

The role of a school counsellor in supporting a gender transition:

An interview with Michelle Myers by John Winslade



Michelle Myers is an elementary school counsellor in San Bernardino in California. This interview is a combination of two recorded interviews, one recorded in private and one in public at a narrative seminar at California State University San Bernardino on the subject of transgender on January 19, 2011.

Michelle Myers earned her degrees (Master of Science in Educational Guidance & Counseling; Bachelors of Arts Degree in Psychology; & Bachelors of Arts Degree in Human Development) and Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) Credentials (School Psychology & School Counseling) from California State University, San Bernardino. She divides her time between two elementary schools as a counselor in San Bernardino, California, is the Team Lead of PBS (Positive Behavior Support), and serves as an Onsite Fieldwork Supervisor of university counselor interns.

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JOHN: Michelle, I would like to interview you about the counselling work you have been doing with a child who has been going through a gender transition. Can you start by explaining the context of your work?

MICHELLE: I'm an elementary school counsellor, so I work with children from kindergarten through sixth grade. So that's about five years old to about twelve years old. I first met the child you are referring to in first grade. The child is now in fourth grade.

JOHN: Can I just interrupt for a second, because I want to be careful how we speak about this child. And I don't want to name this person, because she's not here right now. But, can we give a name so that we can actually talk about this child? Can you make up a name?

MICHELLE: Yeah, let's call the child Daisy.

JOHN: Okay, so you first met Daisy in first grade but then came in contact with her again the next year when Daisy's teacher was concerned about what Daisy was writing? Is that right?

MICHELLE: Yes. I introduce myself to all the students at the school and I usually ask my students a series of questions to get to know them. In first grade, when I first met with Daisy, Daisy was a boy. And yet, I remember the initial conversation we shared. When I asked, 'What would you wish for?' Daisy said, 'Really long hair and a pink dress'. All of the answers were really related to girls' clothing and girl appearance. In the second grade, I was asked by Daisy's teacher to meet with Daisy again because, in Daisy's writing, Daisy was referring to herself as a girl. That concerned the teacher. There was a lot of ambiguity. It was in 2nd grade that I talked with Mom and that this child transitioned from being a boy to a girl.

JOHN: Okay. That's quite a young age for someone to be making that transition.

MICHELLE: Yeah, very young.

JOHN: Okay. When you met Daisy as a result of the teacher referring you, what was the question that the teacher had about the situation?

MICHELLE: I guess more confused and a little bit concerned.

JOHN: Because of what Daisy was writing?

MICHELLE: Mmmhmm. And different random things that would happen throughout the classroom. Like Daisy was wearing butterfly Vans (a brand of shoe). Or Daisy would have a pink lunchbox. It was just little random things that were happening where the kids would say, 'Hey that's a girl lunchbox', or, 'Those are girl shoes'. It was more random in the beginning.

JOHN: So it was more random in the beginning, but did that change? How so?

MICHELLE: The situation changed when it was brought to my attention and I wanted to talk with Mom.

JOHN: And did you develop a connection with the mother as well as with Daisy?

MICHELLE: Yes.

JOHN: So tell me what happened in those conversations with Mom.

MICHELLE: Well I got a missed call from her and she said she wanted to talk with me and, before I called her back, there were a lot of things running through my head. I was worried that she was going to ask me to counsel Daisy out of this. I was worried she was going to say make it stop or ask me to persuade Daisy to think differently. And that's how I was afraid the conversation was going to go.

JOHN: So how did it go?

MICHELLE: During the conversations with Mom I got a sense that she was really very, very supportive of Daisy and that she wanted her child to be happy, regardless of being male or female. But it had taken her some time to get through to that point. And she was experiencing a grieving, like a loss of her son as well.

JOHN: So you were introduced to this transition from a ... I'm trying not to use the word normal ... from a usual gender story to a different gender story for this young person ...

MICHELLE: Yes I actually talked to her right before the official transition.

JOHN: And it was a transition for the mother as well as for the boy?

MICHELLE: Mmhmm.

JOHN: And I'm wondering did that involve you in going through any transitions in your own thinking?

MICHELLE: I don't think there were any transitions in my thinking. Only because there's so much evidence to support transgender or any kind of gender identity as worthy of recognition as legitimate. The American Psychological Association (2011), for example, recognises transgender persons as 'persons whose gender identity, gender expression, or behaviour does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth' (p. 1) ... so I've always had that perception.

JOHN: So it wasn't a new issue for you in that you had understood something about this beforehand and you were in some way prepared to be able to respond to the mother and to the child. Right?

MICHELLE: Correct. I was just hoping that she wasn't going to ask me to counsel her son out of this. That was the main fear that I had.

