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# Melanie's Story: A Narrative Account of a Transgender Music Educator's Journey

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this narrative study was to examine the experiences of Melanie, a music educator who identifies as transgender (MtF), as she navigated her preservice teacher preparation and entered the field. Ten 90-minute interviews were conducted over the course of 3 years spanning Melanie's senior year of college and the 2 years following her graduation. Additional field texts included Melanie's personal blog, reflective writings associated with music education courses, and observations of Melanie during practicum teaching, student teaching, and her first year of full-time teaching. A narrative account of Melanie's experiences is presented, detailing her youth and adolescence as Matthew, a teenager struggling with gender identity, her first 3 years of college as she began transitioning to Melanie, her senior year of college negotiating her developing teacher and gender identities, and her eventual entry into the field as Miss Stanford, a confident young music educator. Melanie's story highlights the particular challenges facing transgender music educators and illuminates considerations for music educators at all levels endeavoring to cultivate safe learning environments for students of diverse gender identities.*

In her blog, Melanie declares, "I am proud to consider myself a transgender female feminist." In my office, she appears to be just a typical senior music education student frustrated with her attempts to keep her second-grade students under control during field-teaching episodes. Despite appearances, she is not entirely typical. In addition to the common student concerns of pacing and engagement and management, she is also worried about "passing": Are my clothes and hair feminine enough? Does my vocal model sound female? Will my 8-year-old students recognize that I am transgender? We both laugh as she recalls how terrified she was during her first elementary teaching practicum 5 weeks earlier, terrified of the potential reactions of 18 children. The second graders, in reality, smiled and greeted "Miss S." unblinkingly as one wide-eyed student whispered, "Wow. She's really tall." It was an innocent remark in an otherwise unremarkable first practicum teaching episode fraught with "ums" and poor pacing and too much teacher talk. Melanie's fears, however, represent real and valid concerns given how recently transgender persons have come to the attention of the American public

and how frequently members of the transgender community experience discrimination in the workplace and in their lives (Rainey & Imse, 2015).

There are nearly 1.4 million people in the United States who identify as transgender (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016), defined as “an umbrella term for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth” (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2014). In recent years, the transgender community has entered the consciousness of the American public, reaching what *Time* magazine called “The Transgender Tipping Point” (Steinmetz, 2014). Public figures like Caitlyn Jenner and Laverne Cox, as well as transgender characters on such popular TV shows as *Orange is the New Black*, *Glee*, and *Transparent*, have brought transgender individuals into the mainstream media and the American living room. While this media representation has raised awareness about and visibility of the transgender community, it does not always accurately portray the lived experiences of typical transgender individuals who often face social and economic disadvantage as well as significant antitransgender discrimination and violence (Grant et al., 2011).

The National Transgender Discrimination Survey (Grant et al., 2011) reported alarming trends of antitransgender bias, harassment, physical assault, and sexual violence against transgender individuals,<sup>1</sup> as well as high rates of attempted suicide and extreme poverty among transgender populations. The 2013 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014) indicated that school settings were equally problematic, reporting disturbing levels of verbal and physical harassment and assault for all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. Transgender students in particular were identified as experiencing the “most hostile school climates” (Kosciw et al., 2014, p. 12), often facing discriminatory practices involving forced use of their legal name, required use of the bathroom associated with their legal sex, and restrictions on gender expression. According to the report, a hostile school climate contributed to higher rates of absenteeism, lower grade point averages, and increased risk for depression among LGBT youth.

Across the country, communities and policymakers have seen the need for laws protecting the rights of transgender individuals, and 20 states plus the District of Columbia have passed employment nondiscrimination legislation that includes specific language protecting transgender individuals (Human Rights Campaign, 2016).<sup>2</sup> In an effort to protect trans students from marginalization, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights has determined that transgender students in the United States are protected under federally enforced Title IX legislation, the Civil Rights law that prohibits gender discrimination in any institution receiving federal funding (GLSEN, 2014). In response to the implementation of discriminatory bathroom bills like North Carolina’s Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act, President Obama instructed schools nationwide to allow transgender students to choose the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity, noting that “society must protect the dignity and safety of vulnerable children”

(Davis, 2016, p. A10). The risks identified and the policies in place to increase protections for transgender students serve as imperatives for educators nationwide to consider the needs of transgender youth, recognizing and affirming a wide range of gender and sexual identities and actively cultivating safe spaces where all students can learn. Research exploring the experiences of transgender students in educational settings may illuminate context-specific challenges as well as best practices for achieving the goal of safe and equitable learning environments for gender diverse students.

Within the music education community, educators and researchers have begun to consider how we as music teachers have a responsibility to adapt our practice to accommodate the needs of students of diverse gender and sexual identities. This concern is evidenced by a growing number of articles dealing with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) matters in music education contexts (Aronoff & Gilboa, 2015; Bergonzi, 2009; Carter, 2013; Freer, 2013; Garrett, 2012; Nichols, 2013; Paparo & Sweet, 2014; Silveira & Goff, 2016; Taylor, 2011) as well as the symposium, *Establishing Identity: LGBTQ Studies and Music Education*, now in its third iteration. In the original call for papers (Establishing Identity, 2009), symposium organizers noted, "Music education has yet to consider research, theory, and practice from a LGBT perspective" (p. 280). Garrett (2012) made the case that music education researchers and music teacher preparation programs are behind their general education counterparts in terms of addressing LGBTQ issues, suggesting, "Although research literature on LGBTQ issues in general education has greatly expanded in the past three decades, studies focusing on the intersection on LGBTQ issues and music education are virtually non-existent" (p. 55).

It should be noted that while LGBTQ issues are broadly underrepresented in music education literature (see Freer, 2013), there is an even greater dearth of literature pertaining to the transgender experience. Nichols (2013) noted:

One of the unfortunate consequences of LGBT education scholarship is that it often subsumes the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons into one category, essentializing or obscuring the particular concerns of each group. This conflation is problematic because the unique challenges in lived and schooling as a transgender person are not presented and consequently go unaddressed. (p. 263)

This lack of attention is particularly troubling given the transgender community's status as an at-risk population, as well as the notion that "transgender youth face even more marginalization than their LGB peers" (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010, p. 1176).

