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“The Unnecessary Gendering of Everything”: Gender Diverse Adults Speak Back to Their K-12 Schools

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As we all settled in for our discussion, Blaine set down their backpack, pulled up a chair, and volunteered to go first. "My name is Blaine. My pronouns are they/them and what I want to say back to schools is, 'Just stop it; stop gendering everything!'"

Blaine was one of eight gender diverse people talking to me about their experiences in K-12 schools (Lewis, 2017). As the researcher facilitating the focus group, I asked each person to introduce themselves by sharing their name and pronouns and briefly answering the question "What do you want to say back to your K-12 schools about your experiences related to gender?" Blaine's response set the tone for the discussion and, by the end of the session, the classroom walls were covered in posters that featured suggestions for creating gender-inclusive schools and outlined what the group called *gendered microaggressions*.

As I listened to these experiences of school life, I wondered about gender diverse students I may have overlooked in my own classrooms over the years. I had a lot of questions for myself: *Who* had I not seen and heard? In what ways did *I* "gender everything?" What could I have done differently to build a gender-inclusive learning environment? I knew my educator colleagues would have similar questions and realized that hearing these gender diverse voices helps us see *who* and *what* we have missed in schools. This chapter illuminates some of these perspectives and experiences that many educators do not see or hear.

Whose Voices?

Eight people who identified as gender diverse shared their experiences and insights with me: Blaine, Onyx, Kirk, Sky, Steve, Harper, Nix, and Nikki. I individually interviewed each person prior to the focus group discussion. These interviews focused on understanding each person's gender identity and listening to their memories of attending K-12 schools in the United States. Although every person may have a gender, it can be a difficult concept to define. Considering that our gender identities are both *personal*—inherently and deeply felt (American Psychological Association, 2015)—and *social*—behaviors and roles we are expected to follow (Lugg, 2003), I asked each person I interviewed to describe their identities in their own words.

Blaine and Onyx described themselves as *agender*; Kirk and Sky used the term *genderqueer*; Steve and Harper both wrote *non-binary*; Nix described themself[i] as *gender non-conforming*; and Nikki said they were *genderfluid.* The table below outlines these terms and their descriptions (including a citation and an explanation heard during interviews).

In this chapter, *gender diversity* is used as an umbrella term to describe a wide variety of gender identities (including those listed above). *Gender diversity* can be used to talk about gender along a spectrum, in recognition that a person can be a woman, a man, both a man and a woman, neither woman nor man, or genderless.

Although all interviews were recorded on a university campus in Central Texas, only four of the people interviewed attended K-12 schools located solely in Texas (Onyx, Steve, Harper, and Nikki). Kirk attended schools in Massachusetts, Virginia, and Maryland; some of Nix's schooling was in Colorado; and Sky and Blaine shared memories from California schools.

Table 1 Gender diverse terms and descriptions

Term	Description
Agender	"does not identify as having a gender identity that can be categorized as male or female" (Green & Maurer, 2015, p. 8) or, as Onyx puts it, "I am neither a boy nor a girl; I'm nothing on the binary. I'm just floating around the binary as my individual self."
Genderqueer	"redefine gender or decline to define themselves as gendered altogether" (American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 862); Kirk said genderqueer means: "When I wear clothes, I try to separate what society thinks a gender should wear versus what I feel like wearing."
Non-binary	rejects the idea that gender is either man/masculine/male or woman/feminine/female (Green & Maurer, 2015) and, instead, expresses gender along a continuum of masculinity and femininity (Meyer & Pullen Sansfaçon, 2014); Steve explained, "I realized that my masculine identity was more than just a female person that was masculine; To me, I define it as... I feel 60% masculine and 40% feminine, so instead of being on a binary of man and woman, it's on a spectrum of masculine and feminine."
Gender non-conforming	"differs from gender norms associated with their assigned birth sex" (American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 862); in explaining nonconformity, Nix said, "I always wanted to wear more feminine clothing and makeup, but it wasn't allowed for boys."
Genderfluid	"moving between genders" (American Psychological Association, 2015, p. 862); Harper explained, "I was playing around with the ideas of gender, switching up names and pronouns—seeing what really kind of fit me."

What Did We Talk About?

During our initial conversations, each person talked about their general experiences in K-12 schools, their gender-related experiences, and any messages they received about gender in these settings. Later in the interview, they recalled moments in which they were excluded from activities organized around gender and then explored how these experiences affected their relationship to school. Several weeks later, we came together as a focus group[2] to revisit these topics and make suggestions back to K-12 schools.

What Was Learned?

"I just never felt like I belonged in school," explained Kirk. Kirk was not alone in this feeling. As I listened to each person share stories about school life, I kept hearing comments related to safety and belonging. Unfortunately, school was not a safe place for Onyx, Sky, and Nix—they shared painful memories of being verbally (and sometimes physically) harassed by others and explained that these experiences made them dislike going to school altogether. Though Blaine, Kirk, Steve, Harper, and Nikki said they felt relatively safe in these settings, it was clear that each person I spoke with felt little to no sense of belonging in their K-12 schools.

