TALKING ABOUT LGBTQ+ IDENTITY

A GUIDE FOR PK-16 EDUCATORS

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Educational Coaching to Re/humanize Mathematics

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INTRODUCTION

Every time I offer a professional development opportunity focused on enacting LGBTQ+ inclusive and liberatory practices, a common concern of educators is that they don't know how to go about this sort of inclusion when they, themselves are still unsure of the appropriate ways to talk about LGBTQ+ identities with their students, or even of the definitions of essential LGBTQ+ terminology. Another common concern is navigating LGBTQ+ laws and policies, which vary by state and locale. This guide has been developed to help educators become familiar with some of this information, differences and similarities between gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation, but also with the understanding that LGBTQ+ identity and knowledge are evolving and ever changing. For this reason, even I, as an LGBTQ+ person, cannot claim to know everything there is to know about LGBTQ+ identity or people. We must not let this stop us from talking about LGBTQ+ identity or engaging in LGBTQ+ inclusive and liberatory practices. As noted by non-binary educator and scholar, shea martin

(n.d.), we cannot leave this work to our LGBTQ+ identified colleagues. We must commit ourselves to ongoing education, reflection, and action to support our LGBTQ+ students and educators in PK-16 schools and beyond.

1

THE BASICS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In this section, we'll go over some basic terminology pertaining to the various dimensions of gender and sexuality. Knowing some of this information will be extremely helpful when facilitating conversations about LGBTQ+ identity.

Gender Identity

Gender identity is referred to as someone's innate sense of being a man, woman, or some other gender. Some individuals, like those who identify as "agender," do not identify as having an innate identification with any gender. Others, like those who identify as "gender fluid," might fluctuate in their gender identity.



Gender Expression

In *Schools in Transition: A Guide for Supporting Transgender Students in K-12 Schools,* Orr and colleagues (2015) describe gender expression as "How a person expresses their gender through outward presentation and behavior. This includes, for example, a person's name, clothing, hair style, body language and mannerisms" (p. 7). It's important to realize that everyone, even you, engages in gender expression.



Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation refers to someone's sexual attraction to individuals of a specific gender(s). Terms like "gay," "bisexual," "asexual," "lesbian," "straight," and "pansexual" are all sexual orientations (though this is not an exhaustive list). Sexual orientation (or attraction) is also sometimes referred to as "physical attraction."



Romantic Orientation

Romantic orientation refers to someone's romantic (or emotional) attraction to individuals of a specific gender(s). Terms like "homoromantic," "heteroromantic," "aromantic," "biromantic," "panromantic," and "demiromantic" are all romantic orientations (though not an exhaustive list). I recommend the UNC-Chapel Hill's LGBT Center website if you want to learn more about romantic orientation and how that is distinct from sexual orientation. Romantic orienta-

tion (or attraction) is also sometimes referred to as "emotional attraction."



Sex Assigned at Birth and Biological Sex

If you think back to middle or high school biology, you probably were taught that a person's sex was either male or female and that the person's sex was determined by their chromosomes with XX being specific to females and XY specific to males. Well guess what? That's not actually correct. In fact, there are some individuals with XX chromosomes that have male reproductive organs and some individuals with XY chromosomes that have ovaries (Sun, 2019). So, what's the truth then? Well, it's complicated.

When a baby is born (sometimes even prior to that), a doctor looks at their genitalia and uses that to determine if the baby is male or female or possibly even intersex. This is what is typically called an individual's sex assigned at birth. This one doctor, at this one point in time, makes a split-second decision, usually based on external genitalia, that then is placed on your birth certificate and follows you throughout your life. If you are transgender, this can present enormous obstacles and is a systemic way that the myth of a sex (and gender) binary is reinforced. This is why the LGBTQ+ Advisory Committee of the American Medical Society (2021) announced in June that it is no longer recommended to include sex labels on "the public part" of birth certificates.

Biological sex, however, is much more complicated than this single observation made by a doctor at the time of a child's birth. As noted by Sun (2019) in a contribution to

Scientific American, when an embryo is first fertilized it begins to develop "without any indication of sex" (para 6.). Five weeks into an embryo's development it develops a group of cells that form the basis of an organ that is neither male or female, but has "the potential to turn into testes, ovaries, or neither" (para. 6). It's not until *SRY* (one of many genes on the Y chromosome, which plays an important role in the development of male gonads) is activated that such development is initiated. But that's not the whole story either. Sun (2019) describes the remainder of this process as follows (para. 7-9):

> "But *SRY* is not a simple on/off switch, it's a precisely timed start signal, the first chord of the 'male gonad' symphony. A group of cells (instrument sections) must all express *SRY* (notes of the chord), at the right time (conductor?). Without that first chord, the embryo will play a different symphony: female gonads, or something in between. And there's more! While brief and coordinated *SRY*-activation initiates the process of male-sex differentiation, genes like *DMRT1* and *FOXL2* maintain certain sexual characteristics during adulthood. If these genes stop functioning, gonads can change and exhibit characteristics of the opposite sex. Without these players constantly active, certain components of your biological sex can change. There's still more! *SRY*, *DMRT1*, and *FOXL2* aren't directly involved with other aspects of biological sex. Secondary sex characteristics—penis, vagina, appearance, behavior—arise later, from hormones, environment, experience, and genes interacting."

Sun goes on to explain how the brain and hormones also play a role and concludes the article by stating "the

science is clear and conclusive: sex is not binary, transgender [, intersex, and nonbinary] people are real. It is time that we acknowledge this. Defining a person's sex identity using decontextualized 'facts' is unscientific and dehumanizing" (para. 17). To learn more about this I highly recommend reading Sun's article in its entirety and/or listening to this podcast episode of *Nancy* (Low et al., 2018), which features an episode of *Radiolab Presents: Gonads.*



As we can see from the above information, while a person's experience of gender, sexual/romantic attraction, and gender expression might be deeply interconnected, they are also distinct. For me, this brings to mind the RuPaul Drag Race's season 13 contestant Gottmik. Gottmik is the stage name of Kade Gottlieb, who is a pansexual transgender man. He is the first trans man to be a contestant on RuPaul's Drag Race, a reality TV show where the famous drag queen RuPaul searches for the next drag queen superstar. When discussing his gender identity journey and his love of drag Gottlieb has stated (as quoted in Kumar, 2021): "Even before I transitioned medically, I was [debating], am I trans?...I would look at all the trans guys in the media and be like, 'That is just not me. That is not who I am. I'm way more feminine'...I love drag, and just looking at these really trans masculine men, I was like, how could that possibly be who I am?...I just woke up, and I was, like, 'Girl, if cisgender men can be feminine, a trans guy can be feminine. Just because it's beyond you, doesn't mean it's not there" (para. 3-4). So, while in everyday life Gottlieb uses he/him pronouns, when in drag as Gottmik, she/her pronouns are more appropriate (RuPaul's Drag

Race, 2021). Note: don't worry, we'll talk more about pronouns later.



