

Bringing love to life: the inclusion of transgender students in Lutheran schools

Dianne Eckermann

Schools are often at the forefront of social change. There are expectations of schools, including Lutheran schools, that they educate and care for all students and that each child is accepted and supported according to their particular needs. In recent years increasing numbers of school aged students have questioned their image of themselves and have disclosed that they do not feel comfortable with their gender; they are identifying as transgender people. For many, this is the beginning of an ongoing struggle, not just with their sense of identity, but with those in the broader community who offer a wide range of opinions, advice, information—some of which may even be helpful.

Bartsch comments that: ‘While the Bible provides many important insights relating to education, it is not a text book of education.’¹ If we were to turn to the bible hoping to find clear understanding on how to work with transgender students we will not find any specific insights; we cannot turn to the bible for answers that are not there. However, we do find that we have been created to be in a relationship with God and it is God who comes to us to build that relationship.² Jesus tells us through the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son the extent to which God will go to bring us into a relationship with Him. Through His actions Jesus also demonstrates how He meets and builds relationships with people who are often marginalised by society. Lutheran schools, therefore, value all learners for who they are and recognise that all deserve respect.³

In exploring the topic of transgender students in Lutheran schools I will use a broad definition of transgender as a term for the many ways in which a person experiences their gender identity differently from people whose gender identity is congruent with their biological sex. I will also focus on what we can learn about inclusivity from Jesus; from documents that already exist in Lutheran education and on the lived experience of some schools through case studies. One of the first points to make is that this is a rapidly changing place. Appropriate language and terminology are part of that rapid change and I ask for understanding if I have unintentionally used terms that are no longer acceptable. Transgender young people are also in a changing medical, social and legal landscape. In Australia there may be fine differences in law from one state to another so it is important that each school is aware of any legislative requirements that may apply. Much of the

1 Malcolm Bartsch, *A God who Speaks and Acts: Theology for Teachers in Lutheran Schools* (Adelaide, SA: Open Book Howden, 2012), 9.

2 Rom 5:5–6; Ps 139:13–18; John 14:23; 1 John 4:7–8.

3 Lutheran Education Australia, *A framework for Lutheran schools* (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Education Australia, 2013), <https://www.lutheran.edu.au/download/a-framework-for-lutheran-schools/>.

literature available on this topic comes from the United States where medical and legal situations differ significantly from Australia, for example formal changes of name or gender currently cannot be made in Australia until a young person reaches eighteen years of age. It is therefore wise to be familiar with the Australian context as much as possible, while also being aware of trends emerging in other parts of the world. The focus of this article is to view the support of transgender students through the lens of pastoral care. It is not intended to be an in-depth theological exploration or an account of what it means to be transgender.

The 2019 Lutheran Education Australia (LEA) Ministry Conference addressed the ways in which practical theology⁴ can be used in Lutheran schools by addressing questions of gender identity in Lutheran schools through Theological Action Research (TAR) methodology.⁵ Society, including our schools, is increasingly aware of the needs of transgender people as there has been an increase in the number of people identifying as transgender. Attitudes towards those who have often been marginalised are changing to become more inclusive. By exploring what we believe (normative theology), what we say (espoused theology) and what we do (operative theology) we are able to map a pathway to hear the stories of transgender students and to provide what they need to be educated and supported spiritually in a caring, Christian community. When we are engaging in conversations about transgender students, we need to be aware that our own pre-conceived ideas affect how we listen to the conversation. We also need to be aware that while others in the conversation may be in different places in their knowledge and understanding of transgender people, all are encouraged to listen with a pastoral heart. This is not just pastoral care; it is theology in action. God loves each transgender person and wants to be in relationship with them but if we, in our schools, want young transgender people to come to know the God who loves them, the ways in which we love, accept and respect all students will be critical to their loving relationship with God.

The Lutheran schools' *A vision for learners and learning*⁶ places God at the centre of what we believe, what we value and what we do. This informs our beliefs about learners, learning and our school communities. According to our ethos we believe: 'each person is a unique creation of God and a person loved by God.' We therefore value: 'the uniqueness and worth of each person and therefore see: each member of our school community as someone in relation to God and help each student grow in the assurance of their God-given worth and purpose.' A quick search of Lutheran school websites shows that our schools use words and phrases such as: welcoming; caring; safe; nurturing; supportive; inclusive; every child matters; open to all students; each person is valued and accepted as a loved child of God. These all portray Lutheran schools as places which aim to welcome, nurture and support everyone because of our belief that 'each person is a unique creation

4 LEA, Practical Theology, <https://padlet.com/LuthEdAus/practicaltheology>, accessed 28 January 2021.

5 Susanna Wesley Foundation, 'Quick guide to Theological Action Research (TAR)' (2017), <https://susannawesleyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Quick-guide-TAR-2.pdf>.

