Abstract: All young children (preschool through third grade) attending public, private, or charter schools in the United States exist inside the social, economic, and political environments of the education system. Many preschool and kindergarten classrooms have preestablished rules and play centers that subscribe to gender norms. Currently, there is a gap in the literature about how these power relations influences transgender children. This study explored the early childhood education experiences of ten transsexual adults.
Introduction

The smell of a freshly open jar of paste, the sight of a new red crayon drawing a long thin mark across a piece of lined white paper, the sound of a radiator’s pop and hiss, the feeling as you slide into your very own desk for the very first time, the taste of cafeteria mashed potatoes; some memories stay with us for a lifetime. Many are associated with important places. Our senses help us experience new surroundings. As we spend seemingly countless days in the same location, it becomes familiar. When we leave it, even years later, we may be able to close our eyes and recall the designs on the circle time mat, the exact locations of peeling green paint on the walls, and the dreaded fear that fills your belly at the sound of a teacher’s heels on linoleum floor. Twenty years after we have left a place, a wafting smell, unique and recognizable, can rush us back to a time when our bodies were small and our hearts were alive with possibility. This is true for many adult persons; including those who were born into a body whose physical sex characteristics do not match their gender identity. Perhaps, these memories of early schooling may be even more salient for transgender individuals, as the experience of navigating normalized spaces can be both frightening and restrictive.

Problem

Many preschool and kindergarten classrooms have preestablished rules and play centers that subscribe to gender norms. Such a social environment can be stressful and restrictive to transgender students (Frankfurt, 2000; Quinn, 2002). For example, it is common in U.S. elementary schools for teachers to establish rituals that reinforce gender segregation— including lining up girls and boys separately and alternating between males and females when releasing children at the conclusion of story time (McMurray, 1998). In addition, many preschools offer a “housekeeping” or dramatic play area (containing baby dolls and cooking equipment) and a construction site (including blocks and toy power tools) (McMurray, 1998; Paley, 1986). It is frequent for children as young as three to label these divisions as the “girls’ spot” and the “boy’s spot” (Paley, 1986). These sexist practices are also heterosexist, body normative, and gender normative.

The early childhood education profession has a commitment to establishing a safe, healthy, supportive and enriching environment for all children, including little ones who bring a rainbow of diversity and culture. Unfortunately, such an educational climate is not always achieved. Policymakers, administrators and educators are often miseducated regarding the needs and strengths of transgender children. As an educational researcher, I am concerned about the social experiences of those children who do not fit gender molds in early childhood education settings. My passion for advocacy of the needs of these young human beings has led to the development of my research questions.

All young children (preschool through third grade) attending public, private, or charter schools in the United States exist inside the social, economic, and political environments of the education system. Since the inception of this system, it has been influenced by, shaped around, and embedded within dominant U.S. societal morals, beliefs, and goals. Curriculum, nutrition, health, and assessment practices are directly linked to the political consciousness of those in power. The standardized assessment procedures implemented during the administration of George W. Bush directly reflect the educational “needs” of our nation’s students only as they are perceived by the majority groups of our society. The most blatant example of this is the No Child Left Behind Act, a federal education policy signed into law by former president George W. Bush at the beginning of the century (US. Department of Education, 2001). Health education programs offered to students are careful to encourage strictly defined moral beliefs and methods of conduct, which assume heterosexuality, have no consideration for varying genders, and only teach material which has been ruled as being appropriate by those in power (You, 2002). Foucault explores this concept in his discussion of governmentality. “His micro-analysis of power clearly place(s) the school and its practices into a complex power/knowledge web in which power is exerted over children, whether or not it is in their (best) interests. Clearly not all power influences are ‘bad’ in Foucault’s view, but those which involve power/knowledge, and ‘knowledge’ from the human sciences, which can lead to subjection and the imposition of identity, are [problematic],” (Marshall, 1996, p. 129). In the U.S. education system, the
academic practices experienced by and imparted upon young children typically reflect the values of the white, high socio-economic status, male, Christian, and Eurocentric majority.

