

# **COUNSELLING AND MENTORING**

*for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learners*

**S. V. Sudheer**

The background of the cover features a dramatic sunset or sunrise over a body of water. The sky is filled with soft, white and blue clouds, transitioning into a vibrant orange and red glow at the horizon. In the foreground, the dark silhouette of a rocky cliff rises from the water. On the cliff, a man and a child are silhouetted against the bright light. The man, on the right, is leaning forward, holding the hand of the child, who is on the left. The child is reaching out towards the man, symbolizing guidance and support.

**UGC-HRDC, University of Kerala  
Thiruvananthapuram**

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**Editor**

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First Printing, November 2017

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*Published by*

Better Books

BN 400, Upasana Kavaloor Lane

Bapuji Nagar, Medical College P.O.,

Thiruvananthapuram

Kerala, India - 695 011

*Cover Design:* Computer Graphics, Pala, Kerala

*Printed at* Global Reprographics, Pala, Kerala

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***Price Rs. 500/-***

**ISBN: 978-81-908006-6-2**

## List of Contributors

- | Sl. No. | Name & Address  |
|---------|---|
| 1       | Dr Alice Joseph, Assistant Professor of English Education, St. Joseph College of Teacher Education for Women, Ernakulam. E-mail: alicejaise@yahoo.in                |
| 2       | Dr Anita Mathai, Assistant Professor of English Education, Titus II Teachers College, Thiruvalla. E-mail: anitamsdan@gmail.com                                      |
| 3       | Ms Anu J. Vengal, Assistant Professor of Natural Science Education, Titus II Teachers College, Thiruvalla. E-mail: annuvengal@gmail.com                             |
| 4       | Dr Arun Kumar P., Assistant Professor of Educational Psychology, Government College of Teacher Education, Kozhikode. E-mail: arunparopady@gmail.com                 |
| 5       | Dr (Sr) Beenamma Mathew, Asst Professor of Mathematics Education, St. Thomas College of Teacher Education, Pala, Kottayam. E-mail: beenammamathew@yahoo.co.in       |
| 6       | Dr Bindu David, Assistant Professor of Natural Science Education, St. Thomas College of Teacher Education, Pala, Kottayam. E-mail: bindudavid10@gmail.com           |
| 7       | Dr T. V. Bindu, Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Science, Institute of Advanced Study in Education, Palace Road, Thrissur. E-mail: tvbindunair@gmail.com |
| 8       | Dr Bisini P. S., Assistant Professor of Education, SNM Training College, Moothakunnam. E-mail: bisini.p.s@gmail.com   |
| 9       | Dr A. Blessing Mary, Assistant Professor of Education, Mother Teresa Women's University Kodaikanal, TamilNadu. E-mail: blessingedn@gmail.com                        |
| 10      | Dr Divya C. Senan, Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram. E-mail: mail2divyacsenan@gmail.com                       |
| 11      | Dr Issac Paul, Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Government College of Teacher Education, Thycaud, Thiruvananthapuram. E-mail: chenai4u@gmail.com        |
| 12      | Ms Jayasree S., Assistant Professor of Mathematics Education, N.S.S. Training College, Pandalam. E-mail: jayasreenpillai@gmail.com                                  |
| 13      | Dr Jisha Baby, Assistant Professor of Physical Science Education, St. Joseph's Training College, Mannanam, Kottayam. E-mail: jishababy100@gmail.com                 |

