

Chapter 2

Moving Towards Equity: Supporting Transgender and Gender- Diverse People in Education

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ABSTRACT

Two Spirit, transgender, intersex, non-binary, and gender non-conforming (2STING) teachers face significant additional stress in their careers. Research shows intolerable conditions for many teachers, even those in states with long-standing anti-discrimination policies in place. Educators reported experiencing harassment at work, hostile colleagues, hostile families, and doxing and social media bullying. Twenty-five percent of participants interviewed for a recent study had left their careers in education within a month of the study completion. Transgender and gender-diverse educators reported shocking rates of non-suicidal self-injury, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts. All learning communities must change the culture surrounding these issues to help keep our LGB and 2STING educators and students alive.

INTRODUCTION

Two Spirit, transgender, intersex, non-binary, and gender non-conforming (2STING) people and other gender-diverse people in education face daunting circumstances, especially in educational spaces. This chapter will use the umbrella term gender-diverse because it is not just those with named identities like those encapsulated in the 2STING acronym who suffer in a pejorative cisgender heteronormative system. Gender-diverse students and educators alike in PreK–12 education are subjected to marginalization, exclusion, and even violence in spaces that are supposed to be safe and welcome to all (Blair & Deckman, 2019; Clark et al., 2014; Goguen, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2020). Learning community norms have traditionally supported cisgender heterosexuality as normal and all else as deviant (Donelson & Rogers, 2004). Schools often include racial, religious, ability, language diversity, immigration status, and other intersectional issues in justice but purposely exclude sexual orientation and gender identity (DePalma

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& Atkinson, 2010). Cisnormativity and heteronormativity are individual and systemic (Chesir-Teran, 2003; Whittle, 2006).

Regardless of how they are trans or gender non-conforming, each person embodies their true self in unique and beautiful ways that are sometimes outside the comfort zone of traditional heteronormativity. When our identities or gender presentations flow outside conventional boundaries, one thing is evident: we face stigma, discrimination, othering, and abuse. Those negative consequences escalate when those transcending are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) (Kumashiro, 2004).

People are also actively trying to harm teachers who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identities (LGBTQIA+). As the visibility of LGBTQIA+ people in education increases, the rhetoric of opposition and its consequences have become increasingly toxic. Doxing educators, including publishing their home addresses with calls for assassination and letter-writing campaigns to their principals and school boards to have them removed from their jobs, is all too real (Gilbert, 2022; Suen & Drennen, 2022; Wakefield, 2022). Attacks by Twitter accounts like *Libs of TikTok* have called for the execution of school superintendents. They have published their home addresses and aggressively promoted the “groomer” discourse that has led to death threats and job loss for LGBTQIA+ educators (Lorenz, 2022).

The increasingly polarized conditions faced by LGBTQIA+ and especially gender-diverse students and teachers in schools put LGBTQIA+ students and teachers, especially gender-diverse ones, at greater risk of poor mental and physical health outcomes (Kennedy et al., 2021; The Trevor Project, 2021). The future for LGBTQIA+ people in schools will depend on local attitudes, and in some places, entrenched homophobia and transphobia in educational leadership will continue to place LGBTQIA+ people at risk. The United Nations frames conversations about gender identity as fundamental human rights. A UN independent expert, after a 2022 visit to the United States, wrote, “I am deeply alarmed by a widespread, profoundly negative riptide created by deliberate actions to roll back the human rights of LGBT people at the state level” (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, 2022). Until the discourse in the United States models the UN framing and addresses the misinformation rampant in the social media assault on LGBTQIA+ people that seeks to restigmatize LGB and particularly transgender and gender-diverse identities, many people in the United States who are unsupported in their families and schools will continue to suffer (Ivan Simonović, 2011; Suen & Drennen, 2022).

About 1-2% of Americans identify as transgender or non-binary. More people under age 30 identify as transgender and non-binary than ever, 5.1% (A. Brown, 2022; Ghorayshi, 2022). Increasing numbers of trans and non-binary people are entering educational careers, many warmly embraced by their learning communities. Many may experience treatment so harsh they cannot safely remain in education (Hart & Hart, 2018). Learning communities must systematically examine their relationship to intersectional social justice issues, including gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ability, language diversity, and economic disparity, in a way that facilitates changes that can allow all people in their community to feel explicitly welcome. This chapter reviews the realities faced by gender-diverse people in schools and recommends changes in educational leadership, teacher education, and professional learning for in-service educators.

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