

# Transgender awareness in early years education

**(EYE): ‘We haven’t got any of those here’.**

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## **Transgender awareness in early years education (EYE): ‘We haven’t got any of those here’.**

### **Abstract**

The paper marks the growth of interest in transgender rights and argues for the value of transgender awareness as a challenge to gender binary thinking. It identifies early years education as a powerful site for a focus on gender non-conformity and aims to draw together theoretical and practical forms of support for the EYE staff who respond to young children’s gendered expressions on an everyday basis. The authors draw on data gathered within their respective research and professional training trajectories which are understood through queer and feminist poststructuralist theory, together with approaches from transgender studies. These are combined to emphasise gender multiplicities and pluralities of sexuality. The paper examines how staff can be supported towards greater gender sensitivity and considers how the presence of more male teachers in EYE can act as a catalyst for developing a gender flexible pedagogy. It concludes that a growing awareness of transgender benefits the mental health and wellbeing of all young children, and protects gender-variant children from peer abuse.

### **Introduction**

The two authors of this paper have collaborated with a strong shared purpose in mind. We want to draw readers’ attention to the significance of transgender rights, an increasingly prevalent concept in society and in academia, and one which represents a major challenge to

gender binary thinking. We aim to consider how early years educators in particular are forced to rethink gender assumptions that arise in caring for and teaching children who do gender in nonconformist ways. Sparks fly when educational institutions, including Early Years education settings, come up against gender nonconforming children. These sparks have the power to ignite a slow but sure revolution towards gender expansion and ‘gender democracy’ Connell (2009).

Although the authors currently share an interest in transgender rights we have arrived at this point by rather different routes. The first author (Jo Warin) has broad research interests in gender and education. In recent years this has taken the form of research studies in the participation of male practitioners in early years education. She has developed an argument for the promotion of ‘more men’ in early years education based on their presence as a catalyst for a ‘gender flexible pedagogy’ (Bartini, 2006; Eidevald and Lenz Taguchi, 2011; Warin, 2018, Warin, 2017; Warin and Adriany, 2017). This theoretical concept draws on Butler (1990) to emphasize how early childhood educators, both male and female, can model a flexible approach to the performance of gender which disrupts prescriptions for men to model masculinities and women to model femininities. It also incorporates ideas about the activities that young children themselves may be encouraged to engage in, with an emphasis on playful and experimental approaches to the performance of gender which allow for gender transgression. Warin (2017) argues that a gender flexible pedagogy develops gender conscious teachers and a gender sensitive curriculum with implications for both what is taught and how, as well as by whom. The second author (Deborah Price) has engaged directly with early years practitioners in developing ‘transgender awareness’, which we define in this paper, following Whittle’s (2006) interpretation of ‘transgender’, as a recognition of people who are gender non-conforming and gender variant. She has achieved this contribution through her books with Kath Taylor (2015; 2016) and through her roles in early and primary

years of education as a teacher, trainer, inspector and lecturer. In these capacities she has led many training sessions for early years practitioners on trans awareness.

The authors' mutual interest is now fuelled by an increasing recognition of the prevalence of transgender issues in society with attention in the media (Vollans 2016; Howell 2017) accompanied by a growing number of sociological studies into the upbringing of children who are transgender or gender nonconforming (Meadow, 2011; Rahilly, 2015; Ehrensaft, 2016; Taylor and Price, 2016; Neary and Cross, 2018). A challenge to the dominance of gender binary thinking is emerging from this growing body of work, nicely summed up by Rahilly (2015) regarding the value of transgender awareness: 'Gender variance exposes the limits of the gender binary and the overly deterministic role it ascribes to assigned sex, in turn signalling possibilities for social change against dominant ideologies and practices' (p 339). A growing body of transgender studies and a recent special issue of the journal *Gender and Education* edited by Martino and Cumming-Potvin, (2018) make a significant contribution to the broader gender studies field (for example: Stryker and Whittle, (2006); Rands, (2009); Ryan et al. (2013); DePalma (2013)). These texts draw attention to an existing gender hierarchy 'which privileges the expression of fixed dimorphic genders over more fluid and multiple genders' (Cooper, 2004, p84, cited in Martino and Cumming-Potvin, 2016) and heighten the visibility of the gender-creative child who 'lives outside gender boxes' (Ehrensaft, 2016).

