls can wear pants and shorts [14]. Upon these changes, WA government further offer ‘gender neutral’ option and Victorian government also guarantees a variety of options to all students [14].

4.4. Enrolment

Enrolment can be a problem to transgender students. In regard to anti-discrimination laws in Australia, Australian secondary schools cannot cancel or suspend a student’s enrolment due to their gender identity. However, single-sex schools might be exempted from this mandatory request under the Anti-Discrimination Act 1991 (Qld), thus, they have the legal right to dismiss the initial enrolment of transgender students [8]. In addition, some single-sex schools also compel students to drop out if they have a sex reassignment surgery during study [8].

4.5. Sports and Physical Activities

Sports are considered as an indispensable part of school life that can both entertain students after stressful classes and promote their health and social skills. As for MTF transgender students, they might be judged for having physical advantages in terms of height and weight. For example, Laurel Hubbard, as the first openly MTF transgender Olympian, was required to artificially reduce his testosterone levels before competition. Public attitudes remain firm- it's unfair to biological female athletes [15].

Frankly, there is a lot of leeway when it comes to school. Intra-school sports (e.g. PE lessons) are not considered as competitive. In this case, sports are supposed to be open to all types of students despite few legal exceptions authorized by Australian government [8].

These above-mentioned factors could lead to transgender students’ low sense of school belonging, high dropout rate and low academic performance. Thus, the level of transgender students feeling accepted by whole school community is highly aligned with the educational outcome. Schools in this process is supposed to be accountable to protect students’ basic rights and enhance their mental and physical wellbeing.

5. INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

Social justice leadership can be defined as taking actions on inequities that exist in schools. It involves (1 interrogating school climate and background, (2 identifying unreasonable and unjust practices, (3 applying democratic methods to activate marginalized groups, (4 replacing unjust practices with equitable and widely accepted ones [3], which in other words requires leadership to be inclusive. Inclusive leadership raises two social justice flags: developing inclusive learning atmosphere consisting of a wide range of student profiles (including trans and gender diverse students), and at the same time, creating learning environments where difference can be expressed and accepted by the public [3]. In this sense, inclusive leadership is an integral component of social justice leadership discourse.

In Australia, there are a variety of services and policies available to provide support to transgender students: such as policies ‘Safe Schools program’ or multiple ‘Anti-Discrimination Act’, organizations like ‘National LGBTI Health Alliance’ or ‘Transgender Victoria’ and national services ‘QLife’, and voluntary student-run groups like ‘Deakin LGBTIQ+ Allies’ or ‘Monash Queer Department’. For Australian educational leaders, they are committed to delivering social justice and the concept of inclusion in schools. However, given all the inequalities transgender students face, the essence of social justice for educational leaders- eliminate marginalization, is still a life-long goal to achieve. Based on a successful case of ‘Bendigo Senior Secondary College’, this paper proposes some exemplary strategies. Prior to transformations, the school had only 1 openly transgender student, whereas now it has around 20 transgender students enrolled each year [7]. These transformations can be generally categorized into three parts: inclusive training and curriculum, positive climate for learning and bonds out of school. Educational leaders can also adapt these strategies to local climates.

5.1. Inclusive Training and Curriculum

Some curriculums are supposed to redesigned or canceled if there are sensitive or offensive content due to lack of basic knowledge about gender identity and sexual orientation. Inclusive training should be mandatory and strengthened to staff and teachers. For them, being conscious of students’ affirming names and pronouns is crucial. In addition, teachers and staffs should be able to identify potential or ongoing bullying behaviors and take actions to stop it. Professional counsellor is also needed for students who are seeking for a sex rearrangement surgery or a social transition. In this sense, a high-quality counselling could be instrumental in accurately providing professional advice and immediate support [7] [8].

5.2. Positive Climate for Learning

The influence of educational leaders should be taken into consideration as leadership team has its own obligations to promote positive and wholesome transgender images through school website and social media. Sometimes it's necessary for leaders to make public speeches to break transgender stereotypes. Recruiting diverse gender & sexual orientation leaders, teachers and staff would be helpful to embody school’s inclusion. Besides leadership-wise, a bottom-up way could work as well. Schools should allow students to form voluntary LGBTIAQ+ groups and decorate the school with LGBTIAQ+ slogans, rainbow flag and etc. Unisex bathrooms, single restrooms and a full range of uniform options also should be offered [7] [8].

5.3. Bonds Out of School

Except teachers, staffs and peers, parents undoubtedly can be trans people’s loyal supporters. However, parents who are not supportive can sometimes backfire, further putting transgender students at risk of suicide and other mental issues. Leaders should take the initiative to arrange a dialogue with student’s parents or carers in an attempt to notify them with evidenced information and basic knowledge about gender identity. Afterwards, most parents just need a little time to process and finally accept the hidden aspects of their children's personality, whereas few parents might still reject to be supportive. In this case, schools are responsible for helping students seek for LGBTIAQ+ legal services [7] [8].

Collaborating with other organizations (e.g. feminist organizations) or movements (e.g. Black Lives Matter) is also a way to help schools convey the concept of social justice, representing their concern for humanity [7] [8].

6. CONCLUSION

This study addresses the challenges and strategies for transgender students in Australian secondary schools. It suggests that inclusive training and curriculum, positive climate for learning, and bonds out of school should apply in secondary education to foster a respectful climate for people with diverse gender identities or sexual orientations. However, some issues require further study. Firstly, considering an increasing number of stakeholders are getting involved in the education field in global context, and neo-liberalism has become prevalent in the Australian education system, the quality and the future direction of schools may vary based on the willing of funding sources. This might be a huge liability to inclusion and social justice in a long term. Additionally, the data about Australian indigenous transgender people, who are marginalized as minorities, is either missing or inadequate. Moreover, there is a paucity of research concerning trans people’s basic rights in competitive sport competition. Future studies can address on these fields to enrich the research on gender development.

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