

SUPPORTING TRANSGENDER STUDENTS IN SINGAPORE

A guide for teachers and educators



Introduction

With the recent spotlight on transgender students in Singapore, some teachers have expressed interest in finding out more about how they can support the trans students in their care.

This guide was developed to help educators in Singapore gain a better understanding of the challenges facing transgender students in local schools.

The guide lays out some approaches that schools can take to create a safe, conducive learning environment for trans students, enabling them to participate fully in school life and benefit from the same opportunities and protections as their peers.

This guide was developed by TransBefrienders, a peer-support and mentorship network of transgender adults and youths in Singapore.

Terminology

Gender Identity: One's sense of self as a man, woman, both or neither. This is independent of gender expression (how masculine or feminine someone is), sexual orientation (who one is attracted to) or gender roles (what one's society expects of men and women). e.g. a woman can have both stereotypically masculine interests and a strong sense of self as female.

Transgender: Describing someone with a gender identity that does not match what is typical for their sex. The word is an adjective and not a noun, i.e. "a transgender man/woman/person", not "a transgender" or "transgenders".

(Some older trans people still use the term 'transsexual' for themselves, but it is considered dated and no longer in mainstream use.)

Trans: Common shortened form of 'transgender'. In contrast, the term 'tranny' is usually considered offensive and should not be used.

Non-binary: A trans person whose gender identity is both, neither or in-between the usual binary of male and female. e.g. those who consider themselves a third gender rather than a man or woman, or whose identity fluctuates between male and female. Some additionally describe themselves as trans feminine or trans masculine. Non-binary people may use gender neutral pronouns like "they" and "them", while others use male or female pronouns, or are okay with either.

Cisgender/cis: Describing someone who is not transgender.

Gender Dysphoria: Distress arising from the incongruence between one's gender identity and sexual characteristics or how others perceive them. Untreated gender dysphoria raises the risks of anxiety, depression, suicidality and other mental health issues (APA, 2009, para. 1). Gender transition is the only known way to effectively resolve (rather than suppress) this.

Many trans adults report symptoms of gender dysphoria or incongruence from early childhood. Puberty often triggers, intensifies or solidifies dysphoria, or in some cases may make someone realise they are not trans after all. Gender dysphoria and trans identities that persist beyond the onset of puberty are virtually always lifelong.

Some trans people may experience little to no gender dysphoria, and may instead experience gender euphoria – a sense of joy or 'rightness' when being correctly seen as their gender. This can turn into gender dysphoria if they are prevented from expressing that gender identity.

Gender Transition: To alleviate gender dysphoria, most trans people take steps to present and live in accordance with their gender identity. This can take the form of social transition (change of name, clothes, hairstyle, etc), medical interventions (hormone replacement therapy, various surgeries) and legal changes (name change, gender marker

change).

A trans person may desire all or only some of those transition steps, depending on their personal preference and circumstances (financial, medical, family, employment, religion, etc). We believe that it is up to each individual to decide if, when, and how they should transition.

Trans Youth Healthcare in Singapore

Singapore has a dedicated Gender Care Clinic at the Institute of Mental Health which provides comprehensive psychiatric support, diagnosis and referrals for trans individuals and others questioning their gender identities.

If a trans youth wants to go on hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and their doctors assess them to be psychologically and medically suitable for it, they must additionally be at least 17 years old (or turning 17 soon) and have both their parents' consent before they can proceed. This applies even if their parents are separated.

Parental consent is not required for those above 21.

HRT is most effective before the end of puberty, as it prevents the further irreversible development of sexual characteristics that could worsen gender dysphoria. The earlier a trans person goes on HRT, the more their gendered appearance will change, making it much easier in the long run for them to blend in with others of their gender. This reduces their lifetime risk of harassment, discrimination and violence, increases their comfort and congruity with their bodies, and contributes overall to greatly improved mental health.

