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Considering Transgender People in Education

A Gender-Complex Approach

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Schools serve as a setting in which students come to understand gender, but transgender students (those who transgress societal gender norms) are largely left out of discussions of education. The high level of harassment that transgender students face poses sizable obstacles to school success. If the field of education is committed to equity and social justice, then teacher education programs must prepare educators to teach gender in more complex ways that take into consideration the existence and needs of transgender people. This article is intended to begin the discussion of transgender issues in teacher education by providing a rationale for why teacher educators need to care about transgender issues, presenting definitions of basic terms and concepts related to gender and transgender, offering a new framework for understanding gender privilege and oppression, and examining three previously proposed or existing types of gender education and proposing gender-complex education as an alternative, and exploring possibilities for gender-complex teacher education.

Keywords: *gender; transgender; gender identity; lgbt; teacher education*

If I could change one thing, it would be that all people were required to understand that there are more than two categories of gender. That way other kids won't have to suffer like I did.

—17-year-old transboy (quoted in Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 67)

Our biggest issue with the school was their lack of knowledge. At first it was suggested that we switch schools to one that is 12 miles away. Thanks.

—Parent of a 7-year-old transboy (quoted in Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 154)

Schools serve as a setting in which students come to understand gender. One group that is largely left out of discussions of education consists of transgender students, those who transgress societal gender norms. The high level of harassment that transgender students face poses sizable obstacles to school success. If the field of education is committed to equity and social justice, then teacher education programs must prepare educators to teach gender in more complex ways that take into consideration the existence and needs of transgender people. This article is intended to begin the discussion of transgender issues in teacher education by providing a rationale for why teacher

educators need to care about transgender issues, presenting definitions of basic terms and concepts related to gender and transgender, offering a new framework for understanding gender privilege and oppression, examining three previously proposed or existing types of gender education and proposing “gender-complex education” as an alternative, and exploring possibilities for “gender-complex teacher education.”

Definitions and Terms

Foundational Gender-Related Terms

To work with future teachers on approaching gender in more complex ways, teacher educators must develop a vocabulary of gender. According to Bornstein (1994), gender identity “answers the question, ‘who am I?’ Am I a man or a woman or a what?” (p. 24). Bornstein wrote that it is “one’s sense of self as a boy or girl, woman or man (or, as we are increasingly realizing, as a nongendered, bigendered, transgendered, intersexed, or otherwise alternatively gendered person)” (Tranzmission, n.d., p. 10). The term originated in the field of psychiatry, which included “Gender Identity Disorder” as a classification in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychological Association, 1980) beginning in 1980

(Wilchins, 2004; Zucker & Spitzer, 2005). This conception of those who do not follow the dominant model of gender identity as “disordered” is a manifestation of and has contributed to the oppression of transgender people. Whereas the origin of the term *gender identity* is less than ideal, when used without a connection to “disorders,” it is a useful term.

Gender expression, a second useful term, refers to “the manifestation of an individual’s fundamental sense of being masculine or feminine through clothing, behavior, grooming, etc.” (Wilchins, 2004, p. 8). In other words, gender expression consists of the behaviors in which a person engages that show that person’s gender. Significantly, whereas people choose how to express gender, they do not choose how others will perceive their genders. This leads to another term, *gender attribution*, which is the process “whereby we look at somebody and say, ‘that’s a man,’ or ‘that’s a woman’” (Bornstein, 1994, p. 26). Gender attribution is based on various cues. Among the types of cues, Bornstein (1994) listed physical cues (body, hair, voice, skin, movement), behavioral cues (manners, decorum, protocol, deportment), textual cues (histories, documents, names, associates, relationships), mythic cues (cultural and subcultural myths that support membership in a given gender), power dynamic cues (modes of communication, communication techniques, degrees of aggressiveness, assertiveness, persistence, ambition), and sexual orientation cues (whom one dates, with whom one has sex, with whom one has romantic relationships). People use all of these cues in combination to decide (usually unconsciously) to which gender someone belongs.

Gender roles refers to “social expectations of proper behavior and activities for a member of a particular gender” (Stryker, 2008, p. 12). They are socially constructed ideas about how people will look, dress, and behave based on the gender category to which they belong. They consist of stereotypical behavior prescribed by assigned or apparent gender. *Gender assignment*, on the other hand, refers to a society’s official designation of one’s gender. In the United States, doctors assign gender based on one’s genitalia at birth. This assigned gender is then recorded on an official birth certificate. The process of gender assignment differs among cultures. For example, among Navajo people, gender assignment has traditionally occurred at a later age based on one’s choice of objects rather than on biology (Bornstein, 1994).

Defining Gender

Given these interacting concepts of gender identity, gender expression, gender attribution, gender expectations,

and gender assignment, it is clear that gender is a complex concept that is not easy to define. In English, the word *gender* has a long history. Beginning in the 1300s, *gender* began appearing in written text to mean “kind, sort, class” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989, n.p.). Here, *gender* is a broad term implying a sorting of persons or objects into categories. Categorization highlights one dimension along which persons or objects differ and marks boundaries according to this distinction. In this broad use, the aspect of distinction highlighted is not specified in the term *gender* itself; rather, *gender* is used merely to indicate that some sort of distinction exists.

