

DISCUSSING “GENDER IDENTITY” IN SCHOOLS: ENSURING THAT STAFF AND STUDENTS RECEIVE APPROPRIATE INFORMATION IN DISCUSSIONS SURROUNDING GENDER.

This post is based on notes I made and used in a meeting where I expressed my concerns about Mermaids content being used to inform policy, practice or ideology in the school where I work. Staff were due to receive some feedback from two members of staff who had attended “gender diversity” training. I asked where the training came from and discovered that it had been delivered by a Mermaids trainer.

In the current climate, many teachers may feel afraid to challenge the ideas of lobby groups like Mermaids, but I have worked at my current school for many years and although I was very nervous I felt it unlikely that I would be forced out of my position. I had also decided that I would fight against any attempt to dismiss me on the basis of my views about sex and gender. I therefore voiced my doubts about Mermaids content and subsequently was asked to come to a meeting with two members of the Leadership Team, and the two members of staff who had attended the workshop and had been asked to feedback about it at a planned whole-staff meeting.

Following this meeting, the member of the Leadership Team involved, decided that the Mermaids content would not be presented to the staff at my school, and that we would look into the matter further before deciding on content. I am sharing these notes in case you would like to have this conversation in your school in a way that is respectful and informed, and presents views other than the ones espoused by Mermaids.

To clarify, I did not attend the Mermaids training (although I have watched secret filming of a training session, which is online). My objections existed on the basis of what I know about Mermaids, and having watched the [Mermaid film](#) which was to be part of the presentation at our school meeting.

I did not use all of this content in the meeting; I mainly had the notes with me so I could feel confident about knowing what to say. Since this subject is becoming so prevalent in many areas of life, in a school context, I found it helpful to ensure that my comments were based on school situations at all times. I would say that posing school-focused questions are important (i.e. “What does this mean for our school, in practice?”) as is having a positive alternative (for this I asked that we look at the Transgender Trend school pack).

I hope that these notes might be of use to any other teacher or parent attempting to discuss all the factors that need to be considered when addressing this issue in schools.

Background about Mermaids - students and staff may not be familiar with the purpose and beliefs of this group.

Mermaids was set-up in 1995 by a group of parents. Its focus is on supporting young people who are trans-identifying and their families (so not LGBTQI). Mermaids is not an organisation staffed by medical professionals. Its CEO (Susie Green) has no specialist medical knowledge or training.

Its focus is not so much on the feelings of other people in any given community where a young trans person has to co-exist with others. Mermaids mainly helps individual kids and their families. But I feel that a school is a community, and we need a holistic approach.

Mermaids training activities are more recent, and there has been a mixed response to the quality of the training; its appropriateness and accuracy.

Here is one example of these concerns, written by a British family law barrister (apologies for the long article; it begins with a case-study and goes on to explore the role of Mermaids and the attitude that Mermaids has toward those who present opposing views about transing young people)

(<http://childprotectionresource.online/in-whose-best-interests-transgender-children-choices-and-consequences/>)

Point 1) Mermaids has been questioned for its encouragement of early interventions in children re: puberty blockers; hormones; surgery. Mermaids refers families to online clinics (one notable such clinic run was run by Helen Webberly who has been suspended by the GMC; as has her husband who also ran the clinic after his wife's suspension). This is not in line with the policy of NHS GIDS who adhere to the practice known as "watchful waiting" with regards to gender-questioning children.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-46400184>

WHOLE SCHOOL QUESTION: *do we share this ideology or would there be a different approach which we would like to explore for gender questioning children in our community? Is an organisation espousing these approaches suitable to deliver training and information to staff at our school?*

Could it be the case that Mermaids have a few positions which we might wish to examine, with particular consideration to who they would affect or influence across our school community?

Point 2) Mermaids subscribes to self-ID and the belief that you are a boy or girl if you say

that you are, as a result of a feeling that you have; and that you should be able to access services, spaces and accommodation based on how you identify.

