

Supporting Gender Development: A Call to Action for Educators

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Abstract

The author recently completed a three-year program in early childhood education in BC and became interested in the evolution of gender development in the early years. Findings of this policy and programs research reveal that the work has been done by upper levels of the provincial education system, but the created programming has not translated into the classrooms as a ubiquitous element of planning for students' learning opportunities or environment in their growth toward their personal identity. Greater effort is essential to support full potential in efficacy to the enriching of children of all ages in their journey of self-awareness.

Historically speaking, educators have been a fundamental driver of social perspectives change, and thus it is essential that educators become more proactive in implementing and also advocating an affirmative approach to gender-fluid development in children and adolescents. Over at least the past decade, renowned researchers in child and adolescent development have found the traditional social constructs of gender roles to be detrimental to the well-being of gender-independent children. In response, Health Canada has introduced an evidence-based gender spectrum perspective of child and adolescent development. The *Canadian Human Rights Act* as amended in 2012 recognizes gender as an aspect of human diversity, equal to other characteristics such as race, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. Educators have day-to-day contact with children and their families and, in effect, have remarkable potential for influencing a sociocultural shift away from limited gender-binary perspectives and for providing knowledge toward broader awareness in validation of the value of the individual, regardless of gender-spectrum expression. Thus, gender-affirmative care models need to be integrated in the roles of educators, curriculum planning, and learning environments in schools as consistent best practice, rather than remaining exclusively a situational response approach.

Leading professionals who specialize in supporting families of gender-independent children and adolescents have published rigorous work regarding the sociocultural need for intentional deconstruction of gender-binary social roles to evolve toward a gender-diversity perspective (Ehrensaft, Glanville, Storck, Tishelman, and Keo-Meier, 2018). Gender development specialists such as Pyne (2014), Ehrensaft et al. (2016), and Edwards-Leeper, Leibowitz, Lurie, Lurie, & Sangganjanavanich (2017) advocate a shift in professional practice to affirmative-based policies supportive of gender expression variation as a naturally occurring phenomenon (Ehrensaft et al., 2018) of self-identification. Their research points to an emphasis on adopting a multifaceted concept wherein gender may be fluid and not binary (Edwards-Leeper et al., 2017). These academics and their colleagues have become the public voices of the issues and obstacles, and even the dangers, faced by gender-expansive children and adolescents.

Pyne's (2014) research has evolved from his first-hand work with families and their children growing in exploration of gender roles, whom he describes as "gender independent" children (p. 1). Pyne has been a significant advocate in the gradual shift of Canadian medical and mental health practices involving children variant in their gender development to using an affirming model, perhaps including some treatment elements, rather than solely a medical model. His perspective is embracing of the naturalness of gender discovery as part of human development. One of the overall messages from his work speaks of the change in focus for intervention being on the sociocultural context of the individual, rather than exclusively on the child as an element of the progress in gender diversity perception among professionals.

Ehrensaft et al. (2018) wrote from a long career, magnified by personal experience, in nurturing gender-expansive children and adolescents and their families. Over the course of her journey with families struggling with sociocultural expectations of their communities, including

her own, she has been on a mission seeking greater understanding of gender role development, conceptualizing gender pathways, and the pathology of gender dysphoria. Ostensibly, over the last two decades, the treatment approach to adolescents whose gender expression is nonconforming with cultural conventions has focused on individual intervention. The end-point purpose of the treatment was to be supportive of the child in ultimately identifying predominantly with one or the other of the traditional gender binary. However, this model of treatment is an oversight of where the need for change truly lies. The causes of pathological gender dysphoria, in actuality, originate from the world around the child, their sociocultural environment, in which gender as an evolutionary process is not understood. Ehrensaft et al. described it as a child's mental mapping of gender self-perception being primarily reflected through the social mirror of family, school, and friends. Therefore, the potential for the child's well-being becoming damaged and eventually dysphoric must be recognized as an issue of contextual intervention and not solely about treating the individual.

As the literature research for this essay ensued, the affirmative-care model as professional best practice became apparent as a repeated theme. Edwards-Leeper et al. (2016) put forward the evidence revealing the effectiveness of a gender-affirmative care model in recognition of building resilience in gender-independent children and adolescents, and their families, and furthermore as a viable mechanism for fostering change in societal perspectives. The essence of their work prepones an ideology of a balanced and nuanced approach to gender roles exploration that takes into consideration the complexity of childhood gender-identity development over time. The affirmative-care model as a collaborative approach supports not only the gender-expansive child but also the child's family, school and community in broadening gender role expectations.

