

THE INVISIBLES: TRANSGENDER STUDENTS EXPERIENCES IN COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

Interactions with faculty and peers are two of the most crucial relationships for college students to cultivate (Astin, 1993). Although transgender college students are becoming more prominent on campus (Pusch, 2005), there is little study of their experiences and problems in the classroom (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Renn, 2010). The goal of this study was to learn about transgender students' experiences in the college classroom, as well as their impressions of faculty and peer support. Four themes emerged from the experiences of five transgender students at a prominent central university: coming out, teacher contact, peer (non) support in the classroom, and the impact of the campus and course setting on the college atmosphere. Participants' experiences varied, but they all mentioned instances of marginalization by teachers and classmates. The lived experiences of transgender college students in the context of the university classroom are given a crucial voice in this study.

Keywords : Transgender, Classroom, Experience, College

INTRODUCTION

Although there has been a considerable increase in research on LGBT college students in the last decade (Renn, 2010), there is still a dearth of understanding of the classroom experience for transgender students. Much of the current literature on transgender student demographics in higher education emphasizes the need for transgender campus resources (B. Beemyn, 2003; B. Beemyn, Curtis, Davis & Tubbs, 2005; McKinney, 2005), student involvement (Renn, 2007, 2010; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). Students who identify as transgender can be of any age, ethnicity, race, social class, or sexual orientation. Some students 'come out' throughout college or graduate school, while others 'come out' during

their undergraduate or graduate studies. Others may never refer to themselves as transgender, yet strongly identify as male, female, transsexual, or another (or no) gender. Some students may decide to transition or live as a gender other than that which was assigned to them at birth. Transitioning is a complicated, personal process that frequently involves altering one's name, appearance, and body type. (Lombardi & Davis, 2006). For many transgender college students, identity development is a complex and dynamic process (Bilodeau, 2005). Consider the following composite portraits, which only scratch the surface of transgender students' many challenges and struggles. Sakthi, for example, was a lesbian before she started college. She recognized she didn't feel like a woman or a man during her first and second years and began to identify as gender-queer. Sakthi came to identify as an effeminate gay guy over time, but as a gender-different student, he found it difficult to locate male partners. Sakthi began hormone treatment and lived as a guy during his final year.

Many transgender students experience isolation and rejection from family and friends (Pusch, 2005). Transgender students face a variety of obstacles on campus, including a lack of access to health care and issues with sex-segregated facilities. (Beemyn, 2003; Nakamura, 1998). Faculty approaches to transgender-friendly pedagogy (Spade, 2011; Wentling, Windsor, Schilt, & Lucal, 2008) and K–12 educational instruction of transgender students is discussed in literature from several fields of education. However, little study has been done on the experiences of transgender students on college campuses. (Horn & Romeo, 2010; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Rands, 2009). resulting in a possible lack of preparedness on the part of instructors in terms of aiding transgender students (G. Beemyn, 2013). However, these discrepancies contribute to transgender students' marginalization in college courses. Failure to investigate these topics is a injustice not only to present and future instructors but also to students who are forced to traverse hostile

classroom environments.

Many transgender's are studying at various higher institution in India. Research on transgender students has grown significantly over the past decade, but there is a lack of understanding of the classroom experience for transgender students. There is limited research exists on their experiences and struggles in the classroom environment. This study sought to provide a rich account of three students' perspectives within a major central university.

In this multi-case qualitative case study, the primary research questions, I sought to answer were: (a) how do transgender college students at a central university experience the classroom environment and (b) how do the experiences of the classroom at a central university influence the overall college experience for transgender students? A deeper understanding of the challenges or problems in the classroom can assist faculty and college administrators to support the needs of the transgender student population.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Coming out

Coming out may be a stressful and difficult experience for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) students. Part of this process for some transgender people includes a time of transitioning, during which they adjust their self-presentation to match their desired gender identification. (Bilodeau, 2005, 2009). Because transgender identities are complicated, these procedures vary from person to person. Individuals who identify as transsexual, transgender, gender-queer or any other self-identified that falls under the transgender umbrella are referred to as transgender. (B. Beemyn, 2003; G. Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). In college, the changing process has led some transgender individuals to hide or only reveal their gender identities when required. (Bilodeau, 2009; Pusch, 2005) As a result, students subscribe to gender identity criteria as a binary system and are excluded

because they challenge it. (Bilodeau, 2009). These binary structures are frequently reinforced on college campuses with residence halls, recreational facilities, university restrooms, and laws that exclude gender identity rights. (B. Beemyn, 2003; B. Beemyn et al., 2005; Bilodeau, 2009). Coming out in the classroom as a transgender student not only challenges these binary institutions, but also put considerable pressure on the student to perform gender "correctly."

