

Creating a Gender-Inclusive Classroom

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"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen!" "Girls line up on the left and boys on the right." Repeated in classrooms every day, statements like these send a subtle message to students who might not relate to the gender binary: You're not included. Curriculum and instruction can reinforce that message, too, when gender stereotypes or inequities go unchecked in classroom texts, topics, and talk.

How, then, can teachers be more sensitive to the way gender is presented in their classrooms? By reflecting on how their own experiences with gender shape their practices and questioning the biases they see and hear, they can begin to shift the culture to be safer and more inclusive. These strategies can help teachers move from awareness to action.

Breaking the Binary

According to a 2016 survey from J. Walter Thompson Intelligence, 56 percent of U.S. Gen Z'ers (13 to 20 years old) said they know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns such as *they*, *them*, or *ze*. This generation eschews traditional gender roles, the survey adds, with fewer shopping for clothes assigned to their own gender and more agreeing that public spaces should provide access to all-gender restrooms.

Despite a seismic shift in how youth perceive gender, "there still is a very strong binary culture that most of our educators grew up in," says Joel Baum, senior director of professional development for Gender Spectrum, an Oakland-based nonprofit. "Almost like a fish is in water—you don't even know that it's there, but it is, and it's being reinforced all the time."

Gender Spectrum's website features a number of [educator resources](#) for creating gender-inclusive environments and outlines questions for personal and professional reflection. For example, "How have issues of gender and gender diversity 'shown up' in your work as an educator or in your role at school?" Or, "What is your own comfort level with discussing issues of gender diversity with: Colleagues? Parents? Students?"

Examining Your Practices

Once educators explore how their biases and assumptions shape their teaching—and gain a foundation of gender literacy—Baum suggests examining their practices. For instance, "How are you using language?" Are phrases like *ladies and gentlemen* or *boys and girls* part of your daily vernacular?

Rebecca Alber, an instructor at UCLA's Graduate School of Education, encourages her graduate students (who are novice teachers) to use nongendered terms in their classrooms, addressing kids as *folks* or *you all* (or even *students* or *scholars*) and staying away from phrases like *you guys*. Alber also leads discussions about using *they*, *them*, and *their* when providing examples during lessons instead of *he* and *she*.

Similarly, think about how students are organized: Are you lining kids up or grouping them by gender as part of your classroom management routine? Gendered language and categorization "reinforces that gender is a strict binary," says Baum, which limits the roles all students can access in school. These practices can make some students feel "invisible," he explains. "And when they feel invisible, they most likely feel unsupported and unsafe."

Deborah Best, a psychology professor at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, who studies gender stereotypes in young children, says this could also pit students against one another. "If you make a point of categorizing kids into different groups based on gender, then you're going to set up competition [between them]."

Best, whose research suggests that children as young as five already have fixed ideas about gender, says that rigidity starts to "loosen up as they see violations of traditional roles and behaviors." She advises teachers to call out "opposite traits" that challenge the myth that "boys are aggressive and assertive and dominant, and girls are sweet and thoughtful and kind." Point out that "Johnny is being kind" or that "Suzy is being a leader."

Look Who's Talking

In a recent Edutopia article, "[Gender Equity in the Classroom](#)," Alber explains that this "aggressive male" and "passive female" stereotype silences girls as they grow older, which ultimately influences whom teachers call on. She has noticed that in elementary schools, most girls eagerly raise their hands, share their ideas, and volunteer to read aloud. But "something just happens once middle school hits," she says. "Around 7th or 8th grade, the girls just get quiet." In high school, "the boys are way more outspoken," she adds. "They're conditioned to share more." Research by Fengshu Liu suggests that because of this, "teachers often unconsciously rely on male students as their target or go-to responders and volunteers."