This is problematic with regards to sex segregated spaces or activities: in the case of a school this could apply to toilets, changing rooms, accommodation on residential trips and some sports- which we segregate on the basis of sex, not gender Id.

Schools are diverse places -also, naturally, in terms of faith. Some faith groups who do not subscribe to transgender ideology would not accept their children being compelled to change alongside members of the opposite sex, regardless of how those children identify. Other parents and students -regardless of faith -may have privacy concerns, or concerns pertaining to safety and comfort.

WHOLE SCHOOL QUESTION: *Will there be an assurance that these spaces will continue to be segregated on this basis (sex) for the privacy and dignity of our students in intimate situations, at a sensitive time of their life/ development, and while we are meant to be mindful of safeguarding issues?*

Point 3) Mermaids does not address the legal requirements re: same-sex provision and safeguarding that service providers and/ or schools are obliged to offer.

In the UK that has led to the removal of girls' toilets in some schools in a rush to be "inclusive" yet there is a [2012 Education Act which requires that separate sex facilities](#) (point 13; page 6) are provided in schools for children over the age of 8.

Some parents have complained that their daughters do not like gender neutral toilets because the presence of boys makes them feel uncomfortable, of incidents of period-shaming and of increased likelihood of assault - leading to girls avoiding drinking water, excessive "holding it in" or even avoiding school, in order not to use the gender-neutral toilets.

WHOLE SCHOOL QUESTION: *What are the laws we need to know about to ensure that we are compliant with the law?*

Point 4) Women's groups are concerned about the dependence of the Mermaid narrative on what they see as conservative gender stereotypes. This is visible in the Mermaids film which invites us to agree that the little boy dressed in feminine attire is a girl because of his stereotypically feminine appearance.

Many narratives shared by Mermaids rely on the stories of boys playing with dolls, liking pink and 'girly' clothes or having a preference for playing with dolls and girls as evidence that the child *is* a girl. The stories are reversed for gender non-conforming girls who

like roughhousing; play with trucks and like “boyish” clothes and short hair.

Here is a slide from a Mermaids presentation indicating their views on gender, and inviting attendees to pick their gender identity label/ place on a “gender spectrum”:



Source: <https://twitter.com/sarforalltosee/status/1095345343611453440>

(No scientific study has been offered to support the validity of the 12 point Barbie -GI Joe gender spectrum. There is no space to say that you don't want a gender identity, or don't feel that you have one).

WHOLE SCHOOL QUESTIONS: *How will this square with our school's encouragement of girls and boys to break away from stereotypes (eg. by encouraging participation of girls in STEM, and playing football)?*

What messages are we giving to 'masculine' girls or 'feminine' boys at our school? Could we be perceived as suggesting that they are really of the opposite sex? (ie. not valid as girls or boys as they are).

To summarise

I raised my concerns because of the implications for our school of embarking down a path which is in line with Mermaids ideology; what that would mean for the practicalities of day to day life at our school and the messages we give students about what is a boy, or what is a girl?

When we make policies for trans-identifying children, I would like to the time to be made to review a variety of resources and approaches, including the schools' pack produced

by Transgender Trend: <https://www.transgendertrend.com/> before an eventual decision is made about how to move forward with regards to this sensitive issue. I would like the resources we consider to fully address the issue of safeguarding girls, who form 50% of our school community.

Additional links about Mermaids/ trans guidance in schools

Letter expressing concern about the role of Mermaids in schools and guiding groups, to The Sunday Times of 2nd June 2019

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/trans-ideology-is-damaging-children-k5nlhwmc8>

Article outlining potential legal breaches of human rights in trans school guidance The Herald, 30th January 2019

<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/17393697.trans-guidance-for-scottish-schools-breaches-11-childrens-rights-campaigners-warn/>

TES article by a trans identifying secondary school teacher about supporting transgender students and safeguarding within the school community

<https://www.tes.com/magazine/england/2019-05-10-england/supporting-transgender-students-what-you-need-know>