



CRITICAL CULTURAL STUDIES OF CHILDHOOD

Voices of Transgender Children in Early Childhood Education

Reflections on Resistance
and Resiliency

Ashley L. Sullivan · Laurie L. Urraro



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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

We enthusiastically welcome this volume to our series, *Critical Cultural Studies of Childhood*, as it reflects timely and critical issues nested in US early childhood contexts and adult memories. Foregrounding the voices and life experiences of children growing up transgender, with emphasis on their experiences in early education contexts, this book will contribute much to the growing literature on transgender issues in early childhood. While there is more public recognition, affirmation of rights and general support for transgender individuals in the United States, the adults who share their narratives in this book grew up in a with an array of barriers, struggles, othering and a desire for belonging. These experiences have not changed substantially in present, persistently transphobic educational contexts. The focal narratives also reflect persistence, hope, and examples of confronting mandatory gender binaries and offer strategies for creating more inclusive educational communities and practices. The authors draw on these narratives to engage questions including, “Who are ‘trans’ children? What does it mean to be ‘trans’ and a child in US schools? What kinds of experiences do they grapple with and what are adult reflections?”

Voices of Transgender Children in Early Childhood Education: Reflections on Resistance and Resiliency draws on post-structural, queer theory and feminist approaches to connect theory with praxis in early childhood—a context in which fixed gender categories and internalized body normalization persist. Working with ten transgender research partners, the original study for the book focused on their reflections on

schooling from ages three to eight. Written in an engaging and accessible style, the book unpacks themes across the narratives including ways children navigated transphobic social interactions, formed friendship with those of the same gender identity or inhabited liminal classroom spaces. Barriers to friendship increased with age and all reported being teased and assaulted, and each found different ways to cope with being bullied (including self-induced isolation, retaliation, building relationships with allies, and providing beneficial services to peers). When reflecting on interactions with teachers, the interviewees recalled far more negative interactions than positive ones. Included in these narratives were discussions of maximum control over the physical body, restrictive curriculum methods, and public humiliation.

The research partners also recalled the effects of gender normative physical spaces and typically regarded the music classroom, art room, auditorium and library as safe and empowering spaces and the gymnasium, cafeteria, bathrooms, and principal's office as unsafe and disempowering locations. Foucault's normalization of the body theory was explored in relationship to the studied population. The findings suggest that gender performativity, gender segregation, gender normalization/gender role conformity are of concern for transgender children in early childhood education. The book concludes with suggestions for creating more inclusive classrooms for diverse students including allowing children to be themselves, abandoning assumptions, eliminating gender segregation, involving parents, creating a safe environment, and supporting/protecting transgender children. Ultimately, the book aims to illuminate the realities and experiences of transgender individuals, in their own words, and provide them with an arena in which their voices may be heard. May readers listen and learn and work to create spaces of belonging in early childhood and beyond and be energized in this important struggle!

Tempe, USA
Madison, USA

Elizabeth Blue Swadener
Marianne Bloch

We wish to dedicate this research project to our partners Aidan, Beth, Chris, Erin, Lady Gazelle, Lana, Lluvy Rae, Maria, Margo, and Mary. We are lucky and honored to be the vehicle through which your stories of courage and fortitude have been transmitted. We also dedicate this text to every transgender individual who reads it. May these stories remind you that you are not alone in the world, and through the telling of these tales, may society develop an understanding of and compassion for you and other members of the transgender community.

To the teachers who have found this text, we hope that you are inspired to act as strong advocates, activists, and allies for the gender creative, genderqueer, nonbinary, transgender etc. students who are entrusted to your care. Your passion, dedication, and willingness to learn and grow can help shape a generation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank, first and foremost, the research partners: Aidan, Beth, Chris, Erin, Lady Gazelle, Lana, Lluvy Rae, Maria, Margo, Mary. We would also like to thank Jackson Millarker, the 10-year-old boy who contributed a prologue for the book. We would like to acknowledge Linda Braus, Milana Vernikova, and the entire Palgrave Macmillan team for their support and assistance in the actualization of this project. A special thank you to the book reviewers for providing valuable feedback for drafts of our work. In addition, we wish to thank Arizona State University and Dr. Beth Blue Swadener (faculty adviser and mentor of Ashley Sullivan) and Dr. Mimi Bloch for their input, support, and encouragement. We also are deeply indebted to Penn State Erie, the Behrend College, specifically the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, for supporting us in our research endeavors which allowed this project to come to fruition. Lastly, we want to thank our dear friend and community activist, educator, and mentor Caitlyn Strohmeier for her support and guidance throughout this process.