Weird. Different. Disconnected. Distant. Other. Outsider. These are some of the one-word answers I heard when asking about each person's relationship to their K-12 schools. In follow-up conversations, I asked them to explore not only why school was not a place of belonging for them but how they responded to these environments.

In reply to the prompt about why school was not a place of belonging, Blaine seemed frustrated, quickly and fervently stating, "Everything was gendered, everything you did—getting in line, playing sports, the way people talk to you, all that sort of stuff." Blaine was not the only person to make comments about the gendered nature of schooling. During both individual and

group conversations, I heard each person talking about schools as highly "gendered" places. Nikki said that "*everything* was boy and girl; it's very she/he, pink/blue; the girls' team and the boys' team and the girls on the left and the boys on the right … it's just super separated." As I talked with Blaine and Steve, they said schools were preoccupied with what they termed the "unnecessary gendering of everything." Blaine explained:

> it's just the little things … guys on this side of the room, girls on this side of the room. It's how the conversations flow, with the added assumption that all guys act a certain way and all girls act a certain way.

As I listened, I realized that gender plays a strong role in these settings and began thinking about how we carry out schooling in ways that exclude gender diverse students. What was the point of separating people into two gender categories? *Unnecessary* may be an apt description for these common practices but the consequences are more than unnecessary; they are exclusionary.

While their schools were "super separated" by gender, each person shared that gender was, typically, not a topic for discussion. Ask Kirk explained, "Conversations about gender were rare and talking about gender diversity was *non-existent.*" Within the focus group, everyone agreed that many gender-related messages in schools tell people how to be a *normal* girl or boy. They decided to list some of these messages on a poster:

> Boys will be boys.
>
> Man up.
>
> That's not ladylike.
>
> Stop running like a girl.
>
> Girls don't say words like that.

The list goes on, but this brief example gives us an idea of the gendered language commonly heard in these settings. It is clear that schools are highly gendered spaces in which we receive messages about what it means to be a *normal* girl or boy. What happens, though, if someone does not fit neatly within these norms?

Some of the people I interviewed either attempted to conform or hid aspects of their personalities in schools. Both Kirk and Steve attempted to conform to their schools' strict gender norms. Kirk was continuously teased about having a disability and not being "girly enough." In response, Kirk said they tried "dressing really feminine and wearing makeup" and explained that this was "one way to minimize bullying." In my conversations with Steve, they talked about attempting to conform to femininity norms so they "could fit in and make friends." When Onyx and I discussed their relationship to school, Onyx simply said, "I always knew how to keep things hidden." When asked to elaborate, they explained, "I loved pretty things and makeup, but other kids teased me about being *girly*." Onyx reacted by hiding their genuine interests from peers and reluctantly mirroring masculine behaviors and interests to avoid being teased. Hearing each person talk about constantly feeling pressure to conform to strict norms and/or hide aspects of their personalities made me realize how gender-separating practices in schools can lead to a limited sense of belonging for many students, and especially gender diverse people.

During individual interviews, I also asked each person to recall activities organized around gender and share how they participated in and felt about these moments. As I listened, I was surprised that each narrative took place outside general classrooms and focused on physical education, recess, sports, choir, and school dances.

Onyx started telling their story by saying, "Ugh … sports, in general, are weird and gendered … *extremely*!" Nikki, Blaine, Onyx, and Sky shared memories about games during

recess and physical education classes. Nikki explained that, in these settings, “They would separate us in boys and girls, and girls could only play certain games and guys could only play certain games.” Although expected to play “girl games,” Nikki preferred activities intended for boys and wondered, “Why can’t I play boy games? Why can’t we all just be playing the same games?” Blaine, Onyx, and Sky echoed this frustration: “Regardless of which side I was on, I’d be uncomfortable. I’m not supposed to be with the guys and I’m not supposed to be with the girls” (Blaine). “I didn’t want to be in either group; I always felt like I was the outsider, so I was just by myself most of the time” (Onyx). “It was always, ‘Girls will do this, and boys will do this.’ There was no option” (Sky).

In sharing these memories, each person talked about feeling “uncomfortable,” sometimes to the point of refusing to participate. Blaine said they always participated but “hated going to gym.” On the other hand, Onyx would often respond by sitting on the side lines in lieu of participating because they could not “decide which side to join.” Sky also refused to participate on several occasions: “I would just sit down in the middle of the field and not play the game.”

Harper, Kirk, Steve, and Nix shared memories about choir and school dances. In high school, for example, Harper enjoyed and successfully sang the “boys’ parts” of songs but was only *allowed* to sing the “girls’ parts” in choir. Although they participated (sang the “girls’ parts”), Harper felt “frustrated” about the lack of choice for musical expression in choir. Nix shared a memory about refusing to attend school dances: “We weren’t allowed to take same-gender partners to prom, so I didn’t go,” they explained. At the time, they responded with anger; now, Nix explains, “I feel like I missed out on something, missed an experience.” Many students look forward to these experiences, but sometimes gender-segregating policies get in the way.

