

# Fluid thinking

Recent transgender stories in the media show the extent to which notions of gender are becoming blurred. *Caroline Vollans* explores a subject that all educational practitioners need awareness of



**T**he past year has been a big one for transgender awareness – vast media attention has included the Louis Theroux TV programme documenting the transition stories of children and young adults, and newspaper articles on issues such as the need in schools for gender-neutral toilets and the GP who prescribed hormone drugs to a 12-year-old. The Tavistock Centre in London reported a doubling of its referrals of patients who ‘feel in the wrong body’, and writer Germaine Greer famously described male-to-female transsexuals as ‘pantomime dames’.

Meanwhile, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers’ conference

expressed its worry at the lack of meaningful discussion and preparedness as more pupils raise issues around their gender identity. Transgender is a current and burgeoning topic affecting children and young people – we are only going to hear more about it, so it is clearly a subject with which all educational practitioners need to engage.

## TERMINOLOGY AND LANGUAGE

Terminology and definitions relating to transgender often become confused – this is because it is a subject that is relatively new to us and we need to grapple with equally new concepts and words. A common theme in recent coverage is about

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how hard it is to find the right words, phrases and expressions. This, however difficult, must not put us off talking about and debating the subject – the language is evolving and will continue to do so as the topic becomes more exposed and familiar.

Some of the terms to date are:

### Gender

To be distinguished from biological sex, gender is a social process through which one learns what it is to be male and female; how to be a boy and how to be a girl. Gender is not a given, but socially and culturally constructed.

### Biological sex

One is born with either female or male sexual organs and, dependent

on which of these it is, referred to as a girl or a boy. It is when the label of female and male is based on biological characteristics.

#### **Intersex**

In rare cases, a baby is born with sex organs that are between male and female.

#### **Gender dysphoria**

When one feels that one inhabits and is trapped in the wrong body. It is when there is an incongruence or mismatch between one's biological sex and one's gender identification.

#### **Gender identity**

The gender with which one identifies. Until recently it was either male or female, but now includes identities that are neither of these.

#### **Transgender**

This can be the decision to transition or cross to a gender rather than remain stuck in a physical body that is experienced as the wrong body. To opt for transgender in this way is an attempt to address the disconnect between one's physiology and one's sense of self.

There is also transgender as a gender identity that is not confined to the realm of female and male and this can be known as non-binary gender identification. It is sometimes referred to as gender neutral. This was brought into popular consciousness by food blogger and trans activist Jack Monroe, who stated, 'I want to be treated as a person, not as a woman or a man.' (*The Observer*, 24 July 2016).

#### **Gender reassignment surgery**

This is when there is surgical intervention to change one's sexual characteristics. Some see this as necessary to the transitional process, others do not.

#### **GENDER FLUIDITY**

The most important thing to say about trans is that it is not any one thing. The most familiar version, the one that we hear many accounts of, involves a crossing over from male to female or vice versa. This is one way of being trans. However, as Jacqueline Rose makes clear in her extensive feature 'Who do you think you are?' (*London Review of Books*, 9 May 2016), 'In addition to "transition" ("A to B") and "transitional" ("between A and B") trans can also mean "A as well as B", or "neither A nor B", that's

to say "Transcending", as in "above", or "in a different realm from".'

Rose continues, 'There are strong disagreements between those who see transition as a means, the only means, to true embodiment, and those who see transgenderism as upending all sexual categories.' For the first, the aim is to put right a bodily and psychic discord – it is about fixing that state of being in the wrong body, making things right.

On the other hand, there are those who see transgender as a challenge to the certainty and rigidity of the categories male and female – trans is a challenge to this and an escape from it.

Differences aside for a moment, we can say that central to all notions of trans is a certain fluidity: a gender fluidity. There is a movement away from the certainty of a fixed gender identity (male or female). We now live in an era of gender uncertainty where there is a proliferation of genders and gender identities.

#### **DISSENTING VOICES**

There are those who do not go along with these notions. At the recent Thinking Differently: Feminists Questioning Gender Politics conference (16 July 2016), organised by feminist academics, the premise of transgender was critiqued and opposed.

