



Transgender Equality Network Ireland

TENI is a non-profit organisation supporting the trans community in Ireland. TENI seeks to improve the situation and advance the rights and equality of trans people and their families. Our Vision is an Ireland where trans people are understood, accepted and respected, and can participate fully in all aspects of Irish society. Ireland remains a place where it can be difficult for trans people to lead safe, healthy and full lives. TENI is dedicated to ending transphobia, including stigma, discrimination and inequality and continues in the struggle for social, political and legal recognition of trans people in Ireland.

TENI works in educational settings to promote awareness and visibility of trans issues. We want to ensure that schools are safe and supportive environments for trans and gender non-conforming young people. We work at all levels of education to ensure that there is a demonstrable increase in awareness, understanding and respect of trans issues and identities.

Teaching about Gender Diversity and Transgender Experiences

This teaching resource is based on the experiences of teachers across the globe, what has proved to be useful when teaching about gender diversity. There are limited studies about this and even fewer that discuss the outcomes of teaching about gender diversity, however most would concur that it will help students who have previously lived mostly by traditional gender norms realise that the world might contain more than simply biological females who identify as girls and act in feminine ways and biological males who identify as boys and act in masculine ways. Research would suggest that even very young children are, in fact, quite ready to learn about gender diversity. Studies suggest that with carefully scaffolded lessons over time, gender diversity, like many other social issues, can be taught appropriately and effectively in both primary and secondary schools. (Ryan *et al*, 2013)

*“Isaac had never identified as a girl but liked to dress and play in a stereotypical female way, carries a pink, sparkly purse when he leaves home, paints his nails purple, likes to wear fancy shoes, loves masks and feathers and dress-up, and records his thoughts in a pink diary that locks with a key he often wears on a string around his wrist like a bracelet. The night before starting school he removed anything female and explained to his parents that he didn’t want to be teased by the other children. He had picked up a specific message. Specific ways of being boy or girl, existing somewhere in between this creates a fear of some sort of sanction. Being born with certain body parts doesn’t mean you automatically feel that gender inside” (Ryan *et al*, 2013).*

Silences in the curriculum about gender non-conforming students send messages that this is not OK. There is no place for them in school or in the wider community. **ALL** children receive these messages. Teaching students to question oppressive and exclusionary systems of gender help students create environments where gender is understood in a more complicated way. This understanding can help create a more inclusive space for gender diverse students.

Making discussion of gender a frequent and recurring theme can slowly build their knowledge of the topic. Students at primary school level are ready for this type of curriculum when addressed appropriately and confidently. We know that traditional notions of gender exert vast influence on students particularly in primary school settings. Stereotype knowledge about gender is high at 5yrs but so is their ability to critically question these categories. Teacher mediated discussions and activities can provide opportunities for resisting gender norms, something they may not feel safe doing on their own. Teachers can often be reluctant to challenge this especially if they do have confidence in the area or feel they lack knowledge on how to address the subject, but re-enforcing gender stereotypes can lead to gender based harassment.

WHAT WOULD SUCH A CURRICULUM LOOK LIKE?

Unwritten Gender Rules

The Other Side, by Jacqueline Woodson, a book about racial equality, can be a useful start for discussions about gender because it focuses on how social rules, rules that are not actually written down, shape our behaviour. Teacher asks 'What is the protagonist talking about when she says 'it's the way things have always been'? Are rules always written down?

She asks students about things they always do even if no one said they had to. How do you know something is a rule? Do parents do not actually write down the rules they have for their children? Focus on the importance of repetition and continual performances of routines as ways that ideas become solidified as rules over time. With this foundation for their ideas, divide the students into groups to discuss "the things we do every day that we don't really think so much about." In this way, you can position the book as a springboard to delve into the children's own ideas and reflections on their everyday lives. Emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers, the purpose is to listen and share.

Usually discussions will emerge around what colours boys or girls like, books, comics, physical strength, clothing, make up etc.