The term transgender is used here in two related ways. Firstly, it is used to indicate that some people are not their gender assigned at birth (cisgender). Secondly, it is used in a broad and inclusive way to indicate the inadequacies of the gender binary system. The term has an enormously powerful symbolic significance to 'trouble' gender. As Vollans (2016) points out in her recent article for preschool practitioners, transgender can be seen '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' (p31). The arguments presented here are aligned with the long-term goals of queer theory to break down the power of the gender binary, and to promote gender fluidity in preference to gender essentialism. The authors also acknowledge that the 'trans movement' includes a diversity of positions on gender, adopting Whittle's inclusive definition of 'trans' (2006) which incorporates a range of gender variant positions: "discomfort with role expectations, being queer, occasional or more frequent cross-dressing, permanent cross-dressing and cross-gender living though to accessing major health interventions' (Whittle 2006, xi). The trans movement is growing and changing continually and cannot be encapsulated by one stance.

The purpose of this paper is to:

- mark the growth of interest in transgender rights and argue for the power of a newly emergent transgender awareness to catalyse a momentum towards an expansive articulation of gender and loosening of the gender binary;
- identify early years education as a crucial place for the seeds of this change and recognise the lead that is provided by children themselves;
- draw together theoretical and practical forms of support for the early years education (EYE) staff who respond to young children's gendered expressions on an everyday basis.

This article does not draw on any one specific empirical study to meet these aims but instead the authors harness their combined years of experience in gender research and early education training to illustrate the paper's arguments.

The paper begins by providing context on current interest in transgender rights, exploring positive lines of current transformation towards greater gender fluidity and complexity. It then moves from a broad brush depiction of transgender rights in society to look specifically at transgender rights in educational establishments. This is followed by a discussion of how transgender rights are emerging in EYE settings with the potential for early childhood practitioners, and parents to take the lead from children and young people themselves. However, this potential can only be harnessed by adults who are sufficiently adaptable and sensitive to gender-nonconforming children. Therefore, the last section of this paper is devoted to considering how EYE practitioners can be supported to provide a gender flexible pedagogy that provides an inclusive environment for *all* children.

## **The upsurge in transgender awareness and interest.**

### A new public discourse focused on gender identity

In recent times there has been a huge outpouring of debates around gender which examine what it means today to be a man, a woman, or neither. In the last year alone, media, and especially social media, has exploded with discussions and a range of analysis. The #MeToo campaign marked a tipping point for sexual harassment to be taken seriously and has connected to and compounded a number of related gender equality concerns such as domestic violence, the gender pay gap, and equal representation in government. In the 1990s the acronym LGBT, for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, became a positive symbol of inclusion to represent a range of gender identities and sexualities (Jonathan and Yescavage,

2004). In response to years of lobbying from users and LGBT groups to eliminate discrimination, the online social networking service Facebook in February 2014, widened its choice of gender variants for users to identify their gender (Associated Press, Menlo Park, 2014).

The trans movement has grown and developed within this growing alertness to gender concerns. Discussion of transgender rights in the press and on social media has become endemic to the extent that it has been described as a ‘bandwagon’ (Howell, 2017). Recent TV programmes and newspaper articles have presented the stories of children and young adults who have made the transition to become a member of the ‘opposite’ sex (Vollans, 2016). More and more people are beginning to recognise that the traditional categories of ‘girl’, ‘boy’, ‘man’, ‘woman’ are too straight-jacketing to capture people’s gender-fluid feelings, experiences and identities (Stryker and Whittle, 2006; Ehrensaft, 2016). Trans now no longer just describes the process of ‘transitioning’ but can be used as an identifier for those who refuse to be defined by their gender assigned at birth and talk about themselves as non-binary, as articulated in the definition of ‘trans’ quoted above. There is a growth in the number of people who define themselves as non-binary and prefer to use pronouns such as ‘they’ rather than ‘he’ or ‘she’. Many non-binary people further think that physical biology is irrelevant and that someone assigned male at birth should be able to call themselves ‘she’ if that’s their correct pronoun – the concept of gender as self-defined rather than defined by physiological markers at birth or given to an individual by society. Many countries now have gender neutral, X, passports for those who wish. This article is not the place to explore the many heated worldwide debates. Instead we set the scene in England where both authors are located and in the educational context of EYE.

