



# Embracing Gender and Sexuality Diversity

A Paradigm Shift  
That Can Help Students Thrive  
and Schools Succeed

BY JENNIFER BRYAN



*All learning begins when our comfortable ideas turn out to be inadequate.*

— John Dewey, psychologist, educator

Given how pervasively political, cultural, educational, and religious institutions are built on a foundation of stereotypes and binary assumptions, it is easy to understand why people find the current reassessment of all things gender disquieting and disruptive. The consequences of this upheaval can be found in all corners of pre-K–12 schooling, from the first-grade boy who wants to wear a dress to school, to the middle school girl who wants to play football, to genderqueer high school students seeking affirmation and inclusion.

When I began working with independent schools on gender-related issues 16 years ago, the goal was to open educators' hearts and minds, and help them understand children and adolescents who were diverse in terms of their gender and sexuality. At the time, using the LGB (and reluctantly, T) framework was the standard approach. Even if teachers weren't comfortable saying the words *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, and *transgender* out loud, LGBT was a recognizable acronym that organized thinking and actions. Over the years, however, this narrow framework has perpetuated a focus on "gay kids" or students who are "different." As a result, we have missed the broad impact of sexism, homophobia, and heteronormativity on all students, of every age.

### **A Robotics Tale**

A fourth-grade teacher shared with me his observation that the boys in his robotics class typically dominate the building, programming, and operating, while the girls make the colorful

posters for their team. "I try to encourage the girls to get more involved, but they are really reluctant," he said. He invited me to visit and observe. After a half hour, with the teacher's blessing, I stopped the class to share a three-minute video montage with the students. The video exposes Lego's sexist, binary approach to marketing the salon, the mall, and the Lego Friends beach party to girls and the volcano heavy-lift helicopter, deep-sea operations base, and heavy-haul train set to boys. I read a seven-year-old girl's letter to Lego in which she complains that boys get to go on adventures and work, while the girls shop and don't have jobs. When these fourth-graders learned that Lego did make a very cool set of women scientists a few years ago and then, in spite of its enormous popularity, discontinued the product, they grew indignant. Fourth-graders care a lot about fairness, and they saw Lego's gendered marketing manipulations as blatantly unfair.

Then I shared my observations with the class: The boys are, indeed, doing most of the building and cool stuff, and the girls are making the posters. When I asked, "Why do you think that is?" the discussion that ensued was rich with discernment, critical thinking, and humanity. The students understood that what was happening in their classroom was more complicated than "boys taking over" and "girls being shy." The teacher emailed me a week later to say that his students were themselves working to mix up the team responsibilities and frequently used the video and our discussion as a reference point. They want to undo



the imbalance and disrupt sexist stereotypes; they want to play fair.

How does changing the gender dynamics in elementary school matter? Susan Silbey of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has been studying gender patterns in engineering education for years. Her recent article, “Why Do So Many Women Who Study Engineering Leave the Field?” (*Harvard Business Review*, August 2016) demonstrates the rampant sexism women experience in

the group-project format — a format central to work in engineering. What begins as exclusion in fourth-grade robotics becomes a corrosive perpetuation of marginalization and workplace hostility.

While independent schools invest heavily in STEM initiatives, female students who go on to pursue a career in science are at high risk of being harassed out of the field.<sup>1</sup>

### Every Student Is Affected, Some More Than Others

Because they live and breathe gender stereotypes from the moment they are born (or before they are born!), too many students reject all kinds of activities and subjects, even before they are old enough to know why they are doing so. Boys don’t dance. Girls don’t wrestle. Boys are good at math. Girls are better at English. And the gender bias leads seamlessly into sexuality bias. Boys who are “too feminine” are gay; adolescent girls who are “too masculine” are threatening. Boys who have sex are players; girls who have sex are sluts. The impact of sexism, misogyny, homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity on the healthy gender and sexuality identity development of *all* children at *every age* has been ignored at great cost to our students.

Students who don’t fit the heteronormative paradigm often endure



GRAPHIC RECORDING BY MATT ARGUELLO

psychological, physical, and sexual harassment throughout elementary, middle, and high school. In 2015, the federal government used its biannual Youth Risk Behavior Survey for the first time to document that students who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual, or those who have sexual contact with people of the same sex or both sexes, are at much greater risk than students who identify as heterosexual for physical violence, sexual violence, bullying, substance abuse, depression, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>2</sup> A senior official at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found the results of the survey “heartbreaking,”<sup>3</sup> yet middle and high school educators have witnessed the vulnerability and victimization of nonheteronormative students for decades.

