



## ***Promoting Dialogue on the Transgender Experience in College Courses through Films and Literature***

**Elizabeth H. Rowell**

*Rhode Island College*

---

erowell@ric.edu

**Abstract:** Although transgender individuals have been part of every culture and society in recorded human history, many people today are unaware of gender variant individuals among them and discussions of rights and equality have usually excluded trans people. This lack of recognition and intolerance often makes being transgender today very difficult. Much work remains to be done to educate the public and improve the safety and well-being of trans people. College professors can help to promote understanding of and advocacy for gender variant individuals. This is an overview of one professor's experiences in weaving critical thinking and dialoguing about the transgender experience into two very different college courses through documentaries and/or literature.

In the past thirty years, the U.S. transgender movement has gained in visibility and transgender issues have become a topic of serious inquiry in many different fields. However, many people today are unaware of gender variant individuals among them and discussions of rights and equality have usually excluded transgender people (A&E 1998, Brill 2008, Currah, 2006, Girshick 2008, Goldberg 2007, PFLAG-TNET 2007, Rosenberg 2007).

Recognition with its key components of value, dignity, and self expression is a critical component of the transgender movement. The importance of recognition can sometimes be better measured by the consequences of its absence as groups and people who are undervalued and pervasively stereotyped often become targets or

scapegoats for the hatred of others (Juang 2006). Harassment, bullying, violence, and discrimination against transgender people persists in their daily life at home, in schools of all levels, at work, and in the community (Brill 2008, Grossman 2006 & 2007, Hall 2006, Holmes 2003). Although many trans people are leading happy lives and have succeeded in different professions, unfortunately others, due to this mistreatment and lack of recognition, are at higher risks for social isolation, depression, self hatred, school drop-out, unemployment, substance abuse, and suicide. Although over the past 35 years strides have been made on behalf of Gays and Lesbians, much work remains to be done to educate the public and improve the safety and well-being of our transgender population

---

Elizabeth Rowell is a professor of elementary education and general studies at Rhode Island College where she has served as co-chair of the Dialogue on Diversity and Diversity Week Committees. She serves as an ally to the LGBT community and has been awarded several faculty research grants to study gay friendly picture books for children and also young children and the transgender experience.

(PLFAG TNET 2007).

Although some feel that the Transgender Revolution is now taking place, many including some ardent diversity supporters, are unaware of the need for better recognizing and acknowledging transgender people and their contributions. I confess that I was once one of those, as I generally gave lip service to the T component of LGBT. I have long been an outspoken *LGBT* ally, helped to obtain Gay and Lesbian campus speakers, written articles for our *Out on Campus* publication, joined protests against taunts and hate signs, backed gay marriage, and posted a support sticker on my door as well as a rainbow banner in my office. I also included sexual orientation in some way in all my classes, had several faculty research grants and a sabbatical dealing with "Gay Friendly" Picture Books For Young Children, and helped the college to amass a nearly complete collection of these materials published or made available in the United States.

Despite this committed involvement, it was not until I received the final edited copy from *Young Children*, the National Association of Education of Young Children's peer reviewed publication, of an article based on my study of these materials that I realized I had not really been on the Transgender support bandwagon. At first I was delighted with the editors' boldness in changing my original title to *Missing! Picture Books Reflecting GLBT Families: Make the Curriculum Inclusive for All Children*. However, after reflecting on *GLBT*, I acknowledged that I had never encountered a picture book for young children with a bisexual family member and there was only one picture book that dealt with a transgender parent (Boenke 2004). I also wondered how many people casually use GLBT when only referring to GL or Gay when including gay and lesbians! I recognized that what was needed was an additional article about young children in regard to the transgender experience and the editor agreed. Due to

the *BT* gaps, GLBT would be a misleading misnomer in the title. The title of the May 2007 publication was appropriately changed to *Missing! Picture Books Reflecting Gay and Lesbian Families: Make the Curriculum Inclusive for all Children* (Rowell 2007).

Since that enlightening moment, I have been studying more about the transgender experience and was awarded a faculty research grant on this topic. Several crucial transgender books have been added to the children's picture book collection including: *Jesse's Dream Skirt* (Mack 1979), *10,000 Dresses* (Ewet 2008) and *Rough Tough Charley* (Kay 2007). Additional related materials have also been identified. I continue to work on changing the Gay Friendly Collection to an LGT collection and am awaiting the first children's picture book about bisexual parents.

In the past, concerned educators have strived to acknowledge in their curriculum the accomplishments of under recognized groups including Women, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, Immigrants, and People with Disabilities. However, working to enhance recognition consists of more than just disseminating positive images for a group. It is necessary to bring attention to conditions resulting from mistreatment and inequality and to support the underlying principle of Brown vs. Board of Education that every individual is presumptively entitled to be treated as a respected, responsible, and participation member (Lawrence 1993 cited in Juang 2006).