Peer Groups

Peers have a significant impact on one's college experience. These social networks are crucial to students' development during college (Chickering, 1969), and interpersonal contacts with peers aid in individual leadership development (Astin, 1993). "The student's peer group is the single most powerful source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years," wrote Astin (1993). Peer groups assist children in making connections, accepting others, and establishing a level of status comparability (Astin, 1993). However, normal behaviors are still expected within peer groups, and transgender students who break such in- group rules risk being marginalized. *Genderism* (Bilodeau, 2009) can stifle these important connections and detract from the learning environment. Peer groups have also been found to have both good and negative effects on students' decision to persist (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to LGBTQ research (Hart & Lester, 2011; Horn & Romeo, 2010; Renn, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005), transgender kids' co-curricular support has beneficial effects. Despite a college setting that is dominated by traditional gender standards, Hart and Lester (2011) claim that transgender students can discover "microclimate" of inclusion given through student affairs offices or academic programs. Despite potential academic risks for those who prioritize co-curricular activities over academics (Renn, 2007), opportunities for involvement, particularly for transgender students, have been linked to growth, identity processes, and most importantly, the creation

of social support (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). However, Astin (1993) discovered that helpful peers improve cooperative learning in the classroom. As a result, for students who do not fit into the gender binary, the quantity of classroom peer support may have an impact on their learning environment and overall college experience.

Transgender Pedagogy

The faculty, in addition to peer groups, play an important role in a student's growth (Astin, 1993), and they have the potential to build a supportive and inclusive environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Rye, Elmslie, and Chalmers (2007) developed a classroom approach to educating undergraduate students about the experience of a transgender person. They discovered that through practical learning, cisgender (denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex) people's negative opinions can be changed. Engaging kids in the gay community, according to Rye et al., helps encourage empathy and learning. Even though these tactics may be helpful, Green (2010) emphasized the significance of not entrusting education solely to the gay community. Green (2010) challenged faculty to use more innovative techniques to represent diverse transgender voices in the classroom, relying on transgender narratives (e.g., through visual media, online communities, or forums) while also ensuring the use of purposeful inclusive language as meaningful approaches to creating a more inclusive classroom. Through changing cisgender students' attitudes and understanding of their transgender peers, these strategies may generate peer support.

Horn and Romeo (2010) identified three approaches for fostering safer peer situations for transgender children based on past research to reduce occurrences of prejudice and bullying:

(a) modifying safe school policies, (b) questioning community norms around heterosexuality and gender conformity, and (c) promoting high-quality group interactions between queer

and non-queer kids. Other basic methods to encourage inclusion and a secure environment include avoiding roll call, enabling kids to self-identify their name and pronouns, and never outing anyone (Spade, 2011). Best practices also rely on the instructors' understanding of the issues that transgender people face (Wentling et al., 2008). Students believe faculty to lack broad knowledge or retain outmoded understandings about the LGBT population, according to McKinney's (2005) examination of LGBT undergraduate and graduate student perceptions of faculty expertise on queer topics. Because the term "transgender" spans such a wide range of identities (Pusch, 2005), maintaining inclusive approaches that allow for dialogue on identity distinctions is critical to promoting meaningful discussions. These dialogues have the potential to change cisgender peers' perspectives and promote a pleasant environment for all students (Rye et al., 2007).