When observing the classrooms of her student teachers and first-year teachers, Alber typically sees fewer females being called on. In a 35-minute discussion, for example, one female student

might speak up. When bringing this to the attention of her graduate students, they are often surprised by what they hear. "They have a blind spot" about participation patterns, she says. "One thing teachers can do is slow down and not pick the first or second person who raises their hand, who are usually male," Alber suggests. "Add more wait time and think time." If one of your students protests, "Wait, I had my hand up first!" then gently remind him, "Well, we've already heard from you a couple of times." Another way to encourage diverse participation is to enforce a "three then me" rule: "If you've already shared, you [then] have to wait for three more people to share before you share again." This also clears air space for more reserved male students to contribute.

Hacking the Curriculum

In some districts and states (most recently, Washington), teaching about gender identity and expression is part of the health curriculum. Districts like Montclair Public Schools in New Jersey, and the state of California, add another element, requiring schools to explore gender roles and stereotypes. But because most teachers don't work in systems that provide time and resources for these lessons, "we encourage you to integrate notions of gender into content you're already teaching," says Baum.

For instance, when giving a spelling test, use sentences that challenge gender stereotypes: "The word is *festive*. He threw a *festive* party for his dolls." Or "The word is *competitive*. She became very *competitivewhen* she played football." Alternately, Baum suggests assigning a writing prompt that incorporates gender concepts, like "How do issues of gender and power inform the #MeToo movement?" Or, have students explore how women are portrayed in the media and how toxic masculinity plays out, by studying films like *Miss Representation*.

In social studies, teachers can introduce two-spirited people as part of Native American culture or teach about historical figures like One Eyed Charlie who defied gender norms in the 1800s. Science teachers can talk about biodiversity—that some fish change sex depending on the conditions or that some animal behaviors defy traditional gender norms, like lionesses who do the majority of hunting for their pride.

Alber also encourages teachers to audit the curriculum to ensure that a diversity of voices is being represented, even engaging students in the exercise. In her research, she found that female voices were largely absent from the language arts textbooks used by the Los Angeles Unified School District: less than 30 percent of the authors in the 8th grade language arts textbook were female.

Many of Alber's graduate students work in underresourced, urban public schools and serve primarily students of color. To be fully inclusive, she suggests supplementing the curriculum with female authors and protagonists of color, as well as stories from the LGBTQ community.

"You want students to have an experience of mirror text. That's how we fall in love with reading—we connect in some way with the story being told, or the character, or the theme."

See Something? Say Something

Finally, model how to question inequities in the curriculum you're presenting, says Alber. Look at the materials through a gender-conscious lens: How are females and males being portrayed? Are the male protagonists in novels "seen as heroic, while the female characters are [depicted as] helpers"?

"I do 'naïve' questioning when I see something that is marginalizing a female or applying a stereotype to a male," Alber explains. For example, if her class is analyzing a primary document about George Washington that references "Mrs. George Washington," Alber might stop and ask, "Wait, I wonder why they don't say her name. Why don't they tell us what her name is?"

"It's just like calling out when we see a racist or stereotypical depiction of someone because of their ethnicity," clarifies Alber. "Question it and encourage students to question and dispute and disrupt that." When teachers challenge gender bias, they create the space for students to do it themselves.

Saying nothing, Alber notes, is unacceptable: "An inaction around that is an action."

Teachers also need to intervene every time they hear a student put down a classmate with gender-biased language, like "You're such a girl." In the 22 years she's been working in public schools, Alber has routinely observed teachers overlooking these comments.

Baum says interrupting such remarks can be done in an educational, rather than punitive, way. He encourages teachers to provide a counternarrative to stereotypes or expressions of toxic masculinity. If a student comments, "Pink is a girl's color," contest that with, "I know boys who like pink" or explain to the class that "colors are colors. There is no such thing as boy colors or girl colors."

"This is climate work," says Baum. "Yes, there's a social justice aspect to it, because the data are clear that kids who are perceived to be at the margins or extremes of gender diversity are endangered and unsafe. But it's not just about those kids; it's about the learning conditions for all kids."