Currently, there is a gap in the literature about how these power relations influences transgender children. Consequently, this study was proposed as a means to explore the educational experiences of early childhood aged (three-eight year old) children in school. During the initial development stages of this project, one method of data collection was considered. This process would have involved thorough, in-depth interviews with members of the population of interest. However, such a study is ethically troublesome on several fronts. Firstly, transgender children existing within heteronormative spaces may be situated within positions of vulnerability. In addition, as the power relationships between children and adults are already grossly unbalanced, the prospect of interviewing children who frequently work to please adults is worrisome. It would also have proven quite difficult to locate enough parents and children who would offer consent for a study of such personal issues. The resolution for these quandaries was found in interviews with adult transgender persons reflecting upon their early childhood experiences.

The educational experiences that the partners recalled for this study existed within the physical space of the school and its grounds. Certain places (whether classroom closet or tree root) represented solace or fear, entertainment or boredom, freedom or restriction, happiness or grief, or rather some variety of these multifaceted emotions. Many were tied to specific experiences with peers or adults, resulting in lifelong associations of places with feelings. As we explore these spaces, particularly in relationship to safety and empowerment, we are granted increased awareness, a real and raw look into the world of our children as they experience it. Educators might ask themselves- how do my students exist within and interact with physical spaces? What role do I play in these relationships? How can I improve the way in which my young children encounter the school environment? How can they improve it for one another?

Transgender Children In Early Childhood Education - An Overview Of The Literature

Most children develop a gender identity at the age of two or three (Cohen-Kettenis, 1997). During this time period some children insist strongly that they belong to a gender opposite from their biological sex (Mallon, 2006). These children are identified as being transgender.

Because people widely assume a ‘natural’ relationship between sex and gender, children who question their birth-assigned gender are pathologized and labeled as ‘gender dysphoric’. (Mallon, 2006, p. 218-219)

Aside from receiving a psychological label of mental illness, transgender children face other struggles. Young human beings who deviate from the socially prescribed behavioral norms are often scolded, corrected, and punished by parental figures. This is frequently confusing to children because behaviors, mannerisms, and play that appear to be gender nonconforming to a parent can “feel perfectly normal to a child” (Mallon, 2006, p. 219). Transgender children may prefer to play with children of the opposite gender and frequently state that they wish to obtain the genitals or physical characteristics of the opposite gender (Tuerk, 2003).

This issue deeply affects human beings that are aged 3-6 years. In the U.S. this age group typically enters school for the first time (either pre-school or kindergarten). In addition to markers, glue, and scissors, transgender children in early childhood settings bring to school struggles related to gender identity. In addition, gender will affect the manner in which children interpret what is taught. Gender is one of many cultural lenses through which all human beings interpret learning. There are countless studies that suggest differences in the ways girls and boys respond to education. Thus, transgender children and their schooling experiences are issues critical to the profession of early childhood education.

School Climate

Institutional heterosexism. is the “unconscious or conscious exclusion of non-heterosexual individuals and their realities” (Blackburn, 2004, p. 103). Although heterosexism does not by definition describe
oppression of transgender individuals, it is a very important concept to explore in relation to this population. One reason for the link is that transgender people are often mistaken as being gay or lesbian (which they may or may not be). A heterosexist school climate would thus place transgender human beings at a disadvantage. United States “schools are typically heterosexist and homophobic institutions,” (Blackburn, 2004, p. 103). Another reason why heterosexism applies is that, as transgender individuals are struggling with gender identity, many may struggle with sexual orientation as well. In addition, institutions that hold heterosexuality as the norm and as a result force sexual normative values on students may be more likely to force gender norms on children as well. Heterosexism and transphobia are inextricably linked. When transphobia and homophobia are transformed into discriminatory language, they can be magnified by teacher apathy regarding the behavior. Such a laissez-faire attitude greatly shapes the school climate. Ignoring remarks like, “that’s so gay,” “you’re so gay,” or “you’re a fag” places value on homophobic remarks that are of the same gravity of comments such as “that’s so stupid” or “you’re so stupid” (Markow, 2005).

Unit Of Analysis

Persons interviewed for this study were viewed fully as “partners” in the research and not “participants” or “subjects” (Pole, Mizen, & Bolton, 1999; Pillow, 2002). They are referred to as such throughout this paper. Although eligibility requirements for transgender research partners included an eighteen year age minimum, the “true” unit of study was transgender children in early childhood academic settings. I sought to study body normalization in the classroom as a means to gain greater insight into the lived experiences of this underprivileged, underrepresented group (Foucault, 1995 [1975]). As the field of education offers limited literature in relation to this topic, I grounded my research in an extensively studied theory, Foucault’s normalization of the body. I examined the concept of normalization from micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social interaction, influence, and decision-making (Foucault, 1995 [1975]).