In contrast, being made to wait – such as if their parents do not consent – can exacerbate gender dysphoria as the youth witnesses their body becoming more and more like a sex that feels wrong to them.

The prolonged psychological stress from this can affect their ability to function in daily life and put them at risk of developing mental illness.

Transgender Students in Singapore

MOE's Position

The Ministry of Education has stated that school authorities in Singapore will have the autonomy to decide on how they wish to accommodate transgender students (Sin, 2021). However, most public schools here do not support transgender students and are sometimes openly hostile.

In one prominent incident in January 2021, an 18 year old transgender girl, Ashlee, was banned from attending lessons due to her hair length, despite having a doctor's letter explaining her transition and asking the school to make accommodations for her.

When she attempted to access HRT, her doctor informed her that MOE required him to first work with and consult schools before prescribing HRT to any student. Ashlee's school leaders then threatened to expel her if physical changes from HRT made her unable to fit into a boys' uniform.

MOE responded by suggesting that home-based learning could be an option for trans students like Ashlee. This social isolation would, however, deny them the same educational opportunities as their non-trans peers and prevent them from fully participating in school life.

School Uniforms and Dress Codes

MOE officials have reiterated the policy that students must wear the gendered school uniform that matches the sex on their NRICs.

This poses significant problems, especially for older transgender youths who have visibly transitioned but are unable to change their legal sex.

In one example, a JC 1 trans boy from a top junior college was told that unless he wore the girls' school uniform, he was not allowed to continue attending school. At that point, he had been on HRT long enough that his voice and appearance had masculinised and all his schoolmates only knew him as a boy.

When he appealed to MOE, he was told that he would only be allowed to wear the boys' uniform if he first went for sex reassignment surgery and changed his legal sex to male. This was not possible at his age, and thus he dropped out of school.

For younger trans students and those who are not on HRT, being forced to wear highly gendered school uniforms each day can significantly worsen their gender dysphoria, negatively impacting their mental health and making it difficult for them to focus on their schoolwork.

School uniforms are primarily an issue for trans boys and other trans masculine students who may be very dysphoric, uncomfortable or subject to bullying or even violence when wearing a skirt, pinafore or other overtly feminine clothing. The same sometimes applies to non-trans but very visibly masculine girls.

For trans girls and other trans feminine students, the key issue is usually hair length, especially if they are at an age where longer hair alone can let them be perceived as female. Being forced to cut their hair thus strips them of the most visible – perhaps only – outward expression of their gender at school, greatly worsening gender dysphoria.

Making accommodations for such students when it comes to gendered uniforms and dress codes can go a long way in helping them cope with dysphoria until they are able to transition in other ways.

Supporting Trans Students

Treat transgender people and identities with respect

Avoid:

- Talking about LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) identities or transitioning being “abnormal”, “sinful” or a “lifestyle choice”
- Claiming the poorer mental health and life outcomes of trans/ LGB people are due to their sexual orientation, gender identity or transition

When discussing LGBT identities or issues with your students, try to do so respectfully and neutrally. Even if you personally have doubts, disagreements or questions, the classroom setting is not the right place to bring them up.

Many LGBT people – particularly transgender people – face high rates of discrimination, violence, abuse and rejection. Unlike many other minority groups (e.g. ethnic minorities) which suffer the same, LGBT people often lack support and understanding from their family or broader community, who may instead be the perpetrators.

The comparatively poor life outcomes of trans people are a direct result of these abuses and social isolation, rather than because there is anything inherently harmful about being trans or transitioning. When those factors are alleviated, and trans people are given access to the forms of transition they need, their well-being significantly improves.

Be thoughtful and sensitive when discussing the higher rates of trauma, mental health issues and suicide attempt rates of trans people. Avoid bringing them up unnecessarily. Such topics can be particularly upsetting for youths (both LGBT and not) who are currently grappling with those very issues.

