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Naming new realities: supporting trans youth in education

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As we write this introduction, trans issues in education are never far from the headlines. In the USA, the Trump administration has revoked a number of policies meant to protect trans youth from discrimination in school; in Australia, debates about the Safe Schools Coalition, an LGBTQ resource for schools, have led to the cancellation of this programme at a national level because of media-fuelled trans and homophobia; and in school districts around the world, trans students and their allies are fighting for access to equal educational opportunities, including the right to access bathrooms (toilets) and changing room facilities, play on sports teams, and use their preferred pronouns.

These conflicts and campaigns are happening, in part, because an increasing number of young people are coming out as trans and are transitioning in adolescence (Rider et al. 2018). In the midst of these changes, trans youth are going to school, growing up, making and losing friends, falling in and out of love, experimenting with and claiming multiple identities, and negotiating and challenging social norms. In response, teachers, administrators, and school authorities are being called upon to develop and implement policies, practices, and curricula that can support the social, emotional, and educational development of trans students. But as many of the articles in this special issue of *Sex Education* document, not only do schools sometimes fail to live up to the promise to educate all students, they often actively discriminate against trans students, sacrificing their best interests to concerns from conservative parents and politicians. Fights over allowing trans students access to appropriate toilets and changing room facilities in schools are the most obvious case of schools' failure to support trans students.

This special issue takes up questions about trans youth and education in these turbulent times. We are not the first to examine these concerns. Indeed, we are living at a moment when there has been a recent rise of emergent scholars, many trans or genderqueer themselves, who are putting these issues at the centre of educational research focused on equity (c.f. Airton 2013; Brockenbrough and Boatwright 2013; Frohard-Dourlent 2016; Keenan 2017; Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, and Airton 2016; Pyne 2017; Sinclair-Palm 2017; Slovin 2016). These scholars are centring the voices of trans youth, creating dialogue about how schools can better support the lives of trans students, and insisting on understanding trans experiences intersectionally.

One lesson to glean from this research in trans educational studies concerns the fluidity of language. No special issue on trans youth would be complete without a discussion of language. The field of trans studies is fraught with tensions about terminology, pointing to the complexity of and the stakes involved in naming the trans subject, and the importance of respecting and understanding the language trans people use to describe themselves. The term transgender was originally used in the 1970s 'by people who resisted categorization as either transvestites or transsexuals, and who used the term to describe their own identity' (Stryker 2006, note 2). In his ethnography of the category transgender, Valentine (2007) points to the limits of the category transgender and how one's intelligibility as a trans person and identification with the category complicates stories about what it means to be trans. Trans theorists and communities continue to debate the use of various terms like transsexual, transgender, trans and trans* (see Feinberg 1992; Namaste 2000; Stryker 2006; Valentine 2007), reflecting a desire to represent and name the wide range of gendered bodies and experiences, while simultaneously defining gender identities and expressions in ways that can be exclusionary and limiting for some.

The fight for trans recognition in schools is, in part, a fight over language. The shifting grammar of trans raises questions: what work do we expect this category to do, who does it name or exclude, when does it feel capacious or stingy and how does this affect our understanding of trans as an experience and identity? The very terms of intelligibility and care (i.e. using the correct pronouns) reflect the importance of language. In one of the first studies about trans youth in schools, Sausa (2005) recommends that researchers and educators pay attention to the diverse ways in which trans youth identify and how language is always changing and influenced by social context including factors such as age, culture, socioeconomic status, and location or region. In this special issue, the papers all work to define 'trans' by using slightly different terms and scope. For example, in their article 'Sex and Gender in Transition in US Schools,' Miller, Mayo and Lugg (2018) describe how both 'diversely gendered youth' and cisgender youth are 'dissatisfied with gender norms and restrictive school policies (GLSEN 2016)' and argue that 'language helps us locate and find our gender identities.' Other articles adopt the term 'trans*' (Kwok 2018), incorporate phrases such as 'gender-creative' (Meyer and Leonardi 2018), or introduce new acronyms, like TIG (trans, intersex, gender minority) (Simons et al. 2018).

We have used 'trans' as an umbrella for describing a multiplicity of experiences and identities, including, but not limited to, transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, non-binary and diverse gender variant practices. We recognise this as a shortcut that necessarily glosses over the different histories and experiences that more specific terms name. And, we also recognise that the researcher often arrives late to these conversations— by the time we adopt terminology, young people have developed new vernaculars of identity. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (2006) note this dilemma in their seminal *Transgender Studies Reader*, 'Given the struggles that have attended of "transgender" as a descriptive term for a heterogeneous class of phenomena, merely to use the word is to take up a polemicised and political position. In the end, we took the easy way out and pragmatically acknowledged that the term "transgender" ... was the term in most common usage' (2). 'Trans' – like transgender in 2006 – is the term in most common usage in our research communities and so we adopt it here.