JOHN: Did anyone ask you to do that?

MICHELLE: No. I was really relieved. I was pleasantly surprised because Daisy's Mom was completely the opposite of what I assumed.

JOHN: In what way?

MICHELLE: She was very, very supportive of Daisy. And she was worried that I was going to be that person who was judging her. So we were both kind of prejudging the situation and we were both relieved when we met. And she told me that this had been going on for several years. It was not something that just started in second grade. It had been going on since Daisy was two years old.

JOHN: So it had started when she was very young and had been developing over a number of years. So it wasn't like a momentary choice in the second grade.

MICHELLE: Yes, and she had been to psychologists and doctors and therapists, trying to find answers, or trying to 'fix' the problem, or trying to make this 'phase' go away. And she said that she had just realised that if she didn't accept Daisy then she was going to have a miserable child more than a happy child, so she had had to come to terms that she was not going to have a son, she was going to have a daughter.

JOHN: And I'm interested in whether you got invitations to counsel Daisy out of what she was wanting to do from other people ... from teachers, from principals, or from other kids?

MICHELLE: Not from other children but other adults.

JOHN: The kids were more accepting?

MICHELLE: Yes. Because the kids at our school are in the same class for several years and they get to know each other and they grow like a family and they are more accepting of each other. But there were a lot of rumours that were saying the parents were coaching Daisy into doing this because she had a miscarriage and the miscarried baby was a girl and Mom wants a girl and she's forcing her boy to be a girl. And there were other rumours that this was like child abuse. A lot of stories were circulating.

JOHN: Among the adults?

MICHELLE: Yes.

JOHN: So people were generating all sorts of little theories about what was causing the situation and then you had all that in your head as you met with Mom, right?

MICHELLE: Yes.

JOHN: I'm imagining that the dominating stories that are around in the world must have affected all of you in these conversations that you were having and I'm wondering how that would be?

MICHELLE: Yeah, there were so many stories and rumours that she was confronted with, as well as her daughter ... about how she had 'coached' Daisy into doing this. Or that this is child abuse. Or that her son was 'choosing' this life and you should explain to children that you don't do this.

JOHN: Like it's a simple cognitive choice or something.

MICHELLE: Kind of like how a child would choose to colour with red or blue. So she was really overwhelmed with that from other parents. So that was really hard, because she felt that she was alone.

JOHN: So how did you think of your role at that point? What sort of ideas did you have about what you were doing?

MICHELLE: I was just so relieved that she was supportive, because then I didn't have to persuade her or educate her about how important it is for families to be accepting and supportive and not force their children to conform into a certain box.

JOHN: What I hear there Michelle is your willingness to accept Daisy as she wanted to present herself in the world. And I'm interested in how come you were so accepting of that.

MICHELLE: Because, even though I had heard the different rumours and the different stories, when I talked with Daisy, it was obvious that it was not a passing whim that was going to go away, that this was a defining aspect of who she was. She said, 'I wish I had really long hair', and, 'I want a pink dress', and the way I see it you can't force a six-year-old to be that way. You're not going to have a happy boy wanting long hair and a pink dress, if he was being forced. You're going to have a kicking, screaming child. As for myself, I assumed that this was a diversity problem or even a discrimination problem and, at a public school, it is our responsibility to make sure that all children are safe and that they get an appropriate education, and I assumed that everybody felt that way too.

JOHN: So, those were the principles you were starting from and then you found people didn't think that way. What was that like for you to hear that people didn't think that way?

MICHELLE: It was really shocking and it was really sad.

JOHN: What was shocking?

MICHELLE: It was shocking, because these stories were coming from the adults and not the children. And I guess I expected ... because everyone says that children can be cruel, I expected the young children to maybe not understand and maybe the cruelty to come from there. But, it was actually coming from the adults. And this was shocking.

JOHN: So, can you help me understand that by giving an example of what were the expressions of cruelty that you heard?

MICHELLE: There were some people who were suggesting that we needed to make CPS (Child Protection Services) reports, because this might be an example of suspected child abuse. And if we are mandated reporters we would need to report this. And then some people were suggesting that we shouldn't allow this to happen at the school, because this is not appropriate, and we should put a stop to this, and they shouldn't have their children subjected to this. And then other people who heard different rumours ... I got the impression that they weren't coming from a place of curiosity. It was more like nosy. Like, who is he? It was like this is a circus or something.

JOHN: Almost like a freak show idea.

MICHELLE: Yeah, and that really bothered me.

JOHN: So those were the ways in which the background cultural stories were impacting on the work that you were doing with Daisy and with her mother ... and with teachers and other kids?

MICHELLE: And some of it was personal. They would say, 'Oh I can't believe you encouraged this family to do this'. That's so ridiculous!

