

# The Transgender Child

As educators, many of us are awakening to (or have been jolted into) awareness of the needs of students identifying as transgender. While anthroposophy offers some understanding of gender fluidity, we find few resources, either mainstream or anthroposophical, to guide our paths in educating the transgender child—or, perhaps more importantly, in educating the class organism in such a way as to let the transgender child flourish alongside peers who are not led to question biological sex.

As a step toward opening thought and dialogue about this subject, we asked teachers of students identifying as transgender from early childhood through lower school to share some honest human experiences. The teachers offered responses to questions from the Editor exploring their classroom experiences with gender fluidity, specifically with regard to children who identify as transgender. We feel that their experiences offer incomparable insight to others approaching this topic for the first time, or encountering a child among the growing numbers of young children questioning biological sex for the first time.

The transgender identity can be a challenging, sensitive topic. To preserve the anonymity of the students we have omitted their names and kept the teachers and the schools at which they teach confidential.

*Teacher 1, an early childhood educator, chose to offer a summary of experiences in the classroom over the course of a few years.*

As an early childhood teacher, I have had two students who have been gender-fluid during their time in kindergarten. Both children identified with and were drawn to the transgender aspects of themselves from a young age, in dress and in what they perceived to be the appropriate attitude of their chosen gender. In each case, the child's parents were open and flexible to how the child was expressing gender<sup>1</sup>. Neither child had yet explicitly identified as a particular gender. Later, both children at different

points in elementary school identified themselves as transgender.

These children were my first personal exposure to gender fluid and transgender people. These children and parents taught me a great deal about the wide range of experience human beings can have with their biological sexes and the genders they identify with and need to express.

I have always said, "We can be anything we want to be in kindergarten." It is a place where all things are possible. As kindergarten teachers we strive to be completely accepting of children's spiritual individualities, and to find ways to support them becoming who they are meant to be. Children in kindergarten are so open-hearted, flexible and willing to accept each other in all their many differences. Except for occasional confusion about what pronoun to use or how to answer classmates' questions of whether they "were a boy or girl," it was easy for these gender-fluid children to feel happy with themselves and accepted in kindergarten.

I found the parents of other children in the class to be accepting. But most of us adults were in need of education. Having not been exposed to gender issues, we had a lot to explore and understand. I consider myself to be an open-minded, liberal, modern person; however I was made aware of my own assumptions regarding gender and the need to expand my way of thinking and open my heart further. It is important to become conscious in our work with archetypes in the kindergarten. Of course there remains truth in the archetype of the feminine and the masculine and this is important too. However it is essential we expand our kindergarten life so that each child can find his or her truth represented, so that each individual is reflected in the whole. I became aware of simple ways that I made assumptions as I was speaking to the children particularly in the use of "boys" and "girls" and the use of "he" and "she". It takes practice to become conscious about gender in our language and in our thinking.

The process is not always smooth. Some families might feel better met by school programs that expressly work with transgender children as part of an explicit focus on social inclusion. Children transitioning into a transgender identity later, beginning in the high school years, may face an emotionally tough

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, a boy might perceive girls as being more sensitive and compassionate; a girl might perceive boys as being more rough and pushy; and children of either sex might perceive their transgender selves as behaving the "opposite" of what their biological sexes would suggest as "correct."

time, no matter how accepting their classmates might be. Waldorf schools can prepare in many ways to support students first identifying as transgender, along with their families.

Our faculty has had a gender expert come and work with us in faculty meetings. Again it was new for most of us, especially older colleagues. Younger colleagues have often had experience with how to meet gender fluidity in college. This is an area where parents and younger colleagues can lead the way. It takes practice to work with gender and pronouns in our language and educational habits. Even the practice of identifying bathrooms by gender can be difficult for children first identifying as transgender. We have met this particular issue by now having a gender-free bathroom on each floor. It is community building to do this practice together.

The more that we can open our hearts, minds and habits to accept children as they are and include their way of being in our education the more these children will find their place to shine in themselves, in their lives, in our schools, and in the wider community.



**Teachers 2 and 3, both lower school teachers, offered direct answers to questions put by the Editor.**

*How was the student's transgender identity presented to the other students and parents? How was it received?*

**Teacher 2:** The parents of the student spoke to the other parents of the class at a first grade Parent Evening near the beginning of the year. It was a very straightforward, warmhearted presentation. The parents of the child were totally supportive of their child's gender fluidity and newfound desire to identify as transgender. Since all but one set of parents in the class had been together through three or four early childhood years, this came as no surprise. It was very well received. Everyone was very supportive. The child had been a beloved classmate since toddlerhood and was well known to everyone except the one new family, who were also very supportive.

I did not make an explicit announcement to the first graders. I simply started using new gender pronouns according to the family's wishes when referring to the transgender child. The children themselves had unconsciously used both he/him and she/her when referring to this child in early childhood. They naturally

understood that this child was gender-fluid. When I heard comments or confusion on the part of the children in first grade, I simply said that who the child was in body was different from who the child was at heart, and that what's in your heart matters most. (The child's parents and I had worked out this language before school started.) I also told pedagogical stories about beings who felt in their hearts that they were other than they looked, and how these beings eventually were accepted and embraced for how they felt and acted based on what their hearts told them. I heard the children say occasionally: you know, so-and-so is like this or that being in the story.