### Shifting the Framework; Gathering Data

This magazine devoted its summer 2010 issue to examining the role of gender and sexuality in independent schools. I contributed an article back then that proposed a new framework for thinking about these issues, and I developed the concept further in a book, *From the Dress-Up Corner to the Senior Prom: Navigating Gender and Sexuality Diversity in PreK–12 Schools* (Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2012). In the article and book, I argue

that we need to shift our thinking about sex, gender, and sexuality from a primarily binary view to one that is more accurately inclusive of all. To do so, we need to think in terms of Gender and Sexuality Diversity (GSD), which is a broad construct that includes all sexes, genders, and sexualities — even those we might not yet know about or might not yet have named. GSD allows us to consider the multiple, complex, interrelated components that make up biological sex, gender, and sexuality for

every human being.

Even though there have been regular additions to LGBT (QQIAA)<sup>4</sup> over the past 10 years, this long queue of identities cannot accommodate the depth and breadth of our collective gender and sexuality diversity, no matter how many letters we add. In the years that I have been using GSD in my work with independent schools, pre-K–12 educators have had a variety of responses to this conceptual framework and to the New Diagram of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality (NDSGS) (see diagram on page 83), which I use as a teaching tool. Perusing a handout of the NDSGS, some teachers let out a small yip of recognition: *Hey! There I am!* Others are cautiously enthusiastic, as they consider each spectrum and think about where different people in their own lives might fit in this schema. Some are perplexed by how different this way of thinking is. Yet almost every teacher is quick to recognize a paradigm that adequately encompasses and affirms every single student, every family, and every colleague with whom they have ever worked. Instead of thinking about some children as “not fitting into the box,” teachers can locate all of their students along a normative spectrum of possibilities.

Take a moment and locate yourself on these spectrums. Where are you in terms of your identity, expression, and







the community respond?” she asked. “What should the policy on transgender students be? Are we a single-sex school or a single-gender school?”

These profound questions get to the heart of the school’s identity. What does it mean to be an institution committed to educating girls when the definition of *girl* is in flux? In truth,

there is no widely accepted answer to that question yet. This student was valued as an integral member of the school community, respected, and loved. Ultimately, the school’s values of *acceptance, inclusion, and respect* prompted the head to support the student’s graduation in his affirmed gender identity.

Making hard-and-fast policy in the midst of not knowing is risky business. As we find our way through this cultural transformation — where no one can predict exactly where we will end up — best practices can be found by pairing greater understanding of gender and sexuality diversity with mission values. For example, many trustees feel that creating new policies related to GSD is a compulsory part of board governance. I have found that board education about sex, gender, and sexuality goes a long way in softening hard-line opposition to (and fear of) any discussion of change or accommodation. There are still strong differences of opinion, but with greater conceptual understanding and a shared accurate language, trustees are less reactive, more productive, and better prepared to make 21st-century decisions that honor the purpose of their schools. And not all decisions come in the form of policies.

There is a growing awareness that school leaders need to reassess many long-standing practices in pre-K–12 independent schools. A short list:

- Admission departments must explore the intention of asking questions about sex (or gender) on the application form. What information are you really looking for and will checking boxes marked *male* and *female* provide it? If the first invitation to identify a prospective student is binary, how many families will look elsewhere?
- Dress code battles are age-old, yet today’s struggles over inappropriate (read: too sexual) dress for girls creates a superb learning opportunity. Schools must address culturally driven sexualization of girls and figure out how to create equitable standards of dress for all students.
- Athletic directors wonder how to accommodate transgender students in physical education and team sports. The summer Olympics in Rio provided a vivid education in how the binary organization of sports serves most athletes

## GSD PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

GSD professional development consists of far more than acquiring content knowledge. Interactive, hands-on learning opportunities allow teachers to reflect on their own experience, create practice and curricular intentions, and invest in institutional efforts to increase inclusivity. Here is a sampling of teacher responses from a pre-K–12 school I worked with at the beginning of the school year.

### ***What might you do in the first two weeks of school to proactively create a foundation of safety in relation to GSD?***

- Talk about heteronormative stereotypes in summer reading.
- Make these topics as much a part of the experience as “traditional” ones.
- Look at my lessons to see how inclusive my content is.
- Will use the social trust barometer and other tools.
- Set classroom norms that address equality for all groups, including GSD.
- Look more closely at the layout of the classroom and materials available.
- Listen more with these ideas in mind as I watch interactions among the children.
- Not divide students up boy/girl.
- Be more conscious of the language I use to refer to sex, gender, and sexuality.

