Why (a)Gender Identity Matters
Now, More than Ever:
Perspectives During a Trump Era

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NYU Steinhardt Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools
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“When you are born in a world you that you don’t fit in; it because you were born to help create a new one.”

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INTRODUCTION

When people ask me why work on gender identity matters now, my response is why doesn’t this work matter more? Though this work has mattered since the beginning of time, gender identity work in pre-12 schools has taken on different undertones in last eight or so years, and gained more traction in the last few years (Blackburn & McCready, 2013; Cammarota, 2007; Mayo, 2007; McCready, 2007; Miller, 2009, 2015; 2016a, b; Robinson, 2005; Savage & Harley, 2009). Now, in the bumpy wake of Trump’s election and with the imminent threat to repeal over 150 policies in support of transgender rights, the urgency to understand how to anchor gender identity work in schools has never been more pressing.¹ Our youth—and adults--for that matter--are in danger of losing their lives; their lives. With an estimated 1.4-million transgender people living in the United States (Hoffman 2016, n.p.), transgender people are under serious threat of erasure, and for that matter, extinction. Transgender people, who have only recently been afforded some level of material, social, and economic gains, even under policies that face constant scrutiny, are once more confronted with not being considered a full member of society (as if we ever were). This Trump term will set the clock back and legitimate, legalize, foster, and condone structural gender-based (amongst others) discrimination and practices.

“1.4-million transgender people living in the United States (...) are in danger of losing their lives.”

Since the election, acts of hate against many communities are widespread. For the transgender community in particular, there have been spikes in suicide hotline calls (Patterson 2016) (where an average hotline receives about 100 calls a day, it’s been up to 500); four teens killed themselves the night of the election (LaCapria, 2016); a mother of a transgender child reported that someone spray painted “Trump” on her truck and lit it on fire; and, undocumented transgender
folks are scrambling to get their documentation (e.g., driver’s license, passport, birth certificates, and social security cards) together for their personal safety and medical purposes. With the presumed normative identity as cisgender, or gender-typical, together they function forcefully to sequester the perceived absence of naming those who are transgender, gender expansive, gender creative, gender dynamic, gender fluid, etc.

Threats against the transgender community are currently poised to sanction different forms of structural violence that will include economic, material, and social consequences. Included on Trump’s wish list (and some are probable executive orders, Hartmann, 2016) is to deny the freedom for youth and college students to attend schools/universities, and for both youth and adults, access to health care, discrimination in employment (under a reversal of Title VII), federally supported housing (repealing HUD’s Equal Access Rule) and access to banking credit (under the Equal Credit Opportunity Act), bullying and sex discrimination under the First Amendment Defense Act (FADA) and by rolling back parts of Title IX. For those who are undocumented and have come to the United States for their safety, they are at risk for incarceration and deportation. Many transgender people will be forced into using a restroom or locker room that does not match their gender identity (see Senate Bill 242 in Texas). For these actions and the many unforeseen, transgender people are under duress. So, I return to, why doesn’t this work matter more, and, what can we do to support our transgender and gender dynamic students who are being primed and positioned to think of themselves as illegitimate, inferior, and hopeless? The unconscionable decisions being made on behalf of transgender people can be interrupted by changing beliefs, policies and practices in schools in the immediate so that they can systemically and structurally spatialize into and across society now and in the years to come.

GENDER / (A)GENDER IDENTITY

“Gender identity is the soul and spirit of a person (...) It is not something one can help -- it is just as someone is.”