Outside of music education, the voices of transgender people are emerging in the discourse, raising visibility for the trans community in educational and scholarly contexts. Nordmarken (2014) contributed a compelling and revealing autoethnographic account of his experience of "in-betweenness" (p. 38), while in educational leadership, case studies presented real-life dilemmas facing transgender students and their school

communities (Boske, 2011; Kaiser, Seitz, & Walters, 2014). In higher education, Rands (2009) encouraged teacher education professionals to adopt a “gender-complex” approach to teaching as a means of “challenging gender oppression and gender transgression and working toward social justice and gender equity for all students” (p. 429).

Scholars in higher education have examined the experiences of transgender college students (Bilodeau, 2005; Pusch, 2005; Seelman, 2016), as well as the perceived climate of college campuses for this population (McKinney, 2005; Rankin, 2003). Participants reported that faculty, counselors, and even health care providers were frequently uneducated regarding transgender issues (McKinney, 2005), and transgender students were identified as the most likely to suffer harassment on campuses (Rankin, 2003). Other findings suggested that while institutional LGBTQ support groups were critical in healthy identity development for transgender students (Bilodeau, 2005), many reported an absence of trans-friendly groups or trans-specific programming on their campus (McKinney, 2005). A lack of access to trans-friendly institutional resources such as gender-neutral bathrooms (McKinney, 2005) was also linked to an increased risk for suicidal tendencies among transgender college students (Seelman, 2016).

Within music education, Nichols (2013) addressed the lack of transgender representation with a narrative study of music in the life of Rie, a gender-variant student and musician. In this landmark article, transgender issues were brought to the *Journal of Research in Music Education* for the first time and the voice of one transgender individual was drawn into the scholarly discourse. A second article (Silveira & Goff, 2016) explored music teacher attitudes toward transgender students through the administration of an online survey, finding that the majority of respondents professed trans-supportive attitudes. While these findings are encouraging, they run counter to multiple reports that trans youth face both nonintervention (Kosciw et al., 2014; McGuire et al., 2010) and open discrimination among faculty in American schools (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2014). Silveira and Goff (2016) suggested that this disconnect may be related to a lack of awareness or training among teachers professing to be supportive. In an effort to grow the body of research related to transgender experiences in music education, the purpose of the present study was to explore the experiences of a transgender music educator as she navigated her teacher preparation program and entered the field.

## GENESIS OF THE STUDY

This narrative study (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) tells the story of Melanie,<sup>3</sup> a transgender woman (male to female) who was enrolled in a university music teacher preparation program and later graduated and entered the field. Bresler (2006) described narrative as “an act of coming to understand the world empathetically” (p. 22) and also noted that “narrative inquiry . . . is motivated by the wish to understand the other’s perspective” (p. 25). I chose a narrative approach so that I could better under-

stand Melanie's perspective and therefore become better equipped to meet her needs as a transgender student. I also ascribe to McCarthy's (2007) assertion that narrative, while not strictly generalizable, might "serve as a source of inspiration for pre-service and in-service teachers" (p. 8).

When I first met Melanie in a foundations course, she was Mel (Matthew on my roster), a male sophomore music education student whom I couldn't help but notice frequently wore a bra. As the semester went on, Mel's hair grew longer and, while her clothes were still decidedly androgynous or even masculine, I got used to the appearance of the colorful bra straps that peeked out from under her shirts. Toward the beginning of the semester, in one of Mel's reflective writings, she wrote:

The last thing that I am worried about is something that none of my colleagues have to worry about. Everybody in our MuEd class is a cisgender<sup>4</sup> individual. As far as I know, I am the only transgender individual in the music school.

From that point on, I was aware of Mel's identity as a transgender student, but I did not truly consider the impact it might (or should) have on my teaching.

While I didn't teach Mel during her junior year, I frequently saw her on campus and noticed her ongoing transition from male to female: more feminine blouses, a little eye makeup, large earrings, and fully grown out hair. When Mel enrolled in my elementary methods course during the fall of her senior year, I received a professional e-mail from her just before the semester started. She requested that I change her name on my roster from her legal name to her preferred name of Mel or Melanie. She clearly and articulately noted:

The reason I ask this is because I identify as transgender (more specifically male-to-female transsexual<sup>5</sup>) and I am currently in the transition process. I ask that you refer to me using feminine pronouns and be discreet about this matter, especially around other students.

I was impressed with her proactive approach and began using the requested feminine pronouns. About 4 weeks into the semester, the class was reflecting on our first practicum teaching experiences in elementary methods. When using Mel's class as an example, I accidentally referred to her using masculine pronouns. The second time I slipped up, Mel quietly noted, "she." I quickly edited myself and moved on with the lesson. It was a small mistake, but it bothered me. Was my class a safe place for Mel? Was I serving as a good role model for the other students in the class? Was I truly respectful of Mel's gender identity? Did I really think of Mel as a female or did I retain an unconscious male designation resulting from our earlier interactions?

It was this mistake that inspired me to pursue a research project with Melanie. I realized that I had never considered differentiating my class to accommodate the needs of a transgender student. I did not, in fact, know what those accommodations might entail. Although I was open and accepting as a teacher and as a person, my lack of experience working with transgender students left me poorly equipped to help Melanie navigate

college coursework, field teaching, and student teaching as a transgender individual. I also considered the fact that others in teacher preparation programs across the country might be faced with similar circumstances and might learn from the journey that Melanie and I embarked on together. We decided to document Melanie's experiences through a long-term research project with the goal of sharing her story to help others in similar teaching and learning situations better negotiate the particular challenges inherent in the preparation of preservice music educators who are transgender.