Transgender College Students

The classroom, like many other spaces on campus, provides vulnerable areas, particularly when it comes to being '*misgendered*.' Pusch (2004) noted the dissatisfaction that transgender students experience, particularly while they are in transition; for example, when course register do not match a preferred name, this dissatisfaction is amplified. Transgender students may not come out in class and may hide their identities to prevent such embarrassment (Bilodeau, 2009). This invisibility provides a sense of security, but it also suffocates any possible constructive discussion regarding gender identity in the classroom (Pusch, 2004), while simultaneously '*othering*' the student. Peer groups and support programs can teach LGBT kids how to deal with discrimination and enhance self-awareness about their identities, resulting in acceptance and validation (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007). Establishing a method for altering gender and name preferences with their institution is one way to increase support for transgender students, particularly in the classroom (B. Beemyn, 2003).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The basic basis for this research is Yoshino's (2007) concept of masking. Masking is a performance that people are used in situations where they believe their identity is being stigmatized or their safety is being jeopardized (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). It is rooted in gender performance (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). (Yoshino, 2007). Gender, according to West and Zimmerman (1987), is contextually placed by our interactions and roles; nevertheless, it extends beyond roles and becomes a "product of the social doings of some sort."

Roles are already "gender defined" in society (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and they are implemented on college campuses through gendered residence halls, restrooms, Greek life, or athletic organizations (B. Beemyn, 2003; Bilodeau, 2009). The gender binary system on college campuses, according to Bilodeau (2009), exerts pressure on transgender students to hide their identities to pass as the normative gender. When a person rejects the socially constructed man-woman binary, he or she is condemned by society and challenged with genderism (Bilodeau, 2009). The non-conforming individual is cast into a world of "otherness" and obscurity. Transgender students frequently attempt to disguise certain gender-ism experiences (Bilodeau, 2009; Yoshino, 2007). Isolation fears are the precursor condition to masking. Forcing transgender people to conform to a binary gender system marginalizes them by increasing certain social norms (Bilodeau, 2009).

Masking gender entails regulating performance to be "gender suitable" on that particular occasion (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Masking can inhibit students from participating authentically with professors and classmates in college classroom contexts. The desire to disguise can have major learning and developmental implications because positive interactions and relationships with faculty members lead to college students' academic and personal growth (Kim & Sax, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). What are

the implications for transgender students' academic performance and general college experience if they must be aware of how others perceive them?

METHODOLOGY

I used qualitative research to investigate the experiences of transgender students in college classrooms because it allows for more in-depth knowledge of the topic under investigation (Creswell, 2007). I used multi-case research methodologies to learn about the perspectives and lived experiences of our transgender students in a classroom setting at a large Midwest public university (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). I employed cross-case analysis (Yin, 2009) to synthesize participant experiences after treating each participant as an individual case.

Participants and Sampling

To recruit participants, I employed purposive sampling (Creswell, 2007) and relied on Queer communities, including sending invitation letters to student leaders of the LGBTQ student organization. Participants had to be currently or recently (within the last academic year) enrolled at the Central University to be eligible for the study. I also utilized snowball sampling, in which I asked participants if they knew anyone else who would be eligible and interested in participating in the study (Creswell, 2007). Five transgender and gender-queer students took part in the study: two identified as FTM (female-to-male) transgender men, two identified as MTF (male to female) transgender women, and one identified as gender-queer preferring he/him/his pronouns. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 26 years old; four were undergraduate students and one was a graduate student pursuing a master's degree.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

I have collected data through telephonic interviews and Google meets video interviews, that lasted 45 minutes to 120 minutes on average with a total of one and half hours. The interviews were recorded and verbatim transcribed with the author's permission of

the participants, which contains the information for this research. The focus of the interview questions was on the classroom experience of the attendees with professors or classmates. Interview questions focusing on the following topics: appearing in class, interactions with professors, as well as the function of as part of the college experience, students spend time in the classroom.

Data was collected and evaluated at the same time (Merriam, 2009). Interview data were evaluated numerous times using grounded theory, principles, and key statements that spoke to participant experiences were discovered and listed in various themed sections (Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The key themes from the participant experiences were identified using open and axial coding (Merriam, 2009). To make appropriate sense of the data and create the participants' shared experiences, I began open coding the interview data line by line and then found axial codes linked to classroom experiences, faculty or peer interactions, coming out, or hiding of identities. Codes were further simplified to offer and tell a story about the participants' experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), with a particular focus on the classroom climate and participant masking. Several codes were invariably focused on areas of involvement, campus activities, LGBTQ support services, and campus spaces; as a result, these codes were reduced and thematically placed to paint a larger picture of the campus context and interactions, emphasizing the inherent intersections of classroom and other campus spaces. Finally, cross-case analysis was used (Yin, 2009), Four key themes emerged from the reduction of topics to capture the nature of the phenomena.