The contemporary use of the term *gender* incorporates certain distinctions that play out in the concepts of gender expectations, gender expression, gender attribution, gender assignment, and gender identity. Wilchins (2004) defined *gender* as “a language, a system of meanings and symbols, along with the rules, privileges, and punishments pertaining to their use—for power and sexuality (masculinity and femininity, strength and vulnerability, action and passivity, dominance and weakness)” (p. 35). Furthermore, following the work of Derrida, Wilchins explained that “words and meanings actually work because of a process of exclusion. . . . With gender, we create the meaning of *woman* by excluding everything that is non-Woman, and vice versa for man” (p. 36). Hence, the contemporary definition of *gender* retains the idea of distinction and continues to mark boundaries according to certain ones.

Wilchins’s (2004) definition includes a number of other helpful ideas. The idea that gender is language relates to gender expression. People can express ideas using oral or written language; people can also express ideas related to gender through certain ways of dressing, behaving, and so forth. As in other forms of language, the message one intends to relay is not necessarily the message others receive; hence, gender attribution is another’s interpretation of one’s gender expression. A direct correlation between gender identity, gender expression, and gender attribution does not exist, just as a direct correlation between speech/textual acts and the reading of speech/textual acts does not exist. Wilchins’s definition also points out that gender is a system of power relations that includes rules with privileges and punishments. This system of power relations and its related privileges and punishments will be elaborated in the section on the gender-oppression matrix.

Defining Transgender

The English word *transgender* was coined in the 1980s by Virginia Prince to mean someone who changed

gender by changing their presentation of self through clothing and behavior rather than by changing their bodies (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). After the publication of Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come* in 1992, *transgender* quickly "became an umbrella term for *anyone* who crossed gender lines" (Wilchins, 2004, p. 26). Hence, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, or PFLAG, defined transgender people as "those whose gender identity or gender expression differs from conventional expectations for their physical sex" (2004, p. 3). Similarly, Tranzmission (n.d.), a transgender and transgender ally activist group, defined *trans* or *transgender* as "those who transgress societal gender norms . . . those who defy rigid gender constructions, and who express or present a breaking and/or blurring of cultural/stereotypical gender roles" (p. 14). These definitions of transgender bring together many of the gender-related concepts described earlier. Transgender peoples' gender assignment does not match their gender identity. Furthermore, transgender peoples' gender identity and/or gender expression fall outside of stereotypical gender roles. The gender others attribute to transgender people may or may not match their gender identity.

Definitions of *transgender* emphasize that it is a broad umbrella term that often entails long lists of identities. For example, PFLAG (2004) has the following list within its definition of transgender:

Transgender people include pre-operative, post-operative and non-operative transsexuals, who generally feel that they were born into the wrong physical sex; crossdressers (formerly called transvestites), who occasionally wear the clothing of the opposite sex in order to fully express an inner, cross-gender identity; and many other identities too numerous to list here. Trans people are usually categorized as Male-to-Female (MTF) or Female-to-Male (FTM) although a growing number, including many trans youth, prefer to identify somewhere between male and female. (p. 3)

What is true for all of these groups of people is that they challenge dominant assumptions about gender.

Rationale for Addressing Transgender Issues in Education

Transgender Issues in Educational Research

Whereas a rich tradition of gender research and feminist theory exists in the field of education (Stone, 1994), research related to transgender people has been largely missing, although this is beginning to change. A 2005

search of the extensive education database ERIC revealed only three documents specifically focusing on transgender issues (Beemyn, 2003; Carroll & Gilroy, 2002; Chen-Hayes, 2001), whereas a search in March of 2009 revealed 16 such documents. Although the term *transgender* is appearing more frequently in education journal articles, it usually appears at the end of the long list "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender" or "lgbt." In most of these articles, the main focus is on lesbian and gay individuals while transgender issues are ignored. Often, even when transgender people are included in research studies, the data often are not disaggregated; therefore, the relevance of the results and conclusions for transgender people cannot be determined (e.g., Irwin, 2002). Book chapters focused on transgender issues have begun to become more prevalent in the past 15 years (e.g., Beemyn, 2005; Bopp, Juday, & Charters, 2005; Carter, 2000; Lees, 1998; Nakamura, 1998; Sears, 2005). Until the publication of *The Transgender Child* by Stephanie Brill and Rachel Pepper (2008), the literature has tended to focus heavily on the experiences of college students or transgender adults, with very little attention to younger transgender people. Transgender issues are completely missing from the field of teacher education.