My students are usually aware of my current research projects as I weave pertinent aspects of these endeavors into the different classes. Due to enhanced media coverage some students have gone beyond the Jerry Springer and Drag Queen TV spoofs and have been exposed to films such as *Boys Don't Cry* and *TransAmerica* as well as Oprah's and 20/20's transyouth TV specials. However, many still acknowledge feeling uncomfortable around discussions



**Cover and CD Images of *Gender Matters***

Image: Courtesy of Frameline

of transgender issues and/or individuals and do not acknowledge personally knowing any.

In my classes I now include transgender issues related to the course content utilizing documentaries and often children's literature as discussions to promote familiarity with, respect for, and concern about gender variant children and adults. These materials have been selected because they also open avenues for dialoguing about inappropriate behavior towards transgender people and the need for advocacy for equal rights.

Each year I have offered an *Open Class* experience for visitors to a graduate early childhood literacy course during the College's October Diversity Week. During the 2008 event I read *10,000 Dresses* (Ewet 2008) eliciting audience participation followed by an oral reflection and critique of the book. Its messages regarding a young child who wanted to make as well as wear beau-

tiful dresses and said he did not feel like he was a boy as well as his inappropriate treatment by others generate a great deal of discussion. We then viewed the portion of *Call Me Kade* (Zolten 2001) dealing with this FTM youth's early years and Kade's parents' discussion of how they had known their child was "different" since Kate's toddler years. The dialoguing that followed reflected the amazement of many class members regarding young children being so convinced of their mind-body mismatch and also the parents' early recognition and support of their child.

After discussing the importance of family members and society's reactions to young transchildren, we watched all of *No Dumb Questions* (Regan 2003) which documents two parents explaining to their three young daughters the transitioning experience of their beloved uncle who will be their aunt when they see him again. *No Dumb Questions* provoked a great deal of

discussion about the age differences of the young children's concerns and their reactions when they met their new Aunt. This was followed by passing out copies of *Carly, She's Still My Daddy* (Boenke 2004) for individual review and sharing.

I then read aloud the out of print but very insightful book *Jesse's Dream Skirt* (Mack 1979), about a young boy who dreams of skirts and wears one he made with his mother to preschool. What transpires in this moving story reveals what a caring and creative early childhood teacher can do to promote understanding for and appreciation of children who have gender different interests and feelings. This was followed by peer and whole group dialoguing about what they would do in this situation. Several students recalled that they had also had similar teaching experiences where a boy wore a dress to school, wanted Dora the Explorer stickers, or always dressed up in "girls" clothes in the costume area. Annotated bibliographies were provided of related books dealing with young boys and girls who preferred to engage in the stereotypically related activities of the other gender, such as boys playing with dolls and girls with fire trucks. Time was also devoted for browsing among all the materials.

Interestingly, our dialoguing about young children and the transgender experience in regard to literacy growth and books seemed to unite this class. The guests who attended Diversity Week's Open Class also stayed to comment on how meaningful the session was. Students continued throughout the course to share related experiences, clippings, and media announcements. Some borrowed books and videos for sharing with other teachers and their own families. A few emailed me after the termination of the course about their experiences in settings with children who said they were different and their attempts to explain the normality of this with their Directors. One shared how helpful this course

and the media and books she had borrowed had been not only in her early childhood career but also in the recent "outing" and transitioning of her own teenager. When she was visiting a psychologist with her child as part of the transition experience, the psychologist was surprised at the mother's knowledge and degree of support. She finally mentioned that she learned about the transgender experience when taking a course in early childhood literacy!

My Core 4 General Studies course entitled *Disability Viewed from a Cross Cultural Perspective* includes students with many different majors. Throughout the class we discuss advocacy for people with disabilities and each week, as the students share their three personal encounters with disabilities issues since we last met, they note that they are becoming more helpful to those with disabilities and angry about the insensitivity of others. Each semester the class views a segment regarding the medical MISTREATMENT of a transgender man from the award winning documentary, *Southern Comfort* (Davis 2001). Robert Eads, a very charismatic cowboy, who transitioned in midlife, was counseled that he would not need to undergo a hysterectomy and oophorectomy as part of his sexual reassignment. However, years later when he had ovarian cancer and a baseball size tumor, he was refused treatment by 20 doctors who felt that his appearance would upset their other patients. Robert was in great pain and his life was compromised by these actions. After this viewing, the students usually need some time to reflect in writing or with a peer about their reactions to this mistreatment of a human being because he was transgendered. The consensus is generally anger and the dialoguing is interjected with concerns about how this could actually happen in our society.