The majority of the data collection took place over the course of Melanie's senior year of college, encompassing her final semester of coursework and her student teaching experience. During this period, we completed eight 90-minute interviews. Interviews began with an oral history focus as we discussed Melanie's childhood and adolescence, her family and school lives, and how she came to terms with her gender identity. Later, we discussed more specifically her experiences as a transgender preservice music educator. With Melanie's permission, I reviewed her blog in which she wrote candidly about her experiences as a college freshman and sophomore. She also provided me with electronic copies of course-related reflective writings that served as snapshots of her fieldwork experiences over time. I supplemented these field texts with observations of Melanie's preservice work in the classroom, as I supervised both her elementary teaching practicum (second grade) and her student teaching internship (high school choir).

Over the course of the year, we developed a strong, collaborative relationship and eagerly settled into our multiple roles as teacher-student, mentor-mentee, and research collaborators. Interestingly, our roles felt very fluid, as Melanie often served as my mentor in "all things trans," sharing mini presentations on trans terminology ("So, you know you're cisgender right?"), quizzing me on previous discussions ("What's the difference between transgender and transsexual?"), and inviting me to campus events that would broaden my understanding of the transgender community ("See you at TDoR<sup>6</sup> tonight?"). Conversely, I served as a font of information about "all things girl," answering questions and providing tips about hygiene ("Never condition the roots"), bathroom culture ("What is hovering?"), and generally sympathizing with the steep learning curve Melanie was experiencing as she acclimated herself to life as a full-time female ("Girl pants! The buttons on the other side!"). Gradually, we built a safe space in my windowless office, a sacred and honest space where Melanie shared her story. As time went on, I developed an abiding sense of empathy and a keen conviction about the ways my practice as an educator would have to change as a result of the work we undertook together.

During the 2 years following her graduation, I continued to serve as a reference and a mentor to Melanie, and we corresponded regularly regarding her job search process. We talked formally once per year, completing two additional 90-minute interviews to discuss her experiences on the job market, her work as a long-term music sub, and, eventually, her first year of teaching. During that first year of full-time employment, I visited Melanie's elementary school, spending two full days observing her interactions

with students and colleagues in the work environment. We completed our last formal interview during this visit. I transcribed all interviews for analysis and treated all data (reflective writings, blog entries, observation field notes, and transcriptions) as field texts (Clandinin, 2013).

As data collection came to an end and I made the transition into the writing process, I wrote with Nichols's (2016) plea forefront in my mind: "I implore music education researchers who pursue . . . inquiry that relies on in-depth, extended accounts of lived experience for data to be cognizant of the moral responsibility that comes with exploring these dimensions of human existence" (p. 451). I grappled with anxiety over what some have called the "co-optation of voice," the possibility that in the end I might have "heard, stolen, and published" Melanie's story as my own (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 75). In order to avoid this outcome, Melanie and I agreed to work collaboratively through all phases of analysis and writing, selecting the events that would frame her story and working toward a rich, "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 1).

We first created annals, developing "a list of dates of memories, events, stories, and the like" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 112) that would serve as a framework for the narrative. Later, as we sifted through the field texts, we sorted those annals into chronicles<sup>7</sup> that seemed to loosely align with the four phases of Melanie's journey: her childhood and adolescence, her first three years of college, her senior year of college and her initial job search, and her first year of full-time teaching. As Melanie and I made final decisions regarding representation, we realized that the phases of her journey aligned somewhat with the names she used during those critical periods: Matthew, Mel, Melanie, and Miss Stanford. In this article, I use each name to represent these phases of Melanie's life story, from childhood and adolescence as Matthew all the way through to her life as Miss Stanford, a successful young first-year teacher. This is not meant to imply that a transition is linear or has clear-cut boundaries; rather, we used the names as a device to interrupt the narrative and help the reader to follow along the journey, transitioning alongside Melanie. The following narrative comprises two components: First, the main narrative of Melanie's life story is presented in four chronicles. Then I share my own narrative, detailing my personal journey toward genuine allyship and how this newfound empathy and awareness informs my work as a music educator.

This restorying of Melanie's experiences as a transgender music educator may serve to cultivate a more empathetic attitude toward students who identify as transgender and create a deeper awareness of how gender identity interacts with music teaching and learning. It is undoubtedly a work of "critical storytelling," one that might "prick the conscience of readers by inviting a reexamination of the values and interests undergirding certain discourses, practices, and institutional arrangements found in today's schools" (Barone, 2000, p. 193). Our hope is that the following stories may serve to raise awareness of the needs of transgender students in music education contexts and the multiple roles and responsibilities music educators have in fostering equitable learning environments for students of diverse gender identities.

## MATTHEW'S STORY

Matthew realized at a fairly young age that he was different in some way:

I have always known that I was different. I always preferred being around girls. I was different than other boys and I mean, I am unique in my own special way just as an individual, but there was always some kind of disconnect with the boys. I played a bunch of sports. I did a lot of the “boy” things, but I still had these feelings like I wanted to be with the girls and spend time with the girls and be a girl.

Even though he was aware of this difference, Matthew had a sense that sharing his feelings would not be wise. “I think at that time, I was kind of smart for a child, and I was like, ‘You know, if I tell anybody this, it’s gonna be bad.’” There were a number of moments from Matthew’s childhood that stood out as indicators of a burgeoning sense of gender dysphoria:

I remember I loved being pushed into the girls’ bathroom. It was a weird thing. My girl friends would push me into the girls’ bathroom and they “locked” me in a stall and I was like “Oh no! I can’t get out and I am so miserable.” And it was weird and at the time I didn’t really understand it. But now I’ve realized that it’s kind of a place that I didn’t have access to before and it’s somewhere that girls were able to go but I couldn’t go.

Throughout elementary school, Matthew enjoyed spending time with his girl friends, recalling, “They would put makeup on me and I would act like I would hate it but I secretly loved it. And then these feelings kind of intensified as I grew up.”

It was during the sixth grade that Matthew found a home in the choir, realizing a talent for singing and becoming more involved with choir as his “thing.” He recalled being recognized for his strong singing voice, earning a solo in the holiday concert:

I remember in sixth grade I used to have the highest voice. Super high soprano and I was pretty good with it, too. I was the only sixth grader that ever got a solo in the Christmas concert and it was such a big deal.