Ten research partners were interviewed for this study. All of these individuals identified as transgender or transsexual. The partners ranged in age, race, gender identity, socio-economic status, location of origin, and type of early childhood education (public, private, or home) attended. Some of the children were shy, others were outgoing; some liked to play with toys, while others used their imaginations to create games using natural materials. Several of the partners performed well in school while others struggled. Some had a supportive adult/family member, though this was not the case for all.

Research Question

1) What are the narratives transgender adults have to share about their early childhood education experiences?

2) How can these reflections guide our understandings regarding the propagation and preservation of normalized social and physical early childhood spaces?

Design

My study followed a qualitative process steeped in grounded theory (Creswell, 1998). This proved to be the best method to explore the extent of gender normalization within the early childhood education system and the effect that such messages have on transgender students (Jaggar & Bordo, 1989). As I am an active part of the LGBTQ community, I have several transgender friends (including two of the partners) who over the years have discussed their educational experiences with me (Johnson, 2007). As a result of these conversations and my extensive research on the subject, several themes arose that begged for further investigation (Creswell, 1998). These included social interactions, experienced curriculum and physical environment (including layout of the classroom, available books, and aesthetics).

Four interview questions emerged from these themes (Creswell, 1998). They were broad and open ended and once utilized, allowed for the facilitation of hours of narratives propelled forward with occasional requests to elaborate. These questions appear in the appendix of this study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Research Partners

All of the research partners were currently residing in Arizona; however they had grown up in a
variety of U.S. states. Two had also attended schools outside of the United States during part of their educational career (in Mexico and Germany). Three of the partners were African American, two were Hispanic, one was Native American, and four were white. Those who were interviewed included a cardiologist, two persons living in a halfway house who were unemployed, two Master’s students, two community workers, a writer, a graphic designer, and a law student. The partners ranged in age from 21-years-old to 62-years-old.

Data Collection
Through in person interviews with ten transsexual adults, I addressed my research questions regarding external methods of body normalization and the internalizing effects of this process. The interviews focused around preestablished questions with the opportunity for follow up questions (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As the IRB determined this study to be “exempt,” each partner received a letter of information specifically detailing all of their rights and protections as an interviewee. All who participated in the study were asked to complete a demographic information sheet prior to interview commencement. The interviews took place over one or more occasions, depending on the availability of the partners (Gubrium & Holstein 2001). In some cases, the interview questions created in-depth discussions and time did not permit responses to each of them in a single session. All of the interviews were audio recorded. The sessions were held in a quiet location of the partners’ choosing (Gubrium & Holstein 2001).

Data Analysis
Grounded theory was utilized as the primary method of data analysis (Creswell, 1998). Patterns of response from the interviews were categorized through a system of layering. An initial coding process was conducted, at which time major themes were identified. A second round of analysis uncovered subthemes in the data. Critical methodologies (particularly queer theory and post-structural theory) guided the entire research process, particularly during the data analysis stage. Though themes emerged, I remained especially cognizant of the power dynamics operating within the social environment of the educational system (Creswell, 1998).

None of the research partners who were asked to participate chose to decline. The partners were located through snowball sampling (Noy, 2008). Many volunteered, unfortunately more than my study could accommodate. Throughout the analysis process, ongoing communication was held with the partners. They made suggestions for inclusion or exclusion of certain elements, added new stories they had forgotten during the initial interviews, and offered opinions regarding interpretation (Johnson, 2007). As I am quite concerned about the ethical implications of conducting interviews, I minimized some of my fears as the partners held the power to determine the manner in which their thoughts and experiences were documented (Pole, Mizen, & Bolton, 1999).

Pseudonyms
All interviewees were assigned pseudonyms of their choosing. This is due to the fact that the research partners could potentially face negative social and/or professional consequences as a result of participating in this study. Many of the people who participated in the project are visible in the local and online communities and thus are easily identifiable.