Steve began telling their story by referring to such policies: “I would have loved to go in pants and a vest and a button-down with a tie; I would’ve looked dope!” Steve and Kirk talked about attending school dances with strict dress codes. They both wanted to wear a suit and tie to prom, but school policies required them to wear dresses. Although they attended their school dances while adhering to the dress codes (“I was wearing a dress, getting my hair done, going all out” [Steve]), Kirk remembers feeling “terrible and uncomfortable” and was “jealous of the boys wearing suits.” Steve said, “I didn’t enjoy myself; I kept trying to cover myself up.” Although they tried to participate, both Kirk and Steve left their respective events quite early. As Steve shared this memory, they expressed some regret: “There was all these things I wanted to do to express myself that were being denied … I really should’ve done it the way that I wanted to.”

Through multiple conversations, I had the opportunity to listen closely to these memories of school life and consider the roles educators played in those moments. Overall, these discussions illuminated much about the gendered nature of K-12 schools. It was clear that a combination of highly gendered structures, practices, and policies created environments that exclude many (especially gender diverse) people. Several people I interviewed felt unsafe and every person felt little to no sense of belonging in schools. The prevalence of gender-separating activities and policies that reinforce roles and stereotypes seemed to create an unwelcoming environment for any person who did not fit neatly into the strict categories and norms in place.

Listening to each person’s memories about being excluded from activities (organized by gender) left me wondering about the ways in which schools structure physical education, recess, sports, choir, dance, and related events. Although they were present as members of the community, these students were not authentically included. In other words, schools overlooked

them. *Why* were these students missed and how might we reorganize activities to be inclusive of gender diversity?

What Does This Mean for Educators?

To better serve our gender diverse students, we must *first* listen to them. Considering the K-12 experiences and perspectives of gender diverse people helps us to engage in cycles of reflection and action (Freire, 1970/2000) as we work toward building gender-inclusive schools. Listening is a first (and necessary) step. I encourage my colleagues to continuously ask, *Who am I missing and what is school life like for them?*

Perhaps you were not surprised to learn that each person felt little sense of belonging in schools. Climate reports consistently show that gender diverse students experience negative school environments and those who resist gender norms are often targets of discrimination (Greytak, Kosciw, Villegas, & Giga, 2016). Maybe, like me, you found yourself nodding along to the list of gender-related messages generated by the focus group and then thought about the times *you* organized activities around gender. As reflective educators, we may already be positioned to notice (and change) some of these gender-separating practices in our own classrooms. This is important work. The way we organize our classrooms matters. The words we use matter.

At the same time, the voices guiding this chapter illuminate the need for a schoolwide approach to addressing the exclusionary and "unnecessary gendering of everything," with particular attention given to common gender-separating activities (including physical education, recess, and dance events). Within our school communities, we may be in conversation about proactively and deliberately building inclusive, welcoming spaces. Gender (and gender diversity) should be included in these conversations.

School leaders have an important role to play here; they help set the tone, communicate goals, inform policies, and organize members of the school community. Considering the need for a schoolwide approach, I suggest intentionally addressing gender (and gender diversity) during school employee training, especially when discussing what is meant by *best practices.* Using gender-neutral language, challenging gender roles and stereotypes, addressing (and changing) exclusionary policies, and restructuring activities that separate students into gender groups are best practices that improve school life for all people, including gender diverse students. These changes make a difference for any student who, like Blaine, wants schools to "stop gendering everything." Perhaps we can start with a simple question about the gendered structures of schooling, *Was that necessary?*

Reflection Questions

Reflect on your own K-12 schooling experiences related to gender and list examples of gender-separating activities and policies. Then, list examples of similar activities and policies you have observed (either as a pre-service or in-service teacher) in today's schools. How does what you are observing now compare with your own experiences? What, if anything, has changed?

List specific examples of boy/girl groupings in schools and discuss with a partner while considering Nikki's statement that schools were "super separated" and that "everything was boy/girl, he/she … " Then, collaborate to create a list of ways to sort students into groups that do not rely on separating into two gender categories.

Imagine that your school's principal wants to take a campus-wide approach to gender inclusive schooling and has asked you to share resources for the upcoming employee training session. Explore one of the sites listed below (under "Other Recommended Resources") and

prepare a brief list of examples (which may include book recommendations, lesson plans, policy ideas, etc.) for your principal. If helpful, organize the list into the following categories: gender-neutral language, challenging roles and stereotypes, addressing exclusionary policies, and restructuring gender-separating activities. Which of the examples you listed could be implemented immediately? Which gender-inclusive actions require a longer timeline for implementation?

Other Recommended Resources

Gender Spectrum

GLSEN

Gender Diversity

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[1] Blaine, Onyx, Kirk, Sky, Steve, Harper, Nix, and Nikki are pseudonyms and each person uses gender-neutral pronouns they/them; in this chapter, *they/them/themself* refers to an individual gender diverse person.