

Transformative Schools: Transing Education

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Abstract

Systems of oppression pressure our Trans community to conform to societal norms, to silence ourselves, and to hide our truth. Transformative Schools (TfS) believes a middle school that teaches transformational resistance will intervene at a critical inflection point, bringing both joy and purpose into the lives of our Transgender, Nonbinary, Genderqueer and Two-Spirit students and their teachers. TfS is especially cognizant of the impact Transformative Schools will make on the lives of children with multiple marginalizations. TfS believes that *transing education* by centering transness in co-constructed student centered spaces will embolden youth to enlist the tools to read and write power that will lead them to lives dedicated to collective liberation.

Keywords: transing education, liberation through education, youth voices, BIPOC, activism

While inevitably doom scrolling through your various social media feeds, it's quite likely that you've encountered an abhorrent constellation of indignant and seemingly unwavering hatred toward the trans community. Smearred across the comment sections are angry cis people who condemn all trans folk for simply being "too loud" about living in their trans truth. But of course, the backlash doesn't just live in the chats; it is an everyday, palpable experience for trans people. Even though we have been told a different story by Western society, gender is messy, plural, dynamic, creative, and in constant evolution (Ashley, 2021). Trans is a type of gender modality, referring to how a person's gender identity stands in relation to their gender assigned at birth (Ashley, 2022). According to the American Psychological Association (2023), trans is a political term that defines people whose gender identity or expression differs from their gender assigned at birth and/or the institutional structures they currently navigate (Mangin et al., 2022). While trans is still a colonial term, it is intended to encompass an ever-growing and ever-changing umbrella of gender identities and expressions. Using this umbrella term allows for the recognition of emerging gender identities that our communities claim within their individual socio-political contexts, as well as a commitment to self-determination and decolonizing bodily oppressions (Salas-Santa Cruz, 2023). The trans umbrella is a "...pedagogical decision in its own right, one intended to invite political connectivity among all people who did not fit within the often harshly enforced social constraints associated with strictly defined gender categories" (Keenan, 2022, p. 310).

Systems of power, both white supremacist and cisheteronormative, pressure our community to conform to societal norms, to silence ourselves, and to hide our truth. This is especially true for those who are multiply marginalized such as Black and Indigenous trans children, trans children of color, nonbinary trans children, disabled trans children, low-income trans children, undocumented trans children, and/or queer trans children. One could continue to expand on all of the ways this current anti-trans agenda is working to fuel continued ignorance about trans people, who have always and will always exist. However, providing statistics and data in an effort to prove to you that trans people are here and that they matter seems futile, especially considering that, trans youth are seeped in social media and keenly adept at understanding the noxious reality of trans hatred. Trans youth don't need to deep dive through charts and figures to know that their lived experience is real, insurmountably overwhelming, and that they deserve better.

Transing Education

Children have an innate propensity to question the status quo, and an unwavering ability to envision an ideal world without limits. We are all born into this world, first and foremost, as humans,

ready to discover how our gender will interplay with the world, evolve, and change. We will relate to and rewrite the rules of masculinity and femininity. However, dominant Western culture, at least as it presents itself today, works against this intuition from day one, attaching various notions of masculinity and femininity to the binaries of “man” and “woman” respectively. We believe children can intuitively see that these binary pathways are illusions, a generational falsehood of indoctrination. And, more recently, as trans movements and histories have started to break through, our children have gained some access and some language that correspond to their intuition. We now see the potential for our children to respond, speak up and out, take the lead, push for change, and imagine their futures, all against, and within, this torrential storm of political hate. As one child said,

Everybody, every human being on this planet, should be welcomed anywhere. If they are dark skinned or gay or nonbinary, or just different, everybody should be welcomed and loved for who they are. You should be respected. That’s all I have to say. (Petra, age 7, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

So, as the grownups (and educators) in the proverbial room, how do we provide a buffer for our kids? How do we uplift the lives of our youth, born into multiply marginalized communities, who want and deserve to live in their truth? While being part of the system, ourselves, how do we help them hold onto their rebellious nature and continue to question in service of liberation? This is where Transformative Schools comes in.

Transformative Schools (TfS) is a new, progressive education initiative centering transness and social justice. We are a community of students, educators, and families whose collective mission is to support trans futures. Our mission of transing education embodies the work of liberation through rigorous academics, joyful connections, identity exploration, and progressive practice. TfS seeks to move toward societal systemic change, equipping our students with the scaffolding to challenge racist, ableist, transphobic, transmisogynistic, and other white supremacist systems of oppression.

