

# Welcoming gender diversity every day in your classroom: Two axioms

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Gender is changing, and people across the diverse transgender spectrum are increasingly coming out and accessing our right to be free from gender expression and gender identity discrimination—including in schools. Among researchers and educators focused on gender diversity in Canadian schools, there is certainly much to celebrate. We have a growing body of Canadian studies on how gender diversity is playing out in our contexts of practice. This is an incredible achievement, and a tool in successful advocacy for policy, curricular, and legislative changes that stand to improve the lives of gender-diverse students in P to 12 schools. These large-scale developments can sometimes take centre stage. However, they obscure the need to offer teachers practical tools to foster a classroom where all of the ways that your students “do gender” are welcomed and expected, where no one is called out for their gender expression, and where no one is told by others that they are not who they are (i.e. their gender identity). In this article, I offer two axioms that you can keep in mind every day.

**1. Teach like you already have transgender-spectrum students, or students with transgender-spectrum friends, family or loved ones, in your classroom.** This axiom speaks to a common assumption that if there

are transgender students in a school or class, teachers and administrators already know. In reality, not every transgender-spectrum student is out or apparent to others around them as transgender. If there are no out transgender students at your school, it doesn't mean they are not there. Rather, it means that they cannot come out and live who they are at school. We know they can't because they don't. Not being open in who we are isn't very livable for transgender people; if we can come out, we generally do. In fact, when I work with teachers and administrators who have students who have come out as transgender in their schools, I ask them to cultivate a well-deserved feeling of honour and pride: they have been given a tremendous gift of trust because the transgender students there have come out at all. There may also be students who will come to realize that they are somewhere on the transgender spectrum later on, but were questioning or uncomfortable about their assigned gender when they were in your classroom or school.

**2. Teach like it's a given that all of your students' relationships with gender are ambivalent and will change over time.** Gender norms and expectations are a source of anxiety for all students, including cisgender (i.e., non-transgender) boys and girls. It is common for all young people to live

or express their gender differently from parental or community standards, or to question whether and how they want to participate in their community's gendered milestones or traditions. Every girl or woman's degree and experience of femininity will fluctuate across time, and the same is true of boys and men in terms of masculinity. How each of us does gender also changes as we move between the gym, faith-based congregations, formal events, and the workplace, etc. If you are teaching as if every student (cisgender and transgender alike) will bump up against rigid gender expectations, then you are taking care of everyone and also not making assumptions about who a transgender student will be. This is important because the transgender spectrum will continue to expand (reflecting what has always been there but in recent centuries was driven underground), and our transgender-spectrum students' needs will also continue to change and evolve.

*For concrete practices that act on these two axioms, see Dr. Airton's feature in the Summer issue of Education Canada.*

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