We wish to dedicate this book in loving memory to our friend, Dr. Jeanine Ruhsam, transgender advocate, educator, and scholar. Your warmth, generosity, kindness, and consideration for those around you will never be forgotten. Thank you for serving as an extraordinary example of the sublime power of perseverance, hard work, and standing up for what you believe in. The life you lived and the legacy you leave behind will never be forgotten.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Who are transgender children? What does it mean to be a transgender child in schools today? What kinds of realities do trans children grapple with while growing up? Though there has been a recent shift toward increased understanding and support for trans youth, their experiences in the education system can often be fraught with challenges and barriers. Nonetheless, there have been and will continue to be arenas of hope that permit and foster a gradual erosion of the often firmly demarcated line between ‘cisgender’ and ‘transgender.’

This book is a qualitative study of transgender children and internalized body normalization in early childhood education settings, steeped in critical methodologies including post-structuralism, queer theory, and feminist approaches. As the struggles and triumphs of trans individuals have reached a watershed moment in the social fabric of the United States, this text aims to proffer a snapshot into the lives of ten transgender people as they reflect on their earliest memories in the American educational system. The book marries theory and praxis, submitting to current and future teachers a text that not only presents authentic narratives about trans children in early childhood education, but also analyzes the forces at work behind gender policing, gender segregation, and transphobic education policies.

The trans people who participated in our study (our “research partners”) reflect on their schooling from the ages of three through eight years old. From their narratives, multiple themes arose regarding

navigating transphobic social interactions. Most interviewees befriended peers who held the same gender identity and/or were considered “outcasts.” There were barriers to friendship that stemmed from perceived gender non-conforming behavior, and these seemed to increase with age. All were teased and assaulted, and each found different ways to cope with being bullied (including self-induced isolation, retaliation, building relationships with allies, and providing beneficial services to peers). When reflecting on interactions with teachers, the research partners recalled double the amount of negative interactions than positive ones. Included in these narratives were discussions of maximum control over the physical body, restrictive curriculum methods, and public humiliation.

The research partners also recalled the effects of gender normative physical spaces and typically regarded the music classroom, art room, auditorium, and library as safe and empowering spaces and the gymnasium, cafeteria, bathrooms, and principal’s office as unsafe and disempowering locations. Foucault’s normalization of the body theory was explored in relationship to the studied population. The findings suggest that gender performativity, gender segregation, gender normalization/gender role conformity are of particular concern for transgender children in early childhood education. The book concludes with suggestions for creating more inclusive classrooms for diverse students including allowing children to be themselves, abandoning assumptions, eliminating gender segregation, involving parents, creating a safe environment, and supporting/protecting transgender children. Ultimately, the book aims to illuminate the realities and experiences of transgender individuals, in their own words, and to inspire early childhood teachers to fortify the rights, address the needs, and encourage the authentic individuality of the young transgender children in their care.

NOTE

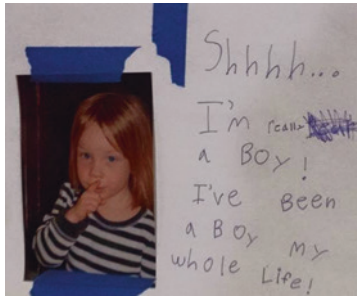
This book is based, in large part, on the dissertation of Ashley Lauren Sullivan (with excerpts from a more recent GEMS article) (Sullivan 2009, 2014). Though the interviews were conducted a decade ago, this work has never been more relevant or timely. The recent political attacks specifically directed at transgender children have provoked the publication of this book at this time. The stories told on these pages illuminate the struggles faced by young trans children over four decades in the United States. Please dear reader, do not take comfort in the fact that

these are not the most recent of tales. They mirror, with precision, the same difficulties children face in 2019. The bullying has only morphed in its method of delivery (modern students endure cyber harassment as well). The deplorable insults remain the same. Gender segregation is still rampant. The very week that the final edits of this book were submitted to the publisher, we witnessed a kindergarten teacher mindlessly lining children up by sex. We have come a long way indeed, though we still have far to go. Thus, we strongly believe that this book can easily be read in a modern context, and that we were called to publish it at the exact time when it was most needed.

