



A countermeasure to remedies: a review of *Transgender People in Education*

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BOOK REVIEW

A countermeasure to remedies: a review of *Transgender People in Education*

Transgender People in Education, by C. Bartholomeus and D. W. Riggs, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, 195 pp., \$109.99, ISBN 978-1-349-95308-0

While there has been a veritable explosion of popular press and media work focusing on transgender people over the past few years, it is no exaggeration to say that descriptive scholarship in education has been slow to catch up. This is partly a function of the glacial pace of the cogs of the academic publishing machine. But it might also be a product of the long scholarly tradition of remedy-making, to the detriment of descriptive work and structural recommendation. As the parent of a transgender child, I would be a rich woman indeed if I had a dime for every time school personnel made accommodations to 'fix' my daughter, rather than engaging in deeper critique. I am tired of such remedies, tired of my daughter being told she can use the nurse's bathroom at school, or opt out of the sex education curriculum, or stand in a line or a section or a room or a world by herself. Remedies locate the 'problem' in individual difference, while critique examines the ways in which we might all become more free.

Bartholomeus and Riggs give us something altogether different in *Transgender People and Education*. It's about time. Not only does this volume expand the conversation beyond just students – the perennial targets of remedy-making – it actively includes teachers, parents, and other people in schools as well. As the authors write, this is a conversation about the whole school and – most importantly – the book's chapters hinge on critiques of cisgenderism and the complex structures it both pervades and supports.

Each chapter of *Transgender People and Education* is centered on a different stakeholder in K-12 schools, preschool through secondary schooling, or what we would refer to as preK-12 in the US. The introduction provides a generous overview of the subject, and includes a wide variety of references for further reading, neatly placed in callouts and boxes within the text, and grouped by country context. The book is situated in terms of the rapidly shifting sands of the current political context, as well as within a feminist post-structuralist theoretical orientation to critique discourse and 'to consider how possibilities for change may occur, as well as to identify the challenges that are likely to be present' (13). This is followed by an extensive discussion and operationalization of cisgenderism, which the authors both employ and critique as an organizing frame, 'paying critical attention to cisgenderism allows for a broader approach as it examines dominant discourses and systemic discrimination rather than individual attitudes' (14).

Chapter two focuses on young transgender people in school, locating the discussion in the specific needs and experiences articulated by the youth themselves. A particular focus is the need for better and more inclusive sex and sexuality education. Chapter three addresses the experiences of cisgender young people in school and how they learn about, and learn to support, transgender people and especially peers. I was at first surprised to find this chapter included in the book (and I am ashamed to say I muttered under my breath something like 'but every other book is already about cis kids!') but on reading and reflecting I see that it is an essential perspective for the critique offered by the book as a whole. Not only does this chapter position cisgender youth in relation to transgender individuals, it also focuses on

perceptions and experiences of representations of transgender people in children's literature, and posits helpful suggestions for creating a better, enlarged conversation with cisgender people.

Chapter four is devoted to the cisgender parents of transgender children. The analyses in this chapter are unusual, pairing a survey of parent experiences with analyses of parenting books to present a critical picture of the all-too-familiar 'loss' narrative. Chapter five focuses on transgender educators. I was initially surprised to find this chapter, as this population is significantly understudied, despite a great need to understand their experiences. The authors concur, and admit that the two groups are combined due to the 'dearth of relevant literature and narratives' (p. 18). Chapters six and seven follow with in-school portraits of cisgender administrators, counsellors and teachers and their steps toward including transgender people in educational contexts.

The book makes a concerted effort to be inclusive in its language and approach and explains both its terminology and approach explicitly to be as broadly useful as possible. A comprehensive concluding chapter divides its time between a useful recap; extremely helpful call-outs providing real, concrete recommendations for productive and safe transgender lives in school; and finally, what comes next from the 'whole-of-school approach' that the book advocates for. The authors admit that even their attempts at inclusivity and multivocality in this approach may inadvertently exclude different gender diverse experiences. Like all good scholars, the authors offer us this frame and foundation and invite us to build upon it. For scholars outside of Australia, it would be especially important to bracket these findings within that particular cultural context (to which the authors fastidiously attend, and provide a range of resources such that this book is not context-restricted), but they are nonetheless still foundational. As a scholar in transgender childhoods, this is the book I have been waiting for to provide a thorough overview of the often widely-ranging interdisciplinary scholarship of our field. I would consider this an essential volume for gender and childhood scholars, but also for anyone working with and supporting transgender people in schools: the resources provided are far-ranging and can benefit any reader.

Finally, I must conclude by saying that I write this review from the United States, where my child cannot be guaranteed basic safety in school or anywhere else; where her own grandfather voted against her basic wellbeing by supporting the Trump regime; where there is a bounty on her head should she use the 'wrong' restroom in many US states; and where the president and vice president have spoken at conferences and rallies of recognized anti-LGBTQ hate groups. My child is only 10 years old and it is no exaggeration to say that fear is the common denominator of our every day. But instead of treating the individual experience of transphobia, we must focus, as this book does, on systemic cisgenderism. In doing so, this book zeroes in on the one inescapable truth that should shake us all out of our quest for remedy and into action: cisgenderism hurts everyone. It may be most visible for my child at the moment, but your child is also smarting from its sting in less visible though equally devastating ways. This is not just an issue for transgender people, but for all of us, and this book is the place to start.

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