### ***How might you adjust, add to, reinterpret your curriculum to include more/different/deeper GSD work?***

- Incorporate more books that reflect GSD.
- Be more intentional about moving away from the binary.
- I am already thinking about this. So how can I represent a more inclusive social studies content?
- Learn about methods of teaching that address how to pose questions to children and increase their thinking about gender issues.
- When we are creating dances/books in Spanish, ask the students to create their own gender/identity.
- Since I teach science, I will look for materials that portray scientists, inventors, etc. who come from a variety of backgrounds.
- Create more projects around GSD issues.
- Last year I did a [fifth-grade] math project on the Oscars (race and gender). I want to start with the Olympics. What do you notice? What do you wonder?



# MISSION AND GSD FRAMEWORK

SCHOOL MISSION	GENDER AND SEXUALITY DIVERSITY FRAMEWORK
<i>We are committed to working with the whole child.</i>	Students' sex, gender, and sexuality are essential parts of their wholeness.
<i>The school prides itself on being a diverse community in partnership with families.</i>	Our community welcomes students, teachers, and parents of all sexes, genders, and sexualities.
<i>We emphasize integrity, leadership, diversity, and service as well as respect for self and others.</i>	Respecting self and others includes understanding the many ways people express their gender and sexuality.
<i>We encourage constructive and responsible global citizenship.</i>	A contemporary, expansive understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality will help students navigate across cultures and countries.
<i>Ours is a diverse community that balances the value of scholarship and the intellect with the importance of meaningful and sustained relationships.</i>	Challenging gender and sexuality bias through critical thinking and, in the context of valuable relationships, builds skills and community.

but not all. For students who are gender fluid, belonging to and competing on a coeducational team such as Ultimate Frisbee provides a nonbinary alternative.

- Boarding schools must reckon with residential life policies that still operate on heteronormative assumptions that all biological females identify and behave like girls, want to date boys, and should live in one dorm, and that all biological males identify and behave like boys, want to date girls, and should live in another dorm.
- In addition to learning about their own identity, students benefit from a curriculum that provides critical opportunities to explore gender and sexuality across cultures, continents, and history.

## Leading from the Front

*NAIS welcomes and celebrates the diversity of our member schools; we expect member schools to create and sustain diverse, inclusive, equitable, and just communities that are safe and welcoming for all; we recognize to do so requires commitment, reflection, deliberate planning and action, and ongoing accountability.*

— NAIS Principles of Good Practice

The field of education has an opportunity to lead the way in this new era of expansive thinking about human identities. Independent schools, in particular, are uniquely positioned to intentionally and fearlessly explore the role of gender and sexuality diversity through the lens of mission, values, and goals. Doing so will provide steady, rational leadership at a time when the needs of school children have been obscured by political debates and legal arguments.

Fortunately, there are many ready vehicles for the work required:

- Offer ongoing professional development that allows teachers and staff to learn, reflect, and practice (see sidebar on page 84).
- Use reaccreditation self-study for explicit GSD inquiry.
- Include GSD vision and priorities in the strategic plan.
- Invite students to conduct a GSD audit as part of coursework in statistics, ethics, or gender studies.
- Develop comprehensive sexuality education that provides GSD scaffolding for all students pre-K–12.

Making the GSD paradigm shift will increase pre-K–12 schools' ability

to achieve their overarching educational goals. In this time of bigger is better, a little acronym may be just what we need. GSD has fewer letters, but it encompasses everyone, and striving for that kind of equity and inclusivity is a hallmark value of an independent school education.

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## Notes

1. Joan C. Williams and Kate Massinger, "How Women Are Harassed Out of Science," *The Atlantic*, July 2016.
2. Adolescent and School Health, *Health Risks Among Sexual Minority Youth*, [www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/disparities/smy.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/disparities/smy.htm).
3. Jan Hoffman, "Gay and Lesbian High School Students Report 'Heartbreaking' Levels of Violence," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2016.
4. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Agender.
5. An executive summary of *Letting Go of the Binary: Comparing Continuous Versus Categorical Measures of Sex, Gender and Sexuality*, 2015. (Jennifer Bryan, Sebastian M. Barr, Christopher Overtree, and Joe Mangine) is available from the author.