### Theoretical perspectives

The significance of transgender identity is not new within theoretical debates about gender. For example Halberstam's influential book on female masculinity (1998) supports the idea that masculinity does not reduce down to the 'male' body and femininity to the 'female' body, echoing the views of Butler presented above. The paper now turns to examine some recent discussion of the theoretical positions that can be taken up in explaining the existence of transgender people and which influence policies and practices.

Firstly, there is a biological essentialist view, held by those who believe that gender is a label assigned or noted at birth because of a new born infant's genital differences from each other – 'he' or 'she'. There are some instances where using these physiological markers do not define a new born and the medical profession are uncertain what a child's gender could be. Roughly 1.7% of the population are born in this category, the same number who are born with red hair, so this is not uncommon (Kleeman, 2016). However, according to this view the identification of these individuals is seen as a biological phenomenon which leads to a medical response to align bodies with identity experiences.

Secondly, there are those who think that it's not the biological differences that shape us as much as the way that society thinks about gender and that these definitions have changed over time, the position we can broadly label as social constructionist. Along with this position is the idea that because of societal shaping men who then define themselves as women have still experienced male privilege and conditioning in their formative years and have been shaped by that in a way that 'natal' or 'cis' women have not. ('Cis' is the opposite of 'trans' and means people who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth and their gender identity).

Thirdly, there is the position that gender is a confirmation of identity that is made by an individual and not subject to any biological markers. This approach is aligned with feminist

poststructuralist approaches, which emphasise contexts of power and privilege, and are tuned into sociolinguistics. Binaries such as male/female, adult/child, heterosexual/homosexual “operate to constitute and perpetuate artificial hierarchical relations of power between the paired concepts, which are perceived as polarised opposites” (Robinson and Diaz, p40).

MacNaughton (2000), a proponent of feminist poststructuralist approaches in EYE, interprets young children’s gender-based practices as: ‘ways of being gendered that do not regulate but are *full of possibilities*’(3)

Queer theory is a logical progression from feminist poststructuralism, and draws on the critique of self as fixed and essential, emphasising the fluid, dynamic and constructed nature of identities which in turn leads to a deconstruction of the gender binary. Indeed, queer theory ‘aims to subvert the entire concept of identity’ (Thurer, 2005, 99) It breaks down the idea that a person’s gender and sexuality are fixed within their biological, sexed body so it is an approach that emphasises the multiplicities of gender and the pluralities of sexuality (Renold, 2005; Robinson and Diaz, 2006).

Finally, transgender studies have emerged within the last two decades. This body of work could be said to ‘queer’ queer theory because it appears to move away from a socio-cultural linguistic deconstruction of gender and brings us right back to the importance of the body. A key issue is a tension between a challenge to the gender binary, rooted in queer theory and feminist poststructuralism, and an affirmation of stable gender identity recognition. Some transgender individuals would argue, from a position of gender fragility, that they long for a stable gender identity, to “pass as ‘real-ly gendered’ in the world without trouble...” (Prosser, 2006 cited in DePalma 2011). DePalma, (2011) resolves the tension by arguing that sex and gender are *both* social constructs. Drawing on Butler (1990) DePalma emphasises that “even the biological diversity of sex is socially policed, squeezed into unrealistic oppositional ideas of male and female” (9) and points out that there are many people whose

physical realities resist a crude categorisation into male bodies and female bodies. In their trans informed theoretical approach, Cumming-Potvin and Martino (2018) subscribe to both a dismantling of the traditional gender order and a legitimisation of non- binary people. This theoretical approach recognises, values and promotes gender expansion and complexity.

How relevant are these gender theories for work with very young children? The next section discusses how far it is appropriate to consider the early years of education as a site for challenging the gender binary and developing gender democracy.

### **EYE as a significant site for breaking down gender stereotypes and acknowledging transgender rights/issues.**

How far should transgender awareness be a priority for work with very young children? This is a controversial question that can arouse strong responses in relation to EYE. Traditionally, childhood has been constructed as a time to be protected from difficult and controversial ‘adult’ concerns (Kehilly, 2002; Blaise, 2005; Renold, 2005;). It has been presented as a period of innocence from the seventeenth century onwards (Robinson, 2013) in which children are protected from ‘difficult knowledge’ (Britzman, 1998). This protective approach, often based on assumptions about developmentally appropriate practice (Blaise, 2009), creates a taboo around topics of sexuality. Sex education with young children, including discussion of gender nonconformity, is a turbulent landscape and can produce protest and resistance from certain parent groups (Parveen, 2019; DePalma, 2016) Yet, a sensitive and sympathetic awareness from teachers collaborating with other relevant professionals such as medics and social workers, and working alongside parents, can support trans children, a model that is well illustrated in Luecke’s case study of Jaden (2011).

