

Chapter 7

The School Counselor's Role in Supporting and Advocating for Transgender and Gender-Expansive Children and Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Transgender and Gender-Expansive children and adolescents are resilient, capable, and amazing and deserve to work with school counselors who build upon their strengths. School counselors who espouse fluid, multilayered, and complex conceptualizations of gender and affectional identities are best equipped to meet the needs of TGE children and adolescents. Therefore, it is essential that school counselors be well-versed and knowledgeable about the identities of those with whom they are working, as well as welcome ongoing growth in areas such as self-awareness.

INTRODUCTION

School counselors often face challenges when working with **transgender** and **gender expansive** (TGE) children and adolescents. Given that many TGE children and adolescents experience a lack of support at home and only 16% of TGE youth always feel safe in the classroom (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2018a), TGE children and adolescents need knowledgeable, aware, and skilled school counselors. Given their unique position within a system where TGE youth spend a large portion of their days, school counselors have the potential to have a significant positive effect on the lives of TGE individuals, as well as

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7319-8.ch007

the system in which they are embedded. Given this, as well as professional ethics and guidelines, it is clear that school counselors are legally and ethically called to provide affirming services and support for TGE children and adolescents in their setting.

Decades of research have established that there is a lack of support in schools for sexual and gender minority youth. In a study conducted by Baum et al. (2014), 40% of TGE students reported being excluded regularly by their peers at school- this is three times the frequency that their **cisgender** peers reported being excluded. TGE students also reported being verbally harassed at school at a rate of 37%, with 42% of students surveyed reporting being called names that involved anti-gay slurs “frequently and often.” Other surveys have established similarly concerning numbers. Of the LGBTQ+ students who participated in The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2018), 59.1% reported verbal harassment at school based on their gender expression, 28.9% reported physical harassment, and 11.2% reported physical assault. Beyond this, the overall school climate is often not supportive, with 94% of students surveyed reporting hearing negative comments about gender expression and 87.4% reporting specific comments about **transgender** people. This is not limited to other students; these comments also come from teachers and other members of the school staff. This paints a clear picture of a highly stressful environment in which TGE students spend a large portion of their time, where they should instead be able to focus on essential learning and development. School counselors, when self-aware and in possession of the appropriate knowledge and skills, are situated to effect change in this setting. This chapter will introduce concepts and terms, present research, statistics, and educational information; examine school counselor self-awareness; analyze intersecting identities; and evaluate legal and ethical imperatives. This chapter will also explain **advocacy** initiatives and introduce counseling considerations and imperatives for honing skills to support school counselors in developing the knowledge, awareness, and skills to be effective, affirming supports for TGE students.

CONCEPTS AND TERMS

It is imperative that school counselors work to be well-versed in the meaning of terms TGE youth may use to self-identify. GLSEN (2020), in their document on key concepts and terms, define **transgender** as “An umbrella term describing people whose gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth or by society” (p.4). Gender Spectrum (2019) defined **gender expansive** as

*An umbrella term used for individuals that broaden their own culture’s commonly held definitions of gender, including expectations for its expression, identities, roles, and/or other perceived gender norms. Gender-expansive individuals include those with **transgender** and **non-binary** identities, as well as those whose gender in some way is seen to be stretching society’s notions of gender. (para. 1)*

Other terms like *gender nonconforming* or *gender variant* are also used and can stand for “a person whose gender identity and/or gender expression does not conform to the gender they were assigned at birth or by society. People who identify as “gender nonconforming” may or may not also identify as “**transgender**”” (GLSEN, 2020, p. 2). Some TGE youth may prefer the term **non-binary** as this is another umbrella term used to include individuals who may not identify with the gender binary of man or woman or masculine or feminine; someone who identifies as **non-binary** may or may not identify as trans, and **non-binary** may include genderqueer, genderfluid and agender under this umbrella as well

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