LIMITATIONS

As with any research project, there were limitations for this study. Due to COVID -19 pandemic, I could not conduct a face-to-face interview. And I did not consider how other identities, such as sexual orientation, financial position, or religious affiliation, would influence the classroom experience. In this study, one participant talked about his

membership in a political organization, while another talked about the financial strains she faced after her parents stopped providing financial assistance. However, a more in-depth examination of inter-sectionality was outside the scope of this research. Furthermore, participant experiences may or may not be transferable to other institutions. Finally, the class level of each participant differed, resulting in a unique range of experiences and backgrounds. However, my capacity to go more thoroughly into contextual factors, such as focusing on one major or one academic year, may have been hampered by this variability. Further research may be conducted to better understand how these experiences, circumstances, and identities affect transgender students' classroom and overall college experience.

RESULTS

The themes that emerged from the data analysis are indicative of the participant experiences, with commonality found across them while still reflecting the participants' various manifestations of processing identity, campus atmosphere, and institutional regulations and norms. These wider themes also show the prevalence of masking, demonstrating how participants were forced to perform and engage in the classroom or on campus less genuinely due to specific settings and institutional restrictions.

The data analysis revealed four themes connected to transgender students' classroom experiences: (a) coming out, (b) instructor interactions, (c) peer (non) support, and (d) campus and course context effect college atmosphere. Despite not being focused on the classroom situation, a fourth subtheme, campus relationships, is covered separately due to the shared significance among participants. These elements were combined to build a narrative for each participant (Yin, 2009), attempting to capture their true experiences on campus and in the classroom. I used pseudonyms and omitted to identify information about the pupils to safeguard the participants' identities. The pronouns used to reflect the

participant's preference.

Coming Out

In the college context, the transitioning process has caused some transgender students to mask or only disclose their gender identities when necessary. Students thus conform to standards of gender identity as a binary system and are marginalized because they challenge this system (Bilodeau, 2009). Participant A, recently transitioned, acknowledged that she had been out since her first day at the university” as a woman:” *I just kind of went to class and I kept my mouth shut. I was afraid to talk to people, I was afraid to use my voice, in that it would out me. My voice is the one thing or one of the things, that does out me”* Participant C recalled coming out was a women’s and gender studies course. He felt comfortable in that class and assumed to be around other open-minded people. This was a perception he also held through many of his psychology courses, a perception that made him more comfortable sharing his identity.

Teacher interactions

When a transgender identifies as a particular gender (irrespective of biological sex), it is respectful of the person's human dignity to use the name was chosen and the pronouns appropriate to that particular gender. To continue to call intentionally prior names will be deliberately disrespectful. It affects the dignity of trans students. Transgender explained their experience when the teacher used to call them old name. *“People would just look at me funny.*

It was feelings of real unsafely and real disrespect for me. It just made the class miserable. I couldn’t focus for the rest of the class.” (Participant B) .In his gender studies course, Participant C recalled the instructor *“repeatedly used feminine pronouns even though I told her at the beginning of class and I kept correcting her.”* He shared, *“It just made me feel invalidated. Even though that’s how I identified, that wasn’t who I was.”*

Peer (non) support

Peer groups help students find connections, acceptance, and a level of comparability in status (Astin,1993). However, within peer groups, expectations of normative behaviors still exist, and violating those in-group rules place the transgender student at risk of marginalization. (Bilodeau, 2009). The level of classroom peer support may influence their learning environment and overall collegiate experience of transgender. Participant A identified little support from peers in the classroom context. After coming out in his gender, he said there were “*some people in there who thought I was creepy or something because I didn’t identify as a normative gender.*”

Campus and Course

Many of the issues faced by trans students in higher education, including safety concerns, bathroom, and health care access, and the proper gender designation on records. Participant A spoke of specific kinds of courses that influenced her decision to enroll or participate. She said, “*I don’t take classes that have a lot of stereotypical people that may not like trans people as much*”. The campus also posed some safety concerns. Participant C spoke of being attacked on campus and how this influenced her participation in Queer groups. These groups allow them to share their experience and support each other. However, as discussed, campus involvement and relationships outside the classroom were very important to the participants; these experiences helped them find a safe and supportive college experience, despite other fears. Participants reported a lack of inclusive pedagogical approaches or appropriate responses to support students.