- 14 Ms Joby Joy Kurian, Assistant Professor of Mathematics Education, St. Joseph College of Teacher Education for Women, Ernakulam. E-mail: jobyjoykurian@gmail.com
- 15 Sr Josephine Joseph, Assistant Professor of Physical Science Education, St. Joseph College of Teacher Education for Women, Ernakulam. E-mail: neenaj7@gmail.com
- 16 Ms Latha Joseph, Assistant Professor of English Education, St. Joseph's Training College, Mannanam, Kottayam. E-mail: lathashine@gmail.com
- 17 Dr Mary Sindhu J., Assistant Professor of Natural Science Education, Karmela Rani Training College, Kollam. E-mail: marysindhu75@rediffmail.com
- 18 Dr (Sr) Mary Thomas, Assistant Professor of Physical Science Education, St. Thomas College of Teacher Education Pala, Kottayam. E-mail: srmarythom@gmail.com
- 19 Dr Mini John, Assistant Professor of Education, Titus II Teachers College, Tiruvalla. E-mail: minijonge@gmail.com
- 20 Dr Padma Priya P.V., Assistant Professor of Natural Science Education, NSS Training College, Pandalam, Pathanamthitta. E-mail: padmapriyaparameswaran@gmail.com
- 21 Dr Rinu V. Antony, Assistant Professor of Commerce Education, SNM Training College, Moothakunnam. E-mail: rinuvantony@ymail.com
- 22 Mr S. T. Sajith Lal Raj, Principal i/c & Assistant Professor of Education, St. Stephen's College of Education, Kollemcode, Kanyakumari Dist. E-mail: sajithlalrajst@gmail.com
- 23 Ms Saritha Rajeev, Assistant Professor of Malayalam Education, N.S.S. Training College, Perunna, Changanacherry. E-mail: saritharajeev82@gmail.com
- 24 Ms Jaya P.J., Assistant Professor, Mount Carmel College of Teacher Education for Women, Kottayam. E-mail: jayajan28@gmail.com
- 25 Smt. Savant Suman Govind, Assistant Professor of Education, Shivaji College of Education, Baad, Karwar, Uttar Kannada District, Karnataka state. E-mail: sumansavant1967@gmail.com
- 26 Sr Shalby P. Jose, Assistant Professor of Commerce Education, St. Thomas College of Teacher Education, Pala, Kottayam. E-mail: shalbypjose@yahoo.com
- 27 Dr Suramy Mathai, Assistant Professor of Social Science Education, Titus II Teachers College, Thiruvalla. E-mail: suramyamathai@gmail.com

- 28 Dr Susmitha P. S., Assistant Professor of Physical Science Education, SNM Training College, Moothakunnam. E-mail: sushmanoj@gmail.com
- 29 Dr Tara S. Nair, Assistant Professor of Education, N.S.S. Training College, Pandalam. E-mail: tarasnair@gmail.com
- 30 Dr T. C. Thankachan, Assistant Professor of Education, St. Thomas College of Teacher Education, Pala, Kottayam. E-mail: tcthanks@rediffmail.com
- 31 Dr N. Theresita Shanthi, Assistant Professor of Physical Science Education, St. Ignatius College of Education Palayamkottai, TamilNadu. E-mail: navisk506@gmail.com
- 32 Dr E. N. Unnikrishnan, Assistant Professor of Sanskrit Education, Govt. Institute of Advanced Study in Education, Palace Road, Thrissur. E-mail: enukrishnan@gmail.com
- 33 Dr Sreevrinda Nair N, Assistant Professor, NSS Training College, Pandalam, Kerala. E-mail: sreevrinda26@gmail.com
- 34 Dr (Sr) Merciamma Mathew T., College Librarian, Assumption College, Changanachery, Kerala. E-mail: mercymathewt@gmail.com
- 35 Dr Jenu Mary Mathews, Assistant Professor, Department of Hindi, St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry. E-mail: vijususanmathew@gmail.com
- 36 Dr Jayalekshmi R, Assistant Professor, Department of Botany, NSS College, Kottiam, Kollam. E-mail: jayalekshminilamel@gmail.com
- 37 Dr Rasi R.A, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Marian College Kuttikkanam (Autonomous), Peermade, Idukki. E-mail: rasi.ra@mariancollege.org
- 38 Dr Money Veena V. R, Assistant Professor of Law, Government Law College, Thiruvananthapuram. E-mail: maniveenavr@gmail.com
- 39 Dr Bijukumar B. S., Assistant Professor, Department of Zoology, Mahatma Gandhi College, Kesavadasapuram, Thiruvananthapuram. E-mail: bijukumarbsd@gmail.com
- 40 Sibi K. I., Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Sacred Heart College, Thevara. E-mail: sibiki@shcollege.ac.in
- 41 Dr. Bindu S., Assistant Professor in Law, Government Law College, Thrissur. E-mail: bindusarojini@yahoo.com
- 42 Dr Sushama Raj R. V., Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Botany, H.H.M.S.P.B. N.S.S. College for women, Neeramankara, TVPM – 40. Email: drsushamarajrv@gmail.com
- 43 Dr Govind R., Assistant Professor of English, M.S.M. College, Kayamkulam. Email: govinnan@gmail.com

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## STRATEGIES FOR COUNSELLING TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

*Sibi K I*

### Introduction

One of the primary responsibilities of any educational institution is that to ensure and provide a safe, respectful and supportive learning environment to all students. This responsibility is especially important with regard to transgender students and others whose gender expression differs from the norm, because a growing body of evidence indicates that these children and youth are often targets of harassment, discrimination, bullying and violence in their educational setting. Transgender students often feel unsafe in schools and experience harassment, depression, and other mental health issues. Student counselors can play a vital role in supporting and advocating for all students, especially students who identify as transgender.