Sixth grade choir was also the first time he experienced friction between his gender identity and the gendered nature of choir singing:

I remember asking [the director] one time, “Oh can I sing with the girls?” Because I had a higher voice and I wanted to sing with the girls. And then she was like, “Well, if you sang with the girls, then you would have to sing all the girl songs.” She kind of put this negative connotation on it. I felt everyone’s eyes on me and I said, “Oh, then I don’t want to do that. Never mind.” And so I got some laughter about it.

During the sixth-grade year, Matthew experienced “a little bit of bullying” and some struggles with “some of the more hyper-masculine boys” in the choir. Puberty hit during seventh grade and Matthew’s covered soprano voice dropped. He noted, “All of a sudden I was singing really low and I was starting to be more masculine. I could feel that I just didn’t like it.” Despite a rapidly changing male body, Matthew continued to notice particular disconnects between his own feelings and experiences and the behavior

of his male peers, noting that while his male friends expressed overt sexual interest in women and would proclaim interest in "being with her," he instead desired to "be her."

As Matthew became more proficient with computers, he took to Google to learn more about what he was experiencing. Melanie explained:

When I finally stumbled upon the word transgender and I started reading about it, I was like "Oh my gosh! That's me!" . . . The more I read and the more I learned about this abstract identity, the more I felt the term click and lock into place with the feelings that I had been experiencing. It was nothing short of life altering. My identity was shaken to its core, but at the same time I felt an alien sense of comfort. I finally understood why I felt more comfortable with women than with men. Why when I played pretend games as a child, I always pictured myself as the female protagonist and not the male. It was the first step of many in terms of understanding myself.

Matthew continued his research, educating himself about the nature of gender identity in an effort to start "figuring out what is this, who am I." Once he was able to put a label on what he was experiencing, there was a feeling of relief but also one of trepidation and fear. "Once I came across the term transgender, then it was like, 'Oh, now I am entering high school. And shit. This is how I feel and I don't know how to *do* it.'"

Matthew's discovery happened right at the end of eighth grade, so the transition to high school was a difficult one. He was struggling with depression, even as he found small ways to express his gender identity in secret, shaving his legs, wearing a sports bra under his baggy sweatshirts, and starting a small, special collection of "girl things." Sophomore year, things came to a head at home and Matthew's father realized that his son was struggling with depression. After a prolonged standoff one evening, Matthew finally confessed his secret to his father:

I think I just said, "I want to be a girl. I am a girl. I feel like I should have been born a girl. That's what I want to be." And it came as a shock to him, obviously. And at the time his reaction was good and he said, "Well you know, I'll love you no matter what." And I was like "OK, cool." But I could tell that he was really not OK with it. Like he obviously was going to have his qualms about it.

Following this episode, it was decided that Matthew would immediately begin seeing a specialty therapist who eventually provided a diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder.

As Matthew tried to come to terms with his developing identity as transgender, he struggled with depression and the recurring depressive thought, "You're a freak." Melanie described it as "one of the most dark times that I have had," a period that culminated in a suicide attempt:

As I came to the conclusion that I shouldn't belong in the world one night, I remember thinking that I just wanted the pain to go away. I thought that maybe if I were stronger I could have handled it, but I just wasn't. I couldn't handle being a freak anymore. I just wanted to escape from it all. So I reached into my medicine cabinet and grabbed the only bottle of pills in there, because there was nothing else that would

get the job done. I poured out the contents of the bottle into my hand and counted the pills. Twenty-seven pills. After some initial hesitation, I began swallowing them, trying to get as many down at the same time as possible. I gagged a few times, and then I was done. I then went to bed, ready to never wake up again. I woke up to my alarm blaring the next morning, signifying that it was time for school. I remember being utterly confused as to how I could have woken up, and I noticed a burning in my stomach. The pills that I had taken? Acne medication. I had figured that if you wanted to overdose on something, you just had to take enough of it. With acne medication, it was clear that 27 pills were not enough, something that I am grateful of to this day. And no, my acne-riddled skin wasn't any clearer.

Melanie often referred to this event as the inspiration for much of the educational and activist work she does on behalf of the trans community. She said, "I think some of the reasons that I do the advocacy work that I do now is because I remember not ever wanting people to feel how I felt at the time. It was so hard." Matthew's parents did find out about the failed suicide attempt, and he was required to continue therapy throughout his high school career.

During junior year, Matthew found a local chapter of Youth First Texas, an LGBTQ support group for youth in Dallas, and began attending weekly meetings. These meetings were a safe space where Matthew could go and openly identify as female and be herself for the first time. This community of support was critical in allowing Matthew to realize that he was not alone and to begin to feeling comfortable embracing a true female identity. In retrospect, Melanie explained,

Starting to meet other trans people was kind of the first time where I stopped feeling horrible about myself. I stopped feeling that quintessential, "I'm alone. I don't have anybody to turn to. I'm a freak. There's nobody like me." And I think that was one of the bigger motivations for me.

The other critical piece during this period was music. Matthew found a great deal of success in choir, singing in two different choirs and the madrigal ensemble, enrolling in advanced placement music theory, and earning third chair in the all-region choir in his competitive Texas district. His bass voice was a source of pride, accomplishment, and confidence:

I think that sort of translated into my day-to-day life. I was able to be more confident as a singer, but it helped me to be more confident as a person in general, on a holistic level. And I was a little bit more at ease. Even though I still was going through a lot of stuff, I had more of a confident center.

Matthew's enduring love for and success in choir led him toward a career path in music, so he auditioned for colleges with a music major in mind. He actively grappled with his gender identity and how it would be possible for him to pursue music as a career, coming to the ultimate conclusion that music education was the right choice.

I chose music education in part because I realized that I couldn't perform: There wasn't any room for a female bass. I talked to people and they said, "You're going

into music but you're transgender. How can you rationalize that?" And I said, "I love music so much. It's a part of who I am. I can't imagine not doing it."

And so Matthew graduated from high school and enrolled with a full scholarship as a vocal music education major at a large, out of state university about 4 hours from home.

