

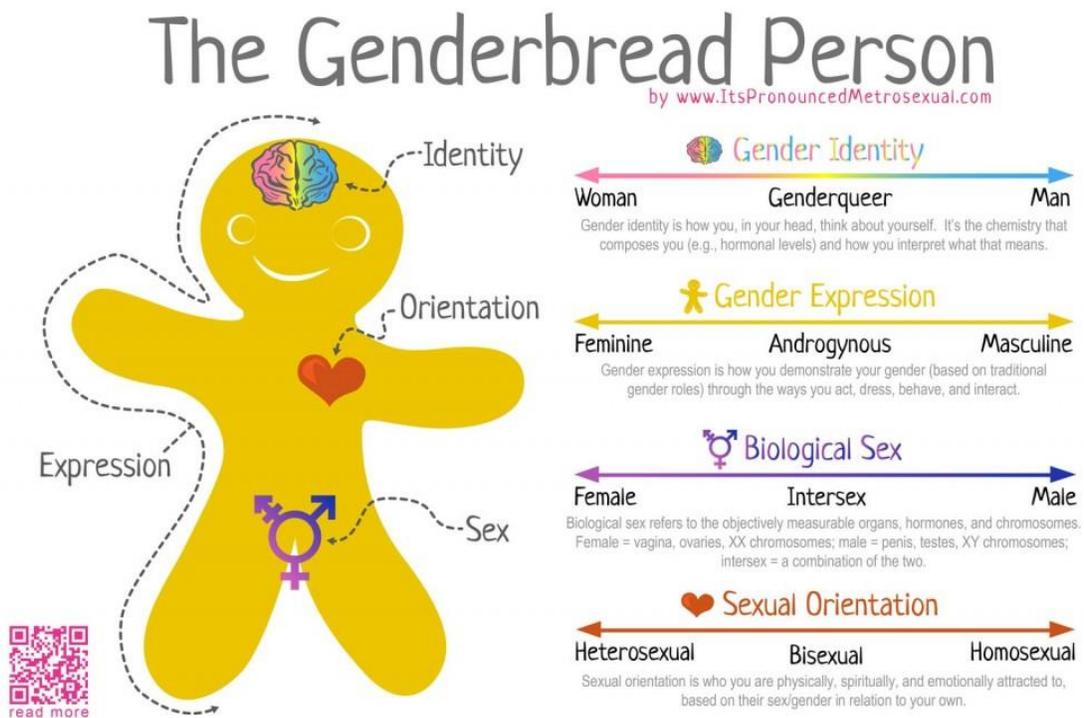
Children's Literature to Support Classroom Diversity

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Today's classrooms acknowledge student diversity, which includes sensitivity to cultural, socioeconomic, and racial differences. But increasingly, gender identity is surfacing in schools as a contemporary issue for educators to address. In America, it is estimated that .58% of the general population identifies as being transgender (Groskopf, 2017). This means that in a school of 500 students, there may be at least three students who are transgender. The population of people who identify as gender nonconforming is staggering as well; in fact, research out of the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law and the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research recently concluded that 27% of California's youth are gender nonconforming (Lawson, 2017). With a population of students who do not fall into the stereotypical gender categories, educators must consider how their practices affect the children that they teach. What are the best practices when interacting with students who are scattered across the gender spectrum?

Before discussing what we, as educators, can do to help all children to feel included and valued, it is important to identify what transgender and gender nonconforming means. As humans, we are all born with female, intersex, or male sex organs, chromosomes, and hormones. In females, this means being born with a vagina, ovaries, and XX chromosomes. Males are born with a penis, testes, and XY chromosomes. An intersex person is born with a combination of the two. This is what is known as a person's "biological sex" (Killermann, 2016). Sexual orientation refers to the

physical, spiritual, and emotional attraction an individual feels toward another individual (Killerman, 2016). Gender expression is “how you demonstrate your gender (based on traditional gender roles) through the ways you act, dress, behave, and interact.” Gender identity is the area that refers to “how you, in your head, think about yourself. It’s the chemistry that composes you (e.g., hormonal levels) and how you interpret what that means” (Killerman, 2016, n.p.). It is this category that defines whether a person is a woman, man, or genderqueer (e.g., transgender or gender nonconforming). These different components can be visualized by using the diagram below:



It is also important to identify what can happen to people whose gender identities are not respected. When students do not feel that their true identity is honored, they are more likely to drop out of school. One such student, Holly Montemayor, a transgender student in Minnesota who dropped out of school due to continuous bullying, knew these consequences all too well. In 2012, Holly, then 13, came out as transgender. Her school

said that she could not use the girls' restroom, which led peers to ask invasive questions and "stare at her when she went to the bathroom" (Gajanan, 2017). In high school, the bullying got to the point that Holly began receiving death threats from other students. The emotional toll from this bullying caused Holly to drop out of school in 2016, forcing her to pursue her G.E.D.