When a trans student comes out to you

Avoid:

- Outing a student (informing others of their trans identity) without the student's knowledge and permission
- Using a student's chosen name and pronouns with people they are not yet out to

If a student has trusted you enough to come out to you about being trans, don't betray their confidence by informing their parents, classmates or other school staff who may not yet be aware.

This includes situations where the student may be semi-public about their trans identity, such as if they have spoken about it in class or their personal social media.

When in doubt, check with the student about the best way to go about the situation. Respect the student's wishes of who, when and how to disclose their trans identity to people.

Here are some possible scenarios that would each require a different set of actions. The only way to tell which one applies to the student is to ask them directly:

- The student has only come out to you
- The student has only come out to you and their parents
- The student has only come out to you and a group of friends
- The student is "out" at class but has not come out to their parents

Let's examine each of these situations in more detail:

A) The student has only come out to you

This would mean that the student trusts you deeply and feels that it is safe for you to be one of the first people that they

tell. Therefore, it is important that you do not betray this trust by 'outing' them to people.

There may be consequences to spreading that knowledge which may not be immediately apparent, such as if the student has an abusive parent who may hurt them upon learning they are trans.

Unfortunately, there have been many cases of breached confidentiality by teachers and counselors working in MOE schools. In order to protect the student that has come out to you, it would be safest not to inform other teachers or counsellors even if they say that they will keep it confidential.

You may choose to discuss with the student about whether they would like to speak with a counselor, or their parents, but it is up to the student to determine how safe it is to do so.

You could ask if the student would like you to address them by a certain name and set of pronouns in private, but be careful to not address them as such outside of the agreed upon context.

B) The student has only come out to you and their parents

Trans youths typically come out to their friends before telling their parents. If they have not done so, it may mean there are specific classmates whom they do not want knowing about their trans identity, perhaps out of fear that their classmates may bully them or spread rumours.

You could ask the student to share more about this if they're comfortable, and ask if there's anything you can do as a teacher to help, including speaking with their parents if they don't mind.

If the parents/guardians know about the student's trans identity and are not supportive, discuss with the student and administration (check with the student if that would be ok) about what that means for Meet the Parents sessions and academic reporting (such as names and pronouns used in report cards or in letters of recommendation).

C) The student has only come out to you and a group of friends

It's more common for a trans youth to first come out to a small group of trusted friends and adults whom they can count on for support. Check with the student who else knows. You can ask if they have a name/pronouns that they might like you to use when speaking to them directly or with that group of friends.

D) The student is "out" at class but has not come out to their parents

This likely means you have a great class and the student has a level of trust and shared understanding with their classmates that they have extended to you.

Trans students who have not yet dared to come out with their parents may reach out to teachers such as yourself so that they can have a trusted adult figure in their lives who knows what they're going through, and can provide the guidance and support they're not receiving at home.

Be there for them with that support, and maintain that trust by clarifying with them about who knows about their trans identity and what the situation is like at home, and if this is something they want kept confidential.

It would be a good idea to explicitly talk to the class

about respect and what it means to show respect for their classmate. Let them know they should not out their classmate to other classes or their own parents, who may tell other parents and cause unwanted consequences.

Stealth trans students

Avoid:

- Telling others that the student is trans, should you find out
- Pressuring the student to “come out”, even to “inspire” or “educate” others

Binary trans people who have transitioned may sometimes choose to go “stealth”, whereby they live fully as their gender and keep their trans status private from everyone except their doctors and perhaps a small group of trusted friends.

A trans youth may have different reasons for doing this: ranging from safety concerns and alleviating dysphoria to simply wanting to go about life as a regular girl or boy. The alternative might mean others fixating on their trans status and treating them differently.

A common misconception is that a stealth trans person is closeted, which may lead to well-meaning attempts to encourage them to “come out”. However, a trans person who has transitioned has already come out. They are living openly every day as the gender they are, unlike a closeted trans or gay person who is forced to repress part of their identity.