6 Lutheran Education Australia, *A vision for learners and learning in Lutheran schools* (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Education Australia, 2013), www.lutheran.edu.au/teaching-and-learning/a-vision-for-learners-and-learning.

of God and a person loved by God.’ Therefore, as this is what we believe and also what we say, we will respond to the needs of transgender students and their families in a caring and inclusive manner when they seek to enrol or continue their education. Each transgender child is created and loved by God.

In addition, *Growing deep*⁷ reinforces that ‘God has intentionally created each person and that each person is uniquely gifted to live in relationship with God.’ This means that as a Christian community we intentionally build relationships to support those who are vulnerable. An LCA/NZ pastor and chaplain explains how Jesus radically ‘invested himself in whatever it took to foster a living relationship with the people He encountered’.⁸ When it came to relationships, Jesus did not recognise the cultural norms of His time and deliberately embraced the marginalised which included women and children. The gospel provides us with a number of His radical encounters, from the tax collector to the pharisee, or the woman at the well to Pontius Pilate. Even rebuking the disciples who tried to prevent parents from bringing their children to Jesus was radical. Unlike humanity, which is quick to judge, to exclude and to misunderstand difference, Jesus deliberately embraced the marginalised, spending time with humanity in all its diversity. We too can follow this example in what we do and how we do it. This does not mean that supporting transgender students is radical; it is the extent of Christ’s love that is radical.

‘Lifelong Qualities for Learners’, embedded in LEA’s *A framework for Lutheran schools*,⁹ describes how school communities reflect the characteristics of God through ‘core values, especially love, justice, compassion, forgiveness, service, humility, courage, hope, quality and appreciation.’ Schools who may be considering the need to develop a policy and procedures to support the enrolment and ongoing support of transgender students might find it useful to audit existing policies in the light of these core values to determine if there is a need for a policy specifically for transgender students. Such a policy, together with its procedures, could develop into a long list of expectations applying to all transgender students, ignoring their individuality. Following set policies and procedures may become legalistic and lack the flexibility required to work with the individual by assuming all transgender students have identical needs. Sprinkle comments: ‘If you’ve met one transgender person...you have met one transgender person.’¹⁰ Therefore, in schools it is important that each transgender student is respected as an individual in the same way that all students are respected as individuals.

7 Lutheran Education Australia, *Growing deep: Leadership and formation framework* (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Education Australia, 2016), 7, <http://growingdeep.lutheran.edu.au/>.

8 An LCA/NZ pastor and chaplain, ‘For such a time as this: a theological response to sexual identity and gender orientation in Lutheran schools and aged care communities,’ *Lutheran Theological Journal* 53, no 3 (Dec 2019): 152.

9 Lutheran Education Australia, *A vision for learners and learning in Lutheran schools* (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Education Australia, 2013), 3, www.lutheran.edu.au/teaching-and-learning/a-vision-for-learners-and-learning.

10 Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2021), 52.

Instead, it may be worth turning to existing policies, particularly those applying to student wellbeing or pastoral care. A wellbeing policy may be more generic but in doing so it can be applied to varying needs and be as unique as each transgender student, adaptable to their individual needs. A wellbeing or pastoral care policy considers the unique needs of all individuals. It is neither prescriptive nor legalistic but inclusive and supportive. It is about relationships with students. In a recent conversation with Dr Stephen Haar from ALC, he commented: 'Relationships are not nurtured on rules but openness, vulnerability and a willingness to cross lanes to meet where people are at.'¹¹ The LCA webpage is also about building relationships: 'whoever you are, whatever your story, you are welcome here with us.'¹² This, therefore, is the why of what we do. Our concern then, is how this works in practice in our schools.

Even if there is not a transgender student currently in a particular school, it is worth considering what the barriers are to those who are exploring their gender identity. For example, is there a unisex school uniform option? Are there any single sex classes and if so, is that the only way to teach the subject? Are gender stereotypes reinforced by things such as always asking girls to form one line and boys to form another? When it comes to sport, at what age can boys and girls compete together? How do external sporting associations make provision for transgender students? How can we support students on camps or in boarding schools? How might our existing policies impact on transgender students? How will a potential new student who is transgender be greeted on their first arrival at the school?

In addition, the school may be called upon to support parents and any siblings of a transgender student who may also attend the school. By the time parents engage with the school they are probably already coming to terms with the daughter they thought they had but who is now identifying as their son, but there may still be moments of confusion and even grief over the change they are experiencing.

Clearly bullying is a potential issue and it may be appropriate to review the strength of harassment policies and procedures and to plan in advance how to work through any bullying that is directed at the students, their siblings and their friendships groups.

There are many voices to be heard in transgender conversations, some accepting, some judgemental, some confused. Some of those voices use scripture in a legalistic manner; some ignore it altogether. One important voice our schools need to hear is the voice of the student, particularly when developing an understanding of the needs of transgender students. It is important that before any decisions are made, schools listen to the student, their parents and any professional opinions from doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists or other relevant professionals. The role of the school is to understand the extent of their expertise and to follow advice from professionals who are working with the student. It is not the role of school leaders or teachers to make decisions about the gender of a child and if asked to do so, they should refer to experts. The role of the school is to support a person

11 Stephen Haar, interviewed by author regarding acceptance of LGBTI students in Lutheran schools, Adelaide, 20 January 2021.