The effect of these and many other studies, particularly longitudinal research, has been a generalized paradigm shift in support services models from a cultural-norms approach of gender conformity to an evidence-based gender-affirmative care approach that positions nonconformity within the realm of wellness (Pyne, 2014). The evidence generated through the work of these and other gender development researchers over the past two decades has succeeded in positively informing perspectives of support providers in that they described children who grow up to be healthy adults who are affirmed in their gender identity (Katz-Wise et al., 2017).

National and provincial laws, policy, and public services frameworks have been positively influenced by the recent findings in gender identity research. The Canadian Human Rights Commission, Canada Public Health, and Manitoba Education are examples of governing bodies that have revisited and revised policies and codes to reflect gender-diverse inclusivity. As stakeholders in societal well-being, their progressive action has brought relevant public services branches into similar states of engagement in evaluation of policies and protocols. Through acknowledging their responsibility for action, their overt leadership has generated momentum in sociocultural adaptation toward a broader qualification of equality.

The *Canadian Human Rights Act* was amended in June 2012 to include gender identity as a characteristic of human diversity congruent to race, colour, religious belief, and other characteristics of self-identification (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017). The consequence of this amendment was the initiation of a transformation in adherent organizations and public services. A conversation amongst mid-level national academia affiliations became focused on evolving the terminology, concepts, and practice directives through a lens of gender-affirmative care. The establishment of an affirming ideology grounded in generally accepted foundations in language and processes has resulted in the validation of all human beings as valuable members of their communities regardless of their gender identity or gender expression (Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, 2015). Furthermore, parameters identifying harassment and discrimination based on gender expression have led to public adoption of the gender-spectrum frame of reference in advancement of basic rights and accessibility in shared public spaces.

Not surprisingly, Canada Public Health endeavoured to advance a precedent concept of gender development as a continuum wherein there are a variety of identities and expressions

(Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010) possibly markedly previous to these and other national and provincial bodies. Health services providers, including mental health, have conventionally been the care providers for children and adolescents considered to be nonconforming of gender due to the previously accepted medical model approach. Pediatricians, psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors and clinicians theorized gender-variant behaviour as pathological in origin, and thus medical treatment to correct this illness was the generally ordained practice. It is no wonder, then, that the organic nature of gender exploration and expression may have been first realized by practitioners in this field.

By the beginning of the 10s-decade, Public Health was promoting a more ethically oriented perception based genuinely on scientific research that linked gender-variant development to a multitude of factors, including neurological, hormonal, biological, social, and relational influences (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). Public health was early to recognize the impetus of educators and schools in the sociocultural perspective change toward gender-expansive children. Their directives to educators and schools convey a shared responsibility in raising awareness and in challenging gender norms within programs and community initiatives. They also convey the necessity of schools to provide a safe, nurturing environment for all students, inclusive of all gender identities (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010).

Egale Canada Human Rights Trust and Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning (2015) collaboratively created a resource to provide inclusive strategies in helping schools become safer and more accessible from the perspective of diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity. As educators develop proactive non-binary teaching attitudes and language, the school community as a result evolves as a place of gender-diverse inclusion. This nationally distributed resource emphasizes the significant value in the integration of diversity attitudes and practices in learning environments and experiences as the mechanism in dispersing the agency of change. Furthermore, when educators adopt practices that promote awareness and understanding of, and respect for, people of all sexual orientations and gender identities (Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, 2015), the result is an inclusive and accepting community of individuality. This resource is dedicated to advancing student-led programs, events, and groups in order to instigate sociocultural change through our future citizenry.

The accumulating inventory of government research-based resources and organizational advocacy-focused written materials is trickling into general societal spaces that perpetuate the acceptance of a gender diverse ideology. Though gradual, a movement toward replacing historical gender conformity attitudes is infiltrating the everyday experiences of the general population. Political thrust for change is visible in offices, schools, public services facilities, community common places, and an increasing number of businesses. Services and resource support, community validation, people's attitudes in honouring diversity are banding together to foster changing gender constructs in a gender spectrum paradigm.

Educators in Manitoba's public school systems have access to a plethora of documented research on the gender identification element of childhood and adolescent development. Systematic documents entailing frameworks and teaching strategies have been created by professional groups to facilitate gender diversity integration in learning environments and program planning. It is incumbent upon administrators, school boards, divisional specialists and clinicians, and classroom teachers to ensure a learning environment with learning experiences that provide a scope of safety and inclusivity. Recently, organizational studies have been conducted in evaluation of the level of educator efficacy.

