

Why Teachers' Refusal to Respect Students' Pronouns Jeopardizes Their Mental Health

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As of March 12, 2022, Kansas teacher Pamela Ricard is suing school officials at her public middle school after being reprimanded several times for continuously refusing to respect her students' pronouns and preferred names. According to Alaa Elassar of CNN, Ricard claimed in the lawsuit that the school's denial of her requests to continue ignoring students' pronouns and preferred names violated due process under the First Amendment because it infringed upon her religious freedom and freedom of speech. However, school officials have every right to require that public school teachers respect their students' pronouns and preferred names. Misgendering and misnaming students is a dangerous threat to their mental health outcomes. This is reflected in transgender youth's higher rate of suicidal ideation and behavior, depression, and low self-esteem compared to cisgender counterparts.

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According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, as adolescents develop and begin to recognize their gender identity over time, those whose assigned sex at birth conflicts with their gender identity often consequently experience impairments in peer/family relationships, school performance, and other aspects of life. In a 2009 study published in the Journal of Youth and Adolescence, Joanna Almeida and colleagues found that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youths were significantly more likely to report self harm (25%) and suicidal ideation (23.9%) than their straight, cisgender counterparts (6.3% and 7.4%, respectively) when faced with discrimination. Then in 2018, the American Academy of Pediatrics reported that transgender adolescents and adults experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm, and suicide, with 56% of transgender youth reporting suicidal ideation, and 31% reporting a previous suicide attempt, compared with 20% and 11% of cisgender youths of the same age, respectively. Medical research has consistently shown that one of the strongest intervention methods for reducing suicidal ideation and behavior in transgender youths is respecting their chosen name and pronouns. In a 2018 study published in the Journal of Adolescent Health, Drs. Russell, Pollitt, Li, and Grossman found that, when a youth's chosen name was used in one social context, their suicidal ideation decreased by 29% and suicidal behavior decreased by a whopping 56%! School environments have consistently been proven to be one of the most influential contexts for shaping an adolescent's identity. Because students spend a substantial amount of their days learning in formal education settings, informal factors (including but not limited to teacher expectations, peer norms, teaching strategies, and differentiation) comprise what sociologists call the 'hidden curriculum.' According to Poorthuis Verhoeven and colleagues in their 2018 study, this hidden curriculum powerfully and implicitly teaches young students "about who they are, should, and can be." Therefore, gender affirming education is especially imperative for adolescents to protect their mental health and increase the safety of each and every student. Teachers have a critical responsibility in this process. Refusal to do so constitutes discrimination against transgender students because the teacher actively creates an unsafe environment in which one's transgender students' identities are devalued, and their mental health outcomes and life expectancy are devastatingly diminished.

These consequences make it clear that the act of teachers' misgendering and misnaming students has seriously negative consequences on their mental health. Teachers can use their position of authority as a teacher and role model over young children to bully transgender students by refusing to affirm their gender. Misnaming and

misgendering is especially damaging to students' mental health in school settings. This is because students spend much of their youth in school, where they learn through the hidden curriculum of social norms, teachers' expectations, differentiation, etc. how to cultivate their identity. When teachers refuse to affirm their students' genders, these students are put at a higher risk for depression, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation and behavior. If teachers want to justify their abusive behavior as exercising religious freedom, it should not be the school board's responsibility to accommodate them for their religious faith at the

expense of the students. It is up to the teachers who are concerned about their job requirements conflicting with their religious beliefs to either leave religion at home when at work or find a new job. Perhaps they can find greater flexibility in religious expression at a devout private school. But based on their troubling lack of concern for young children's mental health, I suggest they reevaluate their careers as teachers entrusted with nurturing the intellectual and social development of young minds.