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PROLOGUE



January 14, 2019

Dear Teachers,

I entered kindergarten as a pretty average kindergartener girl. As the year went on, I felt like I was more than just that. I was a boy inside, but even I still couldn't understand that. The summer after kindergarten, I was still feeling that way. Some days I would wear clothing that was not very typical to see on a five-year-old girl. It was either a superhero shirt and a bright pink skirt or an Elsa shirt and khaki shorts. I knew I was not like other girls.

In first grade, I had some more struggles with what gender I was. One day, toward the middle of the first grade, it was picture day and we were put into two lines—the boy's line and the girl's line. I stayed in the middle.

I truly did not know what to do. That was the first time that I really felt supported by my teacher. My teacher pulled me to the side and told me that I needed to choose a line and I explained that I couldn't. We stood there for a moment and I could tell that she was confused. After a little while, she told me to go to the boy's line and that made me feel happy. I explained this to my parents, hoping that they would be supportive of me. This is when they explained to me what it meant to be transgender. I now knew who and what I was. I was a boy, a transgender boy.

I chose to enter second grade, as my true self, a boy. Over the summer, I had decided on a new name—Jackson, which was the most “boy-ish” name I knew. Imagine the surprise of my classmates when I said that my name was “Jackson.” It was a confusing day, but I knew that my teacher was supporting me. This was the year that I would begin using the boy's bathroom, stand in the boy's line, and truly live as a boy. Without the support of my teachers, I would not have had the confidence to go about my day as my true self.

As the years went on, my classmates began to understand more about me and accepted me for who I was. While my classmates and friends have been supportive, we still have to explain to my teachers every year that I am transgender. I am amazed every year to have a teacher that is so nice and supportive. I know that I am lucky because many transgender students do not have that opportunity. I am now in 5th grade and am the happiest that I have been. My hope is that you are able to provide the same support to your students, all of your students—especially those that are transgender or gender non-conforming. The most important advice that I can give is to truly get to know your students, respect their choice of pronouns, and treat them equally.

Sincerely,
Jackson Millarker, age 10

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Ashley L. Sullivan is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at Penn State Erie, the Behrend College. Her research focuses on young transgender children in early education settings, children's literature containing transgender characters, children in poverty, reconceptualist methodologies, and kindergarten "readiness." She teaches Early Childhood Education courses at Penn State Behrend. Ashley is currently working on a co-authored book (with Gaile Cannella) titled *Introducing Critical Childhood Perspectives: Reconceptualist Thought, Diversity, and Social Justice Expectations*, with an anticipated release date in fall, 2019.

Dr. Laurie L. Urraro holds a position as Assistant Teaching Professor of Spanish at Penn State Erie, the Behrend College (since 2011). Her area of expertise is contemporary peninsular literature and culture, and she specializes in Spanish drama. Areas of interest include sex and sexuality in contemporary female-authored Spanish drama, gender and sexuality studies, and women's studies, to name a few. She teaches Spanish language and culture courses at Penn State Erie, and has co-authored a Medical Spanish textbook (*Medical Spanish for Nurses: A Self-Teaching Guide*, Springer Publishing Co.) that came out in 2016.

Both Ashley and Laurie are currently collaborating on an ongoing project that analyzes transgender characters in bilingual (Spanish–English) children's picture books.

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CHAPTER 1

Trans Who?! Understanding Transgender Children

THE “BATHROOM BILL”: LEGISLATED HATE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

On March 23, 2016, North Carolina governor Pat McCrory signed into law a piece of legislation, the effects of which would cause ripples of shock, discord, and contention throughout the social fabric of the United States. The law, House Bill 2 (HB 2), often referred to as the “bathroom bill,” prohibited the use of public restrooms in all public spaces, including government buildings and schools, for those individuals whose gender identity differed from the sex that appeared on their birth certificates (Gordon, Price, & Peralta, 2016). The law was aimed at transgender individuals. The term transgender is often defined as “An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth” (GLAAD Media Reference Guide, n.d.), although the term signifies different things for different people (Sullivan, 2009, p. 71).