Being stealth also does not mean that the person is ashamed of their trans identity. They may be proud of it, but consider it a deeply personal matter they do not want to share with everyone, out of fear of bullying or worse. Their privacy and wellbeing is more important than the possibility that them being openly trans could help educate their classmates about trans people.

While rare, we are aware of a few trans students in Singapore who are stealth at school. Such students tend to have supportive family but be less connected to a trans community, and may have friend groups that do not know they are transgender.

Many of these students may however have a legal sex or school history that is at odds with the sex they are living as. There is thus the chance that this information may be leaked to school staff.

Do not spread this information should you find out. It would be a massive violation of the student's privacy. Likewise, it would be good to step in if you hear of colleagues gossiping about the students' trans status.

Unlike students who are openly trans, stealth students may have friends who are not supportive of trans people. This means that if their friends find out, they could very well turn on them, leaving them with nowhere to go for support. Something so private being suddenly made public can also make trans students very insecure and afraid of how others might react, which could have ramifications for their wellbeing and ability to focus at school.

Closeted trans students

Avoid:

- Assuming that if one or some students in a class are out as trans, it means none of the rest are
- Pressuring students to come out before they are ready
- Focussing on or drawing attention to a trans student's trans identity to the point it overshadows the rest of who they are

There can be a fine line between being inclusive and making trans students feel pressured to come out if they are not ready or willing to do so.

Some trans students might have determined that it would be safer to go through school life pretending to be cisgender, especially if they have few friends, know their parents would not be supportive, or if they have witnessed other trans students being harassed or bullied after coming out. Others may prefer to have their gender remain ambiguous, either out of personal preference or if they are still questioning their identities.

Be sensitive to the possibility that there may be closeted trans students in your classroom – all the more so if you also have an openly trans student in the same class. Avoid making statements that assume the other students are all cisgender (“wah, first time got ah ger in this school! All you boys must look after her okay?”)

Try to establish a classroom atmosphere where any closeted trans students will know that they can count on your support and understanding if and when they choose to come out.

Talking about LGBT issues in the classroom

If your school’s guidelines, culture or potential backlash from parents makes you unable to express any explicit support for LGBT people, you can try to do this in more subtle ways.

One example would be to include mentions of LGBT people where this is relevant:

- If you’re a History teacher covering World War II, you can talk about Alan Turing’s contributions
- If you’re a Social Studies teacher, you can mention how Singapore only recognises heterosexual marriages for housing and CPF
- If you’re an English Literature teacher discussing a book with racial discrimination as one of its themes, you can ask students what other forms of discrimination they can think of. Chances are that some of them would bring up LGBT people, and you can just

agree and write that down on the board without judgement

- If you're a biology teacher covering sexual reproduction, you can advance beyond the syllabus to mention intersex people, including how someone with XY chromosomes can sometimes develop a phenotypically female body (e.g. in Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome) and vice versa (e.g. in de la Chapelle Syndrome) – showing how sex chromosomes are not the ultimate determinant of one's sexual biology, let alone gender.

Stay rooted in verifiable facts rather than opinions that are more likely to be controversial. The key is not so much to include LGBT people as it is to not exclude them. LGBT people have always been around in every society and part of history, and recognising their existence and contributions can help your LGBT students feel that they too have a place in this world.

If students say things that are homophobic or transphobic, let them know that what they're saying is not kind or respectful. This should ideally apply even when teachers share the same views.

Disciplining students

Misgendering a trans student or questioning their gender should never be used as a threat or punishment for misbehaviour. Such actions send trans students the message that being seen and accepted as their gender is conditional on their good behaviour, when this is not the case for other students.

It also sends others the message that your own values are conditional on other people's good behaviour, which would not reflect well on you. It would be the same for a teacher who finds it justified to use racist or sexist insults on students who misbehave.