Research Findings
Primary Classroom
As a means of aiding the partners in recalling their early childhood environments, those who participated in the study were asked to draw the first classroom or childcare room that they could remember. To draw something from such a distant time requires that a person mentally put themselves back in that place. What colors were in the room? What did it smell like? Where did I sit? Who was in the room with me and how did I feel about them? The purpose of this activity was the process and not the product. However, some of the pictures were striking. As the partners drew, they described the environments. Certain elements were particularly memorable for a variety of reasons.

Aidan had few positive interactions with his first early childhood classroom. Aside from the corner and the coat closet, there were not places in the environment that he liked. Because he was often teased, “I didn’t like any place where there was a lot of people. Aidan’s story and corresponding picture are striking. He found solace in the coat closet, one of the
only places in school where he could free himself from an onslaught of ridicule. This should not be the experience of our children in early childhood:

The funny thing about kindergarten, first and second grade is I don’t remember the classrooms. I remember the little locker rooms where we hung our bags. I used to always hang out in the locker room; hang out with bags in the corner ‘cause there was no one else in there, and I could play with my little GI Joe in the corner, and not be like beat up or picked on. When they used force me to go out on the playground, I would, there was this one tree root I used to just sit on the entire recess.

Erin (Aidan’s fiancé) explained that Aidan spent so much time sitting on this tree root in his youth that as an adult, “he actually took me and showed me the tree root.”

Lluvy Rae recalls the color coded system that existed in her preschool. Everything was divided into, “Blue and pink and I always wanted pink. I never liked blue and there were a few times that I would switch stickers. I would switch stickers so I had a pink one. And I would get in trouble for that too.”

Mike enjoyed a lot of things about his classroom. “We had desks that were for us and we put our stuff in there: things like clay and paper, all that sort of stuff. I remember, because it was the first time we got to have our own stuff, like a pencil box. It was a lot of fun, actually. I still love school supplies a lot. I was really excited about pencil boxes and things.” He loved getting a new box of crayons. “You got to pick the one you wanted, with all the colors you liked. And, this was the sink; and a cabinet that had a whole bunch of other stuff in it. We had a listening station with headphones and, probably, a record player at that time, because I’m that old! What else? A door was over here. And, we had a piano, actually! I just remembered that because she used to play it! We had a piano up here. She used to be a performer, so she would play the piano. So, that gives you an idea and what it was.”

Mary felt a sense of security in the classroom. “I remember it was a very safe environment. It was very clean. There were lots of tables, lots of sunlight, lots of books; all kinds of books. There was a bookcase and I would love to go and start a quasi-high by the
bookcase and if I could sit there, at the bookcase. I could be hidden and read Lorna Dune, my favorite. It was always about female heroines, poems. I was always involved in, ‘I don’t want people to know what I’m reading, because if they know what I’m reading, they’re going to hurt my feelings.’ But yet, I could make conversation with a number of people about the books: ‘Well how did you know that?’ And it made me feel good that I had read that, and I was a part of that conversation. And these people didn’t know anything. They were shallow and narrow-minded. So even though we were the same age, I felt like, ‘You’re leaving them behind. They’ll have to catch up with you.’ And that was okay.” Mary felt extremely safe:

By the bookcase, by the books. I guess I’ve always been a drama queen. So I knew in this bookcase, there was Jane Eyre. I knew in this bookcase there was Lorna Dune, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, all kinds of female heroines in these books. There was also baseball books, I wasn’t interested in that; The Rookie of the Year and all that. I wanted to see the heroines, the strong women do things. They were a part of society. It was exciting for me to read about these strong women that were making a difference and questioning, ‘why?’ And it made me feel important, like, ‘I’m a part of this.’

Because when I went home and sat, I only saw a few strong women. I saw women that were broken.

Margo experienced a sense of safety when she was sitting at her desk. She dichotomized between in-desk occurrences and out-of-desk occurrences:

You know, ‘cause you had activities where the teacher would sometimes put you in a circle or have you line up on the walls, and that’s when kids would do things like poke you with a pencil or trip you or start teasing you or popping you when the teacher doesn’t look. And sometimes you’d have a teacher, if you reported that somebody was doing something to you, they would reprimand the person doing it. Other teachers would reprimand you ‘cause I remember she, she and this other teacher Ms. Mason, both of them, if I would tell on someone picking on me, they would humiliate me in front of the class and say, ‘Oh Mike is such a little tattletale, what do you think class?’ ‘Do you think we should pin a tail on him that says tattletale?’ I mean man, it was like standard issue. It seems like every teacher would say, ‘I’m going to pin a tale on you for tattling,’ and then other students would say, ‘You get to take names,’ and that person did no wrong.