In our call for papers, we invited authors to submit articles that addressed a range of topics related to trans youth and education— both 'trans' and 'education' were meant to be defined broadly. Both of us recognised that our relationships with trans and education in

scholarship and in our own educational biographies were complicated by generational differences, professional position, friendship networks and our own personal, shifting affiliations with an identity that is itself always in flux. Could a special issue on trans youth in education therefore capture not just the diversity of voices thinking about these issues, but also resist the stabilisation of 'trans youth' (and, for that matter, education) as a category available for research? The articles submitted push this question even further. To consider the lives of trans youth in school necessarily means grappling with policies, procedures, curricula and administrative practices that too often neglect the needs of trans students; but equally, the articles collected here insist that our narratives of trans youth must stay open to young people's exploration of gender and desire, emergent vocabularies for identity, and the ordinary challenges and pleasures that trans youth experience as part of growing up through adolescence.

Some of the first published research about trans youth accessed the campus climate and in some cases conducted a needs assessment, highlighting the pervasive harassment and assault young trans students face because of their gender identities, gender expressions, and their actual or perceived sexual orientations (Grossman and D'augelli 2006; Gutierrez 2004; Sausa 2005). These early studies also found that school policies and spaces have excluded trans students and create barriers to trans students' academic achievement (Grossman and D'augelli 2006; Sausa 2005). Recent research finds that not much has changed since the first studies documenting trans youth experiences at school: trans youth are still verbally and physically harassed at school and often feel unsafe and there is still a lack of attention to the successful strategies to recommend to administrators and teachers in schools (Beemyn 2013; Kosciw et al. 2014). However, these studies have inspired a broad range of programmes, policies and legislation intended to protect LGBTQ youth from bullying and harassment and in the last few years there has been a shift in school policy to be more inclusive of trans students. This push towards inclusive practices and policies might reflect a move away from understanding trans youth as always at risk, and yet it is unclear which trans youth will be included in these new practices and policies and under what conditions trans youth will be welcomed at school.

In other words, policy may be crucial for supporting trans youth in schools, but it will never be enough. Research about the role of educational policy in creating safe learning environments for trans youth bumps up against the promise and limits of policy. Some educational researchers have confidence that policy is the most important arena of educational change, while trans scholars tend to address the lack of trans voices in the creation of policy and the failure to adequately and effectively implement policies. Inclusion practices and policies often encourage the normalisation of gender identities and expression among trans youth. In *Normal Life*, trans theorist Dean Spade (2011) argues that LGBT movements that have worked to increase rights for inclusion and visibility by creating antidiscrimination and hate crime laws have been very popular. However, he notes how these laws do not always 'improve the life chances of those who are purportedly protected by them' (81) and sets up the ways discrimination laws are reliant on a perpetrator perspective. Spade argues that by looking at 'how trans and gender nonconforming vulnerability is produced through population-management interventions' (123) we can further analyse how institutions like schools use gender as an administrative category. For Spade, policies and laws that target specific issues like using one's preferred name do important work, but that only focusing on anti-discrimination laws, policy makers do little to address the systemic issues affecting the

lives of trans youth and defines the problem of oppression so narrowly that it 'erases the complexity and breadth of the systemic, life-threatening harm that trans resistance seeks to end' (86). Often, inclusion practices attempt to normalise the complexity of individual experiences, rather than recognising and respecting difference.

The articles included in this special issue are steeped in issues of policy, language, desire and educational practices – they address a full range of experiences of trans youth in schools without recourse to discourses of pathology, risk, and misery. This is not say that trans and gender nonconforming youth do not face difficulty in schools – clearly the research on school climate for trans students demonstrates that schools are most often hostile environments (Kosciw et al. 2014; Taylor and Peter 2011). And yet, the articles collected here complicate that story. Taking up the perspectives of trans youth and educators who work to support them, articles focus on issues, policies, curricula, programmes or legislation that impact trans young people's lives in school. They will be of interest to scholars, teachers, school administrators and trans youth themselves who are in search of research about how to support trans students, make schools more welcoming, and imagine trans inclusion beyond the implementation of new policies or the construction of gender-neutral toilets and other school facilities.

The articles in this special issue reflect a shift in the way trans youth are being represented and addressed in education. There are an increasing number of emerging scholars and trans researchers focusing on the daily life experiences of trans youth. This issue also includes articles that address best practices for working with trans students and make recommendations about how school counsellors, teachers and staff can improve the support systems available to trans students. For example, Frohard-Dourlent (2018) analyses how educators in British Columbia are involving trans students in decision-making processes at their school. Traditionally, schools have treated youth as unreliable in their efforts to create change and yet, recent narratives are centring the experiences and expertise of trans students. Trans youths' experiences in school are also impacted by shifting policies. Miller, Mayo, and Lugg (2018) examine the current state of law and policy in the USA to address changes that could be made in schools to help professionals with the implementation of policy and curriculum to better support the needs of trans youth. These studies also recognise the work already being done by trans students to create change on campus and to advocate for their needs.

