

# The ABCs of Creating an LGBTQ-Friendly Classroom

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The most recent National School Climate Survey (2013) reports some alarming findings about the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth in American schools:

- Schools nationwide are hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBT students, the overwhelming majority of whom routinely hear anti-LGBT language and experience victimization and discrimination at school. As a result, many LGBT students avoid school activities or miss school entirely.
- A hostile school climate affects students' academic success and mental health. LGBT students who experience victimization and discrimination at school have lower educational outcomes and poorer psychological wellbeing.
- Students who feel safe and affirmed have better educational outcomes. LGBT students who have LGBT-related school resources reported better school experiences and academic success. Unfortunately, all too many schools fail to provide these critical resources.
- School climate for LGBT students has improved somewhat over the years yet remains quite hostile for many. Increases in the availability of many LGBT-related school resources may be having a positive effect on the school environment (pp. xvi-xxii).

This report reveals that schools are not necessarily safe learning environments that allow young people to achieve their potential as students and future adults. As a teacher-educator, I believe that public schools have a responsibility to serve all students, regardless of their sexual or gender identity. The findings of the report suggest that administrators, teachers, parents,



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community members, and students must take an active role to help create inclusive and affirming classrooms and schools. The purpose of this article is to help teachers better understand sexual and gender identity and to suggest 26 practical actions for creating a LGBTQ-friendly classroom.

## Sexuality and Gender

Harassment and victimization of LGBT youth are due in large part to learned beliefs about sexuality and gender. Throughout our culture, there is the pervasive assumption that everyone is heterosexual. In essence, one learns to assume that all females are attracted to males and all males are attracted to females, and that anything that does not follow accordingly is considered abnormal. This is called heteronormativity. Those who are or who

are perceived as being non-heterosexual are potentially at risk of being singled out because they do not conform to heteronormative expectations.

Though heterosexuality is most common, human sexuality varies greatly. In 1948, Alfred Kinsey established the notion of sexuality as a continuum based on his pioneering research. More recently, there are other theories and research that suggest human sexuality is fluid and can change over a person's life. Whereas sexual orientation comprises one's sexual and romantic attraction to another person, sexual identity is how one perceives of one's own sexual orientation.

A person may identify as: lesbian (a female who is attracted to females); gay (a male who is attracted to males); bisexual (a female or male who is attracted to both males and females); pansexual (an individual who is attracted to someone regardless of gender or biological sex); asexual (an individual who experiences little or no sexual attraction but may experience romantic attraction); queer (an umbrella term for an individual whose sexual or gender identity does not conform to dominant societal norms); or questioning (an individual who is in the process of exploring sexual and/or gender identity). While students may or may not identify as one of the above, they are likely to have an emerging awareness of their sexual orientations beginning with puberty (though it can be earlier or later).

Though sexuality and gender are related, they are separate concepts. As with sexuality, there is a similarly pervasive belief that gender is a binary concept, meaning that a person is either male or female. Like sexual identity, gender identity can be fluid. Gender identity refers to one's own internal sense of who one is.

A person may identify as:

- transgender: an umbrella term indicating that one does not identify exclusively with the biological sex with which they were labeled at birth
- genderqueer: an individual who identifies as neither male nor female but as some combination of the two or as another gender altogether
- gender diverse, gender non-conforming, or gender variant: an individual who does not follow societal expectations of gender
- cross-dresser: an individual who wears clothing that is associated with another gender
- cisgender: the most common gender identification indicating that one's biological anatomy matches their gender identity and expression, which results in others' ability to accurately perceive their gender
- transsexual: an individual who identifies as the opposite sex of that which he or she was assigned as birth

As with sexual identity, these terms should be reserved for self-identification and should be used with caution when describing others in order to avoid insulting or offending someone with misidentification.

Individuals express their gender identity in a number of ways, using clothing, voice, mannerisms, behavior, etc. When one's gender expression is consistent with societal norms, one is considered to be gender-conforming (e.g., when a boy wears a tuxedo or when a girl plays a flute). When one's gender expression does not conform to societal norms (e.g., when a boy plays the flute or when a girl wears a tuxedo), that person is perceived as being different and potentially subject to harassment and violence.

