



May 7, 2014

Committee III
Vancouver School Board

To whom it may concern, I write in support of the proposed policy changes regarding LGBTQ students and staff. I make this submission as an academic researcher, as a parent of a 9 year old transgender child, and as a queer/trans person myself. I begin with a personal reflection I composed a year ago:

Whenever we are crossing the Canadian-U.S. border, my instructions to my daughter—and her response—are always the same: “I will be calling you ‘he.’” She: “Why?” We have had many discussions about this and none of them have been satisfactory for either of us. But before we leave home each time, I insist that she refrain from wearing a skirt or a dress until we are across the border (if we are driving, it is not unusual for us to pull into the nearest shopping mall parking lot to enable her to “change back” into herself). I tell her I don’t like it either but not everybody understands that we are who we say we are. Most of the time she and I are in solidarity in the face of the failure of others to understand who she is—or who I am, for that matter—or to realize that the categories they impose upon her are contrived and oppressive, but the erasure of her identity is real and it hurts every time. The last time we flew to the United States, I watched as she came through the sensor gate behind me. I did not even notice that one of her fists was clenched until the guard who was waiting to wand her asked her to open her hand. When she did, she revealed a delicate, iridescent pink hair scrunchy. She was trying to find a way to hang onto herself in the face of such denial. I was stunned by her ingenuity and torn up by the way she was left empty handed.

I do not tell her that security personnel might react intrusively and even aggressively, if they noticed she was really a boy but presenting as a girl. We might be separated and questioned, for starters, about the nature of our relationship and the standard of care I am providing for her. These things have happened to other families that I have met. As she grows up, my beloved one will increasingly engage with gendered and racialized “vectors of security and vulnerability” (Spade, 2011, p. 117) unmediated by our queer multi-racial family structure and antithetical to the values that, at least most of the time, characterize, our family culture. Right now she is only 8 years old and I fear that the truth about the extent of the potential danger lying ahead would harm her development. She is a radiant black child and dual citizen of the United States and Canada, who, in her own words “was born a boy but likes being a girl.” For the time being she rides on my magic carpet of white, middle-class privilege but this will take her only so far. Although I have always been visibly queer, I purposefully curtail my own regime of greater trans emergence so as to maintain the privileges I enjoy and that enable me to protect her.

When she was 5, still so small really, she told me that the bathrooms at the Unitarian church we attend made her sad. The image I have in my mind of her as she said this is of a small and anguished child, frozen before two doors. She literally did not know where to go—but she

knew that loss would be the result of either choice she made. As a gender-nonconforming person myself, I have horrible childhood memories of censure and denial.

Many transgender and gender nonconforming children and youth are invisible

We know that whatever the statistic is on the prevalence of transgender and gender variant children, it is likely to be artificially low as a result of the totalizing pressure of much of the gender categorization and socialization children are subjected to (Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011; Hellen, 2009). Understandably, gender variant children and youth are often invisible due to their tremendous efforts to avoid teasing, persecution and scorn from peers, teachers and family members (Whittle, Turner, & Al Alami, 2007). If, as the limited data currently available to us show, transgender and gender variant children and youth are disproportionately victims of “gendered harassment” (Meyer, 2010), self-harm and suicide (Cole et al., 1997; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2008), we can safely speculate that more children and youth would exhibit gender nonconformity if greater cultural flexibility concerning sex and gender identities was the norm. As it stands, the intense social policing of gender and sex identity among children makes it appear as if gender-nonconforming children are a rather tiny minority; the gender socializing/censoring environment of most family, peer, school, sports and religious settings reflects the circular reasoning of the *Thomas Theorem*: “Situations that are defined as real become real in their consequences” (Macionis & Gerber, 2011, p. 332), meaning that the overwhelming practice of sorting children into boy and girl categories and teaching them to adhere to complementary gender roles makes it appear as if these are natural lines of demarcation. This means that most transgender and gender variant children and youth are “non-apparent” (Hellen, 2009) or invisible.

One of my concerns is that people and institutions will wait for a trans or gender variant child or youth to “show up” before adopting transinclusive measures. This misses the point in two ways. First, as I emphasized, the majority of transgender and gender nonconforming children are non-apparent – therefore waiting for one to show up to adopt inclusive measures is inadequate. As parent activist Arwyn Daemyr (2012) emphasizes, “the harm of coercive gender assignment begins before self-assertion of gender.” And second, an inclusive environment is needed also for children and youth who “have non-normative interests for their sex” (Meyer, 2010:62) and for transgender and gender nonconforming children and youth who are not transsexual, i.e., whose gender identities are not consistent with an artificial but socially totalizing gender binary. A coercive gender system is limiting for everyone so efforts to advance the gender spectrum as the norm is a pro-active and structural way of working towards inclusion for transgender and gender nonconforming children and youth. As Lorelee Gillis, Director of Ontario’s Rainbow Health encourages: “let’s put the lens on the structures (as problematic) rather than the kids” (October 25, 2012).

