

Who do you think you are?

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If the human rights of gay and lesbian children in our schools are routinely ignored, then the rights of transgendered children are not even recognised as existing



'Since many people keep their transgenderism entirely hidden, it is difficult to assess how many people live their lives this way'. Illustration: Paul Bommer/Guardian

Looking at feedback on your own articles is a bit of a Pandora's box. Ordinarily, those who make contributions to EducationGuardian.co.uk can be relied upon for a pretty measured and intelligent standard of comment. Unlike some of the other education forums, you don't feel as if you have to take a wash after visiting the Guardian site. I'll sometimes read through them, either nodding sagely in agreement or shaking my curls emitting a wild, cockney cry of, "Nahmateyougotthatallwrong".

Last month, however, one comment got more than a cursory gesture or utterance. It humbled me. "Natacha" wrote so movingly of the challenge facing transgendered children in our [schools](#) that I feel it's only right to make a public apology and to address the issue. If the human rights of gay and lesbian children in our schools are, as I wrote last month, routinely ignored, then the rights of transgendered children are not even recognised as existing.

I contacted Natacha, whom I now know as Natacha Kennedy, a former primary school teacher who is transgender and has researched widely into the issue. What she has to say about how our schools treat the issue screams to be shared.

First, some detail. As Debra Davis, of the [Gender Education Centre](#) in the US, says, gender is only simple "if you're an earthworm". Transgenderism is a catch-all term that, broadly, encompasses anyone whose gender identity does not unambiguously match that which they have been assigned. Transgendered does not automatically mean transsexual. The vast majority (95%) live in the role of the gender other than that which they have been assigned, without ever considering gender reassignment surgery, but the fact that the average age of someone choosing such surgery has been consistently and for some time 42 years of age suggests that many spend a substantial proportion of their adult lives suppressing their transgenderism.

Since many people keep their transgenderism entirely hidden, it is difficult to assess how many people live their lives this way, but best guesses hover around 1% of the population, which is roughly the equivalent of the population of, say, Sheffield.

This would mean that in a large, British secondary school, as many as 10 or so kids could be transgender. Their lives, reports Natacha, can be awesomely difficult. Whereas gay, lesbian and bisexual children may come to a realised understanding of their difference post-puberty, transgendered children often come to this awareness before they are eight years of age.

"[Bullying](#) of transgendered children is utterly vicious and is completely ingrained in our culture," says Natacha. The comedy transvestite, for instance, is an intrinsic part of British comic culture and is so popular a stereotype that it renders bullying of transgender people almost a cultural obligation.

And what is the result of such bullying? Unhappiness, loneliness and suicide attempts. In Doncaster last year, 10-year-old Cameron McWilliams, who had been asking permission to wear makeup and girls' underwear, hanged himself.

"Still there is no effective recognition of the problems that transgendered children face," Natacha reports. "Most of them are aware they are transgendered for most, if not all, of their time in school. Most leave as soon as they can because in the school system, which demands that they show respect and tolerance for other minority groups, they are not tolerated themselves by others."

How, then, are schools to deal with this issue? Should there be compulsory gender studies as part of the citizenship curriculum? One would think so, but if kids are experiencing gender dysphoria at the age of seven, then it is the primary schools that must take a lead on this, well before the nightmare that transgendered children experience as puberty begins.

Natacha's feeling is that schools should, at an early age, be looking at notions of gender identity, and that this could help to alleviate some of the feelings of guilt and shame that will traumatise some transgendered children. "What transgendered children need is for their teachers to talk to their classes about transgenderism and its problems, even if there may not be a transgendered child in the class. Those who are in the classes need to know that they are OK. They are not freaks. They have rights. And there are many others like them."

So, in clarification of my claim last month that homophobia in British schools is the last acceptable prejudice: transphobia remains an inequality enshrined in law. The government is proposing to exclude the majority of transgendered people from any protection against discrimination in the [equality](#) bill, as they say that transgendered people "choose" to live the way they do and there is no evidence of any systemic discrimination. Both of which, according to Natacha, are wrong. It is still legal to discriminate against transgendered people in situations where racism, homophobia, sexism, religious intolerance and disability discrimination are outlawed.

This is an area that the Department for Children, Schools and Families needs to take a serious look at. It has been farsighted and enlightened in producing materials and documents guiding schools in how to deal with issues surrounding homophobic bullying. But, given the Labour government's excellent record in dealing with equality issues, it is time ministers took action to eliminate what is indeed the very, very last acceptable prejudice.