Gender diversity

Background Note

Overview

When teaching Relationships and Sexuality Education in schools, it is important to recognise the diversity in the range and variation of people's gender identity and sexual identity. Teachers need to ensure that lessons cater for all students including those who do not identify as heterosexual and cisgender.

It is common for people to confuse sex, gender, gender identity and sexual identity, but they are all very different things.

(See also: Sexual Diversity. This offers information on how to support students of all sexual identities including those who do not identify as heterosexual. See also: Intersex Variations.)

The difference between sex and gender

The terms 'sex' and 'gender' are often used interchangeably, but the two terms are not equivalent.



Sex

When a child is born they are usually assigned to be either male or female in accordance with the outward attributes and appearance of the baby's genitalia. This is referred to as the **sex assigned at birth** and it is usually recorded on the birth certificate. Some people call the sex assigned at birth **'biological sex'** but this does not fully capture the complex biological, anatomical and chromosomal variations that can naturally occur. The sex assigned at birth may or may not align with all of these elements.

Gender

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Gender is often based on how society thinks we should look, think and act according to our sex assigned at birth. Each culture has beliefs and 'rules' about how they think people should act when they are perceived as male/masculine or female/feminine. **Gender stereotypes** are the fixed and specific roles for males and females that are learned from a very young age by family, friends, teachers, leaders, religion, schools, workplaces, advertising, television, songs, movies, social media, etc.

This stereotyping behaviour can include the colours we dress children in, the toys children are given, the sports which are encouraged, subjects studied in schools, and what interests and hobbies are pursued. The rigid application of stereotyping can have detrimental effects, such as people having false assumptions about others, their behaviour and how they believe people 'should' behave.

Children can be exposed to bullying and teasing when they are seen to not conform to gender stereotypes and expectations. The period of adolescence is a powerful time for gender stereotyping. The peer group, in particular, has a powerful influence on persuading adolescents to behave in ways consistent with the roles and expectations of a particular gender. Restricting what people can and can't do based on gender stereotypes only limits what they can achieve. It can affect a person's social, work and legal privileges. We want to maximise our students' potential and challenge stereotypes and discriminatory behaviour.

Gender identity

Gender identity is about personal identity and how a person feels inside. It is not about how other people describe or label them. A person's gender identity can be the same as the sex they were assigned at birth (e.g. when a person identifies as a woman and their sex assigned at birth is female, or when a person identifies as a man and their sex assigned at birth is male) and this is referred to as being **cisgender**. For some people their gender identity is different to their sex assigned at birth (e.g. when a person identifies as a man and their sex assigned a birth is female, or when a person identifies as a woman and their sex assigned at birth is male). This is often referred to as being **transgender.** Some people don't feel like they identify with either gender and may identify as **non-binary, gender diverse** or **agender**. Other people's gender identity changes over time and they may identify as **gender-fluid.**

Many cultures recognise and celebrate multiple genders and have a broader idea of gender beyond the binary 'male' and 'female', and have done so for many centuries. This map (external site) shows the societies around the world that have their own long-established traditions for multiple genders.

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The way that people express their gender is unique to each person - what they wear, how they cut their hair, how they talk, walk and act. Quite often the way that the world sees someone's gender is based on the stereotypes and expectations that society, media and culture have assigned to being 'masculine' and 'feminine'. These stereotypes are limiting and potentially harmful and they are not an accurate reflection of human diversity and gender expression.

Almost all children begin expressing their gender identity at 2-3 years of age through their preference for particular clothing, toys and interests. If these expressions do not fit stereotypes and expectations, it may mean that a child is role playing as a normal part of developmental play, or it may mean that the child is simply not conforming to rigid gender stereotypes. It may mean that the child may be transgender or gender diverse. Most children's gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth, but for a small number, it does not. This is part of the natural spectrum of human diversity.

To follow are some descriptions of some common terms that are used to help understand some aspects of gender identity. It is important to remember that these are simple descriptions and, just as with all aspects of people's individuality and identity, the lived experiences of people who are gender diverse hold many more variations and self-descriptors.

Cisgender

Cisgender is a word used to describe people whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transgender



Being transgender or gender diverse is when someone's sense of being male or female is different from the sex they were assigned at birth.

By a very young age, most children know their gender identity and find it very difficult to think about themselves in any other way. For other children understanding their gender identity is more complex and they may not be able to express this until they are much older. Many young people who are gender diverse will feel comfortable with their gender identity and may not desire any form

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of intervention or transition. Others can feel extreme distress living in the gender assigned to them at birth and wish to take steps toward more accurately expressing their true gender.

The onset of puberty can be a particularly distressing time for a child who is transgender as their body is developing more characteristics that do not match their gender identity. Menstruation, developing breasts, growing facial hair and a deepening voice can cause significant distress and they will require support from families, peers and school environments. Some young people will seek puberty blockers during this time which block the hormones that lead to puberty-related changes in the body (and students may or may not choose to share this information with school staff and peers). Teachers need to be particularly cognisant of how lessons on puberty and related topics might affect young people going through these potential challenges. As with all sensitive topics, it is best that teachers do not make presumptions about their students' life experiences - private personal information is not always shared and the challenges someone is going through are not always visible. See *Teaching tips* below for ways to deliver inclusive lessons and be a supportive school.

