Gender Inclusive Teaching

When someone with the authority of a teacher describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.

--Adrienne Rich

Gender inclusive teachers...

- Recognize that gender impacts ALL students
- Interrupt binary notions of gender
- Normalize gender diversity
- Question limited portrayals of gender
- Support students’ self-reflection
- Teach empathy and respect

Entry Points

When focusing on the intentional development of gender inclusive school settings, it is helpful to think in terms of four discrete entry points: Personal, Structural, Interpersonal, and Instructional. Depending on the context, any one of these may prove the best starting point for this work.

**Personal entry points** focus on individual educators’ own understanding of gender and reflection about how their foundational beliefs impact the work they do with students. Using tools such as *My Gender Journey*, this entry point is the foundation upon which teachers build their gender inclusive practices, applying a lens of gender awareness to all they do in their classrooms.

**Structural entry points** are concrete steps that create a foundation for gender inclusive practices to take hold. Structural entry points demonstrate to your community that the institution recognizes and honors gender diversity and actively works to reflect a more complex understanding. Structural approaches include:

- Policies/Administrative regulations emphasizing gender as an area of diversity supported by the school
- Systematic staff training that builds the capacity of teachers and other staff
- Written materials and information about gender diversity
- Signage/Visuals celebrating gender diversity
- Student information systems allowing families and students the ability to self-identify their gender and use preferred names and pronouns
- Procedures/Forms that demonstrate a non-binary understanding of gender
- Restrooms/Facilities that provide options for privacy without stigmatizing any students

**Interpersonal entry points** are the various ways in which individual interactions and communications are utilized to reinforce a school’s commitment to gender inclusion. Supported by many of the structural components, these relational aspects nonetheless require intentional behaviors in the day-to-day interrelationships of a campus. They literally voice a school’s commitment to honoring the gender diversity of all students. Frequently language-based, teachers operating from this entry point:

**Use language that challenges binary notions of gender**

- *There are lots of ways to be boys and girls. Isn’t it great?!*
- Toys are toys, hair is hair, colors are colors, and clothes are clothes
- *Is there only one way to be a boy or girl? Can boys and girls like the same things?*
- Rather than “boys and girls,” “ladies and gentlemen,” etc., refer to students as “students,” “children,” or another non-gendered term for the group.

**Help students understand the difference between patterns and rules**

- *Who says only girls wear dresses? Do all girls wear them? Do all boys wear dresses? Do some?*
- *What patterns have you observed about expectations for youth about gender from peers? The media?*
- *Sure, boys might do certain activities more than girls (or vice-versa). But that doesn’t mean all boys do those things (or are supposed to), or that girls don’t (or shouldn’t) do them!*

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Question limited portrayals of gender
- Who decided what things are for boys and what things are for girls?
- Sometimes this stuff is confusing. We get messages about some things being for boys and some things being for girls. But these messages are just some people’s ideas. They may not be right for you.

Recognize that gender is about our hearts and minds
- No one gets to tell another person how to feel on the inside.
- How someone feels about their gender come from their hearts and their minds (not their pants!)
- Certain types of bodies are thought of as boy and certain types as girl, but that’s not true for everyone.

Support processes of reflection
- Who we are (or who others think we are) on the outside is not always who we are on the inside; think of all the wonderful things about yourself that no one else knows about by just looking at you!!
- Being a boy or a girl or something else is not about what you like, or what you wear, or your body. It is something that each of us figures out for ourselves, based on how we feel inside.

Teach empathy and respect
- How do you think you would feel if people were always asking you about your own gender?
- No one likes to be pointed out by other kids. Does it feel good when you think someone is talking about you?
- Have you ever been teased? How does it feel when you are teased or treated as an outsider?

Normalize gender diversity
- History is full of examples of gender diversity!
- There have been gender diverse people in every culture, every religion, all over the world and throughout time.

*Instructional entry points* are specific ways in which teaching and learning are used to instill greater awareness and understanding about gender. Whether standing alone or integrated into other aspects of instruction, instructional approaches are the most direct way to impact students. In some ways, instructional approaches are the most easily accomplished. Teachers in their classrooms have a great deal of autonomy for what takes place there. Yet at the same time, in an era of increasingly scripted curriculum, or environments in which controversial subjects are highly scrutinized and regulated, instructional methods for creating gender inclusion can have the highest stakes for a teacher or other educator. Instructional approaches include:

- Designing Lesson plans to expand understandings of gender diversity
- Exploring current curriculum areas for natural entry points for inserting gender diversity issues or topics
- Using literature that has themes raising gender diversity issues
- Utilizing the arts to explore gender
- Using advisory programs or classroom meetings to surface gender-related themes
- Assigning open-ended projects that include gender-related topics, readings or news
- Arranging for transgender or other gender nonconforming individuals to present or work in classrooms
- Inviting guest speakers who work for greater gender equity in education, law, or other fields
- Using of video or other media that present specific ideas about gender
- Creating space for students to articulate their own understandings and beliefs about gender
- Integrating gender into curriculum areas through story problems, writing prompts, readings, art assignments, or research project

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