Girls seem to be able to cross gender lines but not so much for the boys. Discussions around gender will allow students to explore their own beliefs and possibly re adjust how they see gender. Students will quickly expand their ideas of gender. Establishing a particular learning environment will provide the impetus for students to share their own observations about gender non-conformity.

Although this is suitable for primary level students, it can easily be adapted to promote discussions for second level students.

This video explores what it would be like if the stereotypes were reversed:

[Stereo - a film about reversed gender stereotypes](#)

This video asks the question why is it considered acceptable for girls to cross the gender lines but not boys?

[Gender Stereotyping](#)

Also for older students, this video below opens up the discussion about how we understand the relationship between gender and power dynamics and identities, as well as the different needs and vulnerabilities of girls and women, boys and men, but also how sexual and gender minorities, is essential to peacebuilding. Based on a three-year research project focusing on Burundi, Colombia, Nepal and Uganda, this animation examines what this can mean in practice in terms of access to justice, addressing different forms of violence, economic recovery, and inter-generational conflict.

[Re-thinking gender in peacebuilding](#)

Further information about this research can be found at:

https://www.youtube.com/redirect?v=1DoRWBL-eNo&redir_token=UnBLxdL96YgUrNQ7SPwYgBcMnHt8MTUxMTUxNzY0MEAxNTEExNDMxMjQw&event=video_description&q=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.international-alert.org%2Fresources%2Fpublications%2Fre-thinking-gender-peacebuilding

Developing Students' Critical Lens Around Injustices

Gender nonconformity and other issues of difference are all interrelated. Focusing on issues of marginalization, exclusion and oppression and how these groups may experience different forms of bullying can help them move from ideas that were familiar to them to ones that were foreign. How they can recognise unjust treatment and formulate their responses as advocates and allies.

For younger students, this video called 'Tomboy' is based on a book by Karleen Pendleton Jiménez (2000), in the video the girl Alex is constantly asked if she is a boy or a girl, whilst she clearly identifies as a girl, her choices of clothes and activities made the other students uncomfortable. Discussions focused on the issue of being different, and people being bullied for being different. A person who gives support to "someone who might be a little different" by coming "to help them or by speaking up for them" is called an ally.

[TomBoy](#)

Ask students to watch the video and think about the kind of bullying that was taking place, if they thought there was any bullying, and what stereotypes they saw that suggested girls (or boys) should look and act a certain way. Ask if they think this type of behaviour is happening in their school, ask about other types of bullying, whether someone is bullied for the way they look, who their family is, the colours they wear, how smart they are etc. By getting students to explore these issues, they can be named as racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia etc.

For both primary and second level, incorporating other texts about wider injustices, naming the oppression people are experiencing (racism, xenophobia, classism, etc.) and highlighting possibilities for ally work are important themes during all of this reading. Texts that include immigration, the civil rights movement, the Revolutionary War, the Holocaust, and the colonization of Native American lands by White settlers keep a sense of the arbitrary nature of gender norms and continue to make connections between gender and the other social issues as they are discussed. If they can identify different kinds of oppression and marginalization and how they are interrelated it will help create a classroom where students can learn and refine their critical views in ways that feed multiple perspectives on multiple issues. Students can use this layered knowledge, making connections for themselves among a variety of issues, including gender diversity.

Even if gender diversity isn't explicitly discussed in these lessons, the readings will help the students build their vocabulary around issues of difference more broadly. These terms and an understanding about social norms and their enforcement will provide tools that students can use when they encounter transgender and gender-nonconforming characters in future books.

For older students, the book 'Totally Joe' by James Howe, (ISBN 978-0-689-83957-3) is a book about a 13-year-old openly gay secondary school student. In addition to being gay, Joe likes to express his gender in a non-conforming way. This will enable students to explore sexuality as separate from gender identity and expression whilst still understanding the ways these connections play out for people like Joe in the homophobic and heterosexist behavior of others. One of Joe's friends in the book is an ally to him, and one of his classmates is a bully, this can open up discussions of what an ally is and what types of behaviour a bully engages in.

Students can work in pairs to fill in the blanks, get them to be specific, not just stating that bullying is being mean but getting to the actual words and behaviors bullies use. (This can also be a useful exercise for primary students).