Inclusion strategies must therefore focus on shaping environments in general away from the gender binary as well as responding to the needs of a particular child or youth. **As Dean Spade remarks**, “we need to shift our focus from the individual rights framing of discrimination and “hate violence” and think more broadly about how gender categories are enforced on all people in ways that cause particularly dangerous outcomes for trans people” (2011: 29).

Research in nonclinical settings has highlighted that transgender and gender nonconforming children and youth are particularly vulnerable to coercive pressure to conform to societal gender norms, resulting in bullying and gendered harassment by peers, and often debilitating social stigmatization (Brill, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2010; Hellen, 2009; Kennedy, 2008; Meyer, 2008b; Whittle et al., 2007). In a study investigating school climate, Egale Canada (Taylor & Peter, 2011) reported that 95% of transgender students felt unsafe in schools, 90% reported being

verbally harassed because of their gender variance and 50% said that their teachers and other adults in positions of authority failed to intervene when homophobic or transphobic comments were made. Other studies have reported that doctors, teachers and classmates often misunderstand gender-nonconforming children and youth (Hellen, 2009; Meyer, 2008a), which can result in their increased feelings of social isolation. Consequently, many are at risk of being diagnosed with learning disabilities and/or psychological problems because of stress, depression and suicidal tendencies (Glavinic, 2010; Grossman & Augelli, 2007). One study shows high rates of violence by parents against gender-nonconforming children and youth (Roberts et al., 2012). Recent data, not surprisingly, indicates that LGBT youth are disproportionately homeless.

Parenting activist Arwyn Daemyr is not alone (see, for example, Roberts et al., 2012) in claiming that “gender nonconformity is predictive of PTSD” (2012). The impact of gendered harassment and bullying on intellectual and social development among gender variant and/or queer adolescents is an important dimension (Meyer, 2010). White Holman and Goldberg (2006) emphasize the particular vulnerability of adolescents to violence because of economic dependence, the prevalence of age-peer violence in schools and power differentials between adults and youths.

Schools and sports/physical recreation are two key and often overlapping settings where transgender and gender nonconforming children and youth are vulnerable and/or excluded. An emerging body of work on gender and schooling reveals the extent to which assumptions relating to binary sex difference and heteronormativity fuel the homophobia and transphobia that can make school an unwelcoming place for queer, transgender and gender variant children and youth. (Blaise, 2005; Meyer, 2010). New scholarship on homophobia and bullying in schools has begun to make visible what was previously invisible or taken for granted by those who were or are not its targets (Walton, 2008). Little is known, however, about how such children, youth and their parents/guardians navigate in-school or out-of-school social environments dedicated to sport/physical recreation.

For the past two years I have been investigating the experiences of transgender and gender nonconforming children and youth in North American physical recreation and sport settings, mostly via open-ended interviews with their parents and advocates.

My findings reveal the following general insights:

1. Evidence of increasing access/inclusion in sport and physical recreation programming for children and youth who identify according to binary norms but seemingly intransigent obstacles for those who do not identify as male or female; several youth stated specifically that the ability to participate in sport was a key factor in choosing to transition to a binary-based sex identity. When I interviewed Diane Ehrensaft, Bay area clinical psychologist specializing in transgender and gender nonconforming children and youth and author of the book *Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender Nonconforming Children*, she told me that the desire to participate in sports is a major reason why many of her transgender clients ‘give in’ and affirm a binary identity. This means that at least some transgender children and youth are undergoing varying degrees of irreversible medicalized gender reassignment regimes in order to fit in and participate fully in school and recreation settings.
2. Bathroom and locker room problems for both children and youth who affirm an opposite sex identity and those do not conform to binary norms. Indeed, the stories of persecution and crisis regarding school bathrooms – and three of my interview subjects experienced

severe problems at the primary grade level in VSB schools in the past 5 years – were pervasive.

Let me switch back to a personal perspective: my child is now 9 years old. When it came time to register her for kindergarden she was a gender nonconforming boy. I was very worried about what would happen to her in a school environment, based on my general knowledge about the kinds of gender policing that children experience in school settings. I looked around for an alternative and I found an independent school with a commitment to inclusion and a staffing ratio that facilitated greater intervention in peer dynamics. The research I have conducted as well as personal anecdotes that have been shared with me confirmed the gravity of my concerns. To date, I have interviewed three parents of gender nonconforming children enrolled in Vancouver public schools and the stories they shared with me about their children's difficulties in using the bathroom are nothing short of heart-breaking. My child will begin grade 4 next fall. I sincerely hope that the proposed policy changes will have an impact on the environment she must navigate when she enrolls in a Vancouver public high school several years from now.

I applaud the Vancouver School Board for developing a policy proposal that addresses the general social environment for children, youth and staff as well as guaranteeing that visible transgender and gender nonconforming children and youth will have clear policy-based guarantees of support and inclusion. I very much look forward to future conversations regarding how to ensure that the Vancouver School Board is a North American leader in this regard.

Sincerely,

Ann Travers, Associate Professor