



## Transgender people and education

Tania Ferfolja (Reviewed by)

To cite this article: Tania Ferfolja (Reviewed by) (2019): Transgender people and education, Journal of LGBT Youth, DOI: [10.1080/19361653.2018.1546636](https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2018.1546636)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2018.1546636>



Published online: 09 Jan 2019.



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BOOK REVIEW



**Transgender people and education**, by Clare Bartholomaeus and Damien W. Riggs, US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 195 pp., \$109.99. ISBN:9781349953080

Reviewed by Tania Ferfolja

School of Education, Western Sydney University, Penrith South, New South Wales, Australia

*Transgender People and Education* by Clare Bartholomaeus and Damien W. Riggs is a comprehensive publication that both informs and educates readers about the lives of transgender people engaging in school systems. Well-articulated, very accessible and on many levels, highly practical, the book is an invaluable resource for anyone researching or teaching about gender diversities. Although focused mainly on research from Australia, the authors also draw on findings from further afield, enhancing the relevance of the content to an international audience.

The introduction highlights upfront, the current socio-cultural context that is often fraught for gender and sexuality diverse communities. Using examples from Australia and other English-speaking countries such as the United States, Bartholomaeus and Riggs point out the conflicting nature of dominant discourses vying for ascendancy. These, on the one hand, demonstrate growing support and understanding through legislative improvements and social change for transgender people; but on the other, highlight the palpable hostilities towards gender and sexuality diverse subjects. Growing international political conservatism fuels these inconsistencies and contradictions, illustrating for transgender people – as well as those who are gender and sexuality diverse more generally – the precarious nature of the hard-won victories for equity and social justice.

In terms of school education in Australia, such negativity was recently witnessed through the withdrawal of the Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) program from schools in most states in the nation. The SSCA program aimed to build safe and inclusive primary and high school environments for gender and sexuality diverse students, staff and families. However, relentless, vocal and damaging criticism by conservatives, Christian lobby groups and right-wing politicians at the highest levels of office who were enabled by the media (Law, 2017), resulted in the project being defunded by the conservative Liberal government and disbanded. Thus, set against such a socio-political landscape, this book is timely and much-needed; it has been published at a point when many teachers and schools, have had support for, and education about, transgender identities institutionally withdrawn.

Bartholomaeus and Riggs approach to *Transgender People and Education* is wide-ranging. The introduction illustrates how the social construction of childhood intersects with and is utilized by, conservative social, religious and political discourses perpetuated by a global move to the right. The authors establish the theoretical framing applied to their analysis of the issues faced by a range of transgender identities in the chapters to follow, focusing on the notion of cisgenderism and how it “has a negative impact not only on transgender people but all people involved in school

communities” (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017, p. 15). They provide an overview of critical terminology and how it is employed throughout the text, while importantly acknowledging its limitations when considering the dynamic nature of the broader field of gender and sexuality diversities. It is refreshing to see the authors attempts to move away from discourses that perpetuate the negative experiences of transgender people. Although not wanting to minimize the on-going struggles and discrimination faced by many transgender individuals and communities, they begin with “some positive reflection on education from transgender people, in order to highlight what’s possible in terms of school communities being affirming places for transgender people” (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017, p. 2).

The book then examines the experiences of young transgender people and the criticality of providing comprehensive sexuality education in schools. Although it discusses the on-going discrimination towards these youths and the negative and harmful consequences that result from exclusionary practices, the authors are cognizant not to reinscribe transgender young people within discourses of victim or risk. Indeed, they are far more proactive in their approach, highlighting how the needs of transgender young people should be included in education and to advocate for a school curriculum that provides them, and indeed all students, with knowledge about sexual health, intimacy and well-being essential for the development of positive relationships. As Bartholomaeus and Riggs (2017, p. 40). point out, “while no amount of sexuality education can make any young person immune from rejection or relationship breakdown, it is nonetheless important for transgender young people to be as prepared as possible for the potential responses they may encounter from intimate partners, both transgender and cisgender.”

The authors then focus on how students in schools understand transgender people through pedagogical engagement with picture books that incorporate transgender characters. Although the use of this strategy can provide an important teaching tool in the classroom, Bartholomaeus and Riggs point out the potential limitations of this approach (that must be a pedagogical consideration for teachers), as many books position transgender people within a narrow perspective. Research on cisgender parents of transgender children is also explored and although the authors acknowledge the narratives of “loss” so often prevalent in the literature about transgender youth, these narratives are simultaneously critiqued to illustrate that such loss does not relate to the children themselves. Bartholomaeus and Riggs, from the perspectives of these same parents, detail what transgender children need in education. This theme is to some extent taken up in later chapters where discussion of pre-service and in-service teacher attitudes towards transgender children are explored, as well as what school administrators can and should do in relation to ensuring that transgender people in education are able to fully participate. The analysis illustrates that there is a lack of resources and policy guidelines for transgender inclusion in schools, even though individual educators are generally supportive.

The comprehensive picture of the experiences of transgender people in education is further demonstrated through research that examines transgender parents and educators experiences as clients of and employees in, the educational system, respectively. There is also an examination of the role of school counselor’s and psychologists that illustrates an ongoing need to target training and the importance of these professionals in the implementation of whole school approaches – a central tenant in the conclusions drawn by the authors. Thus, the multi-pronged approach that draws on various

subjectivities provides a meaningful exploration of and for, transgender people in education.

*Transgender People in Education* is highly informative and practical. Most chapters begin with a review and critique of the current literature, frequently providing useful resources for the reader to access. The authors illustrate the various research methods applied to the topic in each chapter, which vary depending on the area under investigation. The methods range from, for instance, the use of survey data through to less traditional academic research approaches including the analysis of You Tube and other online forums using key word searches.

Transgender identities and experiences have only really come to the fore in academic research in the last decade or so and there is a slow, but growing awareness in Australia (and elsewhere) that transgender people should be included and represented in all aspects of the educational milieu; this is a matter of human rights, justice and equity for all. Overall, this book is very relevant to the full range of people who work in education. However, and importantly, its practical and accessible nature makes it an essential read for every pre-service and practising teacher. There is much need in education for increased professional development related to transgender people in order to ensure that educational sites provide equitable and inclusive learning, teaching and working spaces for all. This book goes some way in providing that information and should definitely be incorporated in the reading lists of pre-service teacher education courses at all levels and in all tertiary education institutions.

### Notes on contributor

**Tania Ferfolja** is Associate Professor in the School of Education at Western Sydney University. Her research centres on equity in education with a focus on gender and sexuality diversities in curricula, policy, pedagogy, schooling and employment practices. She is currently lead researcher on an ARC Discovery grant examining parent perceptions of gender and sexuality diversity inclusion in school curriculum.

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