## MEL'S STORY

Despite the progress Mel made toward the end of her high school career, the transition to college represented a significant setback in her gender transition. Fear of reaction from her roommate and the peers on her all-male floor led her to present as male during freshman year.

I was terrified. I came to college identifying as male and presenting as male because I didn't know what else to do. I was living in a dorm with a male roommate, who ended up being transphobic. And the whole dorms and showers only for males . . . it was miserable.

In her very first freshmen year blog post, Mel noted:

I have to say, my overall progress transitioning as a MtF (Male to Female) Transgender Woman on the 1–10 scale is currently at Epic Fail.

This period was one of confusion and frustration, feelings embodied in Mel's writing during that time:

I'm transgender, but I lack the resources to transition. . . . I'm a girl, but I'm a boy. Recently, there just seems to be an internal battle between Melanie and Matthew. Mel vs. Matt. I look at myself and I want to change.

Toward the end of the post, she alluded to her "eventual transition" and cheerfully signed off as Melanie/Miley<sup>8</sup>/Matt, indicating both her hope for the future and her still muddled identity.

In the face of all of this adversity, Mel was still able to claim her new identity in one important way: She officially chose a new name for herself. Early in September of her freshmen year, Mel made a public statement on her blog:

I have decided once and for all what my name really is/shall be. Melanie Elizabeth. I keep looking at myself in the mirror, trying to get used to the sensation that one evokes just by saying "Melanie." How do I feel about my new name? To be quite frank, it feels sort of weird.

Two days after that, she changed her name officially on Facebook, noting, "This was a HUGE step and though it terrified me, I did it and I'm quite happy that I did do it." And so, just a few weeks into college, despite her fears and some setbacks with regards to presentation, Mel was making small but important changes.

Other milestones followed, including ordering her first real bra, going to her first gay bar with friends, and, importantly, attending her first LGBTQ campus organization meeting. Through this organization she found a community of supportive individuals who

welcomed her as a transgender woman. Finding a place where she was accepted bolstered her confidence, and she made a renewed commitment to coming out to her peers and continuing the transition that had been effectively put on hold when she started college.

By the end of freshman year, Mel was out to most of her friends, although she was still not entirely asserting her identity, stopping short of dressing in female clothing and still choosing not to correct friends who misgendered her:

My friends just kind of called me Mel for the most part. They still used masculine pronouns though, because I felt bad asking them to use my preferred pronouns. One of the reasons I liked Melanie was because Mel could be androgynous. And so it was ok if people used masculine pronouns. If they called me Mel I was at least getting there and I figured I could work with that.

Mel also felt compelled to consistently present as male anytime she was in a school setting working with children, adding a considerable amount of anxiety to an already stressful situation. She recalled feeling extremely nervous about entering the school setting and spoke at length about the nature of her concerns:

I thought, “Oh my gosh! I have to go into a public school. This is terrifying.” And so I dressed obviously more masculine. I really stuck with identifying as my legal name and as male until junior year. Anything teaching-wise. Going to the elementary school, I was just so scared of any negative reaction. Not only did I have to get myself into kind of an educational mindset of, “I’m the teacher. I am going in to do X, Y, and Z,” but I had to get into this mindset of, “I am male,” and “OK, be more masculine and try and remember what that’s like.” And so, it was almost as if I had to learn to play a character. So I had the normal questions like, “Are the kids going to like me? Am I going to be an effective teacher?” And then for me it was even more exacerbated: “Are the kids going to realize that I am a ‘gender imposter?’”

Despite her considerable anxiety, during the first 2 years of college, Melanie successfully completed a yearlong “reading buddy” project with a first grader and a semester-long service-learning project in a classroom for children with autism. She also developed a reputation as a strong and committed student within the music education program, passing her barrier examinations and advancing to upperclassman status.

Junior year was a critical period in which Mel continued to transition, wearing more feminine clothing, continuing to grow her hair, and wearing bras and earrings regularly. She told me, “I remember telling myself, ‘You really just kind of need to rip off the band-aid and do it. And so I think that’s what I did junior year.’” As she continued to transition, Mel was particularly aware of finding safe spaces on campus. She spoke candidly about her fears of public restrooms and the potential for antitrans violence in these strongly gendered, unmonitored spaces:

Bathrooms are really difficult for trans people, because you are in a space that is completely segregated based on your sex. And so, especially in schools, for instance, you don’t have people watching. There are no hall monitors. It’s more dangerous. You can get beat up in either the girls’ or the boys’ bathroom.

Luckily, gender-neutral bathrooms were available (though limited) on campus, and Mel had mapped out her weekly course schedule around bathroom breaks in these safe spaces. She also began educating her faculty, e-mailing all of her professors at the beginning of each semester and advocating for herself.

As Mel began to present more consistently as female, she began to occasionally experience antitrans attitudes from some peers and even faculty. She shared with me:

I think one of the worst things that my choir director said to me was, "I really just want you to kind of fade into the background and I want you to kind of keep quiet because there are some people when we go on tour that are going to find this disgusting." And he used that terminology. . . . With that one statement, I didn't feel like I really belonged in the choir and it wasn't a feeling that ever changed.

Mel only recalled one negative reaction from a peer, describing a male friend who simply refused to call her by Melanie and insisted on using her legal name.

While the antitrans attitudes and transphobic comments were troubling, the smaller mistakes associated with daily misgendering by her peers and colleagues also insidiously eroded Mel's confidence. She explained:

Being referred to as he or him, it was always kind of a moment of recognition: "Oh yeah, I'm trans and I have this problem because people are seeing me like this still, even though I am trying for them not to." There wasn't ever really a space where somebody was always using the correct pronouns for me all the time.

It was during college, particularly during her transition, that the gendered nature of choir emerged as a significant challenge for Mel. The use of gender to describe voice parts felt alienating to Mel, as she struggled to integrate as a transgender choir singer.

My director would say, "Men go here, women go here. Men sit here, women sit here." It was always like, "Well where do I sit?" . . . Or something simple as "guys sing this note, girls sing this note." Then you think, "Oh, well, crap. What about me?" And so anything that sort of segregates sex in any way was a trigger.

