

Transgender Studies 101: A Guide for PreK–16 Teachers

by Susan Trostle Brand and Susan Maasch



RESOURCES

1. ***How I Help Transgender Teens Become Who They Want to Be*** (TEDx Talk)
bit.ly/TransTeens
2. ***Beyond the Gender Binary*** (TEDx Talk)
bit.ly/GenBinary
3. **Transyouth Equality Foundation**
www.transyouthequality.org
4. **Personal Self-Assessment of Anti-Bias Behavior**
<http://bit.ly/Anti-Bias>
5. **Gay–Straight Alliance**
www.gsanetwork.org

“When you judge others, you do not define them; you define yourself.”
—Earl Nightingale

Do you have 12 girls and 11 boys in your class? How can you be sure? When school begins in the fall, we check our class lists and compare the number of boys versus the number of girls. However, while anatomically these gender labels are accurate, the individual’s brain may indicate something else entirely. This requires all teachers to stay informed and be proactive for your diverse group of students.

Transgender, transsexual, nonbinary, asexual, gender fluid, gender variant, gender queer, questioning, gender dysphoric . . . the list goes on. Few professors, practicing teachers, or preservice teachers can keep abreast of the dynamic state of transgender terminology. Meeting the needs of all students means knowing and understanding transgender issues and demonstrating a proactive voice in the rapidly and constantly evolving social climate.

Recent research highlights the need to examine gender identity more closely: “*Gender identity exists on a scale, rather than in narrow dichotomized groups. In essence, trans people (have) brain chemistry approaching the middle of the gender spectrum—inherently different from their biological sex and closer to their identified gender*” (Koehn, 2015, para. 6). Clearly, through education and proactive acceptance policies, educators play a critical role in alleviating the anxiety and marginalization that plague the lives of many individuals who are gender nonconforming. With a 42% attempted suicide rate among gender-nonconforming individuals (Haas, Rodgers, and Herman, 2014), the time to take positive action is now.

Let’s examine the Cycle of Gender-Variance Equality: *Education* paves the way for *Knowledge* that extends beyond facts, current trends, and observations; our resultant *Enlightenment* then urges us to seek both *Positive Action* and, finally, *Solutions* in defending the rights of individuals who are gender-variant.

CYCLE OF GENDER-VARIANCE EQUALITY



ONGOING EDUCATION, KNOWLEDGE, AND ENLIGHTENMENT

- Examine your own knowledge and biases. Do you hold preconceived notions or stereotypes about people who are transgender or otherwise different? What goals can you make to adapt your views? (Resource #4)
- Invite students (PreK–16) to inform you of their preferred names and pronouns. Use this preferred language on a regular basis. Let them know that you are available to talk privately, if they prefer.
- Remain alert to overt signs of gender variance or gender dysphoria, such as boys playing only with girls, girls playing only boys' games or sports, or unusual pretend play. Keep note of language clues, signs of depression, unusual hair and clothing styles, social isolation, or a student's claim to be the opposite sex.
- Learn gender-nonconforming vocabulary. (Resource #5)
- Address your students as "scholars," "scientists," "friends," "students," "explorers," "researchers," and "authors," rather than "girls" and "boys" or "guys" and "gals."
- Enroll in "Safe-Zone" training and workshops; educate yourself and keep informed of new developments and information.
- Schedule guest speakers who are transgender to present to your colleagues and Parent–Teacher Organization; allow plenty of time for questions and answers. Asking questions can offer enlightenment.

POSITIVE ACTIONS

- Start a Gay–Straight Alliance chapter in your school, if appropriate. (Resource #5)
- Divide your students into coed groups for sports and projects; allow them to self-select group membership.

- Teach your students how to be *allies* rather than *bystanders*; role-model this proactive behavior openly and often.
- Invite parents to share observations from home about unusual behaviors, depression, isolation, secretiveness, language, dress and hair preferences, and clothing.
- If the child or youth comes out at school, ensure that rules and regulations conform to the law.
- Share and encourage all children and youth to read developmentally appropriate trade books involving protagonists who are transgender. (Resource #3).
- Incorporate transgender teaching into your ongoing health and social studies curriculum.
- Schedule guest speakers who are transgender or transsexual to talk with groups of students and answer their questions.
- Keep parents informed throughout the year about the importance of education and acceptance.

FAR-REACHING SOLUTIONS

- Write to elected officials in Congress, your state's attorney general, and your local school board about LGBTQ rights; voice concerns and suggest new policies and regulations.
- At the college or university level, establish LGBTQ training groups; on a revolving basis, appoint representatives from your department to serve as LGBTQ support persons.
- Form a group of trans students and allies; meet with your university president and board members to promote the establishment of a campus LGBTQ center and residential housing for LGBTQ students.

Whether your students are male, female, gender queer, questioning, straight, gay, nonbinary, gender fluid, or other, they deserve your respect and attention, just like any other student. You will make a huge and positive difference—and you just might save a life! When you count the numbers of boys and girls in your classroom, remember to anticipate and welcome the very real possibility of "other."

References

- Haas, A. P., Rodgers, P. L., & Herman, J. L. (2014). *Suicide attempts among transgender and gender non-conforming adults*. Retrieved from Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law website: <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/suicide-attempts-among-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-adults>
- Koehn, A. (2015, March 22). Neuroscience proves what we've known all along: Gender exists on a spectrum [Web log post]. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ravishly/neuroscience-proves-what-_b_6494820.html

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