

## Chinese Transgender Students and Teacher Allies



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### Introduction

Training educators to work with diverse student groups, including trans/transgender/gender diverse students is a challenge in both regional, and global contexts (Kwok, 2018, 2020). International studies reveal that genderism and prejudice within educational settings are likely to affect transgender students' well-being and learning outcomes, while a safe campus environment and educators as transgender allies can facilitate transgender students' positive school experiences and psychological well-being (Marx et al., 2017; Wernick et al., 2014). Washington and Evans (1991) defined an "ally" as a person who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through supporting, or as an advocate of and for, an oppressed population" (p. 195). Nevertheless, in East Asian cities such as Hong Kong, transgender students usually do not enjoy an inclusive learning environment and institutional legal protection, which is free from genderism, heterosexism, and school barriers

due to transgender prejudice (Kwok, 2020; Kwok & Kwok, 2021).

Teachers and educators, as advocates of social justice in education have the opportunity to act as allies to students within the transgender communities. This entry explores the distinct position of Chinese cisgender educators as allies in supporting transgender students who encounter genderism in education in Hong Kong. The entry starts with a discussion of local and international studies on transgender youth in education settings, and allies' roles in helping these students. A summary of themes that have emerged from one Hong Kong study on teachers as allies for transgender students, around barriers and approaches to establishing support to their transgender students is then discussed.

### Transgender Prejudice and Transgender Allies

Transgender is "an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression, or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth" (American Psychological Association-APA, 2014, p. 1). In the last decade in Hong Kong, members of transgender communities have publicly advocated for equal opportunities and rights in accordance with rising awareness of human rights (Kwok, 2020). An umbrella term "kwa-sing-bit" (跨性別), meaning "across gender

boundaries,” has emerged to represent diverse transgender identities within Hong Kong society. Other languages, such as “kwa-zai” (跨仔) – trans man/trans boy, “kwa-nu” (跨女) – trans woman/trans girl, “fei-ji-jyun-sing-bit-ze” (非二元性別者) – gender nonbinary individuals, and “sing-bit-lau-dung-ze” (性別流動者), meaning people with fluid gender identities, have also become known to the public through social media and local newspaper publications (Crossing the Gender Boundaries, 2019; Trans Boy and Trans Girl, 2021).

Despite more visibility, trans communities have frequently been encountering prejudice and discrimination with no lawful protection. King et al. (2009) describe transgender prejudice/transprejudice as the “negative valuing, stereotyping, and discriminatory attitudes towards and treatment” of non-heteronormative and gender non-conforming individuals (King et al., 2009). Other terms such as transphobia and genderism (Hill & Willoughby, 2005) have also been adopted to describe negative reactions toward transgender students. Genderism is defined as a “source of social oppression and psychological shame, such that it can be imposed on a person, but also that a person may internalize these beliefs” (Hill & Willoughby, 2005, p.534). Testa and colleagues found that through encountering transprejudice and genderism in everyday life, transgender people may be impacted by minority stress and mental health risks (Testa et al., 2017), which further marginalize them at both institutional and individual levels (Wernick et al., 2014).

International and regional literatures document that transgender students encounter school difficulties and bullying (Kwok & Kwok, 2021; Kwok, 2018; Sausa, 2005; Wernick et al., 2014). In addition to harassment from teachers and peers at the individual level, scholars have suggested that transgender students’ harassment in schools could be perpetuated through the school climate and school policies at the institutional level (Kosciw et al., 2014; McGuire et al., 2010; Sausa, 2005; Wernick et al., 2014). Studies also observed system wide oppression of transgender students, in the form of trans-inclusive school-based sex education, family rejection, and abuse

(Clements-Nolle et al., 2001; Jones et al., 2015; Kwok & Kwok, 2021). Previous studies have documented mental health difficulties (Rosenberg, 2002; Wernick et al., 2014) of transgender students, such as anxiety, depressive mood and self-injury behaviors. These difficulties are not linked to their “transgender status per se, but stem from stigma, rejection, and victimization” (McGuire et al., 2010, p. 1175). In the face of rising international concern over the support of transgender students experiencing transgender prejudice in schools, educators are encouraged to create a safe school space and classroom. This action might involve teachers playing the role of allies, to support their transgender students’ developmental needs and creating space for identity affirmation (Clark, 2010; Kwok, 2020).

An ally is described as a cisgender member from a dominant group, who advocates for and supports marginalized transgender and gender expansive communities. They “utilize their privilege to work to end systems of oppression that provide them with their privilege merely because of social group membership” (Ramsay et al., 2015, p.2). An ally understands the struggles of the person being oppressed and appreciates/affirms their expressed identities for who they are (Washington & Evans, 1991). Studies on allies have predominately hailed from the perspective of sexually expansive communities, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual communities, and rarely from gender expansive communities involving people who identify as transgender (Case & Meier, 2014). Past research has documented that heterosexual and cisgender allies come from diverse communities and context, like mental health practitioners, such as counsellors and psychologists (Asta & Vacha-Haase, 2013; Dillon et al., 2004), students (Goldstein & Davis, 2010) and educators (Marx et al., 2017).