Transgender is an umbrella term for anyone diverging from the roles associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. Some transgender children and youth persistently and insistently express a cross-gender identity and assert that their gender, or inner sense of self as being male or female, is different from their assigned sex. Some youth will assert that their gender is fluid or it is non-binary, not male or female. As per the Census Report of 2011 the number of transgender people in India amounts to 4.88 lakh. They constitute the relegated and marginalized section in all societies especially in Indian society. Consequently they confront acute legal, social and economic educational problems and issues. They are the victims of exploitation of several kinds and sufferers of insensitive manipulations of numerous types. The main stream of the society look at them with contempt. They are deprived of their very human rights in all spheres of their life which is truly disgraceful to an enlightened, egalitarian and civilized society.

The exact number of transgender students in schools and other educational institutions is uncertain, and there is a scarcity of research and statistics regarding their number. One of the major reasons for this is that transgender youth are afraid to publicize their identity due to potential harassment and discrimination they may face in school.

Transgender have restricted access to education, which further deprives them of the constitutional guarantee of equality before law and equal protection of laws. No formal education for transgender is popular in Indian context. They are deprived from family and school environment. Often transgender students discontinue their education and risk their future career opportunities. Studies show that their average academic qualification is secondary or senior secondary level. The enrolment is significantly low and dropout rate at the primary and

secondary level is still very high. They are hardly educated as they are not accepted by the society and therefore do not receive proper schooling. Even if they are enrolled in an educational institute, they face harassment and are bullied every day and are asked to leave the school or they drop out their own.

The socio-political climate is changing with the recent exposure to and publicizing of transgender issues, allowing more individuals who identify as transgender to come forward. As this population continues to grow, legislation and policies need to be developed to protect transgender individuals. It is a fact that every transgender student confront severe social, psychological, emotional, cultural problems in the school environment that would adversely affect their academic achievement and total quality of life. In this context, there is a dire need of scientific and professional counselling and mentoring specially designed for these transgender students since their problems are entirely different from ordinary students. This paper is intended to discuss how the process of counselling could be made more effective and successful in our educational institutions in the case of transgender students.

### Understanding Transgender

The student counsellors should have clear understanding of the concept of gender. A central aspect of gender is gender identity. Gender identity is the self-image that one has about one's own gender as masculine, feminine, or otherwise. Often, people assume that gender identity is congruent with biological sex; they believe that a female will identify as feminine, and a male will identify as masculine. However, this is not true for everyone, since some people with male biology feel strongly feminine, and some with female biology feel themselves to be masculine. Others do not consider their gender to be either feminine or masculine, but a blend of both; still others feel that they are neither masculine nor feminine, but some other third gender.

The word "transgender" is a generic term encompasses a number of people who live substantial portions of their lives expressing an innate sense of gender other than their sex assigned at birth. This includes transsexuals, cross-dressers and people who feel like their biological sex fails to reflect their true gender. As per the Transgender Persons (protection of rights) bill, 2016 "transgender person" means a person who is neither wholly female nor wholly male; or a combination of female or male; or neither female nor male; and Whose sense of gender does not match with the gender assigned to that person at the time of birth, and includes trans-men and trans-women, persons with intersex variations and gender-queers.

In a landmark judgement in 2014, the Supreme Court observed that "The transgender community, generally known as "Hijras" in this country, are a

section of Indian citizens who are treated by the society as “unnatural and generally as objects of ridicule and even fear on account of superstition”. In its judgement, the Supreme Court passed the ruling that “In view of the constitutional guarantee, the transgender community is entitled to basic rights i.e. Right to Personal Liberty, dignity, Freedom of expression, Right to Education and Empowerment, Right against violence, Discrimination and exploitation and Right to work. Moreover, every person must have the right to decide his/her gender expression and identity, including transsexuals, transgender, hijras and should have right to freely express their gender identity and be considered as a third sex.” Thus, today the transgender people in India are considered to be the ‘third gender’.

It is important to note that only an individual can self-identify as transgender and cannot be given that label by others. Gender has a social construction aspect to it, and, often the concept of gender includes others dictating or suggesting what it means to be a male, female, etc. Therefore, it is imperative for students to be able to self-identify as their chosen gender and what it means to them. A school counselor must first assess whether the student has disclosed their gender identity to others at school or at home and ask the student’s permission before publicly addressing the student by the disclosed name and pronouns. A school counselor should recognize and be sensitive to a student’s request considering whether or not the student has disclosed their gender identity to friends, other students, staff, and or parents.