- *The Transgender Teen: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals for Supporting Transgender and Non-Binary Teens* by Stephanie A. Brill and Lisa Kenney
- *The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals* by Stephanie A. Brill and Lisa Kenney
- Gender Basics: An Introduction to Gender from Gender Spectrum (video)
- X & Y from *Nancy* (podcast episode)
- What is a Gender Inclusive School? From Gender Spectrum (video)
- KNOW THE DIFFERENCE by Learning for Justice
- *Gender: Your Guide* by Lee Airton
- *Teaching About Gender Diversity* co-edited by Lee Airton & Susan Wooley

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UNDERSTANDING THE ACRONYM

Throughout this guide I use the term LGBTQ+, but you may have noticed other versions of this acronym floating around: LGBT, LGBTQIA, LGBTQIA2S, and so on. Each of these letters represent identities that exist within the larger LGBTQ+ community (though definitely not exhaustive, hence the + that is often attached to each version of the acronym) and are often central to many conversations about LGBTQ+ identity. For the sake of capturing more identities than that of the LGBTQ+ version that I will use throughout, in the space below I have identified what each letter of the longer acronym, LGBTQIA2S, represents, as well as definitions of each term.

L = Lesbian

Any person who identifies as a woman and is attracted (sexually and/or romantically) to other individuals that identify as a woman.

G = Gay

A person who identifies as a man and is attracted (sexually and/or romantically) to other individuals that identify as a man. Sometimes gay is also used more generally to refer to anyone that is not heterosexual (e.g., the 'gay community').

B = Bisexual

A person of any gender who is attracted (sexually and/or romantically) to individuals that identify as a man or a woman. Sometimes individuals say they are bisexual but consider themselves to be attracted to those who identify outside of a gender binary of man and woman as well. However, because the "bi" in bisexual comes from the Greek prefix "bi-", (meaning "two") and reinforces a notion of gender as binary (with the only options being man or woman), some individuals who are attracted to individuals of any gender identity gravitate more towards identifying as pansexual. The "pan" in the word pansexual comes from the Greek prefix "pan-", which means "all."

T = Transgender

The National Center for Transgender Equality (2016a) defines the term transgender as "a broad term that can be used to describe people whose gender identity is different

from the gender they were thought to be when they were born. 'Trans' is often used as shorthand for transgender" (para. 2). Transgender women are women who were medically assigned male at birth (sometimes also referred to as AMAB - for assigned male at birth) and usually use "she/her/hers" pronouns. Transgender men are men who were medically assigned female at birth (sometimes also referred to as AFAB) and usually use "he/him/his" pronouns. Some transgender individuals do not identify as men or women. These individuals might consider themselves transgender or they might identify as non-binary, gender fluid, or gender queer (or a combination of these terms) and often use "they/them/theirs" pronouns, though other non-binary pronouns exist (e.g., ze/hir/hirs or ve/ver/vis; these are sometimes called “neopronouns”).



Q = Queer

The term queer, once considered derogatory, is in the process of being re-claimed by younger generations of LGBTQ+ individuals. It is used to signify any non-normative identity in terms of sex, gender, or sexuality. To understand the term’s origins and evolution, I recommend reading this blog post I wrote on why I use the term and identify as queer. It should be noted that not all LGBTQ+ individuals, especially those of older generations, have participated in this reclamation of the term and still find it offensive. Given the mixed feelings that folx within the LGBTQ+ community have about the word “queer,” it can be confusing for those who do not identify as LGBTQ+ to understand when (or even if) they should use the term. I cannot answer that

question for you. The best advice I can offer is that of Emily Van Wey (as quoted in Ja'ciel, 2021): "the term should generally be used only in the presence of anyone who outrightly identifies as queer or uses the term in certain contexts as a member of the LGBTQ community. Mindfulness and an understanding of the word's history are essential to fostering respectful environments." When using the term in relation to the larger LGBTQ + community, allies should consider:

1. their audience (for example when I'm speaking to LGBTQ+ Boomers I tend to avoid the word).
2. their purpose for using the term and be willing to explain that when asked. For example, are you using it in honor of the trans women of color and other queer folx of color who have used the term as a call to action?
3. the impact of the term's use. For example, if you are calling someone "a queer" or talking about a group of people as "those queers," then it will land very differently than saying "she identifies as queer " or "the queer community."

To learn more about the history of the term queer and its use today, I recommend reading the blog post I mentioned previously, as well as I'Jaz Ja'ciel's (2021) article "The Q Word: A crash course on 'queer'".



I = Intersex

While the above identities refer to different aspects of gender and sexuality, Intersex is a term that applies to an individual's sex. interACT (an advocacy agency for intersex youth) (n.d., para. 2) defines intersex as "an umbrella term for unique variations in reproductive or sex anatomy, compared to the two usual paths of human sex development. Variations may appear in a person's chromosomes, genitals, or internal organs like testes or ovaries. Some intersex traits are identified at birth, while others may not be discovered until puberty or later in life." Being born intersex is relatively common - approximately 1 in 2,000 babies are estimated to be considered intersex (interACT, n.d.). In many states it is legal (and common) for intersex babies to be subjected to unnecessary "corrective" surgery to fit neatly within a male/female binary of sex, at the wish of their parents. Most intersex adults agree that this practice is harmful and non-consensual and are organizing to abolish the practice. Note: While you may have heard the term "hermaphrodite" to describe intersex people, this term is generally considered offensive.



A = Asexual

A person of any gender who does not feel sexual attraction to anyone. This does not mean these individuals do not feel romantic attraction, which is distinct from sexual attraction. Often times the asexual community is referred to as the "ace" community. Those who DO feel sexual attraction to

others are often called “allosexual,” especially by those of the asexual community.



2S = Two Spirit

According to David Herrera, the director of the Montana Two-Spirit Society, Two-Spirit is a "cultural term ... as it relates to Native and Indigenous tribes and people...The Two Spirit term basically was an embodiment of the masculine and feminine" (as quoted in an interview with Dr. Lindsey Doe, 2017, 0:18 - 3:15). Prior to the introduction of the term "two-spirit," many Indigenous communities had their own, unique, term to signify someone that would come to be known as two-spirit. Prior to the colonization of the Americas, these individuals were revered in their communities and often served as healers, ceremonial leaders, or other key members of the tribe. The colonizers, however, feeling such behavior / identity to be abhorrent in the eyes of their Christian God, sought to destroy the sacred place Two-Spirit individuals held within their communities. The Evangelization of many Indigenous tribes eventually achieved this goal in many communities (Bronski, 2019). The term "Two-Spirit" itself was not coined until the late 80s or 90s in order to form a larger Indigenous community of non-normative identities. Since many Indigenous peoples did not identify with the terms Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, etc., all of which were terms coined by white colonizers, creating their own unifying term - two spirit - was a way to exemplify the Indigenous origins of the term and the people identifying as such (though, as Herrera discusses, some Indige-

nous people prefer the terms Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, etc., over "Two-Spirit") (Herrera appearing in Doe, 2017).



It should be noted that these identities do not necessarily occur in isolation. For example, a transgender woman might also be a lesbian or asexual. As another example, sometimes intersex individuals also identify as transgender. It should also be noted that those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual need not identify as cisgender (see definition in next section). For example, a trans woman (who is indeed a woman) can be a lesbian who is attracted to cis and/or trans women or a cisgender woman could be a lesbian attracted to cis and/or trans women.