Governor McCrory justified this horrific bill as an effort to buffer children and women from purported ‘sexual predators’ in public restrooms (despite there being no facts to support this assertion). In addition to legalizing discrimination against transgender individuals, HB 2 also made it impossible for workers to sue on the grounds of discrimination in state court, as well as prevented cities from actualizing social policies, such as an increase in minimum wage (Blest, 2017). McCrory, along with

Lieutenant Governor Dan Forest and Speaker Tim Moore, also blocked a Charlotte, NC ordinance that sought to augment nondiscrimination practices for LGBTQ individuals (Blest, 2017).

Although the “bathroom bill” was repealed in 2017 after overwhelming pressure from citizens and businesses, many cite that a “compromise bill” (sometimes called HB 2.0) cropped up in its place, “leaving state legislators in charge of policy over multi-stall bathrooms, and [putting] a temporary halt on local governments passing nondiscrimination ordinances until 2020” (Silva, 2017). Since the bill’s initial emergence in the NC house, repercussions have reverberated throughout the nation. Copycat bills were proposed, seeking to dismantle the rights of LGBTQ individuals. Likewise, droves of supporters fought to protect LGBTQ persons. There has been an increased amount of violence against transgender individuals since 2016, with GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) reporting that 2016 was the deadliest year on record for transgender people (Schmider, 2016). Twenty-seven people were murdered (including a 16-year old). This is a rate of over two killings per month. Most of the murder victims were transgender women of color (Schmider, 2016). It is important to note that many murders of transgender people are delayed for inclusion or not included in the yearly tallies of these homicides. This is due to a variety of factors, including lack of knowledge, acknowledgment, or reporting of the gender identity of the victim (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). There have also been accounts of individuals barging into bathrooms to verify the physical sex of the people using the restroom (Blest, 2017).

Nonetheless, some of the reaction to the bill has been overwhelmingly supportive of trans individuals: the NBA All-Star game refused to hold its event in North Carolina, the NCAA and ACC changed venues for their championship and tournament games so as not to play in North Carolina. Artists such as Bruce Springsteen refused to perform in the state, DeutscheBank and PayPal cancelled plans to expand in North Carolina, and Google Ventures decided not to invest further in the state (Blest, 2017). Unfortunately, other states have followed North Carolina’s lead. Texas’ Senate Bill 6 (SB 6) was sent for a vote by the full Texas Senate in March 2017 and passed (Ura, 2017). Though eventually defeated, SB 6 would have punished trans individuals with fines of up to \$10,500 (for a second offense) when apprehended using bathrooms that do not align with the sex listed on their birth certificates. In addition to the aforementioned legislation aimed at reducing rights of trans

individuals, over 100 anti-LGBTQ bills throughout twenty-nine states were introduced in 2017, with dangerous repercussions for trans individuals (Miller, 2017). Such legislation, for example, would allow universities and high schools to discriminate against LGBTQ individuals (SB 17 in Kentucky), or forbid changes to an individual's gender marker on their birth certificates (HB 1894 in Arkansas).

Even more recently, President Trump has stated that he is seriously considering defining gender as “as a biological, immutable condition determined by genitalia at birth” (Green, Benner, & Pear, 2018), with the sex listed on one's birth certificate serving as the defining criteria for one's identity. Such a move would undoubtedly restrict the rights of transgender individuals even further. In July 2017, Trump announced via Twitter that he was rescinding an Obama-era policy allowing transgender individuals to serve in the military and receive funding for gender confirmation surgery. This “transgender military ban” has been blocked by several lower courts, and as of December 2018 is being considered by the 9th Circuit US Court of Appeals (Barnes, 2018). It is likely that this policy change will make its way to the Supreme Court, where it will be addressed by newly reconfigured conservative court (with the recent addition of Justice Brett Kavanaugh) (Barnes, 2018). Thus, as fear and misunderstanding of trans people have heightened to a fever pitch of legislated hatred, a more in-depth discussion of transgender individuals is urgently needed.

EXPLAIN THIS TO ME: WHO ARE TRANS PEOPLE?!