Dropping out of school is only one consequence that can arise from failure to recognize a student's true identity; suicide rates are also much higher in transgender people. In January 2014, The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and The Williams Institute conducted The National Transgender Discrimination Survey. The survey found that 46% of trans men and 42% of trans women had attempted suicide. The survey also found that suicide attempts were highest among those who are younger (ages 18-24). In addition, the prevalence of suicide attempts was elevated when people were discriminated against at school. Survey data reported that 54% of transgender people within the study had experienced harassment or bullying at school (Haas, Rodgers, & Herman, 2014).

Another study, conducted by the Department of Otolaryngology, Head and Neck Surgery at the University of Connecticut, found that transgender women who have access to surgery which allows them to "pass" as females report the same quality of life as cisgender people. This study points to the fact that when transgender people are treated the same as cisgender people, those whose personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex, the risk of suicide is no different than for anyone else (Tannehill, 2015). If schools do not recognize a student's gender that they identify with, the child

will not feel that they are treated the same way as other students; thus, their risk of suicide is likely to increase.

What can teachers and administrators do to reduce the risk of suicide and depression in transgender and gender nonconforming students? The Center for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that schools can implement evidence-based policies, procedures, and activities designed to promote a healthy environment for all youth, including LGBTQ students (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health). The CDC encourages schools implement the following policies and practices:

- Encourage respect for all students and prohibit bullying, harassment, and violence against all students.
- Identify “safe places”, such as counselor’s offices or designated classrooms, where LGBTQ youth can receive support
- Encourage student-led and student-organized school clubs that promote a safe, welcoming, and accepting school environment.
- Provide trainings to school staff on how to create safe and supportive school environments for all students, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, and encourage staff to attend these trainings.
- Facilitate access to community-based providers who have experience providing health services, including social and psychological services to LGBTQ youth.

Many studies have concluded that allowing transgender people to use the bathroom that they identify with is part of creating a safe and supportive school environment. By allowing students to choose the bathroom that they see fit, providing education to youth on transgender issues, and putting bullying policies in place,

transgender students will feel more comfortable and accepted than if they are denied these things.

In addition to school-wide policies, teachers can implement best practices in their classrooms to ease the emotional pain that many transgender and gender nonconforming students endure. Katy Thomas, the school counselor at Meadowlark Elementary School in Bozeman, Montana, suggests the following:

- Do not have a boy's or girl's bathroom pass for the bathroom.
- Do not divide students up as male and female when lining up.
- Instead of saying, "Boys and girls," use the term "students" or "first graders."
- Use correct pronouns with students who have transitioned or are in the process of transitioning.
- Figure out what questions a transgender student is comfortable with being asked. Check with each individual child.
- Introduce the student with their preferred name. Lightly bring up who he/she is without making a big deal of it.
- Be in close communication with the family of the transgender student about what they are comfortable with.
- Read books that explain the gender spectrum and have transgender and gender nonconforming characters in them.

(Best Practices for Teachers of Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students, 2018).

Reading books with characters that students can identify with is critical. Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd (2001) argue that children are often motivated to read texts that connect to their lives, especially when they can relate to the characters, their problems, and experiences. While many libraries have been expanding books about cultural diversity, texts with characters that identify as transgender and gender nonconforming are still scarce. Perhaps this is because some believe that there isn't a large selection of books with transgender and nonconforming characters in them. However, these books do exist and should be introduced into school libraries and classrooms. Below is an annotated bibliography on several such books that are appropriate for people of all ages:

Baldacchino, C. (2014). *Morris Micklewhite and the tangerine dress*. Toronto, CA:

Groundwood Books/House of Anansi Press.

Morris is a little boy who loves to wear the tangerine-colored dress from his classroom's dress-up box. The other students in his class don't understand and say that dresses are only for girls. The children in Morris' class begin teasing him to the point that he asks his mother to stay home from school. While at home, Morris paints an incredible picture of a dream he had of outer space. When he returns to school, he brings the painting with him. The other students realize that Morris has a wonderful imagination and see that he is a fun friend to play with.

Bergman, S. B. (2012). *Backwards day*. Toronto, CA: Flamingo Rampant.

In this story, based on the planet Tenalp, backwards day comes once a year. On this day, Andrea and the other residents of Tenalp turn into the opposite sex. Andrea can't wait to live as a boy, as this is what she has always wanted to be. However, this backwards day, Andrea does not change into a boy. She is

devastated as everyone else around her lives as the opposite sex. The next day, Andrea does turn into a boy and her family celebrates.