These studies perceive allies as having vital roles in combating genderism and transgender prejudice and in achieving social justice and facilitating a safe space for transgender students (Clark, 2010; Marx et al., 2017). Particularly, cisgender allies from education sectors can work as supporters for transgender students at various individual, interpersonal and institutional levels

(Harper & Singh, 2014; Singh et al., 2013). For instance, support of transgender students at the individual level may entail recognizing their own privilege as cisgender; listening, normalizing and affirming students' diverse transgender identities and empowering transgender students through connecting them to trans youth help groups. In addition, allies can facilitate transgender students' awareness of the negative impact genderism and transprejudice can have on their daily lives. They can also educate transgender students about the tools and tactics to cope with and mitigate transgender prejudice. The connection to appropriate gender affirming community and medical resources can also be facilitated if necessary.

At the interpersonal level, educator allies can provide family members with educational information on trans identities and health care resources to facilitate their acceptance of their children's gender identities. As social policies and school climate affect transgender students' daily life, previous scholarship recommends allies go beyond individual and interpersonal work, to develop strategies that target institutional support for transgender students. These might include active advocacy to promote policy and system change, along with building networks and coalitions that aim for equal opportunities for all students in schools (Chavez-Korell & Johnson, 2010; Harper & Singh, 2014; Lennon & Mistler, 2010; Singh et al., 2013).

### **Prejudice Against Transgender Students in Hong Kong**

Hong Kong is an international city with influences from both Western and Chinese traditions. Around 43% of the Chinese residents participate in religious and cultural activities. In a multicultural city it is inevitable that cultural forces stemming from both Confucianism and Christian religious values combine to manifest transgender prejudice and genderism (Kwok & Kwok, 2021; Kwok & Wu, 2015; Winter & King, 2010). Transgender people used to be described by Hong Kong Chinese as "yan yiu," a derogatory term which depicted a transgender person as a "human

monster" and connoting "freak" or "a person changed against nature." This insulting term reflects transgender prejudice in Hong Kong Chinese culture (Winter & King, 2010). Over 800 Chinese surveyed from the general population about their attitudes toward transgender people, 35% regarded transgender women as "psychologically abnormal," and 35% of them disapproved of legal recognition of transgender people, even after gender-affirmation surgery (Winter et al., 2008, p. 673). In another 2016 study, over 31% of 208 public participants considered it "always wrong" to want to alter one's body or gender (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2016, p. 120). However, a subgroup of respondents in the same study indicated the difficulties of transgender people in daily life due to the lack of an anti-discrimination ordinance to protect them, that trans people "could not survive if there was no legislation against discrimination of them" (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2016, p. 110). Transgender people suffer from high unemployment and mental health risks (Transgender Resource Center Hong Kong, 2016). In Hong Kong, transgender equality has been debated heatedly since 2017, when the government released a consultation paper on the Gender Recognition Act. Prejudice toward this highly marginalized and invisible population persists, raising concerns about risks to their mental health (Kwok & Kwok, 2021). Proposals for an anti-discrimination ordinance to enhance transgender people's human rights has been opposed by religious and parents' groups (Chan, 2005). Local scholars, such as Barrow (2020, p.138), have commented that the legislation of such rights-based legal frameworks was "seized upon by counter-movements, including religious opposition and parental concern groups." Under these circumstances, transgender individuals, including students, continue to be marginalized.

Lam et al. (2004, p. 490) surveyed over 2000 school-age adolescents of whom 5% of males and 15% of females, respectively, reported having "gender dissatisfaction." This school age group is in need of support in Hong Kong. Transgender youth, similar to LGBQ youth, are subject to prejudice in the form of transphobic bullying and

harassment. Individual-level bullying involves verbal, relational, physical, and online attacks. Institutionally, harassment and bullying are manifested through unsafe and conservative male/female gender-binary school rules, facilities, and curricula. For example, in a 2015 study (Kwok, 2015) with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, transgender participants shared that they were afraid to come out in schools. Even if they had come out accidentally or voluntarily, they were usually banned from using preferred gender pronouns and names as they did not conform to binary school culture. (Kwok, 2015).

Notably, the situation of transgender students is different from other groups, like students with special educational needs, disability groups, and ethnic minority groups. Equal opportunities, legal frameworks, and inclusive policies are present, and educators can be offered in-service and pre-service education to challenge prejudices against these latter groups. There are no such formal educational opportunities, legal frameworks, or school policies to support transgender youth in schools. (Winter & King, 2010; Kwok, 2018; Kwok & Kwok, 2021). Additionally, Hong Kong was a British colony, and European missionaries established schools during the colonial years. Today many public-funded schools are still Christian affiliated (Winter & King, 2010). Educators, school board members, administrators, and principals, especially those with religious backgrounds, have the power to decide school policies and counseling practices relating to sexual and gender diversity issues (Kwok, 2016, 2019).