Recently I have also become much more aware of transgender individuals and issues on our campus. Three years ago at

the annual LGBT Summit, a transitioning student talked about bathroom problems and personal safety concerns. He also expressed a desire to live in a dorm and the challenges that this entailed. His heart felt speech generated into an announcement a few weeks later that there would be 44 unisex bathrooms on our campus. Although it took a few years, there are now 30 gender neutral restrooms most of which are ADA compliant located in different buildings throughout the college. This young man did live in a dorm the following year. At the most recent Summit, another student discussed the embarrassment and humiliation he experienced when a professor insisted on using his female name on the official roster. The roster problem is being looked into and this student recently shared that all current professors were using his requested name. These students' shared experiences were followed up by discussions and activities by all including some faculty advocates.

Although recognition is useful as a starting point, it is not an end to itself. Helping students to think critically and actually dialogue with others about why transgender people need to be valued, supported, and included can sometimes be a vital step in eliminating disrespect, domination, harassment, and victimization. As professors, we have the opportunity to promote dialoguing about different diversity concerns while enhancing the course content. Sometimes our students have never really thought about these areas, discussed them in serious ways, or been challenged to do their part in eliminating these concerns.

Faculty can also serve as supportive role models by attending campus events, summits, and open meetings where transgender students are encouraged to speak out. Just being present, listening, offering to and actually trying to help can encourage others to get more involved. The perks for a professor can be enormous as well. Recently, while attending a large LGBT True

Colors Conference at the University of Connecticut and rushing after a quick lunch to prepare for my session, I noted about 90 people still waiting in line to eat. I was surprised when I heard loud calls for "Dr. Rowell, Dr. Rowell! Some of the college Rainbow members were there and excitedly shared recent Unisex bathroom news. Many of them also came later to my session and contributed in a meaningful way.

Faculty can make a tremendous difference in the experience of transgender students by promoting understanding of and advocacy for gender variant individuals while helping to dismantle the atmosphere of ignorance and fear that often fosters hatred and violence. Hopefully meaningful class related and on campus activities with media, books, and dialoging in different ways will enhance the awareness of the need to be supportive of transgender people, their rights and safety that will be part of college students' lives both now and in the future!

### **PFLAG/TNETS' VISION**

We, the parents, families and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, celebrate diversity and envision a society that embraces everyone, including those of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Only with respect, dignity, and equality for all will we reach our full potential as human beings, individually and collectively. PFLAG welcomes the participation and support of all who share in, and hope to realize this vision (2007).



## REFERENCES

- Arts & Entertainment Docudrama (1998). *Investigative Reports: Transgender Revolution* [video]. Arts and Entertainment Network, AandE.com.
- Boenke, M. (2004). *Carly She's Still My Daddy*. TNET of PFLAG.
- Brill, S. and R. Pepper (2008). *The Transgender Child*. San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press.
- Currah, P. (2006). *Transgender Rights*. Minneapolis, MN. University of Minnesota Press.
- Davis, K. (2001). *Southern Comfort*. NY, NY: Docudrama.
- Ewet, M. (2008). *10,000 Dresses*. NY, NY: Seven Stories Press.
- Girshick, L. (2008). *Transgender Voices: Beyond Women and Men*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England.
- Goldberg, A. (2007). Born With The Wrong Body. ABCNews.go.com
- Grossman, A. (2006). Male-To Female Transgender Youth Gender Expression Milestones, Gender Atypicality, Victimization, and Parents/ Responses. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, v 2 n 1.
- Grossman, A. (2007) Transgender Youth and Life Threatening Behaviors. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, v37, n5, pp. 527-537, Oct. 2007.
- Hall, H. (2006). Teach to Reach: Addressing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth Issues in the Classroom. *New Educator*, v2, n2, p 149-157, Jul. 2006.
- Holmes, S. (2003). School Experiences of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, v 1, n 3 pp 53-56.
- Juang, R. (2006). Transgendering the Politics of Recognition. In ed. S. Stryker, *The Transgender Studies Reader*. NY, NY: Routledge.
- Kay, V. (2007). *Rough Tough Charley*, Berkley, CA: Tricycle Press.
- Lawrence, C. (1993). If he hollers let me go. Regulating Racist Speech on Campus. In *Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*, ed. M Matsuda and C. Lawrence, Boulder, CO: Westview, Cited in Juang, R. 2006.
- Mack, B. (1979). *Jesse's Dream Skirt*, Chapel Hill, NC: Lollipop Power.
- Regan, M. (2003). *No Dumb Questions*, Harri-man, NH: Epiphany Productions.
- Rosenberg, D. (2007). Rethinking Gender. *Newsweek*, Aug 21.
- Rowell, E. (2007). Missing Picture Books Reflecting Gay and Lesbian Families: Make the Curriculum Inclusive for all Children" *Young Children*, May 2007.
- Zolten, S. (2001). *Call Me Kade*, Frame line Distribution, San Francisco: CA.