TfS is establishing a middle school, open to all, where trans students, educators, and families-touched-by-transness can feel both seen and supported. En route to the opening of the TfS middle school will be the launch of an innovative and robust afterschool program that centers trans, queer, and gender-expansive middle school students and educators based in Brooklyn, New York, in the fall of 2023. Our program attempts to address the unmet needs of trans youth by providing a trans-centered community that focuses on developing and improving the inter- and intrapersonal, socio-emotional, and leadership skills of trans youth. We do not believe that these critical middle school years should be treated as a holding pen, a miserable experience that is to be endured. Dismissing middle school as an invariably unpleasant environment does a disservice to students, especially trans youth, and especially those who are multiply marginalized.

Establishing the afterschool program is a direct response to the need to break through the isolation that often feeds what’s harmful in conventional middle school environments: transphobic bullying from peers, hostility and harassment from adults, erasure from curricula, and a constant “debate” about whether or not trans children deserve to exist:

When I first realized I was queer, I felt like such an outsider which put me in such a bad head space. Not even having a strong support system definitely had negative effects. I think somebody who was older and who could have provided me with wisdom, as a young person just figuring things out, would have been super beneficial to me... I would have benefited from talking to other queer people, from just getting to talk to somebody who could give me positive advice and just tell me that “there’s a place for you in the world”. (AJ, age 18, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

TfS knows how transformative participation in afterschool programs can be in the lives of children. Attending afterschool programs is associated with improved social-emotional and communication skills; better relationships with peers and teachers; increased self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy; lower levels of depression and anxiety; and improved feelings and attitudes toward school (Afterschool Alliance, 2015).

TfS's afterschool will be the stepping stone for the establishment of the middle school. During this initial work, our educators and staff will learn with and from our students to deepen our collective understanding of how to support the unique needs of trans youth as we create a more joyful, just, and equitable society for all. At the nucleus of this most important work is the centering of the voices of trans youth as producers of knowledge and decision-makers in their own learning. By minimizing the unintentional but inherent cisgender resistance to gender-expansive development and understanding, TfS will create space and offer time for our community to feel safe enough to think, to learn, to dream, and to play. Our youths' unbound imaginations and limitless dreams will teach us, the trans grownups in the room, about where we can go and the possibilities of trans futures. We can lean on their guidance and wisdom as we seek to shift the larger forces in education and society toward individual self-actualization and the collective empowerment of trans folk and all folk.

We believe a middle school that teaches transformational resistance will intervene at a critical inflection point, bringing both joy and purpose into the lives of our transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, and two-spirit students and their teachers. Emboldening middle school students with the tools to read and write power will lead them to lives dedicated to collective liberation. To our knowledge, there is no school where trans kids can be in a space made for them, nor co-constructed with them, holding their complex and vibrant lives at its center. TfS is actively working to be different. We seek to honor and authentically support the ways our students show up within these spaces.

Trans Teachers

Black trans joy, Indigenous trans joy, and POC trans joy are vital because they are linked to safety. If students don't feel safe, they can't learn. Good teachers make space for joy as it counteracts negative societal narratives and makes school a second (or perhaps only) home for marginalized students. (R. Peña, personal communication, October 17, 2022).

As educators and from personal experiences in middle school, we know how important these years of change and transformation are and how much of a difference school and afterschool alike can have on the lives of children when we center joy, thinking, reflecting, feeling, and equity and when we reinforce human kindness. Taking our students' current and future lives seriously means asking complex questions about the structure of educational time, the relationship between the classroom and the city, and community care and individual growth.

Māhū is a native Hawaiian identity and term. A label for people who live outside of the gender binary, largely folk who in our loosely western translation would be like trans women... I remember in the 7th grade my hula teacher [Kumu] was a Māhū vahiné and so the fact that the Department of Education in Hawaii hired a trans woman, my everyday life just was changed and shifted. They were part of my every day (J. Mock in Wickenden, 2019).

A key part of continuing to center and uplift the lives of our students is as simple as it is rare: the consistent presence of trans adults in the school community. Research has repeatedly shown that marginalized students who have teachers whose background reflects their own, attain better outcomes—improved test scores, more engagement at school, better attendance, and higher graduation rates. They are also more likely to attend college (Ahmad & Boser, 2014; Perry, 2019; Redding, 2019). Trans youth often have no adult trans people in their lives, and trans adults are often prevented or discouraged from contact with kids of all kinds (and especially trans kids). We've seen and experienced the isolation this causes, and the unnecessary confusion, worry, and stress that flows from it. That, along with direct experience of the ways many otherwise progressive schools push out trans teachers, has been part of the impetus behind Trans formative Schools. We believe in an intergenerational trans community.

