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SEXUALITY EDUCATION TODAY

From the Dress-Up Corner to the Senior Prom

Navigating Gender & Sexual Identity Development in School

Jennifer Bryan

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Welcome to kindergarten at Anytown Country Day School. Come on in and pick a role. You can be the teacher, lower school head, Madeline's parent, Liam's parent, or any child sitting in the circle. Now, just settle into the moment.

It's September and it's circle time in the kindergarten classroom. Children are taking turns sharing information about who is in their families. Kids are talking about their moms, dads, brothers, sisters, pets, and grandparents. Madeline, a five-year-old with lesbian parents, says, "I have a Mommy and a Momma and a dog named Zack." A girl named Betsy asks Madeline, "How come you don't have a dad?" Madeline doesn't answer right away and another child, Liam, says, "There has to be a daddy because you need a seed." Madeline shrugs and says, "No there doesn't." The children look puzzled and turn to their teacher.



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Take a deep breath. Depending on what role you chose, I am curious about how you feel at this moment. If you're the teacher, you may feel anxious about how to respond appropriately. If you're the lower school head, you may be a bit worried about how parents will react to this kind of conversation taking place in the kindergarten circle. If you're Madeline's parent, you might be holding your breath to see how all this plays out, as Madeline does not have a lot of experience explaining her family configuration to people. As Liam's parent, you may be pleased (chagrined? surprised?) at how much information he absorbed from that *Nova* special you watched last week, "Reproduction from Bees to Bears to Babies!" And if you're a child in the circle, you may be learning something new about different kinds of families and also wondering when snack is.

This and many other moments like it occur daily in educational settings across the country and raise fundamental questions for everyone engaged in educating children and adolescents. What do all the children in this morning circle need? No small question, that! Fortunately, independent schools have the pedagogical freedom to determine the best approach to contemporary, perplexing educational challenges of this ilk. This article focuses on the increasingly complex arena of Gender and Sexuality Diversity (GSD) in the pre-K-12 setting, offering specific reference points and frameworks for engaging these issues.

Independent schools are actively searching for ways to maintain relevance and fiscal viability in 2010, and, for many, this includes examining the influence of various forms of diversity on school culture and overall educational experience. In particular, GSD poses unfamiliar questions and often opens new scholastic territory. What's the best way to welcome the first *gay family* into our community? What dormitory policies will address the reality of *same-sex relationships* among adolescents? How does the longstanding graduation dress code apply to our student who is *transgender*?

As made clear in its *Principles of Good Practice for Equity and Justice*, the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) is unequivocal about the place of equity and justice in schools, and yet there are knotty questions and concerns about how these tenets specifically apply to *gender identity*, *gender expression*, *sexual identity*, and *sexual orientation*. If a good school, as NAIS's principles state, "ensures an anti-bias environment by assessing school culture and addressing issues of equity and justice in pedagogy, assessment, curriculum, programs, admission, and hiring," what does this mean, exactly, with regard to GSD?

The current social, political, legal, and religious discourse around GSD issues reflects deep-seated conflicts, beliefs, and feelings about those whose gender and sexuality challenge longstanding "truths" and practices. The task for all public and private schools is certainly *not* to settle these ever-changing ideological debates. Rather, the

role of schools is to craft educationally sound approaches that provide all members of the community with accurate information and ample opportunities to learn, explore, converse, disagree, grow, and collaborate in an effort to take collective responsibility for the principles of equity and justice.

Take a Proactive Approach and Clarify Intent

Where to begin? In my consultation work, I advise schools to create a proactive process involving thoughtful exploration and preparation. When schools wait until a “situation” occurs, the community is in a reactive state (e.g., a middle school student just came out and the text messages are flying!), and a creative and inclusive process is much less likely to occur. The old adage, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” is a tempting rationale for postponing any kind of action, yet schools that begin contending with GSD in the midst of a crisis often make hasty decisions that must be undone later.

An important first step is to clarify the context for a GSD initiative. Mandates and guidelines from NAIS and other organizations are important reference points, yet each individual school must chart its own course by which these ambitious goals can be achieved. We must ask ourselves: What is the catalyst for this inquiry? What is our purpose in delving into these potentially disquieting issues? Who will be involved? What is the desired outcome? By what process will we achieve the desired outcome?

Let Your Mission Be Your Guide

Schools engaged in considerations of GSD are best served if they use their institutional mission and values as cornerstones for teaching and learning at every level of discourse. Concerns about the relevance and legitimacy of these issues in the pre-K–12 setting abound; the underlying question is often, *Does this really belong in our school?* “This” can mean any number of things — a particular program, book, performance, conversation, or project — or even a particular kind of person or family. Ideally, in answering these questions, individual schools will use their own independent, unique vision of what kind of education best serves their students. If not, they risk being unduly distracted and controlled by social, political, legal, and religious pressures that deny and obscure this truth: Pre- K–12 communities are uniquely qualified and obligated to educate students and families about these issues.

What Does “Diversity” Really Mean? What Language Do We Use?