Participation of Transgender People in the Educational System

The scarcity of research on transgender issues in education is problematic because transgender people participate in the educational system at all levels. The number of transgender people who participate in the education system is difficult to measure because the high level of societal transphobia¹ ensures that many transgender individuals are not comfortable publicly acknowledging their identity. Furthermore, lack of access to information prevents many young people whose gender differs from the dominant model from having the language to name their experiences and feelings. Despite the difficulties in measuring the prevalence of transgender people in the educational system, Beemyn (2005) noted that

youth who do not fit stereotypical notions of 'female' and 'male' are becoming much more visible on North American [college] campuses and a growing number of students are identifying as gender variant [i.e., those whose gender identity or expression varies from societal norms]. (p. 106)

College is not the only educational setting in which transgender students participate. Lees (1998) stated that

some people seem to be born with transgender feelings. Often expression is given to these feelings at a very early age. . . . I was always aware of being transsexual, though it was a long time before I understood what that meant and could give my feelings a name. (p. 38)

Brill and Pepper (2008) noted that many transgender people realize that they are transgender in childhood. These examples indicate that transgender children participate in the educational system as early as elementary school. Teacher education programs have the responsibility of preparing teachers to support the growth of transgender individuals at all levels of the education system.

Harassment, Bullying, and Violence Against Transgender People

The field of education is failing miserably in its responsibility to transgender students. Gender nonconforming people face much violence and bullying. One well-known example is that of Brandon Teena, whose 1993 brutal transphobic rape and murder are depicted in the film *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999). Because violence such as this is common, the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance memorializes those who were killed because of antitransgender hate (Smith, 2005). Transgender-identified people are not the only ones who suffer because of transphobia. Anyone who transgresses gender expectations can be targeted. For example, Mark Shaposhnikov, the parent of a 12-year-old male competitive ballroom dancer, filed a lawsuit because the child's peers physically and verbally abused him based on the premise that this type of dancing was considered not to be a "male" activity (Glimps, 2005). Young transgender students are disproportionately likely to face harassment in school (Bauer, 2002) and are the least likely group of students to believe that their school communities are safe places (GLSEN, 2001). In 2009, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported that 90% of transgender students heard negative remarks about someone's gender expression sometimes, often, or frequently in school. Almost all transgender students had been verbally harassed and more than half had been physically harassed in the past year. More than one fourth had experienced physical assault such as punching, kicking, or injury with a weapon within the last year. Almost half reported that they felt unsafe at school and often skipped classes and entire school days based on fear for their personal safety (GLSEN, 2009). Furthermore, faculty and staff exacerbated the problem by failing to intervene and by making prejudicial comments themselves (GLSEN, 2009). Obviously, students

benefit little from school if personal safety is constantly threatened or if they cannot come to school at all. Transgender students, like all students, should have the opportunity to participate in school without constant worry about personal safety.

The Gender Oppression Matrix

Privilege and Oppression

Rules for gender are associated with privileges and punishments as part of a system that privileges certain groups of people and oppresses others. According to Johnson (1997), "privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they've done or failed to do" (p. 23). Johnson also pointed out that whenever one social category is privileged, at least one other category is oppressed. Johnson further defined *oppression* as "a social phenomenon that happens between different groups in a society; it is a system of social inequality through which one group is positioned to dominate and benefit from the exploitation and subordination of another" (p. 136). Privilege and oppression operate at the level of groups or categories. Although it is individuals who experience privilege and oppression, "individuals aren't what is actually privileged. Instead, privilege is defined in relation to a group or social category" (Johnson, 1997, p. 34). Also, whereas belonging to a privileged group "improves the odds in favor of certain kinds of advantages and preferential treatment," such group membership does not "guarantee anything for any given individual" (Johnson, 1997, p. 39).

The Gender Oppression Matrix

Privilege and oppression take on specific forms in what I call the "gender oppression matrix."² The gender oppression matrix consists of two connected forms of gender oppression. The first form, "gender category oppression," is oppression based on the gender category in which one is perceived to be. It is an ideology or set of ideas that promotes the privilege of those categorized as men in part by portraying those categorized as women as inferior (Johnson, 1997). Within a society based on gender category oppression, men as a group are systematically privileged and women as a group are systematically oppressed (Johnson, 1997). Feminists have traditionally labeled this form of oppression *sexism*. However, because it is based on gender categories rather than sex, *gender category oppression* is a more apt term. Also, much of the theorizing about sexism subscribes to

the assumption that “there are two, and only two, genders” (Bornstein, 1994, p. 46). This does not take into consideration those who do not identify within the binary gender categorization of men/boys and women/girls. Those who cross gender lines in their gender identity or gender expression (those who don’t follow the “rules” described by Bornstein, 1994) and those who reject gender categories altogether are oppressed because they challenge these binary categories and the assumption that gender maps directly onto biology. This second form of oppression is “gender transgression oppression.”

The gender oppression matrix, which allows people to see the effects of the intersection of these two conceptually distinct forms of sexism, provides a more powerful framework for explaining the complex sets of gender privilege and oppression that individuals experience. For example, a girl who dresses in a traditionally feminine way is both oppressed based on her gender category and also privileged based on her gender conformity. She may face sexual harassment, wear uncomfortable clothes that restrict her movements, and receive less attention from teachers than do boys. Despite these aspects of oppression as a girl, she also has the privilege of using public restrooms without being questioned and can count on people referring to her with her preferred pronoun. Alternatively, a person may have gender category privilege at the same time as experiencing gender transgression oppression. For example, a Female-to-Male transsexual’s contributions to conversations may be valued more than are those of women but he may also experience oppression at the doctor’s office because of his status as transgender.