- A Two-Spirit Journey: The Autobiography of a Lesbian Ojibwa-Cree Elder by Ma-Nee Chacaby and Mary Louisa Plummer
- Born Both: An Intersex Life by Hida Viloria
- Ace: What Asexuality Reveals about Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex by Angela Chen
- A Queer History of the United States for Young People by Michael Bronski and adapted by Richie Chevat

- Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation by Eli Clare
- Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity by Julia Serano
- Why I Use ‘Queer’ by Brandie E. Waid
- The Q Word: A crash course on 'queer' by I’Jaz Ja'ciel
- First Day from Hulu (TV Series)

3

OTHER FREQUENTLY USED TERMINOLOGY

There are some other key terms that may also be useful in navigating conversations about LGBTQ+ identity. In this section we will discuss those terms and their definitions.

Cisgender

Cisgender individuals are those whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.



Normativity

Normativity is a term that describes something that ascribes to larger societal norms. This might be gender normativity (anything that squarely follows what society deems socially acceptable or "normal" for people of a certain gender and erases the gender of those that identify outside of that norm) or heteronormativity (anything that follows the

dominant norm of heterosexuality in society and erases the sexuality of those that identify outside of that norm) or normativity in a general sense (e.g., following dominant norms of what it means to engage in mathematics is a form of normativity).



The -isms: Sexism, Heterosexism, and Genderism

Sexism, heterosexism, and genderism are all terms that fall under a broader umbrella of gender related oppression. Eli Kean (2020), a trans scholar, discusses how gender related oppression is usually framed in terms of sexism and heterosexism. Sexism can be thought of as a bias based on gender or sex that privileges men or boys and is deeply embedded in our social systems. For example, teaching has historically been a woman-led profession, and many have argued that the low pay of teachers is a symptom of the larger sexism that structures our society. Sexism also occurs on an individual level. For example, in STEM, sexism might appear when a woman is overlooked for a job for which she is qualified and instead the job is offered to a man who is either equally or even less qualified.

Heterosexism, also deeply embedded within our social systems, can be thought of as a bias that privileges heterosexual identities. One example of heterosexism is adoption agencies that exclude gay and lesbian couples for consideration. As an example of heterosexism on an individual level, I once visited a medical doctor that asked about my husband. I corrected the doctor and said I was in a relationship with a woman, yet the doctor continued to refer to my partner using he/him pronouns or as my husband.

While sexism and heterosexism are helpful in understanding how dominant systems of oppression impact individuals based gender and sexuality, Kean (2020) argues that these two terms often fail to capture the unique experiences of transgender individuals. In the case of sexism, Kean writes, "dominant understandings of sexism...generally do not trouble the gender binary and fail to incorporate the nuance necessary to understand transgender oppression. For example, using the lens of sexism, trans men's experiences with bias, discrimination, and oppression are erased or ignored...the complex gender experiences of trans people do not fit the 'men versus women' narrative that sexism tends to push" (p. 7). Similarly, while there are some forms of oppression that are universal to LGBTQ+ individuals, heterosexism does not capture the unique forms of oppression that transgender individuals face (e.g., bathroom access).

The term genderism (sometimes referred to as cissexism or cisgenderism) helps to get at some of these more nuanced experiences that heterosexism and sexism fail to capture. Kean (2020) writes, "genderism forces categorization of all individuals into one of two dichotomous gender categories at an institutional level; conforming to binary gender norms is socially policed with punishments for all those who fail to conform" (p. 8). Kean adds that, "genderism also highlights the ways that gender norms act as a source of social control and psychological shame for all individuals" (p. 8).



Pronouns

Many of us recall learning about pronouns as one of many "parts of speech" in our ELA education. Back then, we probably learned that pronouns are the words we use in place of nouns, but we also probably were taught that singular pronouns (pronouns used for one person, rather than many people) were limited to he/him/his and she/her/hers. These pronouns, if we view them as the only singular pronouns, reinforce a gender binary (i.e., there are only two genders, man and woman). But we know that there are many genders that exist outside that binary language. For this reason, some people use "gender neutral" or "non-binary" pronouns such as they/them/their or ze/hir/hirs (pronounced zee/hear/hears). *Schools in Transition: A Guide for Supporting Transgender Students in K-12 Schools* (Orr et al., 2015) has a nice table demonstrating the pronunciation and use of such pronouns (see p. 45).

There are several important items to understand in relation to pronouns. First, everyone has and uses pronouns and it's important to respect each person's pronouns and to not assume you know a person's pronouns before they disclose that information to you. Personally, I am trying to move to a policy of using "they" for anyone who has not disclosed their pronouns to me. Once someone does disclose their pronouns, it is also essential to honor those pronouns as a matter of respect. If you know someone identifies as a woman, you would likely be confused and offended if someone continuously referred to that person as "he" or "him." Same goes for individuals that do not identify singularly as a man or a woman. Using their gender-neutral pronoun is a sign of respect and decency.

It's also important to note that a person's pronouns are

not "preferred," they are their pronouns. While the language of "preferred pronouns" may have been widely recognized several years ago, the LGBTQ+ community has pushed to eliminate the use of "preferred" when referring to someone's pronouns because it communicates a message that the use of those pronouns is optional, when it is not. The use of someone's correct pronouns is, again, a sign of respect and decency.

Another item of note, particularly for educators, is about the process of asking for student pronouns. It has become common practice in many spaces to have individuals introduce themselves by stating their names and pronouns. This practice, though rooted in an attempt at inclusivity, can be harmful to trans and non-binary individuals (especially those that are currently grappling with how they identify). As noted by Kean (2020), "It can be very risky to announce your pronouns in front of a group of people you do not know, where there is not yet trust or a sense of community. Additionally, there is absolutely no guarantee that sharing one's pronouns will mean that those pronouns are actually understood, taken up, and correctly used by the other people in the group... And so, in each of these interactions, in every new class, group meeting, interview, or orientation, trans and non-binary people must make the agonizing decision: do I show up authentically in this moment, risking my safety and credibility, or do I silence myself in order to remain safe while at the same time denying my full humanity?" (p. 13) Instead of asking for this information in such a public way, many leaders in the field recommend allowing students to disclose this privately, if they so choose. Both GLSEN (nd.) and Gender Spectrum (n.d) have created a sample Gender Inclusive Registration form and Student Information form that teachers may utilize as examples.

A final note about pronouns is that you might sometimes get a person's pronouns wrong. If you do, simply apologize, correct yourself, and move on. Over-apologizing runs the risk of putting the person you have misgendered in a position where *they* feel the need to comfort *you*. This is an unfair burden that we must avoid forcing upon someone.



Transition

According the National Center for Transgender Equality (2016b), the process of transitioning refers to " the time period during which a person begins to live according to their gender identity, rather than the gender they were thought to be at birth [i.e., the sex they were assigned at birth]" (para. 21). It is important to understand that this process of transition is unique to each person and while many transgender people undergo some degree of transition in their lifetimes, not every trans person transitions. Many scholars discuss transition in terms of various realms or stages, though these stages need not occur in any particular order or at all for each person that identifies as trans (cf. Dr. Z PhD, 2019).

Transition might occur socially (*social transition*) when individuals "come out" to the people in their lives and begin using pronouns and/or a name that are more aligned with their gender identity. They may also begin dressing in ways that are more aligned with their gender identity.