## The LGBTQ-Friendly Classroom

Because both heteronormative and gender-normative perspectives are learned, teachers can either reinforce or interrupt these perspectives by what they say and do in the classroom. The following list represents a variety of actions—some simple and some complex—to create a more LGBTQ-friendly and -inclusive classroom. Though it may seem overwhelming at first, it's just like learning your ABCs.

- Address the class as a group, such as “Ms. Peterfriend’s class” or “Seventh Grade Band,” rather than by “Boys and girls.” In choral settings, address sections as “sopranos and altos” and “tenors and basses” rather than “women” and “men.” Better yet, use “part 1,” “part 2,” etc. so the focus is on the music rather than on students’ genders.
- Build an LGBTQ-friendly support network of colleagues and other professionals in your school and community.
- Come out as LGBTQ or Ally, where appropriate. While it may not be appropriate in your school setting to discuss your sexual identity, it is absolutely appropriate to show support for LGBTQ students whom you teach.
- Display “Safe Space” stickers that are available as free downloads at <http://www.glsen.org/safespace>.
- Expect that students will treat each other with respect in accordance with “Zero tolerance,” “No bullying,” or other school policies. Always intervene to stop name-calling, bullying, and harassment.
- Facilitate discussion with individual students regarding their voice part assignments. Ask if they are comfortable with their singing voices relative

to their gender identities, and make adjustments as necessary.

- Get to know your LGBTQ families. According to the Williams Institute Report (2013), as many as six million children and adults have an LGBT parent, and there are more than 125,000 same-sex couple households with children.
- Honor students’ names. While certain names are gender-specific, such as John and Sara, other names are unisex or gender-neutral, such as Jordan, Taylor, and Storm. It is common for a student to choose a name other than what is on the official class roster to better fit a given gender identity.
- Include LGBT composers, musicians, poets, and artists in the curriculum, when appropriate.
- Join the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network ([www.GLSEN.org](http://www.GLSEN.org)).
- Keep an updated list of LGBTQ-friendly resources, organizations, and websites that you can share with students, parents, or administrators.
- Learn more about any unfamiliar LGBTQ topics or concerns that you or your students may have.
- Modify concert attire to include options that are non-gender specific. Are your students dressed in “gendered” outfits?
- Name ensembles with regard to their musical characteristics rather than according to gender. For example, “Treble Choir” can easily replace “Women’s Choir,” and “Bass Ensemble” can easily replace “Men’s Ensemble.”
- Offer support to students who may come out, but don’t assume that they need any help.

- Provide role models that reflect a variety of gender and sexual orientations. Years of research shows that gender norms influence students' choices of instruments.
- Queer up songs with "heterosexual" lyrics or texts that reinforce heteronormativity. Explain that although the text expresses a heterosexual perspective, not everyone is heterosexual.
- Refer students to the appropriate school guidance counselor or social worker to get further assistance if they share concerns about their sexual or gender identity.
- Start a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in your school (<https://gsanetwork.org>).
- Treat all students with respect regardless of their personal attire, such as hairstyle and color, jewelry, tattoos, and clothing, as these are expressions of identity.
- Use appropriate pronouns. Some students prefer to be referred to as "they" or the non-gendered "ze" as opposed to "he" or "she."
- Voice concerns regarding school policies and practices that lack appropriate provisions for LGBTQ students, such as gender-neutral locker and bathrooms.
- Welcome opportunities for voluntary professional development on LGTBQ topics, and invite others to join you.
- Xerox and distribute GLSEN's "Safe Space Kit" that is available as a free download at <http://www.glsen.org/safespace>.

- Yield to professionals who are knowledgeable in working with LGBTQ youth; don't think that you have or need to have all of the answers.
- Zap gender-specific directions, such as, "Please line up with boys on one side and girls on the other." Instead, use other characteristics, such as birth month or clothing color.

This list is not exhaustive; it represents a number of effective ways to immediately create change in the status quo. Though some may argue that these actions privilege a minority of students. In fact, research shows that all students benefit from a welcoming and inclusive learning environment. In short, these actions will make everyone will feel more safe and secure, regardless of their sexual and gender identities. •

**SOURCES**

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