The fact that one can face gender category oppression but still have gender conformity privilege (and vice versa) leads to tensions between feminists and transgender activists. For example, in 1991, the Michigan Womyn’s Festival expelled transgender people, transsexuals, and gender-variant women and have continued to exclude them since then (Gluckman & Trudeau, 2002). Hence, some transgender activists have been wary of working with nontransgender feminists. However, gender category oppression and gender transgression oppression collude within the gender oppression matrix to constrain both nontransgender women and girls and transgender people. For example, gender transgression oppression affects all women and girls by limiting choices and prescribing behaviors. Similarly, gender category oppression is based on the assumption that there are only two genders and, therefore, places restrictions on transgender people. In the *Transfeminist Manifesto*, Emi Koyama (2001) stated that “transfeminism believes that a society that honors cross-gender identities is one that treats all people fairly, because

[transwomen’s] existence is seen as problematic only when there is a rigid gender hierarchy” (Call for Action, para. 3). In the words of Sadie Crabtree (2002), “Trans issues are . . . feminist issues. . . . Activists working in both movements [must] recognize the interconnectedness of our issues, and search for ways to work in coalition around these challenges” (p. 11).

Because schools are rife with gender category oppression and gender transgression oppression, creating schools in which all students can flourish demands that teacher educators prepare teachers to challenge the gender oppression matrix in their classrooms, the broader school environment, and beyond. This must begin with teacher educators’ own understanding of the gender oppression matrix and continue with teacher educators’ interactions with future teachers.

The Gender Oppression Matrix and Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity consists of the “localized practices and . . . centralized institutions that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and ‘natural’ within society” (Cohen, 2005, p. 24). The gender oppression matrix and heteronormativity work together to preserve the privileges especially of heterosexual gender-conforming men. For example, Blount (1998) examined the connection between fears of “the homosexual menace” and regulation of gender in school employment after Kinsey and his colleagues’ (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) influential works on the sexual behavior of males and females. Hate crimes and bullying also illustrate how these forms of oppression mutually support each other. Bullies often make assumptions about victims’ sexual orientation based on their gender expression. Lesbians and gay men are often attacked because of gender nonconformity. Gender-nonconforming victims of hate crimes are often assumed to be gay or lesbian. Friend (1993) noted that “not fitting what is considered the ‘appropriate’ gender role is often framed by others as ‘flaunting’ sexual behavior, therefore ‘justifying’ a hostile response” (p. 223). Even though *transgender* relates to gender and *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* refer to sexuality, oppression based on sexuality and gender interconnect.

The Gender Oppression Matrix and Racism

A full understanding of the gender oppression matrix is not possible without considering the ways in which gender and race interact. Johnnie Pratt (2006, personal

communication) has pointed out that the consequences of transitioning from a woman to a man are not the same for a Black person as they are for a White person because Black men are perceived and treated differently than are White men. Black transmen experience racist oppression that White transmen do not. Inversely, White transmen experience White privilege that transmen of Color do not. However, just as gender oppression is complex, so is racial oppression. For example, Max Wolf Valerio (2002) described the complex array of gender and racial privilege and oppression he faces as a transman. Although often confronted with the question, “Now that you’re a white man, and have all that male privilege—how does it feel?” (p. 240), Valerio explained that he is “not actually . . . ‘white’” (p. 246):

My mother is from the Kainai or Blood band of the Blackfoot Confederacy and I’m a registered Treaty Indian in Canada. My father is Hispanic from Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico. . . . Of mixed race, and the lightest person in my family, I appear to be any number or combination of ethnic groups or races. . . . I never liked being so light, and only accepted it with great effort over time. . . . Since some people view me as a ‘white person,’ it would be fair to say that I must sometimes have ‘white skin privilege.’ However, when I am taken as white only, I feel invisible as a nonwhite person, and unseen. . . . And what of this male privilege? . . . I usually have to think hard to tally what privileges I have now that I didn’t have before; in other words—being a man isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Transsexual men do not accomplish their change for male privilege. . . . However, there are certainly some advantages. I am listened to more. . . . I take up more air time. . . . I don’t worry about being raped or sexually harassed on the streets. (p. 247)

Teacher education programs must provide experiences for preservice teachers that support them in developing an understanding of the complexity of gender and race and a commitment to challenge racism and the gender oppression matrix.

Forms of Gender Education

Students learn a great deal about gender in the educational system. These experiences can serve to reproduce the gender oppression matrix or they can challenge it. If teacher educators are committed to social justice, then it is important to take steps toward challenging the effects of the gender oppression matrix rather than reinforcing it in work with future teachers. Four forms of gender education are addressed in this section: gender-stereotyped

education, gender-free or gender-blind education, gender-sensitive education, and gender-complex education.