Children typically begin expressing their gender identity between the ages of two and four years old. Around this age, transgender children often express their cross-gender identification to their family members and caregivers through statements such as “I have a girl brain and boy body” or vice versa and behavior such as dressing in clothing and engaging in activities consistent with their gender identity. Even at that young age, transgender children are often insistent and persistent about their gender, differentiating their behavior from a “phase” or imaginative play.

However, some transgender children receive the message from their families, caregivers and society that there is something wrong with them and they may begin to repress their cross-gender identification out of fear and shame. Not having their gender identity respected and affirmed in their daily lives will likely cause them significant psychological distress. That distress is often exacerbated when a transgender student’s gender identity is not affirmed at school, which can be a much gendered space (e.g., girls’ and boys’ toys/games, girls’ and boys’ lines).

The consequences of not affirming a child’s gender identity can be severe, and it can interfere with the student’s ability to develop and maintain healthy

interpersonal relationships. In the school context, that distress will also hinder a transgender student's focus in class and ability to learn. The longer a transgender youth is not affirmed, the more significant and long-lasting the negative consequences can become, including loss of interest in school, heightened risk for alcohol and drug use, poor mental health and suicide.

Factors such as the student's age, personality and emotional state, the level of family support, the school's organizational design and even the time of year all can affect how the student's transition unfolds. It is important to avoid seeking some universally "correct way," and instead to focus on identifying which steps will create the necessary conditions to make this particular student's experience as positive as possible. Creating a tailored gender transition plan is the best way to ensure the process is thoughtfully constructed and accounts for these various factors.

School counselors should be aware of and explore their attitudes as they relate to transgender students. Knowing ethical and legal obligations and using sensitive and inclusive language are imperative in working with transgender students. Additionally, developing skill sets and utilizing best practices that are supportive and inclusive are crucial in working with transgender students. With the growing transgender population and the continual development of legislation concerning transgender individuals, it is important that school counselors be competent and prepared to work with transgender students. School counselors are required to take action to create a safe and inclusive environment for transgender students. These skills, or best practices, include creating inclusive policies and procedures, curriculum, and co-curricular activities. Students from the transgender community should also have a visible presence on campus through both the school's physical environment and inclusivity when it comes to school events.

### **Role of School Counsellors**

School counselors are key in advocating for transgender issues and inclusivity in schools. It is treated as a unique and special position that allows transgender students to confide in someone in a safe and confidential environment. Additionally, unlike most other administrative positions, advocating for marginalized students, such as transgender students, is a fundamental responsibility of school counselors. Transgender students are at a higher risk for issues such as suicide, low self-worth, anxiety, depression, self-harming behavior, and family and friend rejection. School counselors should assess the socio-emotional needs of the transgender students on campus and be willing to coordinate appropriate groups and services on campus. School counselors are the greatest resource on campus to intervene for individual

transgender students. In addition to offering brief counseling, school counselors can provide off-campus resources for transgender students.

Gonzalez and McNulty (2010) reported that school counselors should do their research within the community and be able to connect transgender students and their families with online and community resources. These resources should include mental health professionals and doctors that are competent in working with transgender issues. Additionally, school counselors should have a list of referral organizations and support groups specific to transgender youth within the community

Singh and Burnes (2009) ascertained that not only should school counselors have specific knowledge of resources within their community, but at the high school level they should also have knowledge of state-specific laws concerning parent consent and access to hormones and/or surgeries. It is imperative at this level that school counselors not only have knowledge of resources within the community that offer safe hormone and surgical treatments, but also educate transgender students about the danger of using unregulated hormones found outside of safe and regulated health facilities.

Kosciw et al. (2016) noted that 63.5% of surveyed LGBT students who reported an incident related to harassment or assault said that school staff responded by either doing nothing or telling the student to ignore it. It is a primary role for school counselors to advocate and intervene for marginalized populations. Despite this, Singh and Shelton (2011) noted that most of the counselors do not have sufficient training to work with transgender issues. Most of the educators and counsellors often feel uncomfortable or incompetent in helping LGBT youth. In this context, it is imperative that school counseling preparation programs integrate coursework and experience specifically working with transgender individuals.

Training programs should essentially prepare future school counselors to meet the needs of diverse populations, and to be prepared to enter their field with necessary knowledge and skills to do so in a manner free of personal bias. School counselors' have the ethical obligation to advocate for their students and enforce the rights of all students to be treated with dignity and respect in a safe school environment free from harassment, bullying and abuse. These obligations will continue to unfold as the law catches up with societal demands. Self-awareness, knowledge and utilizing best practices are key ways to support transgender students in schools.