Manitoba Teachers' Society evaluated the level of knowledge mobilization in which public education was evolving in equitability. Taylor et al. (2015) conducted the study to measure the perceptions of school climate as experienced by classroom teachers. The year of data collection (2012-13) coincided with the related amendment to the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. This study incorporates professional education in terminology and promotes the attitude that an individual's gender may or may not correspond with social expectations associated with the sex that was assigned at birth. The educators in the study overwhelmingly strongly agreed (94%) that the

responsibility of sustaining an inclusive, safe, and supportive learning environment belonged to all school staff (Taylor et al., p. 79). Interestingly, only 78% of participants agreed (Taylor et al., p. 96) that they could respond effectively to gender discriminatory incidents.

Partially in response to the results of the Manitoba Teachers' Society study, and additionally to task educators in being purposely proactive, Manitoba Education and Training oversaw the development of a diversity-inclusive frameworks document. These guidelines were composed by a collaborative group of many stakeholders from a broad scope of professions and partner organizations, all relevant to public support services for children and families. The introduction of these directives incorporates the amended section of the *Canadian Human Rights Act* to elevate professional conduct to a higher level of inclusive practice in order to provide safety in learning environments that support gender diversity exploration and the organic evolution of gender spectrum identification. As a part of the inferences for educators, this document advocates fluidity of gender identity as a natural occurrence of identity formation (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017). In fact, this concept is expanded further to describe the strict nature of gender roles and sex role stereotyping in society as being the problematic issue, not the child's gender expression. The suggestion is that educators can create space for all students to find support and be valued through the integration of challenges of gender stereotypes in learning opportunities within an affirming classroom climate.

The underlying inference is that educators are perhaps the most qualified and most influential voice for changing society's gender categorical attitudes. Classroom experiences for students must have a greater focus on appreciating the unique qualities each child presents and in building healthy relationships as key to strengthening our future communities. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) covers the essential role that schools play in a sociocultural shift in gender development ideology. Because schools are in the forefront in most communities, the AAP supports educators and school administrators in advocacy and implementing policy (Rafferty, 2018). The revision of AAP policy recommends the perspective of a gender-affirmative care model in supporting children and adolescents in a multidisciplinary approach, including places and programs for learning.

Diane Ehrensaft (2016), a highly revered and much published gender specialist, believes schools to be second in line, next to families, in their capacity to support gender-expansive children in realizing their authentic selves. Evidently, educators need to increase their awareness of gender creativity as an aspect of healthy childhood identity development and focus on fostering learning environments and experiences that nurture gender authenticity. It seems there is a resounding societal call to educators for an adjustment in professional attitudes not only to respond affirmatively to individual gender-expansive children but to incorporate challenges of gender role stereotypes into classroom learning, and to integrate nonbinary gender concepts in their language and role modelling.

A significant number of educators seem to be failing to meet the challenge put forward. Small indications of affirmative attitudes can be seen in school environments, such as gender-neutral bathrooms and resource group posters. Even then, these accommodations are more likely in spaces for older learners but are invisible where the children who are primarily engaged in gender exploration spend their days. When asked, the majority of school staff teams have a responsive protocol and strategy for students who disclose at school. The overall impression at this point is that public schools still hold a mental health issue perspective, a situational problem that requires an interventive reaction. The reality is that educators have missed the point of their calling in this domain of human development, the specific specialty of their field.

Educators and public school service providers have a markedly influential role in the sociocultural paradigm shift that will expand the traditional gender-role definitions. By proactively implementing an affirmative approach to gender-fluid development, educators and school service providers become stronger activists in encouraging sociocultural change. Based on vigorous research, experienced specialists are recommending that learning environments and experiences must ubiquitously foster validation of all gender spectrum expressions as evidence-

based best practice. I adduce that a summary of this matter is best described in the *Guide for Sustainable Schools in Manitoba*, wherein schools are to be models of social inclusion, health and well-being, in order to enable all learners to participate fully in school life while instilling a long-lasting respect for human rights, freedoms, culture and creative expression, and challenging prejudice and injustice in all its forms (International Institute for Sustainable Development and Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, as cited in Manitoba Education and Training, 2017). The evidence has been analyzed, the strategies have been documented, and the challenge is declared; hence, it is time to move forward in action.

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About the Author

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