Gender-Stereotyped Education

Gender-stereotyped education reproduces the gender oppression matrix in the classroom. All students are assumed to fit into a dichotomous classification of gender, that is, to be either a boy or a girl. This is evident when teachers address the class as “boys and girls,” in the common practice of having “boy” and “girl” bathrooms, and when teachers segregate students into “boy” and “girl” groups or lines (Brill & Pepper, 2008). These gender categories are viewed as rigid and invariant and as being based on genitalia (Bornstein, 1994). Teachers and students assume that girls and boys are essentially different. For example, boys are assumed to like informational books and girls are assumed to like narrative books (Chapman, Filipenko, McTavish, & Shapiro, 2007). Teachers, parents, and students also make assumptions about competence of students of different genders: For example, teachers, parents, and students assume that boys are better than girls in math (Leedy, LaLonde, & Runk, 2003). Teachers also interact with boys and girls differently: Teachers pay more attention to boys than to girls, and they call on boys to answer more abstract and complex questions more often (Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1992, summarized in Owens, Smothers, & Love, 2003).

These assumptions of gender-stereotyped education play out in specific ways in classrooms. For example, a sixth-grade science teacher in Maryland wrote a list of inventors and their discoveries on the board, listing only men. A girl pointed out, “It looks like all the inventors were men. Didn’t women invent anything?” The teacher responded, “Sweetheart, don’t worry about it. It’s the same with famous writers and painters. It’s the man’s job to create things and the woman’s job to look beautiful so she can inspire him” (Sadker & Sadker, 1995, pp. 6-7). Another teacher created an assignment in which students were to draw lines from items such as a hammer, screwdriver, saw, nails, sewing needle, thread, and a broom to pictures of a man and a woman; students who did not connect the hammer, screwdriver, saw, and nails to the man and the sewing needle, thread, and broom to the woman received Fs (Sadker & Sadker, 1995, pp. 7-8). In another classroom, a teacher often asked girls and boys to line up separately. One student started to hide in the coatroom whenever it is time to line up to avoid having to choose between the “boy” and “girl” lines (Brill & Pepper, 2008). Examples such as these exemplify the ways in which gender-stereotyped education reproduces the gender

oppression matrix which privileges men and boys and those who conform to dominant gender expectations.

Teacher educators promote gender-stereotyped education when they fail to challenge the above beliefs, attitudes, and actions among future teachers. For example, a methods instructor accepts without comment a lesson plan about inventors that only mentions men. A professor teaching children's literature fails to challenge gender stereotypes in children's books. A student teacher supervisor fails to point out to student teachers when they call on boys and/or gender-conforming students more than girls or transgender students. By failing to challenge the gender oppression matrix, teacher educators promote it.

Gender-Free/Gender-Blind Education

Barbara Houston (1985; reprinted in Stone, 1994) described and critiqued a second form of gender education, gender-free/gender-blind education. The assumptions in gender-free/gender-blind education are that gender can and should be ignored in educational contexts and that gender is irrelevant to education. The idea is that if teachers ignore gender, then girls and boys will receive the same treatment and the same education and, therefore, boys and girls will receive equitable educations. Here, "gender-free" refers to the form of education, but not to the students who are being educated. Each student is still assumed to be a boy or girl, not both or neither. However, this categorization is assumed to be irrelevant to the educational process.

Many possible examples illustrate the idea of gender-free or gender-blind education. Coed sports teams are one. Another is a teacher randomly assigning students to the house and Lego centers regardless of gender (e.g., assigning students to centers by pulling popsicle sticks with student names from a can). Still others are these: A teacher uses the same methods to teach reading to boys and girls. Girls and boys wear identical school uniforms. A teacher uses a randomly shuffled stack of name cards to call on students during a class discussion. Toys are randomly assigned to boy and girl characters in math story problems.

Teacher educators take a gender-free or gender-blind approach when they ignore issues of gender. For example, a social studies methods instructor may not specifically address issues of gender in the course. Literacy methods courses may teach about reading methods without considering the role gender may play in learning to read. An introduction to education course may completely leave out gender. Teacher educators see the gender of teacher candidates as irrelevant. A student teacher supervisor suggests that student teachers use gender-free

or gender-blind approaches like using popsicle sticks to assign students to centers or assigning toys randomly to boy and girl characters in math story problems.

Houston (1985; reprinted in Stone, 1994) found that gender-free or gender-blind education does not result in equitable education but instead creates a context that continues to favor the dominant group, that is, boys. Furthermore, gender-free/gender-blind education actually prevents educators from using certain strategies that may be needed to promote gender equity (Houston, 1985). Houston cited examples of the ways that gender-free/gender-blind education reproduces the gender oppression matrix. For example, one researcher found that in the interactions in a fifth-grade coed physical education class, although girls and boys were represented on teams, the boys left the girls out of game interactions even when the girls had higher skill levels than did boys. In addition, both boys and girls considered boys to be better players even when girls actually had higher skill levels. In fact, boys favored passing the ball to an unskilled boy rather than to a skilled girl. Houston suggested that this phenomenon, "where males keep passing the ball to each other, is a metaphor for all types of mixed-sex classrooms and activities" (reprinted in Stone, 1994, p. 124). Although teachers may ignore gender in assigning students to teams (or collaborative groups, etc.), the teacher and students still react to one another according to internalized notions of gender roles based in the gender oppression matrix. Also, because the assumptions of the gender oppression matrix are internalized and often work unconsciously, teachers continue to react to students differently based on gender even when they try not to do so. For example, Houston pointed out that

if teachers fail to notice the gender of the student who is talking, if they pay no attention to who is interrupting whom, whose points are acknowledged and taken up, who is determining the topic of discussion, then they will by default perpetuate patterns that discourage women's [and girls] participation in the educational process. (reprinted in Stone, 1994, p. 125)