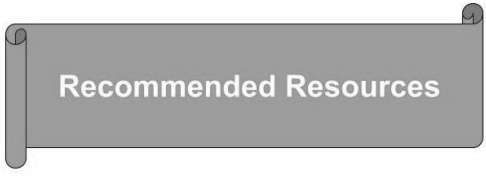
Another realm of transition is that of *legal transition.* Legal transition refers to the process undergone for a person to modify their legal documents (e.g., Birth Certificate,

Driver's License, Passport) to be aligned with their gender identity.

A third realm of transition is that of *medical transition*. A person undergoing medical transition might be taking puberty blockers or undergoing hormone therapy.

The final realm of transition is that of *surgical transition*. Surgical transition describes when a person undergoes one or more surgical procedures to affirm their gender identity (often referred to as gender-affirming surgery or gender confirmation surgery).

The processes of medical, surgical, social, and legal transition can be expensive and medical and surgical transition are not always covered by health insurance policies. This constrains some trans folx's ability to undergo various phases of the transition process and attaches a certain degree of privilege to those who have the means to undergo those phases. However, even if someone has the means to undergo the various aspects of transition, some trans people forgo individual or multiple stages for any number of other reasons (political, personal desire, etc.), but this doesn't make those folx any less trans. There is no bar one must pass to be "trans enough." Again, the process is unique to every individual. For more information, I recommend viewing Dr. Z PhD's (2019) video on the "stages" of gender transition.



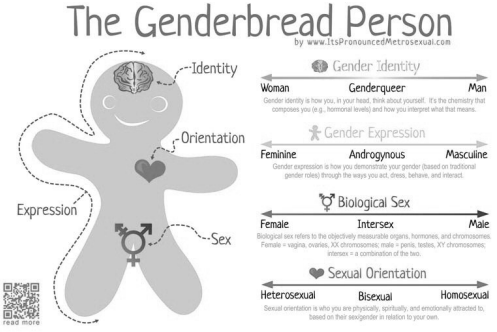
- Dr. Z PhD's "stages" of gender transition (Video)
- Gender Spectrum's Gender Inclusive Registration form
- *Schools in Transition: A Guide for Supporting Transgender Students in K-12 Schools* by Asaf Orr, Joel Baum, Jay Brown, Elizabeth Gill, Ellen Khan, and Anna Salem
- Learning For Justice's *The Acronym and Beyond*

4

THE GENDER UNICORN

As noted previously, LGBTQ+ terminology and constructs are not set constructs, resistant to change. These constructs are ever-changing and evolving to provide better descriptions of the vast diversity that exists within the LGBTQ+ community. For example, in 1948, sexuality was conceptualized by Dr. Albert Kinsey as existing on a continuum or spectrum. To illustrate this continuum, Kinsey created a scale (now known as the Kinsey Scale) where 0 signified a person that was "exclusively heterosexual," and 6 a person that was "exclusively homosexual." At the time, this scale was innovative because it allowed for a more nuanced understanding of an individual's sexuality, moving beyond the then-current understanding of "assigning people to three categories—heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual" (Kinsey Institute, n.d., para 2.). Kinsey's understanding of sexuality as existing on a spectrum also inspired individuals to begin thinking of other aspects of LGBTQ+ identity, such as gender identity, gender expression, and "biological sex", as existing on a continuum as well. Such understandings gave rise to a

popular infographic that attempted to represent the complexity of gender and sexuality. This graphic, commonly known as "The Genderbread Person" is shown below.



Source: Sam Killerman (2012) The Genderbread Person version 1. *https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/01/the-genderbread-person//*

The above image shows four constructs of gender and sexuality (gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation), each existing along a spectrum (or continuum). On the left of the image is the so-called Genderbread Person, illustrating that someone's gender identity resides in a person's mind, orientation resides within their heart (or feelings), sex resides in a person's physical anatomy (and genes), and gender expression refers to how a person presents themselves (i.e., encompasses their bodily expression/presentation).

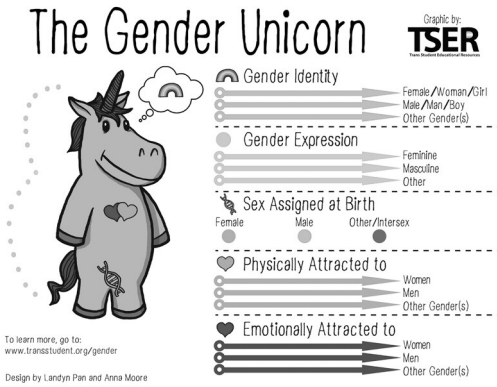
While in 2012 this graphic may have seemed more inclusive of various aspects of gender, today it is largely recognized that the image has several problems. For example, the

image shows a spectrum of gender identity with woman to the far left and man to the far right, and genderqueer in the center. Such a representation of gender identity fails to capture the existence of individuals that are agender and would not identify themselves anywhere along this continuum. A similar failing arises when considering the sexual orientation spectrum, which fails to capture the identity of asexual individuals and ties romantic (or emotional) attraction to sexual (or physical) attraction, which some members of the LGBTQ+ community experience as distinct. For example, if a woman identifies as a lesbian, she might still identify as asexual, with her lesbian identity representing her romantic attraction to women and her asexual identity describing a relatively low physical attraction to individuals of any gender.

Another problem of the Genderbread Person graphic lies in its use of "biological sex." In 2012 this may have been a popular term within the community, but this language of biology is often co-opted when individuals make arguments about trans women not being women, and thus should be excluded from women's' sports or disallowed from using women's restrooms or locker room facilities. Trans journalist Mey Rude (2014), explains that even when allies invoke this terminology, it "allows people to think that they are doing trans people a service, when really they are just continuing to see them as something other than 'real women'" (para. 3). Rude provides a more elaborate explanation for this in an article she wrote for Autostraddle, "It's Time for People to Stop Using the Social Construct of 'Biological Sex' Defend their Transmisogyny." Essentially she argues that biological sex is a lot more complex (not to mention diverse) than people portray it to be. As was discussed previously, while some people might defend the construct as innate, based on

organs, genitals, chromosomes, hormones or some other combination of characteristics, the reality is 1) most people's bodies would not fall squarely in one sex or another based on these characteristics and 2) when it comes down to it, our sex really only reflects the interpretation of our genitalia by a doctor in the delivery room at the time of our birth. For this reason, many LGBTQ+ communities have begun to move away from the language of biological sex and are instead using the terminology of "sex assigned at birth," which is currently the most accurate language we have to describe this idea. One final note that should be mentioned in relation to the Genderbread person is that Sam Killerman (its creator) is a heterosexual, cisgender man and does not identify as LGBTQ+. So, another part of moving away from the use of the Genderbread Person was an act of resistance - one in which LGBTQ+ identified people refused to allow those from the dominant culture (i.e., cisgender and heterosexual) to define and label LGBTQ+ identities.

Over the years, many activists, scholars, and LGBTQ+ individuals have worked to refine their understandings of gender and sexuality and to create updated images that more accurately represent what we currently understand about such identities. One of the most up to date versions of this refinement can be found in the image below, known as the Gender Unicorn.



