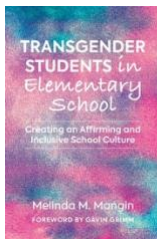


Transgender Students in Elementary School: Creating an Affirming and Inclusive School Culture

Reviewed by Katherine Lewis



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In *Transgender Students in Elementary School: Creating an Affirming and Inclusive School Culture*, Dr. Melinda Mangin offers a clear introduction and guide for elementary teachers who aim to better support their transgender and gender-expansive students. Gavin Grimm’s foreword starts with a glimpse into his experiences as a young transgender activist. He reminds readers that building a better world for transgender people includes addressing “necessary societal, cultural, legislative, and educational changes” (p. x) and that this liberatory work starts with education. While this book serves as an educational tool, one that provides an introduction to the experiences and perspectives of transgender youth while examining the power structures that reinforce rigid gender norms, Mangin also calls us to take swift action; to begin changing our practices to be more affirming of our transgender and gender-expansive students.

The introductory chapter sets the stage for a deep dive into these affirming practices. Mangin shares background information about the policing of gender in schools and provides some context about transgender students’ experiences. Though the target audience is “educators who are new to the topic of transgender identities” (p. 7), *Transgender Students in Elementary School* is a must-read book for all members of a school community—including administrators, experienced teachers, and parents—who aim to change their practices to be more affirming of

students. In this first chapter, readers learn details about Mangin's qualitative research project, a case study of five schools which included interviews with 75 educators. The overarching research question, "How do elementary-level educators create supportive environments for transgender and gender-expansive students?" (p. 10), generated complex narratives about educator-participants' successes and challenges with this improvement process. These stories are shared throughout the remaining six chapters.

Chapter 2 provides additional background information needed to understand participants' stories, including statistics about discrimination towards transgender people in the United States. Terms related to sexual and gender diversity are also clearly outlined in this chapter. Mangin reminds readers that schools mirror societal injustices, and that we are responsible for educational outreach within our school communities. She explains that "unless educators see transgender identities as legitimate, they will remain unmotivated to change their educational practice" (p. 22). The importance of this ongoing educational outreach is explained further in Chapter 4.

Chapters 3 and 5 discuss the role of school administrators and classroom teachers in proactively creating supportive environments. Chapter 3, which highlights principals' stories about supporting transgender students, concludes that supportive principals take a child-centered approach, foster strong relationships with families, and demonstrate a willingness and eagerness to learn. Mangin states that while these leaders play an important role in creating supportive environments, any efforts to "fundamentally change the cisnormative culture of schools" is "the work of a lifetime" (p. 65). In other words, this work requires sustained commitment from all members of the school community. Chapter 5 highlights teachers' experiences supporting transgender and gender-expansive students. Overall, these teachers took proactive steps guided by three principles: reducing gendered practices, increasing classroom discussions about gender, and unconditionally affirming gender identities (especially those not conforming to current gender norms). Based on findings from teachers' narratives, Mangin presents ways teachers decrease gendered practices, including resisting language that reinforces a gender binary. Other suggestions include organizing gender-expansive play and incorporating children's books with gender-diverse characters.

In Chapter 4, Mangin reiterates the importance of continual educational outreach for school communities. She describes some of the learning opportunities available at the five school sites and concludes that "teachers were the most common recipients of professional learning related to transgender students" (p. 72) and that trainings are typically offered once, in response to a transgender student being enrolled at the school. This chapter includes recommendations for ongoing education of the larger school community; such opportunities help to "develop shared beliefs that shift the cisnormative status quo to create school and classroom cultures where all gender identities are affirmed" (p. 94). In recognition that "children are immersed in gendered spaces daily" (p. 124), Chapter 6 explores district-level practices and policies regarding school buildings, and presents ways educators help transgender children navigate gendered spaces. Mangin notes that the dominant approaches used (i.e., accommodating and/or assimilating students) ask transgender students to change; however, modifying spaces with a focus on universal accessibility (which were rarely, if ever, used at the school sites in this study) would be a more sustainable approach.

The concluding chapter provides a summary of the preceding six chapters and points to broader gender inequity problems that require sustained changes in practice. Mangin calls for a two-pronged approach to creating spaces affirming of transgender and gender-expansive youth: proactively changing school cultures and responding to the individual needs of students. In

working to reculture schools for gender equity, Mangin recommends that educators make space for gender-expansive identities, facilitate difficult conversations about gender, and create affirming policies and curriculum. Appendix A provides details about the methodology of this qualitative research project, including demographics for the five elementary school sites at which Mangin conducted interviews with educators. A collection of related resources for educators is offered in Appendix B, which includes relevant websites, books for K–12 teachers, and annotations for children’s picture books. Finally, a glossary of transgender terminology (reprinted from Green & Maurer, 2015) is provided to support educators’ understanding of transgender students’ experiences.

Overall, *Transgender Students in Elementary School* is an important read for all members of a school community, and especially for educators and leaders focused on improving their practices to be more affirming of students. Mangin presents vignettes from 75 educators who are engaged in the messy, imperfect process of continued learning. Across seven chapters, readers first learn background information and context about transgender students’ experiences, and then explore practices that affirm transgender and gender-expansive identities. With this book, Mangin provides an introduction and guide, while calling for a sustained commitment to the ongoing work of engaging in affirming practices. Through sharing real stories of imperfect practice, Mangin’s work not only helps educators envision the possibilities of an inclusive culture but also encourages us to embrace the lifelong commitment to creating deep, meaningful change that affirms all students.

References

Green, E. R., & Maurer, L. M. (2015). *The teaching transgender toolkit: A facilitator’s guide to increasing knowledge, reducing prejudice & building skills*. Center for Sexuality Education.

Author Biography

KATHERINE LEWIS, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor and Director of the Multiple Subject Credential Program at Dominican University of California. Dr. Lewis was an elementary school teacher for nine years in Texas, California, and Colorado. She has experience working with grades Pre-K through 3rd across diverse school settings, including a rural Title I campus, an International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme, and a SWIFT model charter school for full inclusion. She received a PhD in school improvement and her award-winning project (Dissertation of the Year, American Educational Research Association's Leadership for Social Justice SIG) focused on gender diverse voices in K-12 schools.