While the director reluctantly agreed to let Mel wear a dress for the concert season, the SATB<sup>9</sup> choral formation he selected caused a measure of anxiety for Mel during performances:

And so there I was, on the far end of the basses, the only person in a dress. And so I wasn't really happy with that. In the winter concert, we did a processional and it was girls on one side and guys on one side. I had to be with the guys because I was standing on the guys' side. That put me in kind of an awkward situation because it was possible that somebody could hear, "Oh my gosh, that girl is not singing soprano or alto. She's a bass. So maybe she's not a she." It was very awkward.

The strongly gendered nature of that choral experience paired with her frequent public outing in performance were so challenging for Mel that she opted not to join choir as a senior.

It was during junior year that Mel began to present as female in the classroom for the first time, navigating the challenge of learning to “pass” while learning to teach.

I was like, “Oh crap, I have to go and actually present as female and teach as a female and lead warm-ups as a female.” And it was terrifying, you know. Like everything in my life. It was just like, “How’s it gonna be?” So of course my mind was racing all the time. I remember thinking, “Oh my gosh, they are going to know that I am trans.” I was freaking out in my head.

Overall, junior year was when Mel began fully asserting her gender identity publicly, presenting and teaching as female, committing to using the female restroom first with friends and later on her own, and beginning to speak publicly about being transgender and about issues facing the trans community. This critical period allowed her to enter her senior year confident in her identity as Melanie and comfortable presenting as a woman on a daily basis.

## MELANIE’S STORY

By the time she began her senior year, Melanie was living full time as a female and thinking seriously about her future as a music educator. She spent time in her voice lessons working toward a stronger and fuller falsetto for use in the classroom. She also began a process of vocal experimentation, seeing what was feasible in terms of providing a passable singing and speaking voice for the classroom while also avoiding vocal fatigue. Melanie noted, “I talk a lot with a higher larynx and I tend to do that just to be more ‘passable.’”

Student teaching brought a host of concerns as Melanie entered the high school choral classroom on a daily basis for the first time. Melanie was placed with a very strong high school choral conductor who identified as gay. She did note that his status as a member of LGBTQ community was critical to her feeling comfortable sharing her anxieties and ultimately overcoming those feelings to focus on the teaching. While her initial fears were significant, she quickly acclimated to the classroom environment:

For the first few days I was really concerned about, “Are people going to use Miss Stanford, not Mister? Are they going to use the correct pronouns? Are there going to be any slip ups?” So the first day, I didn’t really talk much. I was really trying to figure out where I was in the classroom and trying to get a sense of the classroom culture as well as, not only where I fit in as a teacher, but also, “Am I passing? Are the kids noticing anything? Is this a really big thing?” But I never had a single problem.

While her cooperating teacher and I were both vigilant, anticipating potential issues with the students, we were happy to find that such problems never emerged.

As Melanie and I wrapped up our discussions regarding her preservice training, we came to the conclusion that her careful attention to issues of gender expression helped her successfully negotiate her dual emerging identities, simultaneously cultivating her

teacher identity while continuing to solidify her identity as Melanie. She happily noted, "It's interesting because, looking back at it, I was kind of worried for nothing really. I don't even think the kids really cared."

With graduation and an impending job search looming, Melanie finally took the important step of legally changing her name,<sup>10</sup> spending several days in Texas taking care of the required paperwork. As she began her job search, she realized that most applications required a background check, requiring her to indicate her legal gender marker (male). She explained, "When you run a background check on me it shows that I changed my name legally. And my name before was obviously male. And so it's kind of out there already whenever they do a background check." Since Texas does not have employment nondiscrimination laws that include gender identity, this disclosure was a real concern and source of anxiety.

Melanie was applying to many jobs, often getting phone and Skype interviews and sometimes even driving to Texas for interviews. Several times she seemed to be on the verge of getting an offer, even receiving a verbal offer and touring the facilities on one occasion. But repeatedly, the offers fell through. She began to suspect that at some point in the process, her transgender identity was disclosed, leading potential employers to dismiss her as a candidate. She was made an offer in a very conservative part of Texas, described by the principal as "the buckle of the Bible Belt," in a district where gender identity was not covered in the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policy. Although it was a high school choir job, Melanie ultimately decided that it was not a good fit for her and declined the offer.

During her initial job search, one unexpected barrier emerged: the Educational Testing Service. Although her name was legally changed, Melanie had already taken the Praxis<sup>11</sup> test under her former name. "I reached out to the Praxis people and said, 'Hey, I need to change my name on my scores.' And they said, 'Well, we don't change names on scores.'" Despite conversations with managers and upper-level administration at the organization, they would not change her name on the Praxis scores. At first it seemed like it would not be an issue, since most jobs to which she was applying in Texas did not require Praxis scores. However, after turning down the job in Texas, Melanie was offered a long-term substitute teacher position at a local, urban, low socioeconomic status middle school in the city where she attended university. Long-term subs in the district received a higher pay rate than per diem subs, on the condition that they submit their certification and a copy of their Praxis scores. Melanie was unable to submit her Praxis scores without outing herself, so rather than risk losing the opportunity, Melanie accepted compensation at the lower per diem sub rate. Even more problematic was the fact that it was not possible for her to take the test again (for another \$200) because the scores are associated with individual social security numbers and Melanie's had not changed.

Melanie stayed in the long-term sub position until the end of that first year after graduation, and although it was not the ideal job (she was teaching mostly band along

with one choir), she noted that it was good experience and she did not encounter any issues related to her gender identity. During that time, she also mounted her second job search, sending out upward of 30 applications to districts in Texas. As time went on, Melanie began losing hope that she would be able to secure a music teaching position for the following year. She also experienced a troubling interaction at a professional conference, indicating that perhaps, as suspected, her gender identity had factored into hiring decisions:

I went to the Texas Music Educators Association Conference in February and I ran into my old AP Music Theory teacher from high school. He said, "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but my daughter was actually on one of the committees that you interviewed with." And then he said, "I hate to say it, but you might want to move out of Texas if you want to look for jobs. You might want to go somewhere less conservative." . . . I hate the fact that I would have to leave my home state to have a better life.