Source: Trans Student Education Resources (2015). The gender unicorn. *https://transstudent.org/gender/*

Trans Student Educational Resources (2015), who created this graphic states the following (para. 9):

> *You may recognize this graphic as similar to The Genderbread Person by itspronouncedmetrosexual. We created this graphic with significant changes to more accurately portray the distinction between gender, sex assigned at birth, and sexuality. Ultimately, we wanted to recognize genders outside of the western gender binary, which the Genderbread Person does not. Not all trans people exist on a scale of womanhood and manhood. There are several other issues with this graphic such as the use of the inaccurate term "biological sex," the use of "asex" (which fails to recognize that everyone has sex characteristics prescribed to them), and several other issues with terminology and presentation.*

Like the Genderbread Person, the Gender Unicorn separates gender and sexuality into constructs, though those constructs are portrayed differently. The constructs include:

Gender Identity, Gender Expression, Sex Assigned at Birth, Physical Attraction, and Emotional Attraction. With the exception of sex assigned at birth, each of the constructs contains three rightward pointing (and parallel) rays, with an open circle at the origin (the leftmost side) of each ray. Under gender identity, the top-most ray indicates to what degree a person identifies as a "Female/Woman/Girl," the second ray indicates to what degree a person identifies as a "Male/Man/Boy," and the bottom-most ray indicates to what degree a person identifies as another gender. This three-ray design is beneficial because it has the ability to capture identities such as that of a gender fluid person who might oscillate between identification as a man, woman, nonbinary, or other gender. The rays also have the potential to capture the identity of agender individuals who would most likely place themselves at the open circle at the left-most end of the three rays. This three-pronged method of identification is replicated for the constructs of gender expression, emotional attraction, and physical attraction.

In terms of the sex assigned at birth construct, the Gender Unicorn indicates only 3 options: male, female, intersex/other. Given the discussion earlier about sex assigned at birth as something a doctor assigns to us at birth, these three categories seem more accurate in representing the construct than the use of a spectrum (as was presented in the Genderbread Person graphic).

Though the Gender Unicorn represents our most up-to-date understandings of the constructs of physical attraction, romantic attraction, gender identity, gender expression, and sex assigned at birth, there is a general understanding that this graphic will continue to evolve to capture the diversity and nuance of each individual's experience of LGBTQ+ identity. Thus, this diagram might be seen as a snapshot in

time, in an ongoing process of understanding and evolving to capture the experiences and identities of as many LGBTQ+ folx as possible. The graphic will never be complete or "perfect" and neither will our understanding. That's part of the beauty of LGBTQ+ identity. To be LGBTQ+ means to allow for space to explore and grow in our understanding of ourselves and others and to celebrate the vast diversity that exists within the human experience.



- *The Transgender Teen: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals for Supporting Transgender and Non-Binary Teens* by Stephanie A. Brill and Lisa Kenney
- *The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals Teens* by Stephanie A. Brill and Lisa Kenney
- *The Gender Creative Child: Pathways for Nurturing and Supporting Children Who Live Outside Gender Boxes* by Diane Ehrensaft
- Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims by Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle
- *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde
- *Bibi* from Learning for Justice (Film Kit)
- Finding Latinx by Paola Ramos
- *Kiki* from Amazon Prime (Documentary)

5

HOW DO I TALK ABOUT LGBTQ+ IDENTITY WITH MY STUDENTS?

Now that we have a basic understanding of various constructs and terms related to LGBTQ+ identity, we can turn our discussion to talking about LGBTQ+ identity in PK-16 settings. To do so, the first thing we must understand is that the students we teach will have varying levels of understanding of LGBTQ+ identity and terminology. Some may need support in the basic terminology, whereas others may be even more well versed in these constructs and terms than we are. While, generally, younger generations are more affirming of LGBTQ+ identity, we should not assume that all students will hold affirming beliefs. We must also not assume that none of the students in our class identify as LGBTQ+. In fact, I would wager that at least one student in each of your classes identifies as LGBTQ+. And yet, many LGBTQ+ students move through their entire PK-16 experience having never had their experiences reflected or affirmed in educational spaces. For these reasons, I recommend that educators begin any conversation about LGBTQ+ identity by following the recommenda-

tions set forth by Learning for Justice (2019a) in their guide, *Let's Talk! Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students.*

What Dominant Identities Do I Possess?

In the *Let's Talk!* guide, Learning for Justice recommends that all educators begin with an exploration of their own intersectional identities - both the aspects in which you might identify as a member of the dominant group (sometimes called the agent group) and those in which you do not (and thus belong to the target group). For example, if I were to complete this exploration, I might list the following in considering my own identity:

- I am, in most respects, able-bodied, though I still struggle with some lingering symptoms from a mild traumatic brain injury that I suffered a few years ago.
- I am an older Millennial, though my experiences growing up as a millennial tend to differ from those of my generation, given I grew up in a working-class household that was not always up to date on the developing technology of that time.
- I am a white-passing Latinx woman and am monolingual, though I do understand a decent amount of Spanish.
- I am of average body type.
- I may be considered neurodivergent in relation to a suspected processing disorder, which significantly increases the time it takes me to complete my work.

- I am a second generation American and first-generation college educated student.
- I am a queer woman, exploring the limits to which I identify with my womanhood vs identifying as a demigirl / demiwoman (meaning someone who partially identifies as a woman).
- I was raised Catholic but consider myself mostly agnostic, given the trauma inflicted upon the LGBTQ+ community by religious ideology.
- As an adult, I would solidly classify myself as middle class.

After creating your list to explore your identities, Learning for Justice (2019a) recommends considering the impact of each of those identities on your everyday life. For example, in relation to dis/ability, the *Let's Talk!* guide provides the following questions and statements to consider (all are direct quotations from p. 6):

- What message did I learn about ability growing up?
- How does being a person with/without a disability affect my day-to-day life?
- How often am I asked to adapt to other people's abilities/disabilities?
- What messages - both implicit and explicit - do I convey to my students about ability?
- Talking about ability is challenging because...
- Talking about ability is necessary because...
- Talking about ability is beneficial because...

These questions also provide an opportunity for you to evaluate your feelings about and inclinations to lead critical

discussions centered on topics such as ableism, racism, genderism, heterosexism, classism, and so on. Such an evaluation will allow you to identify topics which you might find you are very comfortable discussing and others which you are not (yet). If one of the topics you are not yet ready to discuss is LGBTQ+ identity, then it is essential to get at the core of why you might not feel as comfortable discussing LGBTQ+ identity with your students. On p. 9 of the *Let's Talk!* guide, Learning for Justice has examples of common concerns that hold people back from having such critical conversations, as well as strategies to counteract those concerns. The guide also includes a graphic organizer, *Difficult Conversations: A Self-Assessment*, that you might use to dig deeper into some of your fears in discussing LGBTQ+ identity with your students, strengths you possess that will help you navigate such conversations in your classroom, and needs you should consider in preparation for that conversation (see p. 11).