This is further complicated by the fact that even when teachers attempt to treat boys and girls the same,

their perceptions of how they interact with students are often grossly inaccurate. Having claimed to have treated girls and boys equally in the classroom, they are shocked to discover through objective observation measures that they spend over two thirds of their time with boys who comprise less than half of the class. (Houston, 1985; reprinted in Stone, 1994, p. 126)

Furthermore, Houston (1985) found that

when teachers feel they are being fair, or even showing favoritism to girls, the empirical evidence shows otherwise. For example, giving 35 percent of one's attention to girls can feel as though one is being unfair to boys. . . . In a sexist society boys perceive that two-thirds of the teacher's time is a fair allotment for them, and if it is altered so that they receive less, they feel they are discriminated against. (reprinted in Stone, 1994, p. 127)

Although gender-free or gender-blind education is intended to eliminate gender-based oppression, it actually allows this oppression to be reproduced.

Gender-Sensitive Education

To counteract the weaknesses of gender-free or gender-blind education, Houston (1985; reprinted in Stone, 1994) suggested gender-sensitive education. In gender-sensitive education, teachers pay attention to gender to counteract "sex bias or further sex equality" (p. 131). Gender-sensitive education is a situational strategy that allows teachers to recognize that different situations may call for different, even opposing, policies. Houston claims that gender-sensitive education is a "higher order perspective than that involved in the gender-free strategy" (p. 131) because the gender-sensitive perspective encourages educators to constantly ask questions and reflect on practice. For example, it encourages educators to ask, "Is gender operative here? How is gender operative? What other effects do our strategies for eliminating gender bias have?" (p. 131). Rather than a "blueprint for education that will answer all our questions about particular practices," gender-sensitive education is a perspective that "constantly reminds us to question the ways in which students and teachers make sense of and respond to a sexist culture" (p. 131).

Houston (1985) investigated what gender-sensitive education would look like in practice. In a physical education class, educators might introduce new rules requiring players to alternate passes between girls and boys. In volleyball, boys might be required to set up strikes for girls. Houston also suggests that single-sex schooling might allow girls to have the opportunity to participate in subjects such as math and science in ways that do not happen in coed classrooms. Because gender-sensitive education is a situational strategy, gender-sensitive educators may decide that the best strategy in one situation is to implement coed instruction but in other situations the best strategy is to implement single-sex instruction.

Teacher educators take a gender-sensitive approach when they address issues of gender in their courses, encourage future teachers to pay attention to gender in their classrooms, and take into consideration the gender composition of teacher candidates in their courses to devise strategies to challenge gender category oppression. For example, the instructor of an introduction to education course assigns readings related to studies on single-sex schooling. An instructor of a music methods course asks teacher candidates to analyze the ways in which gender is portrayed in children's songs. A student teacher supervisor encourages student teachers to address the questions "Is gender operative here? How is gender operative? What other effects do our strategies for eliminating gender bias have?" (Houston, 1985; reprinted in Stone, 1994, p. 131) in their reflections.

Houston offered a strong argument for attending to gender. However, Houston's gender-sensitive education leaves gender transgression oppression unchallenged. To develop an educational form that will challenge the entire gender oppression matrix, educators must take into consideration the existence and needs of transgender students and teach gender in a more complex way.

Gender-Complex Education

I argue for the need of a form of gender education, gender-complex education, that goes beyond the gender-sensitive model. As in gender-sensitive education, educators teaching from a gender-complex perspective constantly question the ways in which gender is operating and what the consequences are. However, gender-complex education challenges not only gender category oppression but also gender transgression oppression. It takes into consideration the complex sets of privilege and oppression that students and teachers experience based on their gender categories, gender expressions, and the gender attributions others make of them. Gender-complex educators are aware of the ways in which the gender oppression matrix and heterosexism work in tandem to privilege certain groups of people and oppress others and take action to challenge the gender oppression matrix and heterosexism. The gender-complex teacher does not expect children to fit into a dichotomous classification of gender. Gender categories are acknowledged as fluid. Gender-complex teachers work with students to analyze at the micro level the ways in which gender is constantly being socially constructed in the classroom as well as macro-level influences on this process. Moving beyond analysis, teachers and students take reflective action to reconstruct gender

in ways that are more equitable within the classroom and beyond.

The gender-complex approach plays out in specific ways in the classroom. Consider a literacy lesson in a kindergarten class. After listening to the story of Cinderella, a student might point out that the man in the story is portrayed as able to take care of himself and others while the woman character is portrayed as needing a great deal of help. The teacher might point out that that is an example of gender category oppression and ask another student to explain why. A second student might point out that all of the characters are either men or women, portraying gender as having only two categories. A discussion of gender transgression oppression ensues. A third student might note that everyone in the story assumes that all of the sisters want to marry a man, and that this is heterosexism. Finally, the class might write a new fairy tale that challenges the gender oppression matrix and heterosexism.