Gender identity is the soul and spirit of a person. It is how an individual just feels about themselves and wants to be seen and legitimated through the eyes of another in the world. It is not something one can help— it is just as someone is (Federal Intragency Working Group, 2016; Herbert, 2016, n.p.). Gender identity can be an embodiment of a gender, or lack thereof and these expressions of self are located in our brains. This internalization and the legitimation by the external, noting it as both spatial and temporal, can be a rejection of gender as a biological or social construct altogether and refusing to identify with gender. The lower case (a) in parenthesis does not nullify the possibility for gender, nor it’s staidness, rather it recognizes gender on a dynamic and ever-evolving continuum where an identity cuts across or goes between, goes over or beyond or away from, and/or can returns to (Federal Intragency Working Group, 2016; Miller, 2016b). It is about a constant integration of new ideas and concepts and new knowledges, comprised of multitudes, and a moving away or a refusal to accept essentialized constructions of binaries, genders, and bodies.
I offer this definition because (a)gender identity is bound and tied to dynamisms of structural and institutionalized manifestations of power; identity is not immune from the desire to be recognized or even assimilated, and power relations illuminate presence, absence, and futurity. For instance, Foucault (1986) and Bourdieu (1980) suggest that the effects of power construct identities, and that the embodiment of identities is vulnerable as a result of power. Social spaces, i.e., schools, thereby become central to understanding an identity because they shape “engagements in spatial tactics of power and in everyday social, cultural and literacy practices” (McCarthey & Moje, 2002, pp. 234–235). Because social spaces are defined in relationship to power, selves are illuminated by their identities within specific social spaces and yet can be excluded when their identities are not defined by their relationship to that space. Identities can therefore be destabilized when a social space excludes a particular identity and by the way their identities have been defined in relationship to society. Selves, therefore, are illuminated by their identities within specific social spaces and yet can be excluded when their identities are not defined by their relationship to that space. Identity can therefore be destabilized when a social space excludes a particular identity. For all this noted, addressing and helping to make schools more safe and inclusive for transgender and (a)gender youth, and for their peers to be part of helping to legitimate their lived experiences, school systems and all of their stakeholders, must step up immediately. If not, the consequences will be deleterious.
POSSIBLE SOCIAL, PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF TRUMP’S TERM FOR YOUTH

Transgender and (a)gender youth have identities that are “made” vulnerable to experiencing the highest rates amongst their peers for bullying, dropping out, truancy, lowered GPAs, mental health and substance issues (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Miller, Burns, & Johnson, 2013), pushout into the juvenile crime processing system (GLSEN, 2016) homelessness and suicidal ideation (Ybarra, Mitchell, & Kosciw, 2014). Attempts and completion for suicide for transgender and (a)gender youth continue to surpass any population of teens to date (Ybarra, Mitchell, & Kosciw, 2014). Even more startling, painful, and of grave concern, is that transgender and (a)gender youth of color, when combined with a queer sexual orientation, experience the highest rates of school violence. If the schooling system embraced policies, practices and beliefs that addressed, broadly speaking, transgender and (a)gender identity topics from early on in schooling experiences, it could disrupt the continuance of microaggressions, and interrupt such violence.

“Attempts and completion for suicide for transgender and (a)gender youth continue to surpass any population of teens to date. “

(A)GENDER 1: TRUMP 0

Regardless of the next four years, even if policies try to erase, rollback, or nullify transgender rights, gender identities will continue to shift and change over time, in contexts, and be dynamic, multitudinous, abstract, and indeterminate. In fact, as history has proven, when a system tries to silence its people it galvanizes people into deeper levels of activism to bring about social and political change. So what can be done? Here, I lay out some possibilities for the next few years.
SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT FOUR YEARS.

(see Appendix for comprehensive list)

(a). Curriculum and pedagogical strategies should include a continuum of possibilities that makes (a)gender ordinary in the classroom (e.g., drawing from the recent election and use it as a way to learn about policy changes and how it has reinstitutionalized discriminatory practices). This can include but not be limited to including genres of books, plays, short stories, poetry, writing assignments, histories, political victories, trailblazers, photos, pictures, artists, musicians, athletes, varieties of professionals, and media icons;

(b). Students should have ample options for chosen names, (a)pronouns, and (a)gender identifications;

(c). District curriculum specialists should work alongside classroom teachers and educate each other about the classroom and schooling experiences of transgender and (a)gender youth;

(d). Districts and schools should work closely with community organizations that address transgender (a)gender and gender violence (e.g., rape crisis centers, LGBT or gender identity non-profits, doctors, mental health and health care practitioners), to develop a deeper understanding of the issues facing transgender and (a)gender youth;

(e). Districts and schools should work alongside families so as to learn from, and with, their experiences and to develop support groups;

(f). Districts and schools should work to change and update district and school policy, codes of conduct, to enumerate bullying policies, to create safe bathrooms and locker rooms, to consider issues about participation in sports and physical education classes—typical spaces for extreme harassment, and to reflect on how to create a schooling environment that can help to foster external safety;

(g). Researchers should address ongoing gaps in teacher education and work closely to continue to deepen and develop the efficacy of pedagogies practiced through strategies that affirm and recognize the intersectional realities facing transgender and (a)gender youth;

(h). Preservice teacher education should introduce (a)gender identity topics in early childhood education and throughout elementary, middle, and secondary coursework, and across disciplinary programs. Programs should decide in which courses such uptake would fit best;

(i). Teacher educators should work closely with school districts to develop professional development models that can support curriculum specialists and teachers in their ongoing awareness about how to meet the needs of transgender and (a)gender youth; and,
(j). Teacher educators, districts, schools, community organizations, and families should caucus with legislatures to change state policy about transgender rights to be more inclusive of health care needs, identification changes, and bullying policies.