Preparing for Critical Conversations with Your Students

After exploring your own identity, the *Let's Talk*! guide discusses the importance of setting up a classroom culture in which students can respectfully engage in critical conversations. According to Learning for Justice (2019a) a critical conversation is "any discussion about the ways that injustice affects our lives and our society. It's a conversation that explores the relationships between identity and power, that traces the structures that privilege some at the expense of others, that helps students think through the actions they can take to create a more just, more equitable, world" (p. 2). While the *Let's Talk!* guide uses "critical conversations" and "difficult conversations" interchangeably, I take the stance

that these words are not interchangeable. What we bring to a conversation can make it difficult or not. If we prepare appropriately for conversations about identity and power, then they needn't be "difficult." I also believe the word "difficult" has negative connotations that we want to avoid in situations like these. It conveys the message that talking about LGBTQ+ identity is difficult, hard, uncomfortable, etc. LGBTQ+ students receive these negative messages regularly and we should avoid reinforcing this harmful messaging. I believe that "critical"more accurately captures the essence of these conversations - conversations that are *critical* to have in order to "create a more just, more equitable, world."

The *Let's Talk!* guide provides several "values-based behavior management techniques" (p. 12) that one might consider before engaging in critical conversations. One such technique is the development of community agreements (sometimes referred to as "ground rules"). In my own teaching, I have found that setting ground rules early in the year has been an asset in developing a positive classroom culture in which students feel seen, safe, and respected. It is equally important to have students involved in the process of co-creating these ground rules or community agreements. While there are a number of protocols available for developing such community agreements, in the next section I will discuss a protocol I've used in the past, grounded in a "brave dpace" framework, to co-create community agreements.

Classrooms as Brave Spaces

As teachers, we often express a desire to create a safe space for our students to learn. But, as I've noted in my free 5-Day Teacher Challenge,

> learning, by its very nature, is risky and challenging; and the idea of 'safety' conveys an environment that is free of risk and challenge. Don't get me wrong, I'm *not* saying we *shouldn't* strive for classroom environments in which students are physically and emotionally safe. Creating physically and emotionally safe environments is something that is especially important for LGBTQ+ students, though each year GLSEN's National Climate Survey shows those needs of safety are not being met. What I *AM* saying, is that the language of safety in this case, in what it's trying to convey, is inconsistent with the process of authentic learning and personal growth. This is why scholars Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens developed the idea of "brave spaces."

According to Arao and Clemens (2013), a brave space "emphasize[s] the need for courage rather than the illusion of safety, [and] positions[s] us to accomplish our learning goals and more accurately reflect the nature of genuine dialogue regarding these challenging...topics"(pp. 141-142). Arao and Clemens identify five community agreements that are effective in creating a brave space. Those include:

1. *Controversy with civility*, where varying opinions are expected with a group commitment to understand the source of disagreement & work together toward a common solution.
2. *Owning intentions & impact*, in which we acknowledge & discuss instances where a dialogue has affected the emotional well-being of another person.
3. *Challenge by choice*, where we have an option to step in & out of challenging conversations.

4. *Respect*, where we show respect for one another's basic personhood.
5. *No attacks*, where members agree not to intentionally inflict harm.

In addition to these, I like to add a sixth agreement, "*Know what stays and goes,* meaning what we learn here should leave here, but what we say here should stay here." If you're unfamiliar with this concept and want to learn more, I recommend watching this video or reading Arao and Clemen's article (though the article uses binary language that should be avoided).

While the above agreements are used by some educators as pre-set agreements, I believe it is important to involve students in their creation. The protocol included below is a method I use to allow students to be more actively involved in this process:

- Ask students to define a brave vs a safe space.
- Ask students to discuss in small groups why we might want a brave space in a mathematics classroom (hello, productive struggle!) and what they personally would need from their classmates, themselves, and their teacher to create such a space.
- Come back together as a class. As students share summaries of their discussion, take notes on the board (especially of the things they identified that they would need to create a brave space).
- Show the five standard community agreements, plus the one I like to add. Explain to students that these are agreements that are typically used in brave spaces. Allow them time in their small

groups to reflect on the standard agreements and answer the question: Is there anything we said we needed that is NOT reflected in these community agreements? If so, what additional community agreement(s) do you propose so we can honor those needs?

- Come back together to discuss student suggestions and try to come to a consensus on a final set of agreements. The goal is to capture as much of what they are saying in as few agreements as possible. Explain that we want to make sure there aren't so many agreements that folx won't remember them.
- Assign one community agreement to each group of students and have them create a tri-fold that indicates what the agreement would look like, sound like, and feel like (here's a sample for active listening). Students might choose to illustrate their answers to each of these questions in words, drawings, or by means of some digital components (e.g., some students have created digital tri-folds with a video in each section to answer each question).
- Students' share their groups' tri-fold creations, which will be displayed around the room throughout the year.

Following the creation of these community agreements, and students' "looks like, sounds like, feels like" presentations, it is essential to also repeatedly revisit community agreements throughout the year. As a means of doing this, I usually have students complete a weekly or bimonthly check in (facilitated by Poll Everywhere or some other

polling instrument) in which they are asked to *anonymously* respond the following questions:

1. Which of the community agreements did you do well with this week?
2. Which of the community agreements did you struggle with this week?
3. Which of the community agreements did the whole class do well with this week?
4. Which of the community agreements did the class struggle with this week?

At the start of the following week, the results of this poll are displayed and discussed at the start of class. Students are reminded of what the agreements look like, feels like, and sounds like (from their classmates' tri-fold presentations) in order to improve upon the agreement with which they, personally, needed improvement. Additionally, for the remainder of the week(s), the community's goal will be to improve upon the agreement that was most identified as a community struggle for the prior week(s). To achieve this goal I typically create a participation quiz (San Francisco Unified School District, n.d.) that allows me to provide student groups with feedback on how they are doing with the selected community agreement. For example, if the class identified "active listening" as an area in which the entire class might improve, and the students had created this tri-fold (Segal, 2011) illustrating what active listening looks like, feels like, and sounds like, then I would construct a participation quiz in which my focus was looking for some of the items identified on that tri-fold (e.g., not interrupting group members as they share, maintain eye contact, a student building upon a group members idea).

. . .

Note: While I typically try to begin each year with the creation of community agreements, it's never too late to have students create agreements and begin using this process. So, there's no need to wait for a new school year. If you haven't already created community agreements or some mechanism to keep revisiting community agreements that you have created with students, you can begin as early as tomorrow in implementing these ideas!

How Do I Facilitate a Critical Conversation?

Before jumping into a critical conversation, it's important that students 1) revisit the community agreements and 2) understand the goal of the critical conversation. As noted in the *Let's Talk!* guide (Learning for Justice, 2019a), "students should know why a critical conversation is taking place and what you expect them to gain from it. Talking through goals with your students also eases the class into the discussion" (p. 25). Consider how LGBTQ+ identity is relevant to the task you are about to complete, an event that may have taken place in your classroom, etc. Ask yourself, how will engaging in this critical conversation set students up for success in relation to _____. Share this with your students at the start of the conversation.

The arrangement of a room for a critical conversation is equally important, as noted in the *Let's Talk!* guide, "make sure your classroom is arranged so your students can all see and hear one another. You want your students talking to one another, not filtering their discussion through you" (p. 17). This might mean arranging desks in a larger circular or U shape and making sure that you, as the teacher, also sit in

that circle with your students. I recommend a dialogue or talking circle (Bintliff, 2014) structure for such conversations. You can also view this elementary level example of a dialogue circle (Edutopia, 2014) or this older grades example of a dialogue circle (Learning for Justice, 2011).