Early years is a crucial place for these discussions to begin. Early childhood educators are in an ideal position to disrupt gender normalising discourses in their pedagogies and practices (Robinson and Diaz, 2006; Cloughessy and Waniganayake, 2017). A number of reasons prompt this assertion. Firstly, we have increasing evidence that some young children are uncomfortable with gender conformity prescriptions and that a small proportion of these are seriously troubled to the extent that they wish for gender reaffirmation (Ehrensaft, 2016; Neary and Cross, 2018). Secondly, if we can create an environment in the early years that challenges gender stereotypes we are creating a fertile and sympathetic environment for the development of gender variation in later childhood and teenage years (Luecke, 2011). Thirdly, a sympathetic and encouraging adult response to gender nonconformity is very likely to benefit *all* children because it goes some way towards removing the pernicious influence of a rigid gender binary and accentuates the accessibility of difference (Martino and Cumming-Potvin, 2016).

There has clearly been an increase in the number of young and sometimes very young children who are actively seeking help through medical channels (Lyons, 2016). In 2017/18 there were 2,519 referrals received at the Tavistock and Portman NHS trust clinic, a well-known provider in the field of gender identity development. This represents a 25 per cent increase compared to the previous year. 198 of these were aged 10 and under (NHS, Gender Identity Development Service, 2018). A qualitative study undertaken by Neary and Cross (2018) with eleven child participants aged 5 -12 reveal that transgender is a live concern within the preschool years. Indeed, the children in their study were strongly gender non-conforming right from the time they could communicate (9). Many children and young people are contacting organisations such as Childline and also talking to their teachers, parents and carers. The increase suggests the likelihood that an unknown number of children are not talking to anyone. We know the implications of this as recent figures show that almost

half of young trans people have considered taking their own lives (Lees, 2017). Early years professionals might be aware of these sad statistics in the older age range of young people and may consider that issues of transgender and sexuality are not the domain or concern of those working with very young children. However EYE professionals are not just educating the pre-school child who is in front of them, but supporting the young person and adult they will become.

### **Children and young people providing the lead.**

It is beginning to appear that a new generation of children and young people are expressing a much more gender fluid way of interacting with each other and their wider society. An interesting recent study from Bragg et al (2018), carried out in England, reports that many young people in the 12-14 age group now have ‘expanded vocabularies of gender identity/expression,’(1) and commitments to gender equality, diversity and the rights of gender and sexual minorities. The study undertaken by Neary and Cross (2018) also delivers a strong message about how children and young people themselves are leading the way on transgender rights/issues, with adults often in a reactive role. A powerful illustration is provided in Luecke’s (2011) portrayal of Jaden’s transition in elementary school from a gender variant boy to a self-identified female.

Young children experience powerful emotions when it comes to choices of clothing, appearance, hairstyle, toys, activities and companions. When their choices challenge societal expectations there is often a battle of wills. The data collected by Neary and Cross (2018) provides some vivid depictions of clashes between transgender children and the highly gendered norms of their preschool and primary schools over gender segregation practices, gendered uniform, separate toilet facilities, and more subtle forms of the imposition of the

gender binary such as gendered language practices. One parent interviewed in this study provides a moving account of her child's distress; "She just sat on me sobbing, "I'm a boy, I'm a boy" and this parent's supportive response to the child "I said "It's ok, you're a boy and that's all that matters" (9).

Parents may sometimes experience strong societal pressures related to the gender binary. Neary and Cross (2018) found that the parents in their study struggled with negotiations over their children's gender variance 'given how everyday life is predicated so ubiquitously on the gender binary' ( 11). These parents felt they were in a vulnerable position especially given the young age (primary) of their children and felt criticised by friends and family for 'indulging' their child's gender nonconformity. Parents often have to act as mediators between their children's desires and the expectations of wider society. Rahilly's study (2105) of parents raising transgender and gender variant/gender nonconforming children, based on earlier parenting studies by Meadow (2011) shows us that some pioneering parents, with their children's interests at heart, resist the normative regulation of gender and develop their own 'gender literacy'. Taylor and Price (2016) point out that it is very often parents who pioneer the practices and policies that schools come to adopt and suggest that too often schools are in a reactive rather than proactive mode. However, whilst parents of transgender children are often the unsung heroes of the slow change towards a loosening of the gender binary, gender variant children themselves are the real pioneers of this gender revolution.