Despite this disheartening advice, late in July, Melanie was offered a job at an elementary school in a large suburban district outside of Houston. She accepted the position and began to prepare for her first year of teaching as Miss Stanford.

## **MISS STANFORD'S STORY**

After accepting the position in late July, Miss Stanford made a quick move to the Houston area and was immediately immersed in new teacher orientation. As she settled into her new school environment, she began developing relationships with students, colleagues, and administrators, confidently introducing herself as Miss Stanford. During our final interview, we talked more about how issues of voice were manifesting in her new classroom. Miss Stanford said, "[My voice] passes almost as a female's voice, especially for those that aren't trained and can't really distinguish the difference." She noted that she does experience vocal fatigue frequently due to the consistently high laryngeal position she maintains for much of the day. In an effort to preserve her voice, Miss Stanford had developed a range of nonverbal cues, gestures that not only provided some measure of vocal rest but also contributed to strong classroom management. Lesson planning was also a consideration: "When I am planning for my classes I think carefully. If I did six classes where all I am doing is singing, I wouldn't have a voice about half the time. And so, I use my voice sparingly." After school, Melanie consciously rests the voice in private, letting it go into its natural register and relaxing the larynx to help preserve her voice across the week.

There was only one small blip related to her gender identity during the first year of teaching. Shortly after disclosing her gender identity to the members of the first-grade team (a positive experience), the head of human resources (HR) paid Melanie a visit in her classroom:

She said, "So, you told some teachers some things and a couple of parents have found out and we just want to make sure . . . there's really only one concern. And

that concern is, are you using student restrooms?" And I said, "No. I use faculty restrooms." And she said, "Ok, well that was my only question and concern. We just wanted to make sure of that."

Before she left, the HR representative expressed her willingness to support Melanie in any way she could. Even though there are no protections for gender identity in the EEO policy for the district, Miss Stanford feels comfortable with the knowledge that she has the implicit support of HR and her principal. She has cultivated positive relationships with her students, her colleagues, and her principal and is having great success in her first year of teaching.

As I transcribed the final interview of this project, I took a moment to toggle back and forth between the first and last interview recordings (2013 and 2016). I immediately noticed a discernable increase in confidence, feminine inflection, ease, and "Melanie-ness" that characterized the latest recording, an aural embodiment of her transition from Mel, an uncertain and nervous preservice educator, to Miss Stanford, the confident young woman conducting her fifth-grade choir in her enormous and well-equipped music classroom. While this part of our research journey has ended, I am excited for Melanie's continued journey as she pursues her career and lives a full rich life as a female. She recently accepted a new position as a middle school choir director outside of Houston and is excited to begin a new chapter of her professional life. She is hoping to begin hormone replacement therapy soon and will undergo gender confirmation surgery sometime in the future when she is financially able.

## MY STORY

In describing the nature of narrative research, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted, "We are in the parade that we presume to study" (p. 81). In an effort to acknowledge my part in the parade and also remain true to the nature and form of narrative research, I would like to incorporate my own voice in this section, examining the ways in which the crafting of this narrative has changed my own practice. By offering an account of the ways this research has influenced me, I hope to illuminate some considerations for music educators working with transgender students both in kindergarten through 12th grade and higher education contexts.

While I have long professed to be an LGBTQ ally, in retrospect, before undertaking this project, I had no real understanding of the needs of transgender students, the challenges faced by the transgender community, or the actions I could take to ensure that my classrooms were safe spaces for gender diverse students. My experiences align with McKinney's (2005) findings that university faculty and staff members are often uneducated about transgender issues and Silveira and Goff's (2016) assertion that "although many teachers believe in the importance of creating a safe environment for students regardless of gender identity and expression, they may fail to do so—perhaps due to lack of training or institutional support" (pp. 15–16).

The opportunity to work closely with Melanie over the last 3 years has afforded me insight into the needs of transgender students and how to better meet those needs. I remain committed to using preferred names and gender pronouns as a means of showing basic respect for all students' gender identities. I have managed, over the course of the last 3 years, to move away from the gender binary in my practice, eliminating phrases such as "boys and girls" and "ladies and gentlemen" from my teacher lexicon. I also do my best to serve as a role model for students and colleagues, educating others about gender identity, modeling trans-supportive behavior, and providing safe spaces for all LGBTQ students. I am aware of the location of gender-neutral restrooms on campus and the importance of the availability of these spaces to the safety and well-being of transgender students (Seelman, 2016). These considerations are now fundamental features of my practice as an educator and extend across all teaching contexts.

For Melanie, LGBTQ communities served as critical supports as she came to terms with her gender identity and later began presenting as female. Previous research has shown that although institutional LGBTQ support groups are helpful and may ameliorate the negative impacts associated with marginalization and victimization (Greytak et al., 2009), transgender students have often reported a lack of access to such LGBTQ communities and/or trans-specific programming (McKinney, 2005). As a faculty member and advocate, I am now better informed about the LGBTQ supports available on my campus and am able to effectively assist students in finding communities of support and belonging.

The strongly gendered nature of the choral context emerged as particularly problematic for Melanie, and her struggles have informed my practice in many ways. In choral methods courses, I facilitate discussions of the role of the choir director in cultivating safe and welcoming singing spaces for transgender singers. I encourage and model the use of nongendered language during rehearsals and classes and we carefully weigh the role of gender identity in decisions relating to uniform, voice part, and choral formation. As a class, we also consider the issue of gender in repertoire and how it may alienate singers who identify as transgender or implicitly reinforce heteronormative and gender conforming stereotypes. Additionally, we discuss the responsibility of the choir director to monitor transgender singers' voices, which may be in flux due to the use of hormones or may be in greater risk of damage due to the vocal adjustments made to "pass." We acknowledge that the choir community may serve as a rich support for a transgender singer or it may, through the enforcement of traditional practices and language, emerge as a hostile or unwelcoming place.