I now realize that my fascination with Kumu [a Māhū hula instructor] wasn't that she puzzled me; I was in awe. She resonated with me at age twelve as I yearned to explore and reveal who I was. With time, I accepted Kumu's own determination of gender and learned to evolve past my ironic need to confine her to the two boxes I had been raised to live within... Kumu taught me, this mixed plate of a kid, how to mirror the movements of my

ancestors and give thanks for the island culture that respected various other identities. (J. Mock, 2014, p. 104-5)

We believe our children deserve trans teachers who they can trust, who serve as advocates and cultural brokers, who have high expectations, and who provide culturally relevant teaching that confronts issues of racism, ableism, transmisogyny, and transphobia. The TfS afterschool and middle school will be co-constructed spaces built with the knowledge that having trans peers and a diverse constellation of adult trans people as potential models for a fulfilling future life is important for students' ability to imagine and grow into their own futures.

Trans Futures

When one envisions a “traditional” school, and no, we aren't entirely sure what that means either, we acknowledge a centering of cisness; that staff, educators, administrators, and parents are often cis. The curricula, especially the history and the literature our children encounter, are also often overtly cis-forward, lest we forget that trans kids are trying to learn, grow, and understand who they are in these cis-centered spaces. Trans kids aren't currently being allowed to center transness, nor are their cis peers given the chance to explore their gender modalities or expression within the stringent ideals of the oppressive cisheteronormative system.

If I [would have attended] a school that is trans-centered, I'd be a lot more gentle and accepting of myself sooner. If I [would have] learned more about people like me, and that [being trans] is just a normal thing that you can be, I definitely would have accepted myself way faster. (Xavier, age 18, personal communication, November 11, 2022).

We don't want or expect to deny the historic relevance of gender roles or important cis ancestors; doing so would be a direct disservice to us all. However, it is important to acknowledge the glaring reality that trans folks have been silenced and removed from history books. Trans people today have been denied our trans history, our valiant warriors, our scientists, and our revolutionary figures on whom students could celebrate, learn from, and model their liberation.

We encourage those who seek to act in trans allyship to work in collaboration with trans folk, to listen to trans folk, and to learn from trans folk, with the knowledge that one's “allyship is not an identity. It is a life-long process of building relationships based upon trust, consistency, and accountability with marginalized (folk)... an arduous practice of unlearning and evaluating” (Gao, 2015). In solidarity and with advocacy work from cis folks, holding trans voices at the center, our collective futures will move toward the joy we all seek.

Trans Liberation

bell hooks (1994) imagined “education as the practice of freedom,” and we aspire to embody her vision. As the grownups in the aforementioned proverbial room, TfS's educators strive to act as facilitators and uplifters towards a larger societal shift, one that continues to confront the oppressive systems that have developed and plague our youth. It is a system that needs to be navigated, critiqued, and ultimately dismantled, unearthing and co-creating a newer way to uplift trans, nonbinary, and queer youth for the betterment and freedom of all.

Within that freedom, if we can imagine gender as the complex changing thing it is, then bigger questions emerge for the world. What happens when the full spectrum of masculinity and femininity is accessible to all kids? What happens when they are encouraged to explore and play within and outside of a gender spectrum? What happens if they are given choices over the relationships between their bodies, their lived experiences, and their language? What happens if, at birth, we center joy, humanity, love, and possibility as detached from the expectations related to infants' genitals?

Trans formative Schools envisions transing education by co-constructing trans-centered spaces to set the stage for gender liberation. Gender liberation works to center joy, possibility, expression, and promise. This allows flexibility and openness for all students to be able to change day to day and to

learn about themselves and others through peer-to-peer and student-to-educator relationships as an avenue for self-discovery. We aim to untether the prescriptive gender-binary nomenclatures of “this is what a boy is,” “this is what a girl does,” and “there is nothing other than girl or boy.” Gender liberation asks us to understand that a broader approach to gender presentation would bring more joy to more children. Full stop.

With empathy and through reflective action, Trans formative Schools advocates for societal change through education, building community, and holding students, educators, and families at the core of our mission. By building resilient learning environments and strong relationships, TFS educators will strive to empower students to question, complicate, rupture, and enact change. Trans formative schools can’t solve all of the pervasive issues that plague New York City’s trans and nonbinary youth, but it can make a huge difference for its students, and serve as a model and source of thoroughly tested best practices for other schools and educators to do the work of transing education.

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