**Teacher 3:** Prior to entering the class, I met with the parents and a small support team, and we developed a plan to keep the student's biological sex private, and not share this with either the students or the parents of the class.

We discussed that parents are able to enroll a student, check off a gender box on the application, and then no one questions that student's identity. In this case, the parent was sharing both the biological sex and the identified gender. It was clear that most of the time we do not actually know "for sure" what the "biological gender" of any student is!

During a gym class, the student was "outed" at which time we went to plan B. I spoke with the parents, who wrote a letter to the other parents in the class which the school sent out. There was never a conversation in which the class as a whole spoke about this—just as we would not speak about any student's personal life to a whole group of children.

The reception and openness of both the parents and the students was remarkable. There was only one incident in which the student was put down by another peer, and that issue was resolved through peer-to-peer conversations as well as a conversation with the parent.

*What was your personal response to the student's transgender identity? What did you have to adjust in your own feeling and thought life to approach the issue?*

**Teacher 2:** I felt like I was entering a new world, but I was excited about the prospect of growing into this world, expanding my worldview. My main concern was that I would be able to do a good job of meeting the child's, the parents', and the class's needs. I met



Photo by Margaret Loescher from *A Year in the Woods* (WECAN 2016)

with the child's parents and with the family's counselor over the summer. This was enormously helpful. I spoke at length with the early childhood teachers who had worked with the family over the years. I read as much as I could and attended a lecture on gender fluidity and transgender children at a local college. I realized that I needed to quickly learn a good deal of new vocabulary. I thought a lot about what gender fluidity and transgenderness might mean in terms of anthroposophy. How do we understand this in light of females having male etheric bodies and males having female etheric bodies? Is this all part of the process of moving away from old forms (of family, gender, nationality) and toward more and more individualization? Are these children out ahead of us, bringing us new news from the spiritual world of great import? I didn't find it difficult to embrace. I was extremely grateful to be living in a place where there is widespread openness to and support for the LGBTQIA<sup>2</sup> community.

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<sup>2</sup> A common acronym for "Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, Queer, Intersex, Asexual," which attempts to encompass all human gender identity choices.

**Teacher 3:** When I was first asked how it felt to have a transgender student, I responded with, "I do not know much about this, but I am willing to grow and work on the parts of myself that may need to grow!"

I was very open and willing to have a transgender student. My only concern was how I would talk about sex and relationships with the group of students. There were a few uncomfortable decisions that I made when speaking to the girls about puberty and menstruation, which I would do differently now that I have more experience. Having a transgender student has given me the opportunity to examine my core beliefs about gender-related stereotypes. I am sure that I have learned as much, if not more, from my student than my student has learned from me!

*What do you feel has been most helpful, both on the practical and soul levels, for you and for all involved?*

**Teacher 2:** I mentioned some of the things above. It was also really helpful to have the family's counselor do a presentation on gender fluidity for the faculty and staff. This was something the counselor did for many schools. She was wonderful. I also did a presentation out of my own research and experience for the faculty. Another key is keeping in good touch with the parents of the child—how am I doing? Is your child feeling met? People's views and needs change over time. You have to keep growing with this.

**Teacher 3:** Meditate on what gender means and how powerful it is when a child can say he/she is not his/her biological sex. What wisdom! Part of my understanding of my own gender meant that I could have a baby grow in my womb, that my breasts were able to create milk to nurture a growing baby. It also meant that when I was in college in a predominantly male field, I had to work harder to prove myself. It meant that there were certain ideas and expectations that society had for me that I could work with or against. For my transgender student, these physical realities and societal realities are different.

I had one person share with me that in the course of incarnating, transgender people actually hold onto the memory of their previous lives, especially gender, and bring that into this life. I enjoy meditating on that thought and holding an image of my very wise student bringing that ancient wisdom.

Be willing to love and be imperfect—just as in any relationship!

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*What advice would you offer to other teachers encountering transgender students?*

**Teacher 2:** Tune into the particular family and work very closely with the parents of the child. Every situation is different. Some parents want people to know about their child's transgenerness and some don't. Some parents are supportive of the child's fluidity and some aren't. The child's parents don't always agree on how they see the situation. Know the laws of your state! State anti-discrimination laws regulating education of transgender students vary greatly. Discuss this in the faculty/staff meetings (be sure to include staff)! Look for ways to make your school more welcoming and inclusive to all people, not just one particular child or family—gender-neutral bathrooms, for example, are helpful in this regard. Include books about gender-fluid or transgender children in your library—have all teachers read them. Explore ways to embrace gender fluidity and transgenderness in the curriculum through the elementary and high school years—find those stories that give helpful images. There are characters and people in

stories and biographies that we normally tell who are gender-fluid. We need to identify more of these stories. Talk with young people—the older elementary students, high school students, and young faculty members (in their twenties) are much more at home in this world (and fluent with the vocabulary) than the older folk. Get discussions going. Be open. It's exciting! There are good questions about humanness and human relationships.

**Teacher 3:** Let the students lead the way, because they actually have a stronger feeling for their own identities than is usual for young people. Be comfortable with being uncomfortable. This younger generation is more gender-fluid and comfortable with sexual identity than previous generations. I think this comfort is their gift to us! ♦

For further reading, recommended by contributors to this article: *Trailing Clouds of Glory: Essays on Human Sexuality and the Education of Youth in Waldorf Schools*, Douglas Gerwin, ed., Waldorf Publications, 2014.

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