As these items are collectively and individually attended to, Trump’s presidency may not be such a bad thing after all. But, we need to remember that under the guise of some policies that cosmetically mask or Band-Aid-type as proxy for changes, unless we challenge root harms, the system will reproduce structural gender-based inequities which will continue to trickle down, shackle and constrict schools to maintain and sustain microwaved policies—even to the point of liquidation.

Now is a pivotal moment in the transgender and (a)gender revolution. Now is the time to dig in, roll up our sleeves, talk, act, work hard so we can prepare for the world for what we want it to be and so that we can welcome each and every identity now and strive toward (a)gender self-determination for the years and centuries that lay ahead. Now is the time to show why this work matters more than ever... .
REFERENCES


# APPENDIX

## Trans*ing Schools Checklist

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<th>Priorities</th>
<th>Actions to be Taken (how can I meet the priority?)</th>
<th>Target Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop more self-awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change/expand curriculum</td>
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<td>Approach language around identities expansively</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reframe the notion of refusal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop lessons that mediate internal safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shift the classroom environment to create external safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revisit classroom or school code of conduct</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work with colleagues on bathroom policies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revisit the name of the GSA and consider how to make it more inclusive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work with colleagues on sports policies relative to trans* issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revise all school forms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create a school-wide, district wide task force/focus group to address trans* harassment (e.g., enumerating bullying policies, physical education classes)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intervene when any student is bullied</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deepen community involvement about trans* issues (your Pride Center)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work with parents about trans* issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work with school board members about trans* issues</td>
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Draw from city, state, and national resources to support teaching

Stay appraised of city, state, and national policies that impact trans* people and discuss them with students, colleagues, parents, etc.,

Work with school health care workers about trans* etiquette and support.

Work with school counselors about supporting trans* students.

Work closely with administrators and leading experts to develop professional development models that can support all stakeholders in their ongoing awareness.

Caucus state legislatures to change state policy about trans++ rights to be more inclusive of health care needs, identification changes, and bullying policies.

\textit{i} In addition to many of the loss of protections, transgender people will lose, lesbian and gay people also face an unprecedented number of possible economic, material, and social protections. They face the possibility of losing same-sex marriage, limited rights to a 2-parent adoption, in some cases, facing conversion therapy, serving openly in the military bullying, sex protections from workplace, housing and credit discrimination and would not be allowed to seek asylum into the United States.

\textit{ii} Students will be denied access to facilities if their gender identity is incongruous to their documents.

\textit{iii} I will use (a)gender from here on out to refer to a continuum of possibilities for self-identification.

\textit{iv} Scientific arguments have been made for gender identity causality but there is no concrete proof about how and why someone thinks or sees themselves to be a particular (a) gender identity.

\textit{v} (a)pronoun refers to the choice of having or not having pronoun.
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sj Miller, Ph.D., award winning teacher/writer/activist/scholar, is Deputy Director of Educational Equity Supports and Services and Research Faculty at NYU. sj has a combined 22 years of teaching secondary English Language Arts, and undergraduate/graduate courses in Literacy, and Urban/English Teacher Education. sj has written and published over forty articles in peer-reviewed journals, over twenty book chapters, six books, and presented widely in state, national, and international conferences on a variety of topics including anti-bullying pedagogy, challenging the gender binary and LGBTQIA topics, and disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. sj is Executive Committee Member for the The National Council Teachers of English LGBT Issues in Academic Studies Advisory Committee, American Education Research Association (AERA) Division G Affirmative Action Officer, and AERA’s Queer SIG Co-Chair, and consultant for the College Board. sj is co-editor of two book series, Social Justice Across Contexts in Education and, Queering Teacher Education Across Context and UNESCO representative for the United States to develop Education for Peace and Sustainable Development in India with the Mohathma Gandhi Institute.