### **Support (practical and theoretical) for EYE staff**

How can the playful, experimental and sometimes resistant gender expressions of young children be supported in EYE? Children cannot develop a challenging approach to the gender binary unless their EYE professionals have this kind of awareness. The following

section discusses the need for staff gender sensitivity, how to support the development of this capacity and bring about a 'gender flexible pedagogy'.

**1. Gender sensitivity - and gender blindness. Helping staff towards greater gender sensitivity.**

Sometimes EY practitioners have a very strong value for challenging gender stereotypes with young children they teach and care for but find they are caught out by their own deeply gendered assumptions that influence their practices and language. 'Unconscious bias' is a term that describes how many teachers perpetuate gendered behaviours despite their best intentions. It was well illustrated in a recent TV documentary series which set out to investigate the gender relations within one primary school class: '*No More Boys and Girls: Can Our Kids Go Gender Free?*' (BBC2, 2017). A male member of staff, committed to challenging gender stereotypes, welcomed in the TV team and put his practices on the line. He was clearly surprised to discover just how much he was himself influenced by traditional deeply held gendered assumptions for example in the way he used terms of endearment ('love', 'darling') with the girls but not the boys. The pupils were tasked to tally the frequency of these utterances to surface this unconscious behaviour.

How far should gender sensitisation be central to teacher training? In the 1990s MacNaughton (1997) found that early childhood educators 'fail to see' the importance of gender in their preparation of new EYE teachers, whilst Drudy (2008) found that an explicit attention to gender issues was low on the agenda of most teacher education programmes (2008). Hogan (2012) found that her teacher trainees were 'gender blind', believed that 'gender in early childhood education is largely unproblematic' (2012, 1) and showed a resistant attitude to examining gender critically. However, currently, a growing body of researchers is calling for teacher preparation courses to include gender sensitisation training and create a more gender-

conscious workforce (Peeters et al., 2015; Josephidou, 2018; Warin, 2018). Some authors argue strongly that trainers should be willing to examine and discuss their own gendered assumptions before expecting their trainee students to undertake this kind of consciousness raising (Lenz Taguchi, 2005; Burn and Prat-Adams, 2015). Warin and Adriany (2017) claim that EY educators must develop gender sensitivity before they can deliver a gender sensitive pedagogy and cultivate gender flexibility in themselves and the children they interact with. A gender sensitisation training package, 'Gender Loops' was developed by Krabel and Cremers, (2008) providing exercises for EY educators to reflect on their own gendered attitudes. As Price points out (2018) this kind of training through open and honest discussion can only occur in an environment where participants have co-constructed a climate of mutual trust.

## **2. Gender sensitivity as part of a gender flexible pedagogy in EYE Training issues**

Warin (Warin and Adriany, 2017; Warin, 2017) argue for the promotion of a 'gender flexible pedagogy' in early years education. This concept has the capacity to incorporate a focus on the needs of transgender children and bears close similarity to Rand's presentation of a trans informed 'gender complex pedagogy'.

This concept depends on the meaning of the word 'pedagogy' to include and meld together both what is taught and how it is taught, so a 'gender flexible pedagogy' incorporates ideas about staff modelling of alternative forms of masculinities and femininities, the value of a mixed gender workforce, and explicit gender teaching within curricula. It can include staffing policies and the increase of male EYE staff teachers; teaching practices; relationships with children, and the provision of resources; equipment; choices about the availability of activities. It also entails training support to develop practitioners' gender consciousness. At a national level it could also implicate the embedding of a specific gender sensitivity goal

within the English national curriculum for early years education. In the following sections we consider firstly issues about the early years workforce: who can be supported and how in the promotion of transgender awareness. We then consider other aspects of pedagogy such as the curriculum and provision of resources, materials, and activities.