Dr Julia Long, sociology lecturer at Anglia Ruskin University, said, 'Parents understand their child as

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**Whatever one's views on gender fluidity, it is a fact that stereotyping can be limiting**

"transgender" through seeing documentaries and even celebrity features on television. The stories mean parents and children believe a child's feelings of discomfort at not fitting into stereotypical roles of masculinity and femininity are best addressed through "transitioning". The widespread acceptance of these ideas is facilitating a wave of medical interventions that are likely to have grave consequences for children in their future adult lives.'

This group consider the media to be entirely accepting of trans without any critical analysis. At the heart of this critique is the premise that gender and, therefore, transgender are socially and politically constructed in what is our male-dominated society. Put very simply, if women are sexualised and objectified from a very young age and told how they must live as a female then is there any wonder that many women do not want to? Transgender is not a condition as such, but a side-effect of a patriarchal society. It is this that should be challenged and changed: it is not the body that is wrong, but society.

These dissenting voices say debate is urgently needed, that they are being stifled and labelled 'transphobic'.

#### **GENDER STEREOTYPING**

It would seem that, irrespective of one's position, there is an indisputable area of consensus – the ▶







problem of gender or sex stereotyping which makes gender rigid and is the exact opposite to the fluidity that is being called for. Whose interests can be well served by prescriptive gender stereotyping that provides an extremely limiting representation of gender choices? Whether one's gender identity is female or male, or beyond, it is unquestionable that stereotyping is not only inhibiting but oppressive and disabling.

We are living, then, with an arresting paradox: there is, at one and the same time, a burgeoning flexibility around gender identity alongside an unprecedented rigidity. We live in a culture that is more heavily gender stereotyped than ever before: during the past decade we have witnessed an explosion in gender marketing. Children's clothing and toys are divided into cultural roles from birth – one only has to go into shops and department stores to observe this.

Lego, a company that used to have a reputation for being gender-neutral, now sells girl and boy Lego sets and, while there used to be a single magazine, now publishes a main magazine and one for girls (seemingly a subgroup for the company).

JeongMee Yoon's The Pink and Blue Projects starkly illustrate the power of gender-orientated marketing on young children. Yoon was prompted to do this piece of work when she noticed how her five-year-old daughter wanted to play with and wear exclusively pink toys and

clothes. Yoon went on to photograph American and South Korean children in their bedrooms with their pink and blue objects. The photographs are eerily clear – the little girls are immersed in a soft and cuddly pink environment and little boys in a mechanical and technical blue one. Yoon's work, then, delivers an overt message of a strong gender divide with nothing in between, and with no overlaps. There is the feminine and there is the masculine.

### GENDER-NEUTRAL EDUCATION

It was pointed out in the first of Radio 4's *Bringing Up Britain* programme (20 July 2016), which looked at transgender, that in English we only have the feminine and masculine singular pronouns – no gender-neutral one: just 'he' and 'she'. This, however, is not the case in many other languages: for instance, in Sweden the word *hen* is a gender-neutral pronoun borrowed from Finnish.

The programme went on to feature the attempts being made in Sweden to create a more gender-neutral education. At the Egalia pre-school in Södermalm, a borough of Stockholm, they consider it necessary to create an environment where there is a wider notion of what it is to be a boy or a girl. They want to free children

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from the restrictive social expectations contingent on their gender.

Frida Wikström, a member of staff at Egalia, explained how they go about this. First, they avoid referring to children as girls or boys, and instead use their first names: 'The children are not their gender, they are their personality.' The term *hen* is found to be particularly useful if, for example, a firefighter is due to visit the school, or a nurse – by referring to them as *hen*, it leaves open the possibility that it could be a woman or a man making the visit, thus avoiding any stereotypes. The term 'friends' is used to address a group of children collectively.

Within the gender-aware curriculum, there is a strong emphasis on the emotions. Wikström explains, 'We work a lot with emotions at our school. We look at how emotions are divided up: for girls it is more OK to be frightened, to be sad, to be emotional, and for boys to be angry or



Jenny Hammond Primary School



frustrated. All boys, all girls, have access to all of this, all of the emotions. It is OK for a boy to be frightened, to be sad or to be angry, and the same for girls.'

Integral to the gender-aware curriculum are books that are carefully selected in order to side-step those dominated by traditional roles. All toys and games are free for all to use and this is encouraged – boys can dress up in dresses and play with dolls if that is what they want to do. In all, at Egalia, they aim to avoid any notion of a girls' world and a boys' world.

