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Learning, Pronouns, and Learning Pronouns: The Trans Student Experience

In Terre Thaemlitz's "Viva McGlam?: Is Transgenderism a Critique of or Capitulation to Opulence-Driven Glamour Models?", Thaemlitz recalls an anti-smoking poster she saw as a child in the 80s. The poster contrasts "Smoking is very glamorous," with an image of a smoker Thaemlitz calls, "a messy drag queen - no makeup, a mopy wig perched on top of her head, hairline visible underneath." Though her investigation into the campaign and its model came up fruitless, she became convinced from an early age it was a "transgender image," one designed to make women fear smoking might make them look similarly unglamorous, similarly like men. "It is a mindless shift that discloses how we 'unthink' the processes through which we survey and represent the body." Though unintended, who is and is not glamorous according to this ad is clear. Thaemlitz discusses how seeing this poster in doctor's offices and other places with nothing else to look at left her to think about how people conceptualize bodies, especially transgender ones like her own. One of the places she saw this poster hung was in her school.

Transgender and cisgender students may attend the same school but be met by two completely different campuses and experiences. Bettering the self through learning becomes difficult when something so integral to the self is constantly denied. Whether it is higher rates of misgendering, lack of understanding, frequent harassment and violence, being viewed as lesser when correctly identified as trans, increased mental illness rates from this lack of acceptance, or being less likely to be prioritized for resources, to be a trans student often means to receive an

inferior education by no fault of one's self.

First, A Word.

I would like to begin first by trying my best to empathize with anyone cisgender who is reading this. If I may make one assumption about cisgender people (they have certainly made enough about me), I think they are afraid of transgender issues in a way that can be hard to express. They are afraid of challenging a system that has supported them and has supported how they define their gender with centuries of precedent. Challenging this system may lead to new discoveries, even questioning one's gender, which I, for one, understand is scary. I would, however, assert that a greater understanding of transgender people, and gender at large, benefits all of us. However, I can only truly speak to a transgender person's experience, so I intend to do so in detail.

Support and Academic Performance

For many trans people, school is where they learn they are trans. In a 2014 remark for The Lost Lectures, Amanda Lepore, a transgender model, briefly mentioned her experience in school. "Growing up, I thought I was a girl, and my parents were torturing me by cutting my hair and not allowing me to wear pretty dresses. It really became a problem when I started school and they would separate us in groups of male and female... Substitute teachers couldn't tell if I was a boy or a girl." School served to enforce the cisgender binary in Lepore's formative years, often taking the center of her bullying. Peers and even her own mother took to mockingly calling her "Miss Lepore" or "Miss Hollywood." By the age of 15, it was no longer a joke. Lepore began taking hormones she acquired from her friend's transgender coworker at a strip club, exchanging the pills for costumes she made. When time came to go back to school, Lepore came back, bleach blonde and dressed as a girl for the first time. "I was being bullied anyway, so

I thought, ‘What does it matter?’ Ironically, no one said anything that day, and I was called into the guidance counselor. She said I couldn’t go to school that way, and I could quit if I wanted to. I said I wanted a high school diploma, and she gave me a tutor. My grades drastically went up.”

Abbie E. Goldberg has done extensive research on transgender students. Some evidence suggests trans students who were more supported performed better in school. But this point was fairly tertiary to other discoveries. For instance, out of all student responses, non-binary students consistently rated campus environments the most hostile. 85% of all trans students reported having some form of mental health issue as of Goldberg’s 2018 study. Often, still, trans students reported having therapists who failed to use their name and pronouns, understand trans issues, or focus on lack of acceptance for their identity rather than identity itself as the cause for distress. One respondent even reported their old therapist advising they go off of hormones and live as their birth sex to solve the problem. Every level of bureaucracy a student can go through opens them up to potential bigotry, even those designed to help them.

I would, however, like to speak now to transgender students’ strengths. One study Goldberg cites mentions that despite slightly lower than average academic performance, trans students “have greater confidence in their artistic ability and creativity, compared to national norms... Trans students were also twice as likely to score high on a measure of civic engagement compared to the national sample (47.5% s. 23.4%).” This should not surprise anyone who has seen how politicized something as simple as people like me having to pee is depending on state. I do not find it difficult to understand why a student who feels welcome existing on campus and recognized as their gender as frequently as those who happened to be assigned the correct one would report more positive perceptions of a campus or higher grades. Trans students nationally rate themselves lower on “physical health, social self-confidence, leadership ability, and

academic self-concept" (Goldberg). I find these more linked to levels of stress than ability to learn.