Historically within the 1986 Sex Education Guidelines, the theme of “homosexuality” was grouped with topics considered as “controversial sex issues” by the Curriculum Development Committee. Also portrayed as ‘problematic issues’ were the topics of “abortion,” “pornography,” and “prostitution” (Hong Kong Education Department Curriculum Development Committee, 1986, p. 84). Ten years later, revised guidelines were published by the Government (Hong Kong Education Department Curriculum Development Committee, 1997). Concepts and terms relating to diverse sexual identities were included, such as

bisexuality, homosexuality, and heterosexuality, yet the implementation of gender diversity topics is not a mandated or compulsory subject. Currently, the Education Bureau subsumes the “sex education” curriculum into the “moral and civic education curriculum” and themes on “sexual orientation” and “gender identities” are frequently excluded by teachers. Students and educators perceive that seminars or workshops linked to these topics may clash with schools’ founding rules, policies, and religious affiliations (Winter & King, 2010; Kwok, 2018; Kwok & Kwok, 2021). Exclusion of such topics from school curricula generates an unsafe and non-inclusive educational environment for trans students. In addition, anti-discrimination and anti-bullying school policies have not been initiated officially by the Education Bureau.

### **Educators as Allies to Support Transgender Students**

Transgender youth are particularly at risk in schools without legal protections, such as anti-discrimination law and a gender recognition act. When they decide to come out and they subsequently face gender-based bullying, abuse and prejudice, adult administrators and educators in schools are not able to assure their safety. Studies reveal that teachers and administrators usually do not confront or take action to prevent homophobic incidents. Even worse, these people may act as the perpetrators in the incidents of such harassment. Transphobic and homophobic behaviors and attitudes from school personnel pose obstacles to school participation, limit learning opportunities, fulfillment of the potential of transgender students, and further precipitate mental health and gender minority stress (Kosciw et al., 2010; Marx et al., 2017; O’Donoghue & Guerin, 2017). Conversely, studies proposed that support from teacher allies facilitates resilience among transgender and sexually expansive students. Teacher allies therefore have an important role to play in reducing prejudice and promoting equal opportunities among sexual and gender minority students. Such teachers are in better positions, through their

daily interactions with their transgender students, to get to know the issues, struggles, and oppressions they have to navigate (Getz & Kirkley, 2006; (Rostosky et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2013). Recent research reveals that teacher allies are more willing to engage in professional development in order to understand sexual and gender diversity issues. Through exposure to this training, they are more likely to play the roles of allies and create safe, accommodating and inclusive space for transgender students (Clark, 2010; Marx et al., 2017; Meyer & Leonardi, 2018).

At present, the Hong Kong SAR Government, under the administration of Education Bureau, offers 12 years of primary and secondary education free to all public-school students. For students with special educational needs such as a learning disability or mental health issues, the HKSAR government has put much effort into providing school support through policies and practices of inclusive education as well as those from minority ethnic groups (Education Bureau, 2024). There is an anti-discrimination ordinance based on disability to protect students with disability from prejudiced practices in schools. No school-based support program was found in Hong Kong public schools to support sexually and gender expansive students facing stigma and prejudice. Two exploratory studies were subsequently established to explore the perspectives of cisgender and heterosexual educators on lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transgender students. The aim of these studies was to address sexual diversity and trans-inclusive education within teacher education from 2017 to 2021.

The research team has interviewed over one hundred people from the sexual/gender expansive and educator communities in Hong Kong through research projects on transgender prejudice and sexuality education for minority students. The goal has been to create prejudice free and inclusive approaches to sexual orientation and gender diversity within professional development training for educators. Among those participants from educator/teacher communities, there was a subgroup of nine who had worked with transgender students and identified themselves as educator allies to transgender students. Through qualitative

data analysis, their experiences and approaches for advocating and supporting gender diversity and transgender students in schools are summarized as follows. First, all participants in this subgroup had completed, or were participating in, a trans inclusive gender diversity course or sexuality education in their work settings or pre-service training courses. For instance, some were undertaking general education courses on gender diversity and visiting transgender communities in Hong Kong, or participating in transgender support groups as volunteers for an extensive period. Those educators who were trained as school counsellors also received some training around transgender topics and how to support students from diverse groups. In their experiences of working as volunteers in transgender communities, they had opportunities to equip themselves with current knowledge about transgender cultures, including the appropriate use of pronouns. These educators also observed institutional prejudice against transgender students, such as challenges around making trans inclusive sexuality education accessible in schools and creating gender affirmative school regulations and policies. They also witnessed trans students' difficulties in accessing safe and affordable gender affirmative medical care services and family support during their gender transition process. Following these steps, they then started to identify themselves as transgender allies.