A quick survey of mission statements across a range of independent schools reveals a growing emphasis on “diversity.” However, not all schools spell out exactly what they mean by “diversity,” and an even smaller number make explicit what their inclusion of GSD actually looks like in programs, policies, and day-to-day school life. Moreover, language referencing GSD issues is complex and problematic. Some terms change meaning over time; other terms are used interchangeably when they are not actually synonymous; new terms can emerge with dizzying speed. The word *gender*, when it appears in a school’s diversity statement, is likely to stand for *biological sex*, and only a handful of schools include *gender expression* and *gender identity* as forms of diversity that are valued and protected. Using accurate, current terminology and enumerating exactly what “diversity” stands for within an institution, makes it clearer to everyone — prospective families, current faculty, staff, teaching candidates, students, alumni — what a school’s “commitment to diversity” actually means.

Create a Safe, Predictable Learning Process

In order to successfully address GSD, professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators must offer a sanctioned, safe, predictable framework. It is in this kind of environment that candid, difficult, and often transformative dialogue and collaboration can occur. At the end of such programs, participants often remark on the value (and relief!) of “finally having this dialogue with my colleagues” and “bringing an uncomfortable conversation to a more comfortable place.” After 10 years of facilitating such programs, I have learned that the conversation will be different at every school, and it is essential that all school communities be permitted to “start where they are.” Tailoring the learning process in this way is critical as well for parent workshops, board retreats, and student education.

Conflict as a Catalyst for Growth

Schools that engage comprehensively with GSD should anticipate conflicting opinions, a range of experiences, strong emotions, lots of contradictions, and plenty of ambiguity throughout the process. Why stir up that kind of intensity? As educators, we know that important “learning” often includes some measure of intellectual and emotional discomfort. (My daughter’s third grade teacher called this the “Stretch Zone.”) If participants trust the integrity of the process and believe the effort will ultimately serve the best interests of the community, they will eventually risk honesty, authenticity, and discomfort. “Learning what my colleagues think/feel was not always easy but it was so important,” they commonly say. Or, “In spite of our differences, I feel more confident now that we can move forward as a community.”

Pedagogy First

By age six, children understand cultural norms and social expectations for girls and boys and families; through the modeling they observe, they constantly soak up lessons about what is acceptable, desirable, praiseworthy, right, and wrong.

One common approach to “diversity” in the past had been to “celebrate” everyone who is not white, not male, not Christian, not upper class, not American, and, occasionally, not heterosexual. This approach may be well intended, but it is pedagogically suspect, as these celebrations are typically isolated events and not well integrated into the intellectual and social fabric of the school. The real charge is to create a culture in which approaches to GSD not only reflect school mission and values, but also embody best pedagogical practices. Educators I work with are relieved

when I remind them *they* are the experts in teaching the very skills students need to make sense of these complex issues: effective communication, critical thinking, dispassionate research, curiosity, openness, empathy, and a broad view of the world.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice Includes GSD

There are intricate complexities involved in educating and working with the “whole child,” and teachers are trained to engage a student’s multiple dimensions *simultaneously*. Historically, however, teachers have been discouraged from addressing aspects of identity and behavior that relate to gender and sexuality, creating the false impression that those parts of a child’s identity are not developing and emerging right along with cognitive ability, social capacity, and gross motor skills. Without a comprehensive, contemporary understanding of human identity development from birth to young adulthood, educators working with every age group are at a disadvantage. There is a wealth of data that tell us how integral gender and sexuality are to the development of children and adolescents at every age. It is impossible and even unethical for teachers to attend to certain parts of a student and ignore others.

GSD 101

Explaining the evolution of Gender and Sexual Diversity is beyond the scope of this article. I’ll offer instead four key concepts:

1. There is tremendous biological diversity and variation in all living species, including humans.
2. Gender and sexual identity development begin *in utero* and continue throughout the lifespan.
3. American society is organized by uniform, opposing categorizations, such as male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual. As a result, it is difficult to recognize that the various components of gender and sexuality actually exist along a continuum.
4. Discrete categories suit some people; others are more accurately identified in terms of degrees (e.g., He’s mostly masculine but has a few feminine qualities.) and blends (e.g., She’s bisexual, attracted to both women and men). These “variations” are inevitable, biologically predictable, and normal, even if less common statistically.

Biology and Socialization

Biological processes that shape GSD begin *in utero*; the socialization process begins at the same time. Expectant parents, full of projections and predictions, talk to the fetus *in utero*. When parents know the biological sex of the fetus, they speak more often to a girl, using gentle language and soft tones. A boy? Not as often and not as soothing. Our role in shaping who girls and boys will “be” begins before the child even arrives in the world.

By age six, children understand cultural norms and social expectations for girls and boys and families; through the modeling they observe, they constantly soak up lessons about what is acceptable, desirable, praiseworthy, right, and wrong. Even kindergartners settle

Without a comprehensive, contemporary understanding of human identity development from birth to young adulthood, educators

into morning circle on the alphabet rug already knowing quite a bit about the implicit and explicit rules of the game. Children who ask “*Can a man marry a man and a woman marry a woman?*” are developmentally right on task as they continue to search for answers; they just want to know the rules about how the Big World works.

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What Does It All Look Like in the Classroom?