Many trans students have had to become self-made experts. They need to be able to justify their existence to peers, explore the sociological and endocrinological options of transition, have the history to find precedent for our current understanding of non-binary and trans binary identities, know their own legal rights by state, protect themselves from violence, employ fashion and stereotypes where fit... this list is getting too long. The point is many trans people outpace their cis counterparts in terms of actual knowledge and, contrary to popular belief, understanding of the world around them. Current academia would do well to merely recognize, utilize, and cultivate it.

Now, I do not wish to linger on the violence committed against trans people. It is voyeuristic. It is exhausting. It is the kind of statistics cisgender people tend to really like for some reason. However, omitting it completely would be irresponsible. According to Goldberg, "The USTS found that 24% of respondents who were out as or perceived as trans in college/vocational school reported being verbally, physically, or sexually harassed at that time—with 16% of those who experienced harassment reporting that they left college because of it." That is nearly 4% of total trans students who leave school due to harassment. One in 25. Trans students interviewed also reported feared for their physical and emotional safety when choosing gender presentation (66.7%), many choosing to dress or present more rigidly to the gender binary than was their identity for fear of harassment.

Non-binary Genders

Bear with me a moment as I get anecdotal.

I remember two years ago, my best friend Milo had two roommates, a girl our age and a former R.A. of ours, Morgan. Morgan was exceptionally chipper whenever I saw him. He was a fan of hikes and skiing. When the R.A.s freshman year went around the room, saying their names and pronouns, I remember him saying, “Morgan, he/him,” my brain going “*Obviously.*” After a few visits to Milo’s new place, it became clear to all of us that I made their third roommate very uncomfortable. Milo, of course, responded by having me over as often as possible. On a car ride with her, Morgan recalls the roommate talking at length about how non-binary genders were not real and how confused and disgusting I was compared to “real” and respectable trans people like him who put the effort in.

Oh, did I mention Morgan is trans? Funny thing is, actually, he is also non-binary, though he tends to ride by passing as a man to most. The ways in which trans people protect themselves, the pronouns we use, and the varieties of our experience often confuse even one other. It is here I would suggest trans people are a large group of people with a variety of needs and identities. I ask that you be not confused but as mesmerized as I am.

Education and Hierchy

I was lucky enough to interview Morgan about the trans student experience specifically. He began hormones in high school before coming out and entering university, as he says, mostly passing. “I decided to attend college my senior year of high school largely because I was trans and not being in my high school allowed me to feel more comfortable transitioning. Ultimately, I see this as a positive for my education. Although, being a young queer in high school was rather socially unpleasant.” As all trans students, Morgan has had his share of bumps in the road. “In university it has largely been a non-issue, I did have a teacher who was less cool about it my freshman year and ultimately I dropped that major for a variety of reasons but partially because I

would've had to take several more classes with her.” Power imbalances are a major factor in the treatment of trans students, who are constantly at the mercy of, largely, cisgender staff. Morgan remarked, “As it is, the teacher student hierarchy is pretty set in stone and hard to challenge, and I think it would be beneficial in many ways to not have this be such a clear distinct unbreakable hierarchy.”

As grateful as I am for statistics, the work that goes into gathering them, and the people who do it, they can often have a bit of distance to them, so I am equally grateful for Morgan’s interview, as was he. “I’m tired about hearing about us as only statistics. I feel like there is so much breadth to the trans experience that usually gets lost.”

Self-Image and Anxiety

I was also able to interview Aurora Stark, a close friend of mine I met in a general-level film class. They are an art major, illustrator, Spiderman fan, and we frequently threaten to kiss each other over Discord, but that is our business.