These allies realized the importance of educators' self-reflection and self-awareness in the process of working with transgender students. They stated that they first became aware of their own heterosexist and cisgender privilege when they met transgender students in volunteer or school settings. Across these interactions, connections, and dialogue, they identified gender minority stress faced by transgender students derived from social stigma and institutional barriers in Hong Kong. Moreover, at the individual level, these teachers and educators recognized the positive and empowering impact of affirming and acknowledging their students' gender identities and expressions using trans-affirming language and pronouns. A few also undertook initiatives to create safe space in their classrooms with trans-inclusive curriculum content. This involved

using narratives from local transgender communities in teaching specific subjects, such as language and literature classes, where poetry or a song written by transgender people was used as teaching materials. By discarding the outdated and transphobic perspective that transgender students are “psychologically abnormal,” this group of educators used a prejudice free and affirmative perspective to listen to their students’ gender concerns. These issues included discomfort toward their body, their desire to be called by their preferred gender pronoun and treated in accordance with this gender identity in their daily life. Other issues concerned their hope for schools to support their choice of uniform choices, gender expression and use of changing rooms and other facilities. They also wanted support for their plans to come out to their parents and peers and to have access to resources related to medical transition in the future.

At the interpersonal level, one teacher used a whole school approach to work with a trans student. This teacher had connected the family, school guidance team, administrative team, and educational psychologist to facilitate a student who was transitioning at school. This teacher also organized a trainer from the transgender community to provide trans-inclusive sexuality education for other students and staff of the school. This training included the use of trans-inclusive language, making school facilities accessible to trans students, and instituting other trans inclusive school policies, such as developing guidelines on anti-transphobic harassment and gender-neutral school uniform etc. The teacher also connected the transgender student to a trans-friendly social service, psychiatric service, and community peer support group. Some teachers also participated in workshops organized by non-government organizations to advocate for equal opportunities for transgender students in various public education campaigns.

### **Roles of Teacher Allies of Transgender Students in Schools**

Transgender students can suffer from gender minority stress and this suffering may be chronic

and require extra adjustment (Testa et al., 2017). School support at the individual and interpersonal level from teacher allies, such as affirming classroom arrangements, affirming gender identity with preferred names, may help to ameliorate gender minority stress. In addition to this support from teacher allies, transgender students may also need institutional support. Feminist scholars extend our perspective on the impact of genderism from an individual to an institutional level by employing a social and political lens. Szymanski et al. (2008) suggest that the personal difficulties that marginalized students experience in society can be analyzed as being “connected to the political, cultural, social, and economic climate in which people live and that many of the problems experienced by persons with limited power in society can be conceptualized as reactions to oppression” (p. 513). Based on this perspective transgender students’ stress is attributable to oppressive practices and prejudice toward transgender people and a society like Hong Kong without laws to safeguard their human rights.

A review of the literature reveals similar themes in Hong Kong to those identified in other countries regarding societal attitudes toward transgender students. For instance, genderism and transphobic attitudes have been found among the general public, and within the education sectors (Kwok, 2018; Equal Opportunities Commission, 2016). Genderism against transgender students can also impact their mental health, as seen in the gender minority stress model (Testa et al., 2017). The cis-normative and heterosexist socio-cultural climate in Hong Kong makes it hard to create trans-inclusive projects in educational sectors.

Educator allies who are trained in the cultural sensitivities of working with transgender students can perform an important bridging role by filling this service gap in schools. They are aware of the probable impacts of internalized transphobia and genderist messaging on the psychological well-being of transgender students. Teacher allies can also organize support networks and psychoeducational groups to provide emotional support on gender diversity to students, parents and educators. In addition, these educator allies can contest



homophobia and transphobia at institutional and policy levels by participating in action and advocacy groups to promote policy and institutional change (Chavez-Korell & Johnson, 2010; Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Goodrich & Luke, 2009; Szymanski et al., 2008).

## Conclusion

This entry explores the potential of teachers as allies of transgender students in East Asian cities, specifically the Chinese cultural context of communities in Hong Kong. Transphobia, transprejudice, and genderism against transgender people are fundamental barriers to transgender students' developmental goals and academic achievement. The review of current literature provides teachers with knowledge on transgender students in both a regional and international context. The case of educators as allies to support transgender students provides teachers with an example of how to support transgender students in the Hong Kong educational context. It also reveals a compelling need for school educators to develop ally programs through sexual and gender diversity competence training to support transgender students to navigate genderism in schools. The hope is that such programs will help reduce transgender students' feelings of marginalization and their quest for equal opportunities within the Hong Kong secondary school system.

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