I have also made purposeful changes to the content of the preservice music education curriculum, weaving gender and gender identity into the fabric of all methods courses and discussions of diversity. Rands (2009) noted, "If the field of education is committed to equity and social justice, then teacher education programs must prepare educators to teach gender in more complex ways that take into consideration the exist-

tence and needs of transgender people” (p. 419). By raising my students’ awareness of the ways gender and gender identity affect all aspects of teaching and learning, I hope to move them toward a more inclusive practice.

Although I have not had another openly transgender student, I have come to better understand the particular challenges related to the simultaneous negotiation of gender and teacher identities. The issues of voice and gender presentation in the classroom were areas of concern for Melanie and, as such, would be primary considerations for me when working with transgender students in the preservice context. Melanie also insisted that her success in the student teaching context was in part due to having an open and accepting cooperating teacher that was also a member of the LGBTQ community. With this in mind, I would give careful consideration to the placement of trans students (also suggested by Paparo & Sweet, 2014).

From a practical standpoint, I am better equipped to discuss considerations for transgender students as they pursue certification, register for teaching exams, and submit job applications. I was appalled to find that Melanie’s perception of employment discrimination based on her gender identity had been corroborated in the literature. The Washington, DC Office of Human Rights report, *Qualified and Transgender* (Rainey & Imse, 2015), found that despite local nondiscrimination laws, “48 percent of employers appeared to prefer at least one less-qualified applicant perceived as cis-gender over a more-qualified applicant perceived as transgender” (p. 6). Since working with Melanie, I have familiarized myself with employment nondiscrimination laws by state, and I frequently have candid conversations with LGBTQ students entering the field about the potential influence of district EEO policies, nondiscrimination legislation, and political and community climate on their job-seeking process and their job security.

Melanie once said to me:

I have been so many people’s first trans person. And I remember a lot of the time being limited by that because I told myself, “If this is the person’s first experience with a trans person, I want it to be good.”

I was fortunate that my “first transgender person” was Melanie, a thoughtful advocate willing to guide me through the process of becoming a true ally. Ever the advocate, Melanie offered some final words of advice to music educators:

Being transgender is not easy. I educated myself so that I could properly advocate for myself, but not all transgender people have the strength or ability to do that. My hope is that these stories provide some insight and encourage you to advocate for musicians like me, people who may not even know what support they need.

By introducing Melanie and her story to our professional community, she might serve as many others’ “first transgender person,” so that our community of music educators may be better equipped to meet the needs of the gender diverse students who will enter our classrooms, sing in our choirs, and enroll in our teacher preparation programs.

## CONCLUSIONS

This narrative study illuminates the unique story of one transgender music educator and the challenges she faced during her preservice teaching preparation and as she entered the field. Continued efforts to document the experiences of transgender musicians and music educators is required to grow a body of more generalizable literature representing the rich variety of transgender experiences in music education contexts. Future inquiry may consider the experiences of transgender (or more broadly LGBTQ) students in music education settings across grade levels, including gender fluid children and transgender, genderqueer, and gender fluid adolescents and young adults. Deep examination of the experiences of minority individuals who identify as transgender is also required, as these voices are largely absent from the discourse at this time. More focused research on transgender voices and vocal pedagogy is another critical area of need and would inform music educators and voice teachers working with transgender singers in the studio and in the choir.

Narrative accounts like this one and others (Nichols, 2013; Nordmarken, 2014) serve to humanize the experiences of transgender individuals. Narratives also have the unique “ability to raise questions that provoke readers to dig deep and think again from a different perspective” (Stauffer, 2014, p. 181). My hope is that Melanie’s story raises questions and offers potential solutions for those endeavoring to create safe spaces where transgender students may engage in meaningful music-making experiences. I also hope that by bringing this story to the scholarly discourse, it will enhance the visibility of LGBTQ issues in music education, raising awareness and advocating for differentiation in education for a group of marginalized individuals whose voices are often silenced. By sharing Melanie’s story, we bring the voice of one transgender music educator to the research community and encourage continued discourse regarding best practices for working with transgender students in a variety of music education contexts.

## AUTHOR’S NOTE

This paper was presented at the LGBTQ Studies in Music Education Symposium III on May 19, 2016.

## NOTES

1. According to the Human Rights Campaign (2015), the transgender homicide rate reached a historic high in 2015 with at least 21 victims; between 2013–15 there were 53 known transgender victims of murder in the United States.
2. There are still 28 states in the United States that do not have any employment or housing nondiscrimination legislation covering gender identity and three states (Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina) have specific legislation preventing the passing or enforcement of local nondiscrimination laws protecting transgender individuals.
3. We chose to use a pseudonym to protect Melanie’s privacy both now and in the future.
4. Cisgender is a term referring to “a person whose gender identity is aligned with the sex/gender they were assigned at birth” (Kosciw et al., 2014, p. 7).

5. Transsexual is a term referring to transgender individuals who wish to physically alter their body as part of their transition. This could include hormone therapy, facial or genital reconstructive surgery, or breast removal or augmentation. Not all transgender individuals pursue a transition or identify as transsexual (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2009).

6. TDorR is the Transgender Day of Remembrance. It is an annual event on November 20 that honors those who lost their lives due to antitransgender violence.

7. "The sequence of events in and around a particular topic or narrative thread of interest" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 112)

8. Miley was the name Melanie had originally chosen during high school. She noted, "I got tired of everyone asking me 'Oh, like Miley Cyrus?' and now I am really glad I chose Melanie!"

9. SATB means soprano, alto, tenor, and bass and, in this case, refers to a formation where singers are grouped into sections according to their voice parts.

10. Melanie originally intended to apply for a name and gender marker change, but the courthouse clerk advised her against it. Texas is one of several states that have unclear, unknown, or unwritten policies regarding gender marker changes, leaving the decision at the discretion of the judge. Rather than risk a full denial, Melanie applied for and received the name change but her gender marker is still legally "male."

11. The Praxis is an American teacher certification exam administered by the Educational Testing Service.

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