In addition to improving the services and campus climate for trans students, researchers also acknowledge that schools are a place where trans youth begin to date and explore their sexuality, and yet there are very few studies that investigate trans students' sexual identities, behaviors and/or relationships. In response to this gap in the literature, Jourian (2018) conducted interviews with transmasculine college students about how they navigate sexual and romantic relationships. Lack of discussion about trans youths' sexuality influences the ways these issues are discussed in sexuality education. Young trans people's accounts of intimacy and sexual health offer important recommendations for school-based sexuality education in the piece by Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018). These studies demonstrate the important role of personal narrative in trans studies and Shelton and Lester (2018) build on this tradition in their unique methodology drawing on the role of storytelling. Through collaboratively constructed biographical narratives these authors highlight the ways schools can be empowering spaces for trans students.

Articles also address how the increase in trans awareness and visibility has led to the need for new policies and recommendations for practice. Few studies of trans youth have explored the experiences of Chinese students, and Kwok (2018) adds to this small body of work by addressing the prejudice and discrimination Hong Kong Chinese trans students face in schools. She argues that school educators and community support services need to work collaboratively to respond to trans invisibility and the lack of mental health services for trans youth. Drawing on a school-based qualitative study in England, Bragg et al. (2018) provide a look at gender cultures and awareness among children and youth and identify challenges educators are facing in these changing times. In Ireland, recent shifts in policy are influencing public discourses about trans lives, and Neary (2018) explores how these new policy changes are shifting the ways gender is being discussed in schools and society.

The increased presence of trans students in schools is leading educators to consider how to better respond to the needs of these young people. Researchers Meyer and Leonardi (2018) provide a study of the ways in which US educators are working with trans students and describe the needs that educators report through the development of two concepts, pedagogies of exposure and culture of conversation. These concepts stress the need for more exposure to the topic of gender diversity. In addition to the important role that teachers have in supporting trans students, school counsellors are also having to find ways to assist trans students navigation of schools systems. Using a strengths-based approach, Simons, et al. (2018) look to the role of the school counsellor to find ways to improve school systems for trans students.

The final article of this special issue examines how the trans students are conceptualised in transnational policy. Drawing on interviews with key informants about recent shifts in US policy and the characterisation of progress in trans rights, Jones (2018) explores the colonising and/or contradictory approaches in US policy addressing trans students' rights.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue provide a discussion about trans youth in education across a variety of perspectives and call on policy makers, teachers, staff, and students to rethink the ways trans youth are conceptualised in education and to develop strategies to better respond to the needs of trans students and their daily life experiences in schools.

The stories we tell about trans youth matters, and when educators and policy makers only see trans youth as at risk, we limit the stories available to trans youth about who they are and who they can become. Part of creating a more inclusive environment at schools is listening for the multiple and competing stories about what it is like being a young trans person. The articles included here offer their own lessons for how schools can support trans youth. Consider these five reminders:

- (1) Trans youth, like all young people, use school to explore and experiment with gender. Schools provide a site to try on new presentations of self, adopt new names and pronouns, and test friendships and relationships. It is schools' responsibility to hold open this space for identity work.
- (2) Gender is messy and difficult to narrate. It can take time for trans youth to describe and understand their gender. Gender vocabularies are always shifting and young people are its most creative authors.

- (3) There is no singular origin story for trans youth development. Becoming trans is not necessarily a linear process. In work with trans youth, we must be open to the sideways direction of development (Stockton 2009).
- (4) Trans youth, like many other young people, have complicated relationships with their families and sometimes feel like their gender is misunderstood or not recognized. Despite these challenges, trans youth often still feel very connected and close to their family.
- (5) Trans youth may be defined by their gender, but they describe and construct their gendered identities through their relationship to their race, culture, religion, class, abilities, sexuality and nationhood.

This special issue comes at an important moment in the field of trans studies because it brings together research authored by and written about the first generation of trans youth who had access to that term and identity in public discourse. Up until recently, the only stories about trans childhoods and adolescence have been through trans adults retrospectively reconstructed narratives. This shift has meant that increasingly, trans youth are advocating for their need for recognition, improved resources and services, and a more complex understanding of their lives. It is an exciting time in the field of trans studies as more voices are being heard and the experiences and needs of trans youth are being taken seriously in schools. The strength of the papers in this special issue bodes well for the field of trans studies in education and we look forward to more journal special issues of this kind.

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