Transgender people, also referred to as “trans” individuals, are persons whose gender identity does not align to the sex assigned to them by medical professionals at birth. However, the term transgender can signify a plethora of different things for different people. Some who fall under the transgender umbrella include people who are ‘agender’ or ‘genderless,’ identifying as neither male nor female (Weber, 2014), ‘androgynous,’ having both male and female characteristics (Weber, 2014), ‘bigender,’ identifying as male or female at different times and switching between the two (Weber, 2014), ‘demigender,’ having a partial connection to a particular gender (Gender Wiki, 2016), ‘gender creative,’ in which individuals (typically children) do not conform to particular gender norms (Sirois, 2016), ‘gender expansive,’ one who expresses their gender in ways that broaden the culturally defined behavior expectations

(Welcoming Schools, 2019), ‘genderfluid,’ one who expresses both male and female characteristics at different times (Weber, 2014), ‘gender non-conforming/variant,’ one who does not act according to societal expectations for their sex (Weber, 2014), ‘gender questioning,’ one who questions their own gender identity (Weber, 2014), ‘gender non-binary,’ who disregard the idea of male/female dichotomy or continuum with androgyny in the middle and view gender as more of a web or three-dimensional model (Weber, 2014), ‘two spirit,’ indigenous Americans who possess attributes of both genders with distinct social/tribal roles (GLAAD, n.d.), ‘intersex,’ those individuals born with indeterminate genitalia/reproductive organs, and/or different chromosomal constitution (GLAAD, n.d.), and ‘pangender,’ those who identify as a third gender with both male and female aspects (Weber, 2014), to name just a few.

SOME FACTS AND FIGURES ABOUT TRANS INDIVIDUALS

In order to understand transgender persons, it is imperative to examine the psychosocial forces at work while they were children. Kohlberg’s theory of gender development (1966) is a useful lens by which to study the trajectory of trans individuals, as it suggests that a child’s own understanding of gender proceeds in stages. Progressive development through these stages solidifies and becomes more complex. The first stage, *gender identity*, is usually reached around age two, at which point, the child is able to identify their own gender. The child is also able to understand that others have a gender label. The stage of *gender stability* follows and occurs around age four, where a child realizes that gender (typically) remains the same across time; nonetheless, that same child’s understanding of gender is influenced by external societal factors such as clothing, hair style, toy choices, etc. Here, a child who was assigned male at birth may say that wearing a dress would make him a girl. At the third stage, *gender constancy*, achieved between the ages of five and seven, the child begins to understand that gender is unrelated to external features, and thus begins internalizing his/her/their own concept of gender (Sammons, n.d.).

Despite the fact that children as young as two are able to arrive at conclusions about their own biological sex, and, by age seven have developed the ability to begin to process the disconnect between external factors and gender, there are varied estimates regarding the number of trans children (Hoffman, 2016). There are no national surveys whereby

physicians are able to report on the number of transgender patients they have. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (which provides analysis for behavioral health data) has not finalized an appropriate health survey that would include a question about one's gender identity (Hoffman, 2016). In addition, the U.S. Census Bureau does not ask who is transgender, and, even when people answer the question, the reliability of their answers poses a problem, as many might be frightened to answer, or disagree on the meaning of the word transgender (Chalabi, 2014).

Flores, Herman, Gates, and Brown (2016) estimate that approximately 0.6% of the population, or 1.4 million individuals in the US, identifies as transgender. Other estimates put the number of transgender people at 1.3% of the population, or 4.2 million individuals (Berli et al., 2017). In the 2018–2019 school year, there were 56.6 million US school children (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), and at 1.3%, as many as 735,000 of them are transgender (Berli et al., 2017). However, the exact cifer of transgender children continues to remain a mystery. Reasons for this paucity of data include factors such as parents' lack of knowledge about their child's gender identity until that child is an adolescent or older, lack of parental support regarding their child's gender identity when it is disclosed a young age, the transgender child's own fear of disclosure, or the fact that, despite Kohlberg's theory, some children take much longer, even decades, to come to terms with or identify their own gender (Hoffman, 2016). Also, for some individuals, their gender identity is not fixed and can shift over time (Wiseman & Davidson, 2012). While society has historically pressured children to arrive at conclusions about their gender, "young children are still actively in the process of constructing these concepts" (Casper & Schultz, 1999). With as many as $\frac{3}{4}$ of a million transgender US school children, and the likelihood that teachers will educate at least one trans child over the course of their careers, understanding and advocating for this vulnerable population is a critical role of early childhood educators.

SO, HERE'S AN IDEA: PURPOSE OF OUR PROJECT

In reflecting on the legislation aimed at restricting or removing rights for transgender individuals, concomitant with the facts and figures about this population, one may pose the obvious question: why are transgender persons (as young as two years old) in public spaces a contemporary