Unlike Mary, Lluvy Rae felt generally unsafe at school.

I didn’t want to be there just because I liked staying home. But I knew it was something I had to do. I knew it was something I had to do. I knew I just wouldn’t be able to stay at home because I knew I had to go to school.

Margo felt empowered:

In my chair, again it, like any other time you can screw up, because there were times when you would come up to the front of the class, and that was the place you would feel less secure. You’d get called on to solve a problem and have to go up to the blackboard and everyone looking at you. And the teacher would give you something to do and if you didn’t do it well, that was the worst place to be because the class would laugh at you if you screwed up, or the teacher would reprimand you if you were not doing it right. And so you did not want to be up there, it always came down to, if you could just sit at your desk all day and be left alone, you had a good day.

Playground

Early childhood aged children in the United States often spend a bit of time on the playground. Most schools house one on the premises and the children are expected to play on it during recess. Throughout the interviews, the playground was mentioned by the partners. This was either a place of entertainment or a location of contention. Aidan avoided this area as a means of protection. Maria “liked to play in it when I was in elementary, that was fun. ‘Cause when I was in elementary you know, it was more innocent like.” Lluvy Rae felt empowered on the playground, “because I drew all the girls to me
and I would be able to tell them all what to do and they
would follow and I knew I could get away with saying
let’s do this or that.” Erin was empowered in, “the play
area ‘cause no one used to screw with me. So, I kind of
played by myself.” Mike was accepted by peers on the
playground:

Until we got to that puberty stage. Until we hit
that stage, it didn’t matter. I just related to them
in ways they related to each other. I’ve never had
much of an easy time relating to girls or women.
I just see the world differently, so I don’t
understand.

Beth described the playground as her least favorite
place in school:

I was probably the only kid in school who
couldn’t wait for recess to be over. The
playground was very unforgiving because kids
would play basketball. Of all the sports, I did
enjoy basketball, (but) I didn’t get the chance.
They would knock you down on the court. I
hated football. They would run right at you and
knock you down and was just part of how they
played the game, sort of like rugby. I might of
enjoyed baseball and softball, but all the skilled
boys would get all of the fun positions. The rest
of us got stuck in the outfield and of course, we
couldn’t judge where the ball was and it would
fall to the ground.

She did not try to play with the “other boys” because:

I didn’t throw very well. I didn’t try (to play with
the boys). And then sometimes on the
playground we couldn’t go over to the girls’ side.
The playground was very large. We had the
monkey bars, the jungle gym, and the ladder that
goes above your head that you could climb,
swings and slides. I remember going down the
slide one time and instead of sitting up I was
almost on my back. When I hit the end my back
hit it and knocked the wind out of me and I was
scared because I couldn’t breathe.

Lluvy Rae explained that she felt secure on the
playground.

I think it was like that because I was able to be
myself. I could play with who I wanted, getting
in line (boy, girl, boy, girl). So that’s the only
time I felt free and not get in trouble for it.

Specials Classrooms
Music

Several of the students played musical
instruments. All who participated in this activity
enjoyed it immensely. The music room was Beth’s
favorite place in school:

Because we, even in elementary school we had
musical instruments like the drums, the
woodblock. In the 5th grade we had something
called the harmonica band, which was really
cool. We would have these little Horner
harmonicas that were not chromatic. They were
just a single scale but we could play in the key of
C and of course, I had a solo. It was called
Arkansas Trapper. Some of the other kids
thought I was a smart because I had a solo.

Lana has fond memories of her interactions with
musical instruments:

School was fun. Once they found out what was
wrong with me in third grade I started playing
music because I think they thought it would
challenge me. I started out playing trombone that
didn’t work. It was too loud. Saxophone chapped
my lips. But I stuck with the viola for a few years
which was good ‘cause no one really played the
viola. And my teacher Mr. Walsh, I will never
forget him. He was a really good teacher. He had
actually come from a music school to teach us.
So he was really awesome. Now that was a really
interesting opportunity I had there.

