

Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Youth in Schools

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Background

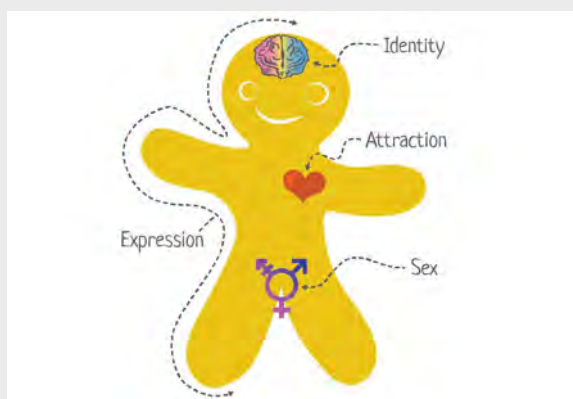
The LGBTQ2+ population have fought for decades for their rights in Canada. Recent events demonstrate that these rights continue to be under threat. Governments threaten to remove gender identity from already established curriculum and try to exclude people who identify outside of the gender norm from participating equally in society. These potential exclusions mean that talking about gender and gender identity in a more inclusionary way is more important than ever.



The Basics

Terminology is important to advocate effectively for equity in education. LGBTQ2+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, 2-spirited) is an umbrella term that encompasses people who do not identify as heterosexual or 'straight' (for example, when a man dates a woman), or cisgender (when your gender identity aligns with the gender assigned to you at birth). Gender identity and sexual identity are often confused or even conflated because both these identities are

a part of the LGBTQ2+ umbrella and community. Gender and sexuality are separate parts of a person's full identity. Gender identity is the gender someone identifies as their own, whereas sexual identity often identifies the gender of the sexual or romantic partners of that individual.



In the Indigenous community, 2 Spirited people are Indigenous people who are believed to have both the male and female spirit as opposed to just one of them. This was considered a third gender identity for individuals. Now, this identity often encompasses Indigenous people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual as well (2 Spirited People of the 1st Nations, 2019).

In each case, the term Two Spirit allows the Indigenous person to talk about their identity in the context of their cultural identity, and to resist the colonial definitions of sexuality and gender.

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Some important gender identities other than male and female are transgender (trans) and gender non-

conforming (GNC). Transgender is opposite to cisgender in the sense that people identify as transgender when their gender identity does not align with the one assigned to them at birth. Often these individuals will transition from one side of the binary to the other: male to female (mtf) or female to male (ftm). People who are gender non-conforming reject the gender binary and often choose more neutral pronouns, for example they/them pronouns.

For some, the term gender non-conforming identifies people that do not conform with stereotypical gender presentation or norms. Members of the queer community recognize, however, that terms such as transgender and gender non-conforming may result in the 'othering' of individuals and leave the gender binary as 'normative' (GLAAD, 2006).



Issues Recognition

The rights of trans and GNC youth in schools is often framed as acceptance of

diversity. Andrews and Ridenour state "in terms of gender, tolerance is not sufficient" (2006, p. 36). Trans and GNC youth in schools are seeking recognition, rather than acceptance. Recognition is seeing a person for who they are and how they are presenting themselves to the world. You cannot accept someone - increasing belonging and inclusion - if you are unaware as to who they are.



The consequences of not recognizing and, thus, not actively supporting trans and GNC youth are significant. Below are three of the major issues to consider:

Bullying/Harassment: Trans and GNC youth face issues with bullying and harassment significantly more often than their gender conforming counterparts. This often takes the form of verbal harassment, and students are often scared of physical assault (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Harassment includes online forums or cyberbullying (McConnell et Al., 2017).

Mental health: Students that are struggling with gender identity often face different mental health issues than gender conforming youth. Mental health issues stem from a lack of supports in institutions and communities for trans and GNC to express themselves authentically. From 2014-15, researchers found that approximately two-thirds of trans and GNC youth in Canada reported self-harm behaviours and about one in three had attempted suicide (Veale et Al., 2015).

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School Success: Trans and gender non-conforming students are often unsafe and unsupported in schools. These youth may feel a lack of belonging in the school culture, ranging from a lack of representation of trans and gender non-conforming individuals among teachers and administrators to an exclusionary curriculum of trans and gender non-conforming issues. A lack of belonging and safety can result in these students being pushed out of schools (Johnson, Singh & Gonzalez, 2014).

Actions



Below are four major considerations that will help educators be better prepared to support trans and GNC youth in the classroom.

Space: Trans and GNC youth require space to be themselves and to explore who they are as individuals. Gender is an evolving concept.

Schools must provide space for students to discuss their gender in relation to each other and explore their own gender identity. Schools create exclusionary spaces when they enforce rigid gender norms of behavior, clothing, and activities. Alternatives to these may include: the elimination of gender binary uniforms - for example skirts for girls and ties for boys, the enforcement of gender neutral dress codes - meaning the same rules apply to people of all genders, gender inclusive



washrooms, Gay-Straight Alliance clubs, and classrooms free of binary imagery.

Language:

A student cannot identify as transgender or non-conforming nor can a

	Subject	Object	Pronoun	Pronunciation
Gender Binary	she	her	hers	as it looks
	he	him	his	as it looks
Gender Neutral	they*	them*	theirs*	as it looks
	ze	hir	hirs	zhee, here, heres
	ze	zir	zirs	zhee, zhere, zheres
	xe	xem	xyr	zhee, zhem, zheres

*used as singular

student be an ally if they do not have appropriate language. Educators can create an inclusive classroom by challenging language that affirms the norm as cisgender and gender binary. For example, when teachers say “boys and girls” they are using exclusionary language. Educators need to use and teach language that normalizes the presence and experience of trans and GNC youth in their classrooms. A great resource that explains LGBTQ2+ inclusive language is the GLAAD media reference guide which can be found online (GLAAD, 2016) or Lee Airton’s book *Gender: Your Guide* (2018).

Curriculum: An inclusive curriculum is vital to inclusive schooling for trans and GNC youth. When explicitly part of curriculum, gender and sexual diversity are most often found in health and social studies. All courses, from history to science, must recognize the trans and GNC individuals. Educators have readily used children’s books in English courses (*Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard: The Hammer of Thor*, 2016) and news articles in Civics courses (*The Secret Life of Transgender Rocker Tom Gabel*, 2012) to make an active consideration of gender and sexual diversity

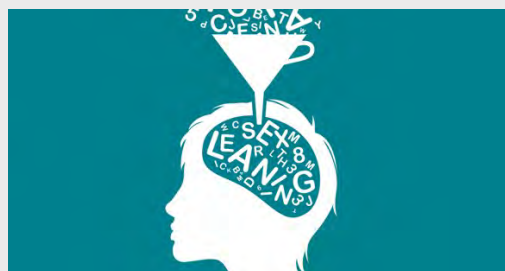
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to the forefront of course content from kindergarten to grade 12.

Resources: Educators who are non-experts in trans and GNC youth should not pretend to be experts. Being supportive often means finding resources that can provide the support a student requires. Resources may include another student, another teacher, a counsellor, an administrator, or a community member. Websites with more information and phone numbers for local organizations specializing in gender identity may also be important to provide for trans and GNC students. Educators need to engage in professional learning to

increase their own understanding of the language, issues, and resources to create inclusive schools for trans and GNC youth.



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