### **Strategies for counselling Transgender students**

Transgender students run a high risk of family rejection, suicide, substance abuse, peer aggression, and family violence. But little has been written

to guide school counselors in creating safe environments for them. Taking a developmental approach, Anneliese Singh and Theodore Burnes outline strategies and interventions for school counselors working with transgender students across grade levels. At the elementary school level, the counselor will ideally serve as an ally, facilitating the child's "safe expression of gender that feels congruent to them," opening communication about gender expression with the family, and ensuring a safe school environment. Counselors at this level should encourage caution with parents and school personnel seeking to "police" or "change" the child's gender expression.

In middle school, the issue of a safe environment intensifies since LGBTQ bullying and violence seems to peak at this time. Working proactively, the school counselor might address gender identity in student guidance classes and teacher professional development and also consult with fellow staff about students who may have already been targets of bullying. In addition, the counselor should understand the responses typical to families with a transgender child and the experiences of the child him- or herself. It is the responsibility of each school to ensure transgender and gender-expansive students have a safe school environment, which includes ensuring that any incident of discrimination, harassment or violence is thoroughly investigated, appropriate corrective action is taken and students and staff have access to appropriate resources. Complaints alleging discrimination or harassment based on a person's actual or perceived transgender status or gender expression should be handled in the same manner as any other discrimination or harassment complaints.

Restorative justice programs and positive behavior interventions and supports are two examples of alternative discipline approaches that improve school climate and address the root cause of bullying and harassment. The most effective way to reduce bullying is to create a school wide culture of inclusion and respect for difference. Supporting transgender students boils down to the basic principle that students can and should be supported and able to attend schools where their authentic gender is recognized and honored. Planning is essential, but that doesn't mean the process of supporting a transgender student will be without its challenges, anticipated or otherwise. Although educators are on the front lines of this effort, the ultimate success of the student's experience rests on the ability of all the stakeholders to work together. Just as a transgender youth's transition is a journey, so too is the process of supporting that transition and creating an affirming school environment. And the process is ongoing, as new situations can present themselves even years after a student has socially transitioned.

Counselors need to work close to the extent possible, with the student's parents/ guardians. Social transitioning goes more smoothly when the school,



student and family work together and maintain regular communication. It may be useful to have a designated school health staff member, such as the school psychologist or counselor, who is available to check in with the student on a regular basis or is just made known to the student as the person to contact in case of difficulties. This may be especially important if the student is undergoing a social or medical gender transition during the school year.

School health staff (counselors, school psychologists, social workers, nurses) can also be of great assistance to school administrators in thinking through how best to support the student. It is also important to develop a communication plan that spells out who needs to know what information, when, and how it will be communicated. All students have the right to privacy, including the right to keep information private about transgender status, gender assigned at birth, medical or mental health treatment of any kind, or other information of a similar nature. It may be that no one needs to be told about a student's transgender status, or that only key staff need to be told on a need-to-know basis. On the other hand, when a student's gender transition is or will be public, as would be the case for a social transition during the school year, thoughtful communication with the students' classmates, school staff, and even the public can help build support for the transgender student and ensure successful integration into the school community.

Moreover, counselors also should pay adequate attention to the difficulties faced by transgender or gender diverse students due to the unavailability and inaccessibility of separate infra structural facilities especially with regard to bathrooms, rest rooms etc. All students are entitled to have access to restrooms, locker rooms and changing facilities that are safe, sanitary, and adequate. Students should have access to all restrooms that correspond to their gender identity. Providing gender neutral bathroom and locker options is an option, although in most settings this raises concerns about limiting access or resources for the transgender student. Access to sex-segregated facilities in a manner consistent with the student's gender identity is the preferable option.

## Conclusion

The very first step in working with transgender students is to become aware of one's current attitudes toward this population. Inaccurate information and anti-transgender ideas and beliefs permeate our society and affect everyone in many different ways. In order to become an ally, advocate, or competent school counselor, school counselors must become aware of and unlearn any potential biases or stereotypes they may have about transgender individuals. The counsellors should be specially trained for dealing with gender identity issues. They are the primary vehicles on campus for raising awareness and increasing visibility of transgender issues and making schools safer for these students.

School counselors should assess the socio-emotional needs of the transgender students on campus and be willing to coordinate appropriate groups and services on campus. They should be capable to intervene for individual transgender students. Along with counseling, school counselors can provide off-campus resources for transgender students and able to connect transgender students and their families with online and community resources. These resources should include mental health professionals and doctors that are competent in working with transgender issues. Additionally, school counselors should have a list of referral organizations and support groups specific to transgender youth within the community. Since the number of transgender students are growing up in our academic institutions the need for effective gender specific counselling and mentoring is essentially important in ensuring a dignified life to this most vulnerable section of our society.

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