This practice, however, is not without its critics. The main opposition to a gender-neutral approach is from psychologists concerned that it is going to be confusing to young children for whom a strong part of their identity is based on their gender. An environment built on gender neutrality is going to deny them this.

Faced with this criticism, Wikström defends the approach. 'That's absolutely not what we're about. I think most children would be aware if they are a boy or a girl. We have no intention of wanting to change that knowledge either. We have no interest in erasing gender, we only want to expand the notion of gender.'

So, how should early years educators respond to these many, different controversies around gender and to the demands that we should offer children more options to think fluidly? When the issues can become so heated, and when families from different communities, religions and traditions might take such radically different positions, it can be difficult to know where to start and how to handle it and, perhaps, even tempting to try to side-step it altogether.

### CASE STUDY: JENNY HAMMOND PRIMARY

An example of a school which is in a diverse, multicultural area and has decided to face these issues head-on is Jenny Hammond Primary School in the London Borough of Waltham Forest. The school has done a vast amount of work on cultural diversity, including around gender and sexuality, and the positive impact of its work has been recognised by Ofsted as an example of good practice.

A strong philosophy based on an ethos of respecting, accepting, understanding and valuing everyone's difference runs through the curriculum and day-to-day running of the school.

The staff at Jenny Hammond work closely with Stonewall – the campaigning group for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equality. Stonewall's 'Different Families – Same Love' posters are displayed around the school in public areas and in each classroom, giving out a strong message of diversity regarding sexuality and family groupings to parents and all who visit the school – this too is reflected in the school's handbook. The staff team work with a diversity consultant from Stonewall, including those staff who are new to the school.

At Jenny Hammond they too celebrate a diversity week once a year when, instead of following the regular timetable, each class reads and does various activities related to a core book. The books tackle a range of themes – from different families and gender stereotypes to LGBT historical figures and the celebration of civil partnerships.

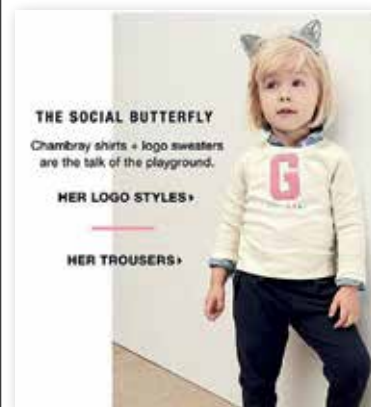
Jenny Hammond was also one of the first schools to be involved in the No Outsiders project – an action research project addressing LGBT equality in schools and classrooms. The school has been at the forefront of work in challenging homophobia using age-appropriate literature and related activities.

In the small number of cases where parents have queried the work, the school has responded with an open and transparent approach, using Stonewall's Different Families resources to show that the work is about love and diversity, and backed this up with reference to Ofsted's *Common Inspection Framework* and the requirements of the Equality Act (2010).

While it may seem that this approach is more suited to a primary school than the EYFS, I would argue that Jenny Hammond shows how important it is to make issues of equality and diversity run through the curriculum and day-to-day school life.

In other words, it is probably most helpful to frame the discussion in terms of helping very young children to grow up not only with a spirit of openness and tolerance, but also to celebrate diversity and oppose all kinds of bullying. Even young children will put pressure on their peers to conform to gender roles, such as laughing at a boy who chooses to dress up as a princess, or telling girls that certain toys are 'just for boys'.

**Gap's recent ad, describing a boy as 'the little scholar' and a girl as 'the social butterfly', shows how gender stereotyping is prevalent in modern marketing**



### INCLUSIVE MESSAGES

If we want children to be able to explore all the play opportunities in a setting and all the different aspects of the EYFS, regardless of gender, then we need to think about how we promote those messages of inclusivity to parents and children. The EYFS statutory framework and the Equality Act both require all early years settings to combat discrimination and promote equality.

We need, too, to examine our own deeply ingrained ideas about gender identity. Last week I overheard a new grandmother saying to her friend, 'I'm so glad she had a girl – I wouldn't know what to say to a little boy.' Though this may sound a funny or slightly odd thing to say, I would claim that it is highly unlikely that we are immune to gender-influenced interactions, at least some of the time. We need, above all, spaces where we can talk about and explore our gender perceptions, assumptions and biases without fear of being labelled prejudiced.

And, finally, I think it is fair to say that none of us is helped in developing a broader concept of gender identity when such adverts as the recent one from Gap remain so prolific (see above). ■

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