“Schooling is perhaps one of the biggest factors to my anxiety,” Aurora said. “I KNOW I had anxietal tendencies before being diagnosed, before high school, but they’ve definitely been exacerbated by school... Looking at it, I don't think ‘anxietal’ is an actual word.” Initially when asked if being trans has informed, changed, or challenged their education, Aurora said they were ready to say no. School was, however, often a delivery system for their body image issues. “Presenting more masculinely-- or even just, not using feminine body standards to judge myself against-- has helped a lot lately, as has getting a binder. And I only bring all this up because I very clearly remember how uncomfortable I felt in my junior high and high schools changing room at gym, judging myself against others there.” Like all my interviewees, Aurora had not had a single openly transgender instructor. “Nobody that I knew for certain was trans. There

have been teachers I was fairly certain were queer in some way, but no one explicitly ever said they were trans.” It does not surprise me that so few educators are trans, considering the education needed to become one and the disparities explored above.

Transition and Sexism

My third interviewee, Jesse, I have actually known since elementary school. When I asked him if being trans has affected his academic performance, he said, “I started college well before I started testosterone replacement therapy and as I’ve progressed through my transition, I find that I’m taken far more seriously compared to my female-presenting colleagues. I’m questioned less for my ideas in group projects and my input seems to carry more weight. I think it has impacted my academic performance in a way. I feel less hesitant and cautious about my ideas, it’s easier for me to just go for them and not get grief for it.” For Jesse, this largely proved the sexism present in academia. “Being trans in higher education means I’m still constantly defending and explaining my existence towards cisgender people, whether they’re well-meaning allies or not. I’m still not allowed to just exist as I am.”

Morgan similarly remarked on the role sexism played in his experience as he transitioned. “I would say... that my dysphoria pre-transition made it very difficult to speak up in class or do presentations. Similar to stage fright but with a very specific root cause.” Trans conversations greatly benefit from highlighting sexism, provided those involved are correctly counted as their gender as opposed to birth sex. I would go as far as to assert any gender-based statistics that exclude trans people are incomplete, but I digress. As Morgan reported, “The more masculine I present myself, typically the smarter people assume I am. Even within being read as male, being read as stereotypically masculine comes with this assertion more.” And, as eloquently summarized by his former roommate, cisgender people are far more open to gender presentations

and experiences in line with what they already understand and a greater effort to “act cis” on the part of trans people, which is a tremendous responsibility. And expensive.

Trans Students and Mental Health

All three of my interviewees discussed mental healthcare. Whether it was in examples of how trans students can be supported or their grievances with the current education system, one thing was clear. “[We need] access to school provided counseling, as often times we are unable to afford counseling outside of school due to the costs,” Jesse said. “[There is a] lack of consideration that transgender students are far more likely to be mentally ill due to societal transphobia and often need more accommodations than cisgender students.” Stark also stated a need for “just better mental care, and frankly more value put in the humanities. There should be counselors for mental health at every school, not just people who help you sign up for classes.” Morgan added, “I was very lucky to have supportive parents but many student-age trans people I know don't have that, and I just wish that wasn't such a problem that then bleeds into educational struggles. University is just too damn expensive.”

Another frequent problem mentioned was invalidation and “jokes” about trans identities. Whether it be “political debates” on their existence or the belief trans people are a new invention, bigotry being rewarded with laughter was a frequent problem. “There are better ways to educate than playing the devil’s advocate and ultimately just being a voice to asshole ideas,” Morgan said. “[There needs to be] zero tolerance for any sort of joking or prodding against queer identities,” Aurora said, recalling an instructor laughing when a student made an insensitive joke.

In Summary

When asked to summarize how school has made them feel in a single word, my participants listed, “Exhausted,” “Overwhelmed,” and, more optimistically, “Growth.” I

personally wrote that question with the word “Wasted” in mind. We must create educational institutions where trans students feel, at the very least, welcome. Trans students are so wonderful. Trans students bring so much knowledge and humility and kindness and anger and ideas and fun to the classroom. They deserve to have their needs met the same way cisgender students do, and it is clear they are not. So many trans people are lost at such a young age because the systems in place are not working. It is so easy to write and read about trans people as a monolith with an easily bulleted list of how to be an ally to all of us in exchange for lengthy descriptions of our bodies and suffering, but I hope we can work towards a future where trans students, like all students, are treated case-by-case. We deserve mountains of student debt and to fail a class because of sleeping in on finals like everyone else. That is all I ask.

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