12 Lutheran Church of Australia, www.lca.org.au, accessed 27 January 2021.

presenting with a reality and the ways in which this person is cared for and included can have significant impact on their wellbeing, including their spiritual wellbeing.

Case studies

The following case studies provide examples of some of the ways in which school leaders have supported transgender students in Lutheran schools by aiming to provide a safe environment where all students can be educated and nurtured spiritually.

Case study one: a female student in a large school socially transitioning to male

In this instance the student preferred to use the term ‘recognising’ as male rather than transitioning. He was an only child and an existing student at the school with an existing and supportive peer group.

The school principal and the leadership and counselling team worked together as they planned this transition and kept in close, continuous contact with the student and his parents. Initially the student and his parents approached the school counsellor who was described as warm and welcoming. No decisions were made without consultation with the student and his parents. The appointment of a staff member, who was intentionally not the child’s teacher, as a contact person for the student and his parents proved to be valuable in sharing information with both the school and the family.

Considerable time was also taken by the school to make sure they got it right and kept all who needed to know informed at the right time. In this case the school worked for over a year to put in place all that was needed to help this student to be recognised as male.

There were some existing practices in the school which made the student feel comfortable. The school already had a unisex uniform option. In addition, there were no single gender classes. Existing policy in the PE curriculum was that team sports were not segregated according to gender. Change rooms were also not an issue as students were permitted to wear sports uniform to school on days when it was required. The school was therefore already reasonably welcoming for a transgender student but there were still a number of decisions to be made.

Training of staff and building awareness of transgender students was important. In this case the school used the expertise of Headspace. While well known for its work in youth mental health, Headspace also provides support for student wellbeing and sexual health and is active in the transgender space.¹³ It is also a national body and easily accessible in capital cities and major regional centers.

Informing other students was also important. In this case the student decided he felt comfortable enough to tell his class personally, with a teacher ready to support as needed. A letter home to inform parents of other students in the class was discussed, however his class peers felt confident that they were able to inform their parents and couldn’t really

13 Headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation, ‘Understanding gender identity—for family and friends,’ accessed 24 February 2021, <https://headspace.org.au/friends-and-family/understanding-gender-identity-for-families/>.

understand why the school might want to write home. This acceptance and support from the class members had the effect of normalising the situation. Similar support from other students has been noted in other schools, particularly in the senior school age group.

Decisions were shared with staff about the preferred pronoun to be used. While the student's legal name could not be changed, except by deed poll which was not chosen as an option, his preferred name was able to be added to the school data base and became the name he was now known by. The use of appropriate toilets was resolved as the student chose to use a disabled toilet, despite some misgivings from the school that this could label the transgender student as disabled. As this was not an issue for this particular student the school respected his decision.

Case study two: three female students in middle school identifying as male

Again, the school had a sensitive approach in supporting the students and parents through a nominated staff member. Staff training was considered to be very important as not all staff were sympathetic to the needs of the students. In this instance it was presented by an existing staff member who raised awareness of gender diversity in the community and who was open about the importance of school values in including all students. The school also made allowances in what had previously been a strict uniform policy to meet the needs of the students. A unisex toilet was also made available for the students. Where one of the students was in a single sex classroom a letter was sent home to the parents of students in that class to explain what was happening. Teaching and learning in the class continued smoothly.

Case study 3: sharing information—a school supporting three transgender students

This case study involved significant information gathering to understand how best the school could and should support transgender students. From the very beginning their position was clear: transgender students were not a 'problem to be solved' but each had their own story which needed to be heard and responded to appropriately for each individual.

The school board was provided with a significant amount of information including legal advice and recommendations; information from the state based independent schools' association and the regional Lutheran Education office; theological insights from the *LTJ* and *LCA/NZ*. This allowed the school to fully understand its obligations and to identify best practice in supporting transgender students. It guided the school to review all internal policies to identify areas where transgender students might be impacted. This enabled the school to make a strong and informed commitment to ensure all students, particularly transgender students, were in a safe school environment.

Communication was also an important factor throughout this process. Students were heard; teachers were informed and educated; the school board was actively involved.

Conclusion

These three case studies identify some of the different ways in which Lutheran schools are already supporting and caring for transgender students. Each has approached their work with transgender students in different ways, but all have aimed to stay true to their beliefs about the importance of each individual as a precious and loved child of God. All of the case studies demonstrate the work of Lutheran schools in caring for children academically, pastorally and spiritually, yet each has undertaken this journey in a way that best suits their community and in particular the transgender students in their care. School is a significant part of a child's life and those schools who celebrate the God-given diversity of their students are well placed to support all who come to them to live in relationship with their Lord and Saviour.

Dianne Eckermann is Director of Leadership at Lutheran Education Australia