Next, the *Let's Talk!* guide suggests that educators begin with some sort of "shared starting point" (p. 25) in which students are provided the opportunity to respond to a prompt that allows them to connect the topic to their own personal lives. One way to go about this is to create a shared experience or view a shared text (with the word "text" here used loosely to mean anything that conveys information - a graph, a video, an image, a meme, a poem, an article, and so forth). While there are many texts or experiences that might be drawn upon for such an opening, I provide one example in the following section.

Elementary Example: Woke Read Alouds

As an example of providing a shared text in the early elementary grades - you might have students view Woke Kindergarten's (2020) 20 min read aloud of the book *She, He, Easy as ABC* by Matthew Sg and Maya Christina Gonzalez (2019). After watching the video, you might ask students to respond to the following questions (one at a time, in their dialogue circles).

1. What is a pronoun?
2. What are some of the different pronouns used in the book?
3. Early in the video, Ki asked you to pay attention to the characters in the book and find someone who liked to do some of the things you like to do.

Which characters did you find? How did their pronouns compare to yours?

4. Ki talks about some ways we can show love and respect to people who use different pronouns from us or from what we might originally think their pronouns are. What are some of those ways?
5. What do you do if you don't know someone's pronouns?
6. What should we do when we get someone's pronouns wrong?
7. Do you know anyone who uses pronouns they, ze, tree, or some other pronoun besides he or she?

Secondary Example: Reflections on Race and Gender: Creating a Shared Understanding

As an example of providing a shared text at the secondary level- you might have your students view Gender Spectrum's (2019) approximately 4 min video, Reflections on Race and Gender: Avery, Leia, and Jude. After watching the video, students would be given time to respond to the following prompts. After students have time to organize their thoughts, you can organize a dialogue or talking circle to discuss students' responses to these questions.

1. Everyone has a culture, and every culture has gender norms. Think of a time that the gender norms of your culture impacted your life and write about it.
2. Avery, talking about sharing themselves with people of their culture says, "If I'm not allowed to

share everything with them, it's kinda like halfway fitting in and halfway standing out." Can you think of a time when you felt this way, like you were "halfway fitting in and halfway standing out"?

3. The video uses a lot of LGBTQ+ terminology.Circle any words that you aren't exactly sure to the meaning: Latinx , Conform / Nonconforming, They / Them Pronouns, Identity, Gender Dressing, Gender expensive, Come out / Came out, Nonbinary, Cis.
4. Are there other LGBTQ+ terms that you've heard and think are important for people to know? What are they?
5. Are there other LGBTQ+ terms that you've heard and aren't exactly sure of their meaning? What are they?

Considerations as You Facilitate Critical Conversations

This activity allows the classroom community to co-construct a shared understanding of LGBTQ+ terminology and definitions, which will in turn be utilized in whatever it is you have planned next, whether that be a social justice lesson, a conscious effort to introduce problems or texts with LGBTQ+ characters, or something else.

As students move through the questions, it is important to give them space to be able to ask questions about appropriate terminology use and definitions. For example, several times when holding conversations about transgender identity in middle school classrooms, students have used terms like "choose" or "decide" when defining what it means to be transgender (e.g., when someone is born as a boy but

decides they are or want to be a girl). In these instances, I've halted the conversation to discuss the words "choose" and "decide." The students and I talk about how a framing of choice often is used as a weapon against LGBTQ+ individuals, as if we are "choosing" to identify these ways. While I do believe everyone should have a choice in identifying who they are, many LGBTQ+ people (including myself) feel strongly that their LGBTQ+ identity was very much not a choice, it's just who they are. Students are usually very receptive to this discussion, and we work together to frame the definition of transgender identity in more productive ways.

As you move through these questions, it's also essential to check in with students to see how they are feeling throughout the course of the conversation. The *Let's Talk!* guide provides two strategies (adapted for both grades K-5 and 6-12) for this purpose. The first strategy is "Restate→Contemplate→Breathe→Communicate," which is more of a self-regulation strategy to pause, process, and breathe before responding, especially when feeling strong emotions (see pp. 30-31 of the guide for a more detailed explanation of this strategy and its K-5 adaptation). The second strategy, "Fist to Five", might be something that teachers use between each question posed to the dialogue circle. For this strategy students hold up a fist, one finger, two fingers, three fingers, four fingers, or all five fingers to indicate how they are feeling, with the fist indicating "I am very uncomfortable and cannot move on" (p. 32) and all five fingers indicating "I am ready to move on" (p. 32). An adaptation of this activity for grades K-5, "Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down" is included on p. 33 of the guide.

At the close of the discussion, you should ask students to summarize what they've learned from the discussion and

revisit the goals to ensure they understand how those goals have been accomplished or where they will be going next. After this, I like to close the discussion with an exit ticket, which has students answer the question, "What are you thinking or feeling in relation to what we discussed today?" I try to include this as an exit ticket at the end of most of my classes throughout the year, so that students don't think I only want to know what they are thinking or feeling in relation to critical conversations, but also about math concepts we cover and any other lesson we might be working on. At the start of the year, I tell students that such exit tickets are a space for them to reflect on how they are feeling emotionally, summarize their learning, reflect on their confidence with the material, provide feedback to me if something I'm doing isn't working for them (or is working well for them), or whatever else it is that they would like to reflect upon. I also let students choose whether they submit the exit ticket, which helps to encourage honest reflection and to build trust. If students choose to submit their exit ticket, I make every effort to address their concerns or feedback in the next lesson and sometimes write responses to them as well.

Additional Considerations

As noted before, we should not assume that all students will be affirming of LGBTQ+ identity or that none of our students identify as LGBTQ+. By its very nature, such a critical conversation is likely to bring up strong emotions in some students and it's important to anticipate those emotions, as well as strategies to respond to them. The *Let's Talk!* guide (Learning for Justice, 2019a) contains a graphic organizer that lists some of the emotions you may encounter, some strategies you might use, and space for you

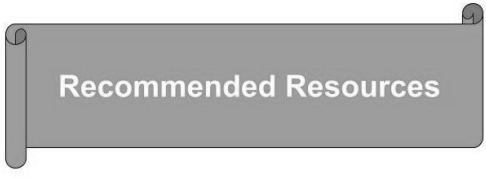
to outline a plan tailored to what you know about your own students (see p. 20). The guide also contains information as to how to navigate polarized classroom environments (see pp 21-22), particularly by repeatedly emphasizing class agreements, discussing the differences between intent and impact as well as identities and ideas (e.g., it's ok to question an idea but not someone's identity).

Similarly, care should be taken to not look to LGBTQ+ individuals to serve as a representative of their community, as this will likely only create feelings of anger and resentment. The guide also discusses the importance of knowing when "drawing red lines" (p. 21) is necessary. For example, if a conversation of LGBTQ+ identity turns to talk about a person's sinfulness, it's OK to stop the conversation and remind students of classroom norms and the fact that identities, people's humanity, and morality are never up for debate in your classroom.