She continued to explain that:

I was in the school orchestra. I sat in first chair as
violinist and the first chair as clarinet, and played
the clarinet. I really enjoyed that, but my mother
could not afford to keep me in that class. You
had to rent an instrument every month and she
couldn’t afford to do that. So that was my last
passion. Everybody was nice to me. I guess musicians are like artists, very eccentric people. They are very accepting and you know, not concerned about my sexuality or anything. But that was my last passion and after that I pretty much gave it up on continuing to live a life that I was living.

**Gym**

Unlike music class, physical education was often detested by the participants. Mike recalled that:

It was really embarrassing in the locker room, and really painful. I would always change in the stalls. I would walk into the locker room and my face would be red, immediately. I would just shove my head in the locker, ‘okay, grab your clothes and change and get out of here.’ It was always really uncomfortable. I spent a lot of time in the locker room, but I certainly spent the least amount of time of anyone, probably. I just wanted to get out of here. It just, always, felt wrong. It just really felt uncomfortable and it just wasn’t a good experience.

Lady Gazelle similarly disliked changing for gym class. The locker room was her least favorite place in school… ‘cause I had to take my clothes off, you know. And people treated me like I had a disease. And there is no supervision in that locker room.”

Maria’s negative feelings about physical education were the result of teasing that occurred while in the gymnasium:

‘Cause the gym, oh my goodness, especially in the other school, it was very rough, very rough. Gym is where I specifically would always get into fights. And the boys would pick on me and the boys would always, you know, say, ‘You little girl,’ or ‘You fag.’ And I didn’t really see myself as if I was broke. But other than that I looked at myself and then said, ‘Damn mi hija,’ I don’t know but, I am a survivor ‘cause all those beatings. ‘Cause gym, you know, it was a perfect time and I was in the room and the teacher didn’t do anything about it. And it was a perfect time for those guys to pick on me, and get into fights.

And it was pretty bad and I never had encountered any sexual abuse. But I did encounter physical abuse, and sometimes torture abuse like pinching of private parts, or punching. And so I just stayed with mostly with physical abuse and torture, lots of torture.

Mary hated gym because of dodge ball.

The boys appeared to want to hurt me. And I thought, ‘You wanna hurt me? I’ll show you hurt.’ So it made me even more aggressive, especially in dodge ball. I just chose not to wrestle. I didn’t want to wrestle, so I would sit out. Swimming? Oh, I hated it. Because the boys swam nude, and I just did not want to show my genitalia. So I failed swimming, and yet I can swim. When teachers embraced my modern dance, I came alive. I taught them different steps, and I was involved. (The teacher) taught me how to tap, taught me ballet, taught me pivots. I was a quick study. I was there to be the teacher’s pet, and to be a part of, ‘Okay we’re going to do it now. David, please show us how to do this. Come do this with me.’ Yes, so, yes, I was very much so involved in that.

**Art**

Although Mary disliked “mechanical drawing,” the art room was often an enjoyable place for the participants. Lana explained that in many ways:

I think I received special treatment because I was transgender. In a good way though, believe it or not. Like I was in a lot of art classes and things like that, to develop those skills and it worked. And I won national competitions in pottery and sculpting and painting and all that type stuff and it paid off. And then I published twice for poetry and so all of that was in the special stuff they did for me and started me into around that age.

Her most beloved location in the school was:

Anywhere that I was doing art. Probably the art room though because I got to do pottery, which I love, in the potter’s room. Once I learned the
pottery world I was just like, that’s was it, so it would probably be the art room.

**Larger School Environment**

During out of classroom experiences, the students had the opportunity to interact with different types of spaces as well as a variety of teachers and staff members and children of multiple age groups. Certain locations seemed to pose a higher state of discomfort than others. Although not exclusively, the interviewees tended to reflect on bathrooms and the cafeteria as being places of contention while the library and the auditorium were enjoyed.

Interestingly, the locations in the school that were criticized were places of maximum control. When discussing the cafeteria, several of the partners explained that they were unable to choose where they sat or the food they consumed. These feelings of constriction and lack of control over one’s own body created discouraging discourses with physical spaces defined by confinement. Highly regimented places in the school were described on multiple occasions as being akin to prison life where one is continuously monitored and reprimanded for behavior that violates a code the “prisoners” did not themselves create.