DISCUSSION

I wanted to learn more about how transgender students feel in the classroom environment, especially with their interactions with instructors and classmates, through this study. According to participant accounts, many staff members appeared to have little grasp

of best practices in interacting with transgender students, There were no inclusive instructional approaches or acceptable answers to support kids, according to participants. However, the positive staff interactions, students mentioned are encouraging, especially when it comes to respecting names and pronouns and facing issues in the classroom. Despite the favorable accounts, all of the participants encountered marginalization in the classroom, particularly from their classmates.

Although some participants found peer support, particularly in regards to correcting others' pronoun usage and forming friendships, others reported harassment, bullying, and apathy from classmates. Despite any good faith efforts on the part of professors and peers, many of the participants still saw the classroom as a normatively gendered environment (Bilodeau, 2009), leading to feelings of isolation, irritation, and discomfort. The findings depict the difficulty of coming out in the classroom (Bilodeau, 2009; Garvey & Rankin, 2015); worry and trepidation were particularly prominent. The themes show that these social encounters were contextualized (Blumer, 1986; West & Zimmerman, 1987) by how participants evaluated the classroom atmosphere and their ability to hide their identities if necessary. Students might limit their engagement with peers and withdraw from participation in larger classroom situations, which is a sort of performance (Goffman, 1959). Avoiding disagreement by masking or not addressing being misgendered by faculty or peers gave a sense of safety from potential harassment (Yep, 2003; Yoshino, 2007), supporting genderism and the expectations that transgender students must disguise on college campuses (Yep, 2003; Yoshino, 2007). (Bilodeau, 2009). Participants in this study, on the other hand, had positive experiences in smaller classes where they felt more at ease being out and performing outside of the gender binary. Masking was most common when participants didn't feel supported in any of the studies. Participants wanted to express who they were in this more intimate and participatory classroom setting, rather than masking and seeking

invisibility in a massive lecture. Participants commonly found peer support outside of the classroom in LGBTQ communities (Hart & Lester, 2011; Renn, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). These off-campus peer groups appeared to provide a safe area for students to explore their identities, make friends, and become more involved in school. Certain classroom settings tended to indicate a welcoming atmosphere. Even though participant testimonies differed, it is important to grasp their perspectives on the classroom setting. Despite some beneficial interactions, all of them were subjected to some type of marginalization from students and faculty members. These findings highlight the importance of instructors and practitioners reflecting on the possible impact of classroom experiences on students' academic and overall college experiences. These implications were felt by the participants when they were forced to discontinue courses, hide their identities, or withdraw from classroom involvement. These encounters had an impact on more than simply the academic setting. The importance of understanding how peer support is received and what situations are safe for authentic gender expression was emphasized by participants. Faculty and staff members must participate in opportunities for self-reflection and professional development to work with and support transgender students.

CONCLUSION

According to past studies on the transgender college experience, the college environment can be difficult at times due to teachers' and peers' lack of information about transgender identity and empathy. Through the lens of masking, I wanted to explore how transgender students see the school setting. Spade (2011) and Wentling et al. (2008) studied the use of names and gender pronouns. The findings also imply that transgender students perceive faculty apathy, with some reporting outright discrimination based on their gender identification. The participants were honest about their identities and only masked or performed differently in situations they thought were dangerous. They struggled at times due

to the instructor's lack of comprehension. Even though some students found peer support, many others had encounters with hostile peers. According to research (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), the classroom environment and faculty relationships with students are significant. I appreciate the transgender students' willingness to share their academic experiences. I hope that these experiences have put more light on this student population's persistent marginalization.

Overall, instructors are judged to be lacking in knowledge of best practices in interacting with and assisting students based on these data. University-based professional development to ensure that all people are included and accepted pupils who are transgender's, supporting them in welcoming environments. Positive learning environments in the classroom may be possible. Interactions between transgender pupils and transgender students, their counterparts. My aim is that these findings will provide a much-needed student viewpoint on the classroom environment and encourage teachers and students to support their education regarding transgender-inclusive institutional policies and practices.

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