### Promoting a gender flexible workforce through the employment of male EYE practitioners

There has been much attention in recent times within England, to the promotion of more men working in the early years education workforce. Indeed, the DfE devoted a chapter of this in their 2017 policy document (DfE, 2017). However, as Warin has pointed out (2017) there are some vastly different and contradictory rationales for encouraging an increased male presence. Sometimes the rationale is based on heteronormative ideas about the complementarity of male, father figures working alongside female, mother figures, especially when this is triggered by the prevalent popular discourse about the disadvantages faced by father-absent families. This ‘gender balance’ rationale leads to practices which *reinforce* the gender binary as men are allocated to roles and practices within the early years setting which do nothing to challenge gender stereotypes, for example they are directed to support physical and outdoor play. Warin (2017) argues for an alternative basis for the inclusion of men to create an environment where men and women work alongside each other with interchangeable rather than complementary roles.

Warin’s argument for the promotion of ‘gender flexibility’ and her critique of ‘gender balance’ arose from her study of Acorns nursery, a preschool that was unusual in its employment of a high proportion of male practitioners: five amongst an overall classroom staff of twenty six (including full and part timers). She was commissioned to evaluate the ‘impact’ of the male presence in the setting and undertook a case study over a series of three visits, spending 8 whole days of researcher time on site. The specific case study methods, undertaken by two researchers, included 12 semi-structured interviews with staff, two staff

focus groups, a survey with parents, observations of practitioners in interaction with children and parents (recorded in field notes) and analysis of policy documents and the setting's environment including posters, and wall displays. Further detail about the case study methods can be found in Warin (2017 and 2018). The study aimed to discover how far the presence of the men was acting as a catalyst for greater gender sensitisation across the whole setting.

Warin discovered that gender stereotypes were clearly apparent in this setting especially within heteronormative assumptions about the nursery as a kind of surrogate family. For example one of the male practitioners, Adam (fictional name) reported that children need to have both the male influence and the female influence in their lives to replicate the traditional family gender pattern: 'It is nice to have them both in here... Daddy... Mummy'. However, Warin also found examples of gender flexible pedagogy such as when Steve (fictional name) told the researchers that each practitioner needs to develop both fatherly *and* motherly skills. His description depends on, but plays with, the gender binary.

You can't be too stereotypical towards your own gender. It just doesn't work. You can't be the masculine man. You can't be the feminine woman. Neither of them would work in this situation... It's aspects of both. It gets combined... Being a mother and father at the same time. You have to be able to do both. You can't rely on someone else to be the other half or anything because the same person wouldn't always be there.

None of us work alone here. You've got to be able to switch.

Steve's words imply the value of gender fluidity within EY staff behaviour. Interestingly he emphasises fluidity and versatility, 'switch', as a pedagogic value for EY staff. His attitude suggests that the presence of men can operate as a catalyst for developing gender sensitivity.

## Promoting a gender flexible curriculum

The paper now considers the curricular and resource implications of a gender flexible pedagogy looking briefly at ideas about materials, activities and practical opportunities for the promotion of gender sensitivity and challenges to gender stereotypes.

Addressing curriculum concerns it is revealing to compare the English Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (EYFS) curriculum with its Swedish counterpart. Based on interviews with male pre-school teachers Warin (2016) discovered strong support for the Swedish curriculum which has an explicit goal to challenge gender stereotypes. The EYFS does not include such an explicit gender-focused goal. Instead, we find there is an emphasis on the broader term 'diversity' which features within the Promoting Positive Behaviour Policy and is also mirrored in the diversity policies of individual settings (Warin, 2017). However, a rhetoric of broad diversity can sometimes mask some more specific inequalities. For example, in Adriany's ethnography of an Indonesian pre-school (Adriany and Warin, 2014) there was a stark contradiction between a rhetoric for diversity and practices that clearly entrenched gender difference. The children were taught a song entitled 'Berbeda itu indah' ('Differences are beautiful') but were expected to perform it in gendered movements and dress which emphasised the traditional gender order.

A gender-flexible pedagogy should incorporate an attention to the uses of language, the physical environment, images and resources within the EYE setting. One of the authors, Warin, was recently invited to scrutinise a range of European pre-school picture books for the frequency of depictions of male staff. It was very striking that the Scandinavian books showed both male and female practitioners in the background as a normal element of everyday preschool life. One Swedish book, 'Tisdags – Piraterna' (Tuesday – Pirates) by Edfelt and Johansson (2012) was especially noteworthy as it showed two gender-ambiguous adult teachers, for example one was wearing a baggy pink sweat shirt over defined breasts,

track suit pants, medium length hair and a beard. It is also necessary to audit books and ensure that there is a wide and diverse range available by using suppliers like Letterbox library who scrutinise each book that they sell in terms of diversity. Transgender studies literature includes models of practices and pedagogies which offer guidance for explicit and gender-complex teaching such as the case study of elementary school teacher Janice (Martino and Cumming-Potvin, 2016), the gender diversity lessons presented by Ryan et al (2013) and the resources discussed by DePalma (2016).