**Bathrooms**

While discussing school bathrooms, Mike exclaimed:

Oh, god, I hated restrooms up until I started using men’s rooms. It was just such a horrible experience, especially as I got older.” He recalled the bathrooms he used in first and second grade. “I do remember them and trying to find bathrooms that were empty, just because I didn’t like the crowds in bathrooms, ever; really uncomfortable.

Beth has a detailed memory of the bathrooms from her early childhood:

Elementary school, that was a three-story brick building that was built around the turn of the 20th century and therefore was 50 years old by the time we occupied it. The plumbing was in the basement and the top two floors did not have running water. If you wanted to use the bathroom, the local shorthand for that was, ‘we want to go to basement.’ Of course they had the girls’ on the east end and the boys’ on the west end. They would have the girl in the circle on the door. Boys’ bathroom stank and they were always making all these toilet jokes. It was not someplace I enjoyed and of course I hated standing up to urinate anyway. The thing when you stand up would be looking around noticing you, you’re tiny. And so they would make fun of me for that. Whenever I could I tried to go inside the stall and act like I was going number two.

Lluvy Rae’s least favorite location in the school was the bathroom.

I would get harassed in the boys’ bathroom. They would call me names, ‘sissy,’ and say that I acted like a girl so I should use the girls’ bathroom. Just stuff like that, probably the only place in the building that I felt uncomfortable. Didn’t want to be in there, but I had to.

When the teachers overheard these interactions, they would tell them to ‘stop’ or they would tell them, ‘it’s not nice to say that.’ But they continued to do it. It was addressed but it wasn’t addressed as often as it should have been.

**Cafeteria**

Of the participants who spoke of the cafeteria, Maria and Margo held fond memories of the experience. Maria’s favorite location in the school building was, “lunch ‘cause lunch was you know, I was with my friends and I was socializing and eating.” Maria and Margo had drastically different cafeteria experiences. They were both social, but Maria felt included while Margo recognized that the lunch room was yet another place where social disparities were reinforced. On Margo’s first day at school she explained:

I had to eat school lunch, and I hated it. And I saw the other kids had brought lunch boxes and I was so confused and I thought, ‘Why did they get to bring food from home and I had to eat (school lunch)?’ So then the next quarter my mom lets me bring a lunch. Oh god, that was the
best thing in the world ‘cause I could not eat that shit. But I learned my first lesson- don’t put ice in a coke-a-cola in a thermos. It is a bad idea. Then I also learned, don’t let faculty know that you’re bringing in a coke-a-cola to school. Bringing a Coca-Cola to school was taboo. I mean, you might as well be bringing drugs to school. So I was always trying to outsmart the system, like sneak food in. Like I would mix carmation instant breakfast into my milk ‘cause I wanted chocolate milk. It was weird ‘cause when you’re a little kid, they give you chocolate milk in school. And then when you go to a higher grade, then they give you like prison food. It looks like prison food, plop, plop, plop. And then the kids in school would mix their food and try to gross each other out.

Beth explained that:

We were very regimented in lines to go to lunch. You had certain tables you could sit in. It kept things under control. The only choice you had was either sweet milk or chocolate milk.

Sweet milk is just white milk. It was whole milk as opposed to buttermilk. Mississippi loved their buttermilk. Although there were strict rules, the lunchroom wasn’t a bad place.

Mike’ least favorite place in school was lunch.

I didn’t like lunch very much. A lot of social pressure during lunchtime, you know, in the cafeteria- where you sit, who you sit with. Especially as we got older, that felt really intense for me. So, when I was older, I would eat lunch in the library because I didn’t want to deal with that, a lot of those things are tied to gender norms and being accepted by whatever group.

Library

The interviewees tended to enjoy the library because it offered a greater amount of freedom. Margo’s favorite educational spots were the:

The cafeteria and the library. ‘Cause when you go to lunch you could sit with whoever you wanted to. When you are in the classroom you had to sit in assigned seating, you had to sit where the teacher told you to sit. But when you went to the library or to the lunch room, you could pretty much sit down anywhere you wanted to sit. You had someone who was in charge of the place, it was harder for them to micro manage you on the same level the teacher micro manages in the classroom. ‘Cause when you’re in a library, you’re not the only class in the library, so you pretty much were getting left alone. And so I liked the library because, that was the one place I was allowed to choose what I wanted to do. And if I wanted to read a book on a certain subject then I could choose it, whereas the classroom you had to do whatever the teacher wanted you to do.