Imagining Gender-Complex Teacher Education

For the above scenario to take place, teacher educators must begin to rethink the ways in which they prepare teachers to work with students in classrooms. Transformation in teacher education must take place simultaneously in three layers. First, we as teacher educators must begin to think about gender in more complex ways. Second, teacher educators must work with future and current teachers to think about gender in more complex ways. Finally, teacher educators must support teacher candidates to actually enact gender-complex education with students. In the next section, I begin to imagine possible forms each of these levels of transformation might take.

Transforming Ourselves: Gender-Complex Self-Education for Teacher Educators

For teacher educators to support future teachers in enacting gender-complex education, teacher educators must interrogate their own thinking about gender. Most teacher educators have themselves experienced schooling that is gender stereotyped, gender blind, gender sensitive, or some combination of these. Settings outside of school also most often contribute to gender-stereotyped, gender-blind, and gender-sensitive ways of thinking about gender. Hence, most teacher educators do not think about gender in complex ways (although there are certainly exceptions, especially those teacher educators who themselves fall outside of dominant gender norms). For teacher educators who do not think about gender in

complex ways, a first step might involve gaining awareness of gender complexity and gender variation throughout different times and places. Reading books such as Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors* (1996) and *Trans Liberation* (1998); Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* (1994) and *My Gender Workbook* (1998); Riki Wilchins' *Read My Lips* (1997) and *Queer Theory, Gender Theory* (2004); José Estaban Muñoz's *Disidentifications* (1999); Mattilda a.k.a Matt Berstein Sycamore's (2006) *Nobody Passes*; and *Genderqueer* edited by Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchins (2002) is a good way to start. However, awareness in and of itself is not enough to enact transformation. In *Against Common Sense* Kevin Kumashiro (2004) argued that

challenging oppression requires more than simply becoming aware of oppression, and this is because people are often *invested* in the status quo, as when people desire repeating what has become normalized in our lives. Change requires a willingness to step outside of this comfort zone. (p. 46)

Kumashiro argued that it is important for people to address their "own subconscious desires for learning only certain things and resistances to learning other things" (p. xxvi). Kumashiro proposed that one aspect of this is "learning through crisis" where crisis means "a state of emotional discomfort and disorientation that calls on students to make some change" (p. 28). Here, Kumashiro clarified, the crisis itself does not constitute learning; rather it is working through the crises that forms the learning process (p. 28). In *Troubling Education*, Kumashiro (2002) modeled addressing his own resistances related to the stories told by Debbie, a transwoman:

Debbie's stories remind me of stories I read several years ago, when I felt perplexed by transgenderism. I did not understand why people who were critical of a gender binary would reinforce that binary by claiming the "other" gender. I wondered why they did not discard the binary altogether and claim a different, queer gender. . . . But then I did some homework . . . and realized that transgenderism is not as simplistic as I had assumed. Transgenderism involves contradictions. It involves paradoxical ways of troubling gender identities. In particular, rather than merely rejecting "male" and "female," it simultaneously embraces and looks beyond these identities. This paradoxical process refuses to stabilize gender identities, which is perhaps why I initially felt so troubled by transgenderism. It destabilizes my own gender identities. (p. 167)

By “troubling” his own thinking about gender, Kevin Kumashiro transformed his thinking about gender from a more simplistic mode to a more complex mode.

Transforming Teachers: Gender-Complex Education With Future and Current Teachers

The second layer of transformation involves supporting teachers to think about gender in more complex ways. One place to begin is with the concept of privilege. Often in teacher education courses, I have introduced the idea of privilege through Peggy McIntosh’s (1990) article about White privilege. I also prepare 9 or 10 sheets of paper, each of which lists a form of privilege (e.g., race privilege, class privilege, linguistic privilege) and a sentence stem (e.g., “In the United States, White people can count on . . .”) at the top. Among the forms of privilege are “gender privilege” and “gender presentation privilege”³ with the respective sentence stems “Men can count on . . .” and “Nontransgender people can count on . . .” Teachers form circles and pass the sheets around, adding as many examples as they can within a certain time period until everyone has had a chance to contribute to each sheet. These lists of teacher-generated concrete examples provide a starting place for discussing the gender oppression matrix and how it intersects with other forms of privilege and oppression.