Broadhead, T. (2013). *Meet Polkadot*. Olympia, WA: Dangerdot Publishing

Polkadot is a non-binary, trans kid. This story discusses the ideas of allyship and the challenges that Polkadot encounters. *Meet Polkadot* is suggested for children 3+. It is also the first in a series of Polkadot books.

Carr, J. (2010). *Be who you are*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse

Nick was born in a boy's body, but identifies as a girl. He reveals to his family that he no longer wants to dress like a boy or be called a boy. Nick's family is very supportive and tell him, "Always remember to be who you are Nick.

Remember that we love you, and we are so proud of you." (p. 17). Nick's family finds other families similar to them. With his parent's support, Nick asks to be called "she" and "Hope" later in the story.

Ewert, M. (2008). *10,000 Dresses*. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.

At night, Bailey dreams of beautiful dresses. When Bailey tells his parents of his dreams, they are not supportive. Instead, they say, "You're a BOY!" Bailey meets Laurel, an older girl who is amazed by Bailey's imagination. Together, Bailey and Laurel begin making lovely dresses together.

Fabrikant, A., & Levine, J. (2013). *When Kayla Was Kyle*. Lakewood, CA: Avid Readers Publishing Group

The other kids at Kyle's school mercilessly call him names, but Kyle doesn't understand why. He looks like the other boys at school, but feels different inside.

Kyle searches to find the words to share his feelings about his gender with his peers. Meanwhile, Kyle's parents help him to transition into the girl he was meant to be.

Freeman, D. (1964). *Dandelion*. New York: Penguin.

Dandelion, a likeable lion, is invited to Jennifer Giraffe's come-as-you-are tea party. He goes to great lengths to dress for the event, changing his appearance so his friends don't recognize him. In the end, he discovers that "true friends like you as you really are."

Hall, M. (2015). *Red: A crayon's story*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.

This book tells the story of a red crayon that is really blue inside. The crayon tries as hard as he can to make "simple" drawings like scarlet strawberries, red fire trucks, and more, but simply can't! At the end, the red crayon embraces his blue self and begins drawing blueberries and vast skies.

Herthel, J., & Jennings, J. (2014). *I am Jazz!* New York, NY: Dial Books.

This children's picture book documents the real-life story of a transgender child who was born with a girl's brain in a boy's body.

Munsch, R. N. (1980). *The paper bag princess*. Toronto, CA: Annick Press.

Typical gender roles are switched in this story about a princess who must save her fiancé prince from being kidnapped by a dragon. Unfortunately, Princess Elizabeth's clothes were burned when the dragon came to take her fiancé away and she must wear paper bags instead. Once rescued, Prince Ronald is ungrateful

and suggests that Princess Elizabeth “come back when she looks more like a real princess”. In the end, Princess Elizabeth decides not to marry Prince Ronald and goes off to live her own life.

Newman, L., & Moore, C. (2004). *A fire engine for Ruthie*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.

In this story, Ruthie enjoys playing with toys that are typically reserved for boys. Unhappy with this, Ruthie grandmother tries to push her into playing with “girl” toys. In the end, Ruthie’s grandmother accepts Ruthie’s desire to play with boy toys with her friend Brian and ends up playing with them.

Pessin-Whedbee, B. (2017). *Who are you?: The Kid’s Guide to Gender Identity*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

This story provides an introduction to gender for very young children. The book discusses how people experience gender: their bodies, their expression, and their identity.

Walton, J. (2016). *Introducing Teddy: A gentle story about gender and friendship*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA Children’s.

Errol’s teddy bear, Thomas, is feeling blue one day when he tells Errol that he feels that he is actually a girl teddy, not a boy. Thomas changes her name to Tilly and changes her bowtie into a hair bow.

Many might wonder, “Why should I read books about gender to small children? Is this even appropriate?” Yes, it is. Gender is appropriate for all ages. Dangerdot

Publishing (the publishers of the *Polkadot* series) argues that “information about gender identity is extremely important for children and grown-ups.” The publishing group goes on to say that “By giving children access to stories about children like Polkadot and teaching them that gender identity and gender expression are based upon each individual’s sense of Self, then children like Polkadot gain a sense of acceptance, autonomy and self-expression” (Dangerdot Publishing, 2016, n.p.).

It is critical for students to feel comfortable with who they are. To help with this, educators should be willing to change their classroom practices and avoid traditional gender stereotyping. When teachers acknowledge a student’s true gender, bullying, suicide, and depression can be drastically reduced. After all, doesn’t every teacher want students to live long and happy lives?

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