Adults set the tone for welcoming all students

A scholar whose son is gender nonconforming allows her experience as his mother to shape her academic work and her views about how schools can become more comfortable places for all students.

By Graciela Slesaransky-Poe

My academic interests used to focus on creating inclusive environments for students with disabilities. But my personal experiences parenting gender nonconforming children gradually expanded my interests to include creating welcoming schools for gender and sexually diverse students, families, and educators.

When my 12-year-old son was three, he displayed a strong interest in toys, clothes, and activities typically associated with girls. He used a blanket pretending to have long hair and enjoyed playing with the many princess costumes his sister had, though rarely played with. His sister was interested in building things and playing sports, and not so much in princess dress-up and Barbie dolls. She was what we call a tomboy. Since I was a tomboy as a child, my daughter's interests and behaviors felt very familiar, comfortable, and natural.

That's why I was surprised to find myself confused about how my son expressed his gender, and I wondered about the best way to support him. He seemed so happy pretending to be a princess, and he danced...
so beautifully listening to music. And yet, allowing him to freely express himself did not feel as familiar, as comfortable, as natural, as it did with my daughter. Experiencing my son’s gender fluidity was puzzling to many, including our families of origin. I am Latina; my husband is black. Our cultural backgrounds foster narrow views of masculinity. Yet, we know that sex, gender, and sexual diversity know no limits; it is present in all races and ethnicities, classes, abilities, religions, ages, and countries of origin.

Fortunately, my husband and I found an online group of parents through the Children’s National Medical Center web site who were raising children just like ours and who are at various places along the gender continuum. Together, we create ways to support and affirm our children, embracing and loving them for who they truly are. We support and encourage each other in our quest to challenge society’s assumptions and understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality; to defy the narrowly defined, socially constructed binaries that constrain our children and ourselves. We understand that gender nonconformity may be unusual, but it is not unnatural. We work hard so that our children feel comfortable, well-adjusted, and confident just the way they are.

We are facilitative parents — parents who strive to allow our children to express themselves in their own unique ways, while helping them adapt to a world that will not necessarily embrace their way of being (Ehrensaf, 2007). One of our tasks is to collaborate with our schools to create safe, welcoming, and affirming places for our children. I take this responsibility very seriously and very personally (Slesarsky et al., 2013). This is partly because I am a teacher educator, but also because I know that my son was privileged to be born to parents who had the education, professional status, emotional resources, advocacy skills, and strength to address and support his needs. Not all children are as fortunate.

As parents, our biggest fears are our children’s safety, their social and emotional well-being, and their ability to be successful learners. According to a recent survey, 42% of gender nonconforming elementary students report not feeling safe in school; 35% indicate not wanting to attend school because they feel afraid and unsafe (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network & Harris Interactive, 2012). According to another survey, gender nonconforming high school students report high incidents of physical assaults and verbal harassment (Kosciw et al., 2012). More than half (57%) report having heard negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other staff. The school climate landscape for most gender and sexually diverse students is very frightening: eight out of 10 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer (LGBTQ) youth report feeling unsafe; many of them avoid classes or miss entire days of school rather than face a hostile school climate. Absenteeism affects student learning, which in turn hinders LGBTQ students’ academic success, educational aspirations, and attainment. Additionally, hostile environments relate to poor psychological well-being.

We understand that gender nonconformity may be unusual, but it is not unnatural.

Schools respond to the problem of harassment of LGBTQ individuals by focusing on anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies and procedures. Though necessary, such measures are not sufficient. The anti-bullying paradigm, which pays too much attention to behavior and attitudes, places the problem on individuals rather than culture (Payne & Smith, 2012). In order to change the culture, we need to move beyond defining the problem in terms of individual-to-individual or group-to-group interactions to focus on school culture (Payne & Smith, 2012).

Education for adults

Schools need a comprehensive approach to create safe, welcoming, and affirming schools for LGBTQ students and their allies. This approach consists of providing inclusive and comprehensive sex, gender, and sexuality education to the adults in schools.