Additionally, if students are making biased or stereotypical remarks about LGBTQ+ identity (or any other identity), it would be beneficial to familiarize yourself (and your students) with a few effective strategies for speaking up and addressing those remarks in the moment. Four such strategies Learning for Justice (2018) discusses in their *Speak Up at School* publication are summarized below (see pp. 18-23 of the guide for a more detailed description of each). Whatever the strategy used, a calm and collected tone is essential.

- Interrupt - If someone makes a biased or stereotypical remark, you must stop and address it every single time. Otherwise, students are receiving an inconsistent message about what is and is not acceptable and whose identity is or is not worth standing up for.

- Question - For this strategy, rather than responding to a comment right away, you probe the speaker's thinking by asking them to explain themselves further. This allows the speaker to reflect on why they are saying something (and possibly identify their own bias), as well as provides you with more information and time to craft your response.
- Educate - Choosing to educate means to explain why a comment is harmful, which some people might not have the experience to know or understand. For example, in a previous section I discussed stopping conversations with middle school students to correct the language of "choose" and "decide"and explaining why such phrasing might be considered harmful to LGBTQ+ people.
- Echo - This strategy is effective if someone else has already spoken up about a biased or prejudiced remark. If you and others echo this person's insistence that such language is harmful, the probability of having an impact grows.



- *Let's Talk! Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students* by Learning for Justice
- *Speak Up at School* by Learning for Justice

- Let's Talk! Discussing Gender in the Classroom from Learning for Justice (Webinar)
- Religious Freedom and LGBT Equality from Learning for Justice (Webinar)
- Gender Savvy: Creating an Inclusive School Climate from Learning for Justice (Webinar)
- Intersectionality from Learning for Justice (Webinar)

6

WHAT IF I RECEIVE PUSHBACK?

As we have seen in 2021, through the record number of Critical Race Theory Bans and Transgender Athlete Bans that have been passed in multiple states throughout the United States, we are living in an increasingly polarized society in which having critical conversations are likely to receive pushback. There are also several states that currently have passed, "No Promo Homo" laws, which either full-on prohibit talking about LGBTQ+ identity or only allow such conversations to take place in a negative manner. Others have affirming laws that require the teaching of LGBTQ+ history and protections for LGBTQ+ students. Given that such laws vary by state, I recommend that all educators view GLSEN's (2021) *Policy Maps* page, which contains up-to-date information about the states that have affirming, discriminatory, or no policies in place. It is essential to familiarize yourself with these laws and the sociopolitical context of your community before engaging in this work.

No matter what laws are in place in a state, it's essential that every educator believes they can move their class to be

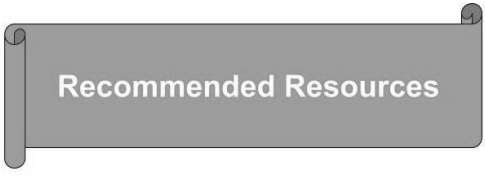
an affirming space for LGBTQ+ identity. Moving toward this affirming space doesn't mean an educator must overtly risk their job (though there will always be an element of risk in this work), but it does mean looking for creative solutions to show LGBTQ+ students that they are seen and valued members of the classroom community. In some locales that might mean removing binary and heteronormative language from curricular resources, interrupting biased and stereotypical statements made by anyone in the school community, and advocating for more LGBTQ+ inclusive policies to administration, school board members, or state officials. In other locales, there might be greater liberty to move toward more open critical conversations, such as those above. To understand the methods that may be possible for such work, I often recommend that educators read Rochelle Gutiérrez's (2016) work on "creative insubordination."

In the linked article, Gutierrez defines creative insubordination as when "teachers have learned to be creative in the ways they talk and act with others in their work environments so that they are successful in advocating for youth and not simply dismissed" (p. 53). Such strategies include: Press for Explanation, Counter with Evidence, Use the Master's Tools, Seek Allies, Turn a Rational Issue into A Moral One, and Fly under the Radar. Each of these strategies are described in greater detail in the article referenced above.

This work should not only be limited to activities inside of your individual classroom. If your state does not currently have inclusive laws for LGBTQ+ allies, it is essential to gather evidence in support of such policies and work in coalition with other teachers and community members to advocate such laws be implemented at the school, district, or state level. Such evidence might be obtained from various

sources such as Kosciw and colleagues' (2020) *National Climate Survey* and GLSEN's (2020) accompanying *State Snapshots*, which describes the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in PK-12 schools in the US and the impact of that experience on their social and emotional health. Peter, Campbell, and Taylor (2021) *Still in Every Class in Every School* provide similar context and data for Canadian students. GLSEN (n.d.) also has created several resources that illustrate model LGBTQ+ policies for schools and districts to use as they craft their own LGBTQ+ inclusive policies.

In addition to knowing your state laws, it is equally important to know how to respond to pushback, whether that pushback is from administrators or the larger community. Learning for Justice's (2019b) *Best Practices for Serving LGBTQ Students* Guide provides a number of suggestions for preparing yourself for such pushback. For example, pp. 19 - 21 of the guide provides several possible responses to statements of pushback (e.g., being LGBTQ+ is a sin and should not be promoted in schools), as well as common misconceptions (e.g., K-12 are too young to know if they are LGBTQ+). Similarly, p. 25 provides a few suggestions of what to do if your administration is not supportive, many of which align with the strategies of creative insubordination outlined by Gutiérrez (2016).



- *Best Practices for Serving LGBTQ Students* by Learning for Justice
- Principles for Responding to Concerns by Gender Spectrum
- Responding to Concerns: Teaching About Gender by Gender Spectrum
- Responding to Concerns: Supporting Transgender Students by Gender Spectrum
- Strategies for Creative Insubordination in Mathematics Teaching by Rochelle Gutiérrez
- National Climate Survey and accompanying *State Snapshots* from Kosciw and colleagues and GLSEN
- LGBTQ+ Advocacy in Special Education from GLSEN (Webinar)
- Supporting LGBTQ+ Students of Color from GLSEN (Webinar)

7

CONCLUSION

My hope is that this guide has illustrated how the experiences of sex assigned at birth, gender identity, gender expression, physical attraction, and romantic attraction are all deeply connected, and yet distinct elements of a person's identity. A person's experiences of these identities is also deeply interconnected with their other identities (e.g., racial, socioeconomic, religious, mathematical), thus pointing to the need for an intersectional and differentiated approach to teaching and learning (across all content areas and grade levels). As PK-16 teachers, it is important for us to allow students the space and comfort to explore these aspects and to recognize that, just like the language used to describe LGBTQ+ identities, our individual identities are ever-evolving. This does not mean, however, that LGBTQ+ identities should be treated as "a phase" that students are going through. As our language evolves and as students learn new LGBTQ+ terminology, they gain new understandings of themselves and the world around them. This undoubtedly leads to many (micro or macro) shifts in identity over time, even over a single school

year. This process of self-discovery should be celebrated and nurtured. To that end, that means we must avoid singular representations of LGBTQ+ identity through the lens of negativity or trauma (e.g., bullying, suicide, HIV/AIDS). While such topics might have a time and a place in certain discussions, we must seek to center discussions that also celebrate the beautiful aspects of the LGBTQ+ community.

8

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