JOHN: So you were given some of the blame by that dominating cultural story?

MICHELLE: Yes, I was coming from a place of support and I like to think, not that I'm encouraging her to wear a dress, but that I'm supporting the family and, if she's wearing a dress, it doesn't matter as long as she's following the dress code. But it's more viewed like, 'Okay, you encouraged them or you told them to do it'.

JOHN: Any other ways in which those cruelties were expressed that you became aware of?

MICHELLE: Yeah, a lot of the stories from the adults got passed down through the students. Like, 'My mom or my dad told me you were a fag and not to play with you'.

JOHN: So that was directly said to Daisy?

MICHELLE: Mhmm. And there were other cruel things that adults would tell their children, and then they would share those on the playground.

JOHN: So as a school counsellor, you had a sense of what your responsibility was. And I'm wondering, can you speak to that? Like, what did you start to think that you were responsible for, given that these cruelties were being expressed?

MICHELLE: I felt that, in a sense, I was alone too. But it was my responsibility and my job and also, because I cared about the family, I had to really support them, advocate for them, and educate the staff and the students, to prevent any ill effects from happening.

JOHN: So advocate, educate and support. So what kind of knowledges did you draw from that would help you to do those things?

MICHELLE: Well I wasn't a transgender expert, so step one was I had to consult with people who were in the community. And I had to gather a lot of information about what would be appropriate.

JOHN: So your first step in countering the stories of cruelty was to educate yourself.

MICHELLE: Yeah. To make sure that we were not actually doing something that's indirectly cruel or discriminatory.

JOHN: Whom did you consult with and where did you go for information?

MICHELLE: Lots of places. I looked at websites: Trans Youth Family Allies has a website that helps get terms clear; PFLAG is an organisation for family and friends of GLBTI young people. I consulted people on the phone: the Pride Center at California State University San Bernardino; the director of TransYouth Family Allies; the Director of Affirmative Action at San Bernardino City Unified School District; an attorney at the Transgender Law Center. I talked with Esben Esther Pirelli by email (See Pirelli Bennestad, 2007). I also read through policy documents from the Los Angeles Unified School District; the San Francisco Unified School District; the San Rafael Unified School District; and The California Safe Schools Coalition. I studied the California Education Code. I consulted a document by the California Attorney-General's office on the legal issues with regard to name changes. And I talked to my pastor and my university professors.

JOHN: And what were the next steps?

MICHELLE: The other steps were, after I gathered enough information, to set up trainings for the teachers and the administrators with experts who knew more about the community of transgender and transitioning from male to female or female to male than I would.

JOHN: So that was another step you took to provide a more hospitable context for this young girl and her family.

MICHELLE: Right. So the staff were able to ask questions that they had been thinking about. And really be as confrontational as they wanted to be with the presenter. They would ask questions and she could respond with what the law says, or what the medical association says, or what our obligation is.

JOHN: So you created space and room for questions to be asked and addressed and answered, so that people could speak from a more understanding perspective. And what else? What were the next steps in countering the cruelty?

MICHELLE: The other steps were working with the students and also working with Daisy as well.

JOHN: OK, what did you have to do to work with the students?

MICHELLE: I set up an undercover anti-bullying team (Williams, 2010; Williams & Winslade, 2008). Daisy selected two students who were bullies in a sense, like leading a lot of the cruelty on the playground, and saying things like, 'You're a fag', or, 'You're gay', and, 'My Mom says we shouldn't play with you', and things like that. And then she selected four children who are really good role models and kids who really stand up for her. They had been friends with her before the transition. They would say things like, 'Oh, that's just the way she is. It's no big deal.'

JOHN: So you had a group of six. Two who were being cruel and four who were being more supportive. And then what?

MICHELLE: And then Daisy had outlined what would be okay to share with them, how the situation was affecting her at school, and how she ultimately wished things to be. And what it makes her feel like, how it makes her feel sad and hurt, she outlined what it was okay for them to know. And I brought them in and I just acted like I didn't know who the bullies were and I didn't know who had been kind. I just told them the story without mentioning names. And instantly it was like, 'I know who you're talking about', and I explained to the team that I was putting them together to get rid of this bullying and Daisy didn't want anyone to get in trouble.

JOHN: And were they willing to do that?

MICHELLE: Yeah, surprisingly they all were.

JOHN: Even the ones who had been cruel.

MICHELLE: Mhmm. Yes.

JOHN: And then what happened?

MICHELLE: We worked with that team all through third grade and into fourth grade until the problem was scaled down to a zero. Because, when we first started talking with the team, it was at a ten. And we kept the team alive and going until she said it was a zero. And so they met every week or every other week to talk about their plan and what they were going to do on the playground or in the classroom to discourage meanness and cruelty and encourage friendship.