Adults include teachers, district and school administrators, nonteaching professionals, staff, parents and guardians, volunteers, and members of the school board; in sum, every person who spends time interacting with students and their families. This approach requires these adults to reflect on and be inquisitive about the socially constructed meanings of sex, gender, and sexuality and how schools reinforce gender-normative discourses, policies, and practices, which knowingly or unknowingly feed the fertile ground for hurtful teasing, bullying, harassment, and discrimination so prevalent in today’s schools.

This approach is grounded in the assumption that in order to learn, all students require a safe, nurturing, and relaxed atmosphere — one that is affirming of their multiple identities. As the student body becomes more diverse, adults need to become informed of these diverse identities, including gender and sexuality identities. Learning and teaching about these realities should be done in ways that reflect the diverse needs and realities of all people, and should
be age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and respectful, affirming, and inclusive of gender and sexual diversity (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2010a, 2010b).

**Comfort and expertise**

The foundation for this work acknowledges that we all are at different levels of comfort, experience, and knowledge when it comes to supporting LGBTQ individuals and that we all have room to grow. Conversations with colleagues may provide a safe way to engage in professional development about these issues. Resources such as those provided by Welcoming Schools, an LGBT K-5 Inclusive Guide, are excellent tools to guide those sessions. (See for example, the Connecting with Colleagues section of the Welcoming Schools Guide published by the Human Rights Campaign, 2012.)

Some have said that having adults learn about sex, gender, and sexuality isn’t necessary because there are no LGBTQ students or families in their school communities. However, LGBTQ youth, families, and school personnel are present in all schools. Their invisibility is a sign of concern; it could mean that they don’t feel safe to “be out.” In addition, in almost every school, educators would admit that their K-12 students frequently use denigrating expressions such as “That’s so gay!” while many others don’t know or are misinformed about their true meaning as shown in the movie, “What do they know?” (Brodsky, 2011).

**Terminology**

There is a general misconception that gender non-conforming or transgender children and adults are gay or lesbians. That shows the need to start by learning about the constructs of sex, gender, and sexuality, which are commonly conflated and used interchangeably.

Sex is biological and includes physical attributes such as sex chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive structures, and external genitalia. At birth, sex is used to identify individuals as male, female, and intersex. Intersex means a person whose biological sex is neither clearly male nor clearly female, or “whose physical sex exceeds our binary sex categories” (Carrera, DePalma, & Lameiras, 2012, p. 997).

Gender is one’s internal sense of being a girl/woman, boy/man, both, neither. Gender is socially constructed; it is learned through social and cultural processes since birth. We used to think of gender as a binary, where we were either a girl/woman or a boy/man. However, we now know that there is broad variation in which individuals experience and express gender, which is really a continuum.

Gender identity refers to a one’s internal, deeply felt sense of being girl/woman, boy/man, somewhere in between, outside these categories. Some individuals iden-

![FIG. 1. Learn the terminology](image-url)
Schools need a comprehensive approach to create safe, welcoming, and affirming schools for LGBTQ students and their allies.

Transgender is an umbrella term, which describes a wide range of identities, expressions, and experiences. It includes those whose gender assigned at birth does not match their gender identity or expression. Transgender is also used to encompass anyone whose identity or behavior falls outside of stereotypical gender norms, which sometimes are referred to as gender nonconforming, gender variant, gender fluid, and trans. Not all gender nonconforming individuals consider themselves transgender.

Transsexual refers to transgender individuals who undergo some kind of medical intervention to find ways to match their biological sex to their gender identities and expressions. These could range from hormones to a variety of surgical procedures.

Sexuality is considered an essential and natural characteristic of all people. It begins to develop in early childhood and continues over the course of one’s lifetime.

Sexual orientation refers to whom individuals are attracted physically, romantically, or emotionally. Current research indicates that sexual orientation exists along a continuum of emotional and sexual attractions. This continuum ranges from people who are only attracted to those of another sex (heterosexuals or straight) to those who are attracted to those of the same sex (lesbians, gays, and bisexual) and those who are asexual, that is, who are not attracted to other individuals.

The Genderbread Person (Killerman, 2012) provides a creative and informative summary of all these complex concepts and identities. (See Figure 1 on pg. 42.)