When people say [some kind of bullying language]

I can [some kind of response]

When people do [some kind of bullying behavior]

I can [some kind of response]

Part of the book relates to how difficult it can be for parents and this can facilitate a discussion about how people in the past were regularly disowned for being gay or transgender, and that this still happens although less frequently, ask students how they feel about this and to explore why parents might struggle with this.

The video below explores the idea of how gender stereotyping can sometimes influence how bullies act, (suitable for second level students)

[How does gender stereotypes affect Boys and Girls ?](#)

Comparing/Contrasting Being Transgender with Gender Nonconformity

Exploring the experiences of gender-nonconforming and transgender individuals will help establish the students' understanding of the similarities and differences between gender expression and gender identity.

This video can be used as a guide for primary school teachers on how to discuss gender identity, it also has a number of books that may be used as resources and narrates one of them.

[Gender Spectrum Story Time - Who Are You? The Kids Guide to Gender Identity - For Kids](#)

1000 Dresses by Marcus Ewert can be read aloud to primary school students, it is a book about a transgender child who identifies as female but whose family is not affirming of her gender identity. Ask the students to look first at the cover of the book. Students may not be able to decide if the child on the cover is a boy or a girl, introduce the term *androgynous*. This is defined as "when it isn't clearly distinguishable whether someone is male or female" and explained that "people who are androgynous have a gender, but they don't dress and present themselves so you can tell." As they read, point out the different pronouns which are used to describe Bailey and which ones matched with which character's perception of Bailey's gender. Lead the students in a discussion about the conflict represented by the different sets of pronouns. Reintroduce the term *transgender* and ask students if they remember what it means. Remind them it "is when you change your gender, or want to change your gender. You don't feel the way inside that you look and are on the outside." Stress the importance of self-identification by stating, "In this book, the author refers to Bailey as 'she' because Bailey sees herself as a girl and wants to be a girl because she feels like a girl inside, but her outsides don't match how she feels.

For second level students the YouTube video below depicts a transgender adolescent, what that journey looks like for her and her family and the challenges that brings. It can prompt discussion about the complexities of gender and both for the young person but also for what that might mean in terms of the loss that family members may feel.

[Inside Out - Ciera Taylor \(transgender teen\)](#)

In discussion groups ask students to list ways in which people can live their affirmed gender, including “changing your looks *without* having to have surgery” and using “medicine” and “surgeries” for people’s “outsides to match their insides.”

Encourage them to think about gender expression as well as gender identity and what that might mean in terms of the real life experience.

Support for teachers

Creating this kind of learning environment can help students become independent problem solvers who had confidence to stand up as allies for classmates and community members who were being bullied or treated unfairly. It will enable them to do this from a place of deep empathy and understanding, while still making room for a variety of opinions. None of these issues should be framed as being about distant “other” people; instead, they are about their friends, their family, their teacher and her friends, students in their school, and characters in their books. The lessons learned should help them recognize that “my princess boy could be your princess boy” (Kilodavis, 2009, n.p.) or that “for all you know, your kids just might be ‘people like that’ too” (Howe, 2005, p. 47). All of this learning can make their school and community a safer and more supportive place for transgender and gender- nonconforming youth.

Howe, J. (2005). *‘Totally Joe’*. New York, NY: Atheneum.

Kilodavis, C. (2009). *‘My princess boy’* (S. DeSimone, Illus.). Seattle, WA: KD Talent.

Ryan, Caitlin L., Jasmine M. Patraw & Maree Bednar (2013) ‘Discussing Princess Boys and Pregnant Men: Teaching About Gender Diversity and Transgender Experiences Within an Elementary School Curriculum’, *Journal of LGBT Youth*, Vol. 10:1-2, pp. 83-10

Teachers who feel they need support in using this resource can contact Transgender Equality Network Ireland for extra resources and training,

01 873 3575, office@teni.ie

Catherine Cross, Family Support and Education Officer: 087 063 7933, catherine@teni.ie