Third graders are making special decorative bags for collecting valentines. As the children work at a table together, the teacher overhears them talking.

Amy announces proudly, “I’m going to make BLING! valentines for everyone in the class.”

Diego chimes in and says, “I’m giving everyone candy in mine.”

Ben responds, “Well, actually, boys shouldn’t send valentines to boys because that says you’re gay.”

Amy makes a silly face and says, “I don’t think so.”

“Yeah, well, it’s true,” insists Ben. “Valentines are girly anyway and I only care about the candy.”

Diego does not say anything and has stopped working on his project.

“I like chocolate kisses the best,” says Amy, as she glues more dots to her bag.

The kindergarten discussion of who can be in a family has certainly evolved over the years. These third graders are now talking about who it is okay to be and whom it is okay to love. Ben has learned — from peers? older brother? TV? parents? church? — that “gay” is not something a boy should be, that boys should avoid “girly” activities, and that rules on the playground (*i.e.*, don’t be gay) are often more important than rules in the classroom (*i.e.*, send a valentine to everyone).

How might the teacher listening in on this conversation respond? When I pose this scenario in my work, teachers often react first to Ben and suggest pulling him aside and telling him that he “shouldn’t talk that way.” Others suggest reminding the children that sending valentines is about affirming loving friendships. Typically, teachers are afraid to address what the children are really talking about. They don’t want to overstep a boundary. They don’t want to get the dreaded phone call from an irate parent. They don’t know if the administration will support a direct, comprehensive response. “How free are we to engage these issues in class?” they ask. “Will administration back us, even if parents get upset?”

If a teacher pulls Ben aside and doesn’t address the real issues around the table, what are the unintentional lessons for these third graders?

Lesson 1: If you talk about gay stuff in front of a teacher, you get in trouble.

Lesson 2: The rules about sending valentines are different for boys and for girls.

Lesson 3: Being gay, especially if you are a boy, is not okay.

Lesson 4: Our teacher was uncomfortable with this conversation and that means something important.

If a knowledgeable, thoughtful adult does not address children’s questions, someone else will. This third grade teacher is in just the right place at just the right time to engage these students in a vital conversation. Here is what she might ask/say: “Now I’m curious... what makes sending valentine’s girly? Is there something wrong with ‘girly’? How come it’s okay for girls to send friends a valentine and not for boys? Who made that rule? Did everyone get to vote? How many of you have heard the word gay before? What does it mean? How is it used? ”

Notice that these questions invite the students to share what they already know, and what they’ve already observed. If the teacher’s tone is curious and respectful, students will readily share their “knowledge” and confusions. With more information in hand, the teacher might then offer a working frame for her students. “Well, here is what gay means — gay is when a man loves a man in a romantic way. Does everyone know what romantic

means? It can also be used to describe a woman who loves a woman in a romantic way, though there is another word for that, too, which is *lesbian* — and yes, there are lots of different feelings about gay and lesbian people and being gay. You are going to continue to hear lots of opinions about that from all kinds of sources: your parents, your siblings, TV, your church. It's kind of confusing and something you will need to sort out, with the help of grown-ups you trust. What you need to know right now is that here at Anytown Country Day, in our school community, this is what we believe and this is the behavior we expect."

On to Middle School and Beyond

Children and adolescents need to have these kinds of conversation with adults over and over again because, with each age, the context and the key developmental issues will change.

In seventh grade Social Studies, there is a productive debate going on about whether money raised at a student/faculty basketball game fund raiser should be donated to the United Way as originally planned. After a conversation with her parents last night, Caroline speaks up today and suggests that if the money is given to the United Way, which is a supporter of the Boy Scouts of America, then the school will be supporting the Scouts' policy of discriminating against gay people. Dylan says, "I don't think that's such a big deal. The United Way does a lot of other good stuff. That's why we chose them in the first place." Caroline argues that it is a big deal — that discrimination is wrong — and Rebecca agrees. Only a few students are actively participating in the discussion, but everyone is listening closely. Eddy says, "I don't think it's a good idea for gay people to be scout masters." This statement is followed quickly by Rose raising her hand and asking the teacher, "What makes someone gay anyway?"

Talk about a teachable moment. Just consider the sheer number of issues embedded in this one scenario! To skillfully address this web of complexity and to effectively enable students to learn *how to learn* about this intricate subject matter, teachers will need well defined administrative support, professional development around best pedagogical practices, and thorough grounding in the school's mission.

The debate about whether issues of GSD "belong" in schools is specious. We have met the issues and they are us! It does, however, take courage to willingly enter the "Stretch Zone" over and over again with issues this complex and this personal. When teachers lean into the discomfort of the unfamiliar and emerge encouraged, they become hopeful about the possibility for change. I have witnessed this kind of transformative learning at many schools, and each time I am reminded about the powerful potential that is at the heart of independent school communities.

Jennifer Bryan is a psychologist and educational consultant living in Northampton, Massachusetts. She specializes in gender and sexuality consultation for pre-K–12 schools (www.jenniferbryanphd.com).

National Association of Independent
Schools
1620 L Street NW Suite 1100
Washington DC, 20036-5695

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