A supportive climate

Next, schools could evaluate their school climate and culture by assessing and addressing the following indicators of supportive school environments for LGBTQ individuals:

- Anti-discrimination policies and practices;
- LGBTQ inclusive curriculum;
- Supportive adults; and
- Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) (Kosciw et al., 2012).

Anti-discrimination policies

School and district anti-harassment, anti-bullying, and anti-discrimination policies and procedures should be comprehensive and enumerate the categories of gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, and family composition. Adults may feel more supported when addressing gender identity and expression, and sexual diversity issues in the school setting when anti-harassment policies are in place. Indeed, they may be more willing to interrupt hurtful teasing knowing that the school or district has a policy to protect all students (PHAC, 2010a, 2010b). In addition, these policies may send a message to the school community that gender and sexually diverse individuals are worthy of respect and that violence and discrimination won’t be tolerated (PHAC, 2010a, 2010b).

LGBTQ inclusive curriculum

A curriculum that includes positive representations of LGBTQ people, history, and events can promote respect for all and improve the experiences of LGBTQ students, families, and educators (Kosciw et al., 2012). Use LGBTQ inclusive resources, materials, and activities throughout classroom curriculum content and materials, multimedia library, posters, etc. For example, use books, texts, and visual literacy that depict all kinds of people and families in developmentally and age-appropriate ways. A great example for younger students is The Great Big Book of Families (Hoffman & Asquith, 2011). Also, Not true! Gender doesn’t limit you! (Moss, 2007) offers a great way to teach young children how to respond when someone is excluded because of their gender. Additionally, Bibliographies — Books to Engage Students by Welcoming Schools (2012) has a comprehensive guide for using books for K-12 students and adults on gender and sexually diverse individuals and families.

It also is important to pay attention to how we communicate; what we say and write may unknowingly reinforce gender and sexual stereotypes. That is, notice whether your school and classroom communications use inclusive language. Do your Emergency Contact Forms or school directory use the terms Mother and Father, or do they say Adult 1, Adult 2. Do you use some of the activities that are staples of elementary school, such as the Family Tree, the celebration of Mother’s and Father’s Days? Do they...
provide opportunities for students who may have a single parent, two dads or two moms, or who may be adopted, or live in foster families to feel included, visible, and represented? Do your district’s vision and mission communicate a welcoming message for LGBTQ individuals?

**Supportive adults**

The presence of adults who are supportive of LGBTQ students and families can have a positive effect on the school experiences of all students and their psychological well-being (Kosciw et al., 2012). Equally important is enabling those adults to identify themselves in visible ways. This can be done by being outspoken about these matters and by using posters and signs indicating that their offices are safe and supportive. In addition, according to PHAC (2010b), supportive adults often seize teachable moments to educate students about sexual orientation, prejudice, and homophobia; they address assumptions that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is bad, and reinforce that everyone in the school environment deserves respect. They confront the stereotypes and misinformation behind insults and the abuse of sexually diverse students, families, and educators; they confront stereotypes and homophobia raised by their colleagues, and they explore with LGBTQ students more appropriate responses to insults than physical violence or reverse name calling. Finally, they teach students to be resilient.

**Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)**

At the secondary school level, GSAs or other similar student clubs can provide safe, affirming spaces and critical support for LGBTQ students. GSAs can also contribute to creating a more welcoming school environment. LGBTQ students with a GSA report a greater sense of connectedness to their school community. The *Jump-Start Guide for Gay-Straight Alliances* (GLSEN, n.d.) provides information on how to start a GSA. One possible GSA activity is involving the larger school community in programs such as Ally Week, Day of Silence, or No Name Calling Week (www.glsen.org).

**Final words**

My son is in middle school now, and even though it felt scary at first, he continues to enjoy and blossom in school. He is the same smart, happy, healthy, respected, self-confident, well-adjusted child he was at his elementary school. Our partnership with his school is not only benefiting him, but is having a positive effect on the other children and educators in the school. Let’s support each other. Together, we can make a difference one student, one school, one community at a time.

**References**