Classroom observation, a common component of teacher education programs, provides another possibility for transforming how teachers see gender. Riki Wilchins (2004) told a parable of an anthropologist who

goes in search of new genders. He sails to a remote, distant island, where the inhabitants recognize six of them. He goes ashore, and finds himself face-to-face with half a dozen statues representing gods, with one for each recognized gender. Crestfallen, the anthropologist turns around to continue his search elsewhere because, as he reports back, “like everyplace else, they had only two genders.” Two genders were all he could see. (p. 134)

Based on teachers’ own previous gender-stereotyped, gender-blind, or gender-sensitive education, many teachers will see in the classroom exactly what the anthropologist saw: two genders. However, discussing the concepts of gender identity, gender expression, gender attribution, gender assignment, and gender roles before teachers observe may allow for a more nuanced interpretations of how gender is enacted in the classroom. Observers might consider some of the following questions: Which aspects of dress, speech, and behavior do

I interpret as expressing gender? What gendered meanings to I attribute to these? In interactions among students or between students and the teacher, what gender attributions do different people seem to be making? How do students and teachers communicate gender expectations? In what ways do students conform to or contest these expectations? In what ways do different students benefit from these various gender attributions and expectations? How are students limited by them? What roles do race, language background, form of mobility, and other dimensions play in all of this?

Although nuanced observations may raise awareness of gender complexity in the classroom, it is critical to follow such observations with ways to address resistances, work through crises, and allow teachers to interrogate their reactions. Possible questions to consider include the following: How did what I saw fit with what I expected and what challenged my expectations? What surprised me about my own reactions? Was there anything I saw that I wanted to overlook? What did I see that other teachers did not see and vice versa? How did our interpretations differ? How might my interpretations benefit or limit different students? This process may take many different forms such as dialogue journals with a teacher educator or another teacher, small- or whole-group discussion, or art-based responses.

Imagination plays an important role in transformation. Fettes (2005) suggested that “teacher education, the process of becoming a teacher and aiding others to become teachers, is in part a journey of imaginative development. Students come to imagine teaching, and themselves as teachers, in new ways” (p. 3). Califia (1997) challenged readers to imagine worlds with different gender systems:

What would it be like to grow up in a society where gender was truly consensual? If the rite of passage was to name your own gender at adolescence, or upon your transition into adulthood?

What would it be like to walk down the street, go to work, or attend a party and take it for granted that the gender of the people you met would not be the first thing you ascertained about them? What impact would that have on how you treated them? Or on how they treated you? What if gender was no longer a marker of privilege . . . ?

What would it be like to live in a society where you could take a vacation from gender? Or (even more importantly) from *other* peoples’ gender . . . ? And what would it be like to live in a society where nobody was punished for dressing up in drag? (p. 277)

One possibility is to challenge teachers to pose their own “what if” questions, such as “What if all children in our

society started out using gender-neutral pronouns and then chose 'he' or 'she' at the beginning of middle school? Or chose from 4 possible pronouns?" Teachers might then choose one or more questions to expand into a teaching scenario, short story, or poem.

Transforming Students: Supporting Teachers to Work With Students in Gender-Complex Ways

Even if teachers begin to think about gender in more complex ways, they may not enact gender-complex education when actually working with students and may not be prepared to work with transgender students. One way current and future teachers might become better prepared is through variations on Augusto Boal's (1995) Forum Theatre. In Forum Theatre, a group of people identify an event in one person's life in which that person experienced oppression. Several people act out the event as it happened. Then, they act it out again, but this time those in the audience (the "spect-actors") can freeze the scene and exchange places with the protagonist (the person who had the oppressive experience). Once a spect-actor joins the scene, the action resumes, the new actor attempts an intervention to prevent or challenge the oppression and those playing the oppressors adapt to the new storyline. The event can be enacted repeatedly, allowing the group to work through possibilities for challenging oppression. Forum Theatre might be used in multiple ways in gender-complex teacher education. First, teacher candidates might identify events in which they experienced gender category oppression or gender transgression oppression and collectively use Forum Theatre to work through alternative ways in which they could respond. Second, teachers could use Forum Theatre to work through alternative ways to react as teachers in situations where students face gender category or gender transgression oppression. For example, what possibilities are open to a teacher if transphobic parents demand that their children be moved into a different class when they find out that one of the students is transgender? What might a teacher do if an administrator says that a transgender student is not allowed to use the bathroom with which the student feels most comfortable? What could a student teacher do if a cooperating teacher refused to call a transgender student by his or her or hir preferred pronoun or name? This process allows future and current teachers to enact multiple ways to challenge the gender oppression matrix so that when faced with similar situations, they will be better prepared to challenge oppression rather than stand idly by or contribute to oppression.

Conclusion

Teacher education programs have the opportunity to be at the forefront in challenging gender category oppression and gender transgression oppression and working toward social justice and gender equity for all students. The current educational system in the United States is shortchanging transgender students on a daily basis. In addition, by not challenging gender oppression, the educational system is doing all students a disservice because all students are in danger of incurring punishments for crossing gender lines. The gender-complex approach to education provides a framework for beginning the work of challenging the gender oppression matrix within the field of education.

Notes

1. *Transphobia* is the fear and hatred of transgender people.
2. The "matrix" portion of the term *gender oppression matrix* loosely references Patricia Hill Collin's (2000) term *matrix of domination* and Judith Butler's (1990) term *heterosexual matrix*, though it is used somewhat differently here. Here, the term is used because gender category oppression and gender transgression oppression are the "elements which make up a particular system [the gender oppression matrix], regarded as an interconnecting network" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989, n.p.).
3. I would now use "gender category privilege" instead of "gender privilege" and "gender conformity privilege" instead of "gender presentation privilege."

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