JOHN: And what did Daisy experience out of all of this?

MICHELLE: She loved it. She gained a sense of control over the situation and she started coming in and telling me what she wants the team to do and sharing stories like how they would eat lunch with her.

JOHN: I imagine that there are other school counsellors who could have been persuaded by those theories that were around and I'm interested in what it was that led you to be accepting and to do the work that you did? What did you draw on to respond in the way that you did?

MICHELLE: I could also draw upon the California State University San Bernardino counselling program that educated us for three years and helped us to understand diversity and culture and being empathetic and advocating for families.

JOHN: So did you consciously call on stuff that you had learned or read? Did you go back and find things and look for them again, or what?

MICHELLE: I don't remember having a specific course on transgender but I do remember talking about diversity and culture, and in my mind it fitted into the picture.

JOHN: Anything else? Any other things that helped you to make sense of what was going on in a way that you could come to be supportive of Daisy and Mom?

MICHELLE: Yeah, a couple of other things. The second is that I work at a public school and my role is not to investigate the situation and to unravel pieces. The students are all at the school to learn and to be educated and to feel safe. And we have an obligation to make sure that they're not discriminated against and that they have a right to wear what they want to. They have that freedom.

JOHN: And have whatever color schoolbag they want.

MICHELLE: Yes, and it didn't matter if there were butterflies on the Vans. Or if it was a pink lunchbox, or if Daisy wanted to wear a pink dress, as long as she was following the dress code and respecting others.

JOHN: So one thing you drew on there was the history of public schooling and students' rights. It's like the rights discourse became useful to you at that point. Like she had a right to wear what she wanted to wear?

MICHELLE: Yes, as long as there was not a bare midriff or spaghetti straps. Then I also had to think about all the things that everyone said and really make sense of it for myself that I am really doing the right thing. Because people might say things like, 'Really this is a choice', or, 'She's going to grow out of this'. And I didn't know what the future was going to say. But I had to know that all the decisions I made along the way were in the best interests of the child and the family.

JOHN: So you had to do some examining of what you were doing and whether it was the right thing to do, and figure that out. What helped you to address those questions?

MICHELLE: I know one person who was asking me, 'How come you're different from other counsellors, because, when I go through the district, other counsellors don't think that way about supporting the family or trying to educate the staff?' They asked me 'Where does that come from?' I realised that there were two places. One was the counselling program really helping us understand diversity and culture and not being judgemental towards other people or groups. And the other part I realised was my faith in Jesus and how he taught us to love people.

JOHN: So you drew on the training experiences and on your faith to give you that place of strength in yourself to know that what you were doing was the right thing.

MICHELLE: One Sunday, I was sitting in church and the pastor was talking about this very topic and he said that, if Jesus were here, he would be hanging out with everyone, anyway. My pastor would always say, 'It's not just about you. It's about other people. And that's what Jesus would do. You're here to serve other people. And you can't live your life in this little bubble with other Christians. You have to mingle with everybody the way Jesus would. And be accepting of people.'

JOHN: I'm interested in that because many people from some religious traditions have argued quite strongly against being hospitable to people who are transgendered or gay or queer. So I am interested in how it was that you came to think like this? It sounds like you took an example from Jesus's work, rather than from some of the religious prejudices that are around. Is that a fair summary?

MICHELLE: Yes, it makes me very sad when I see people who love the same God act very hateful or judgemental, because that's not the way I see it.

JOHN: I would like to ask what you have learned for yourself from this situation?

MICHELLE: I think I learned to follow my gut.

JOHN: But what I'm hearing is that your gut was not just speaking from nowhere. It was speaking from places that you have thought through, and from your own places of compassion and love and belief. Those things are not there by chance. Your gut is educated by those background experiences. Is that fair to say?

MICHELLE: That's accurate, yeah. And I did not let my gut be influenced by everyone around me.

JOHN: By the discourses that would advocate for cruelty, if you like.

MICHELLE: Even though they can be very powerful and it would be easier for me to just get sucked into that crowd.

JOHN: One last question. What's it like for you to talk about it at this point?

MICHELLE: It's nice. It's good.

JOHN: What's good about it?

MICHELLE: It kind of revalidates that the whole process was helpful, even though at moments I felt discouraged or confused, because of what everyone was saying.

JOHN: I'm thinking that what you went through was a situation where there were a range of stories, discourses, ideas, messages swirling all around you and, in the midst of those, you had to stand firm with your own commitment, and your own compassion, and your own gut, and all of those things were tested ... but you had to stay with your professional commitment too. So thank you, Michelle, and I do admire what you did in this work.

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