Warin's ideas on the promotion of a gender flexible pedagogy map on to Price's practices and policies in the training she has offered EYE staff on the development of transgender awareness. We now provide more detail about some of the key ideas that are embedded in Price's training experience.

### **3. How to support staff specifically in developing awareness of, and a sensitive response to transgender issues.**

Price has offered training that not only develops gender sensitisation in the broad sense described above, but also incorporates the specific and sensitive topic of transgender.

Preschool managers and practitioners are now becoming alert to the possibilities of transgender issues, in their various manifestations, including opportunities for children who want to play with different gender identities, and they are requesting training and advice.

Price has responded by offering a range of taster sessions for EYE practitioners and related professionals. The response from attendees is that they are: worried about 'saying the wrong thing'; concerned about supporting parents and carers; aware that this is a very current and relevant topic; feel a need to be prepared. The training sessions identify the need to have items in place *before* practitioners concern themselves with a child who is trans in their setting. The trainer is aware that often it is too late as practitioners are attending the training

because they have a child who is trans (or they suspect is trans) in the setting and they want urgent guidance and support. In some of her longer training sessions participants benefit from simply having a safe and confidential space in which they can talk to each other and receive support and inspiration. Discussion focuses on: who the practitioners are supporting (children; parents; staff – any of whom might be gender variant or trans); how to promote a gender flexible environment.

Many authors have identified the heteronormativity of the preschool (Blaise, 2005; Cloughessy and Waniganayake, 2014; Warin, 2018). Practitioners must disrupt such assumptions and sensitise themselves to the needs of a diverse parent group (Kinter-Duffy et al 2012). They may be concerned about the parents of a child who is non-binary or trans and how they can support ‘the child within the family’ to make sense of this new order in their world. If an EYE setting is a supportive and trans friendly environment for children, parents and carers, then it might also attract trans staff. In supporting a trans staff member EYE managers are acting in line with employment law – especially The Equality Act (2010) where one of the nine protected characteristics is ‘gender reassignment’.

Making the environment supportive in terms of staff interactions can be more problematic. Price’s training suggests using a mission statement to base staff discussions on. If the setting states that its aims are to make the early years facility inclusive, then it needs to ask questions about the visibility of trans issues. Having these discussions can make practitioners examine their own morals, ethos and ideas about gender. Making it clear that good practice is there to benefit and nurture *all* children in the setting as well as support parents, carers and staff members implies a move towards this inclusive practice and not away from it. An environment that is supportive to trans people is also supportive to the diverse society that the setting is part of, and is good equalities practice for everyone. Where early years staff

promote and practice a gender flexible pedagogy they will, by default, create a climate that is inclusive of and supportive to trans children, parents and workers.

## **Conclusion.**

Transgender rights in the early years are of vital importance as they have a symbolic significance that leads us to think, and practice, beyond the gender binary. Early years settings and primary schools need to encourage a climate of diversity in general so all children can flourish. However, an explicit attention to challenging gender stereotypes is also required so that gender diversity issues do not get ‘brushed under the carpet’, along with the glitter and gluey paper. The authors of this paper welcome a growing attention to transgender issues because it benefits the mental health and wellbeing of all children creating what has been termed a ‘pre-emptive school culture’ protecting gender variant children from peer abuse (Atkinson and DePalma, 2010).

An awareness of transgender issues benefits all children and young people (Luecke, 2011) especially those who are engaged in resisting gender conformity and it benefits the wider society. It goes beyond support for the individual (important though that is) because it has a wider symbolic significance. Transgender awareness leads us to think and practice, beyond the gender binary, which is deep, entrenched and influences all our social interactions. The early years of education offers a rich site for practitioners to challenge gender stereotypes and to interrogate the gender binary which positions children in gender boxes. Indeed, EYE settings could become potential beacons of gender sensitivity and the promotion of gender-complex teaching, and the establishment of gender flexible pedagogies. Recognition and acceptance of transgender is a giant step in the direction of a transformation to a less gender rigid society.

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