Mary’s most preferred educational location was the library because it was quiet:

I could go to a small or intimate corner and sit. My back would be against the wall. No one could come behind me. I could sit there and concentrate. I could sit there and escape. I had all of this knowledge around me. It was a reference center for anything I wanted. And the librarian was very knowledgeable. She would direct me and show me how to use the reference books, the index cards. She was a woman. There was light, stained glass, and James and I would go there and read.

Auditorium

Although not discussed extensively by the partners, Lady Gazelle’s recollections of the auditorium are worth noting. This was her:

Favorite place ‘cause I was in the school orchestra. I was safe there. It was in an environment and in a world that amazed me and excited me. And I can’t ever remember having one bad experience in the school auditorium and that why it sticks out the most to me.
Principal’s Office

As with most elementary school aged students, trips to the principal’s office are often unenjoyable. Lana spent a great deal of time in this location:

‘Cause I always got in trouble. I had to sit in this little itty bitty room, I remember. And they had this small square window with this little fixed looking thing over the front of it. And when you got in trouble you had to sit there with it at this desk and this filing cabinet. And it had a little bed there I felt like I was in prison. So I didn’t like that. I remember, so there was a bed on this side of the room and a little desk and a filing cabinet. And it was plain, there was no pictures. There was nothing, just the little squares. And I was not tall enough to see out of the squares. You could see people go past, but (you were forced to stay and) be miserable. And like, ‘here I am in detention again.’

Lana was occasionally sent to the principal’s office for fighting, but:

A lot the times I used to get into trouble with the teachers because they would want me (to do it their way), especially in math. I would figure out a way to do my math work, but I would not use the formula they gave me. I would make up my own formulas. The answers were right, but they wanted me to show my work. Well if I could do it in my head, why would I do that? And that was all the way in through school. And I remember that starting, probably in first grade. And they were like, ‘You have to do this,’ and I was like, ‘Well I don’t want to do this. I just want to show my answers. So why do I need to do this.’ ‘Well, it’s important.’ ‘Well, it’s not important to me. So if the answers are right,’ and my parents went back and forth with that for year. ‘Cause the teachers, I don’t know. And they felt that was the reason. They felt that I didn’t understand what they were telling me and I don’t think they understood what I was telling them. It’s right, so what’s wrong? So what is the problem?

Summary

In this article, the partners described their interactions with and within normalized education spaces. Most felt unsafe at school due to bullying and restrictions of gender expression. They found a variety of ways to cope with the lack of security, including keeping close proximity to friends and teachers. For many, particular locations in the school represented the highest levels of safety, as reflected in both their narratives and their drawings of early classroom memories. The partners discussed Specials Classrooms and the larger school environment. Although all had unique experiences, themes arose that categorized art class, music class, and the library as favored places while the gymnasium, cafeteria, bathrooms, and principals office were often locations of contention.

Conclusion

This study explored the early childhood education experiences of ten transsexual adults. They shared their social interactions with friends, peers and teachers. The implications of bullying and violence were discussed, sometimes resulting in retaliation and other times isolation. The interviewees critiqued pedagogy, racism, parent interactions, and gender norms. They opened up regarding interactions with physical spaces- the playground, specials classes, and the larger school environment. They talked about where they felt safe and where they felt empowered. The interviewees illuminated the manner in which transgender children navigate social and physical educational spaces.

The findings of this study are not intended to be generalizable, to answer the question, “How do all transgender children experience school.” They are meant rather, to ask questions, questions of ourselves as educators and members of the US society. And so I pose this to you the reader, where do we go from here? There is clearly still much to be done. What can you do in your own classroom to make transgender children feel safe and supported? How can you create an environment ideal for all to learn? What can you do in your family, school, and community to educate others about what transgender children need and have to offer? There is no one right answer to any of these inquiries. Every child and every school is situated among social and political contexts that must be given thorough consideration.
References