For trans students, this includes not telling a disruptive trans girl that a girl wouldn't act that way. Apart from reinforcing gender stereotypes and implying she's failed at being a girl, it would also suggest to the

boys in the class that it is normal and expected for them to act that way. On the other hand, positive reinforcement can be effective – such as telling a trans boy, “You’re a bright young man and I expect better from you.”

Students are expected to treat teachers with respect regardless of how much they like them, and this is a good opportunity to model that same respect for them. If you believe that trans people are who they say they are, it means upholding that belief even when a trans student is late for class, rude to you, cheated on an exam, got into a fight or set fire to the school.

Affirm their gender without excusing them from the consequences for their actions.

However, do use your discretion for situations when the rule-breaking is understandable – such as a trans girl being unwilling to cut her hair to the male standards. In such instances, allowances should be made for the student, similar to how male Sikh students are allowed to keep long hair.

Likewise, if a student (trans or otherwise) is chronically absent from school, always acting out or rarely turns in their work on time, it could hint at them having problems that would be worth looking into rather than jumping straight into disciplinary action.

Sex education

While you may not be allowed to discuss LGBT identities in sex ed (allegedly apart from its relation to HIV/AIDS), you can just be matter-of-fact and non-judgemental about how some people are LGBT.

It can help a lot to simply acknowledge that not all your students may grow up to be cisgender and heterosexual. This means avoiding statements or jokes that assume they are all grappling with newfound attractions to the opposite sex, or feel a certain way about the changes their bodies are going through.

For example: “At puberty, a lot of you are going to start feeling attracted to the opposite sex,” vs “At puberty, you’ll start feeling attracted to the opposite sex”.

Or: “At puberty, your voice gets lower, and boys’ voices usually drop a lot more than girls.”

Or: “At puberty, your body starts producing a lot more sex hormones like oestrogen and testosterone. All of us have these hormones, but usually girls have a lot more oestrogen and boys have a lot more testosterone. This is what each hormone does.”

Not tying gender so strictly to bodily changes will also help cis students who are late bloomers or who have sex-atypical hormone levels or physical characteristics they are self-conscious about. e.g. boys with gynecomastia, or girls with a lot of body hair.

Celebrate students’ full selves

There’s more to a trans student than their trans identity—which can sometimes be difficult even for trans students themselves to remember, especially when up against a society that often reduces them to their trans identity and dehumanises them for it. Even if they are in a supportive environment, being known as “the trans student” can risk eclipsing the rest of who they are.

All this can sometimes make it hard for a trans student to conceive of a life where being trans is not the main thing that defines them, or the first thing that others think of when they hear of them.

Help your students not lose sight of who they are as individuals. Chat with them about their lives, and discover their interests and their passions, as you would with any other student. Encourage them to develop their talents and pursue their dreams, and find ways to affirm them that don’t always involve their gender.

About TransBefrienders

Organisation Background

TransBefrienders is a peer support service for transgender youths in Singapore seeking assistance, friendship or mentorship. Our befriending programme matches youths with older trans volunteers who have prior experience with transitioning in Singapore.

Existing professional support systems, such as counselling, focus on medical and mental health and are not accessible to everyone due to cost and time. Mental health providers are also usually not transgender themselves and may face difficulties in fully understanding and empathising with trans youths – hence the need for peer support, where fellow trans people who are older and more experienced can provide help and a listening ear.

The organisation is led by Coen Teo, who began his advocacy work by uploading YouTube videos documenting his transitioning journey and providing information to transgender folks seeking to transition. He started TransBefrienders in 2019 to provide peer support for transgender youths. Coen currently sits on the Pink Dot committee and has contributed to several other LGBT groups such as Bissu and Heartweavers. He holds a BSc. (Hons) in Aviation Business Administration.

There are currently 15 volunteer befrienders and another 5 non-operational volunteers under the organisation.

www.transbefrienders.com
transbefrienders@gmail.com