It has been estimated that between 1.2% and 4% of Australian young people are gender diverse or transgender.[1] [2] This means that, in a school of 1000 students, between 12 and 40 students may identify as transgender. Young people that identify as transgender can have huge difficulties at school – Do they feel safe to share their true gender identity with peers, other students, teachers? Will they be bullied or discriminated for sharing their true gender identity? Which toilets and change rooms should they use? What uniform should they wear? What if they go to an all-girls or all-boys school? Schools need to be conscious that there may be students in their school who may identify as transgender or be questioning their gender identity. These students may not feel safe expressing this at school (or home or both).

Further professional reading/viewing:

- You can't ask that: Transgender (external site) 27min video from ABC (M-rating).
- Nevo's story (external site) – 10.49 min video of a young person who is transgender.

Non-binary

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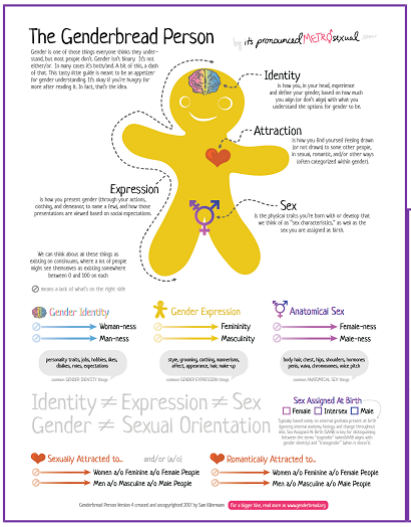
Non-binary is the term that includes people who don’t identify as male or female. They may identify as neither male nor female, both, or another.

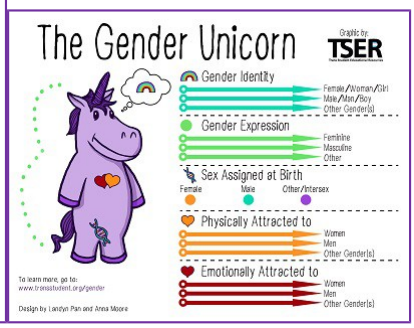
Pronouns

Pronouns are words that take the place of nouns, we use personal pronouns in the place of someone's name. People who are cisgender aren't likely to have given their personal pronouns much thought, but for someone who is transgender or gender diverse it can be a very important part of affirming their gender identity. Everyone has the right to decide how they are referred to by others. Just as people choose to be called by their full name (e.g. Elizabeth instead of Liz), by a nickname (e.g. Bill instead of William), or as Miss/Ms/Mr/Dr, people also use the pronouns that affirms their gender identity. Some common pronouns include: she/her/her (typically feminine) and he/him/hers (typically masculine). Some people prefer gender neutral pronouns such as they/them/theirs or ze/zir. Using the correct pronouns (and names) shows that you respect that person and their identity.

Models that can help to explain the difference between gender identity and sexual identity

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- The Gender Unicorn (external site)
- The Genderbread person (external site)

Outdated, inaccurate or offensive terms

Although some people may use the following terms to describe their own gender, most of the terms are considered outdated, inaccurate and/or offensive:

Gender Identity Disorder - the preferred term is **gender dysphoria**.

Sex change operation - the preferred term is **gender affirming surgery**.

Pre-operative (pre-op) and post-operative (post-op) - terms to describe if a transgender person has had gender affirming surgeries or not. Many transgender people do not want or do not have access to surgeries and focusing on whether someone has had surgery or not is invasive and a violation of privacy.

Transsexual - an older term that some people find offensive.

Tranny - while some transgender people refer to their gender by this term, most find it highly offensive.

Discrimination

Transgender and gender non-conforming people may experience harassment or discrimination from people who are scared or uncomfortable with such identities. This is referred to as

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transphobia. It is the fear, hatred, disbelief, disrespect, exclusion or mistrust of people who are, or who are thought to be, transgender or gender diverse.

School can be a nurturing place, and there are lots of stories of young people being supported and celebrated in their identity but schools can also be a place where young people experience bullying, exclusion and abuse. 75% of gender questioning young people experience abuse or discrimination and 80% of the abuse happens at school.[4] The types of harassment and discrimination experienced at school include: discriminatory language; social exclusion; deliberate use of the wrong pronouns; humiliation; rumours; online bullying; written abuse; graffiti; verbal abuse; and physical abuse.[5] The impact of this discrimination at school can lead to: inability to focus in class; truancy; poor academic performance; self-isolation during break times for personal protection; missing days at school; and complete disengagement with the school system.[5] Discrimination related to gender identity can have a significant impact on mental wellbeing. The statistics are alarming, with 48% of transgender people having attempted suicide and 80% having self-harmed in their lifetime.[6] All school staff need to ensure that they are providing a safe environment for all of their students. There are many helpful services and resources that help support students, schools and families listed in the resource section below. Inclusive Education WA (external site) work specifically in this area of support.

Teaching tips

- Remember that sex, gender, gender identity and sexual identity are not the same thing.
- Be aware and respectful of the potential gender diversity within your class/school. Be mindful that just because you don't know of any transgender or gender diverse young people in your school/class, does not mean that there are not any. It may be that they do not feel safe to share this at school (or home, or both).
- Ensure displays in the school show examples of people in non-stereotypical ways and promote diversity. e.g. men wearing pink, girls playing with trucks, male nurses, female firefighters, stay-at-home dads, male child care workers.
- Avoid unnecessary division of students into boy/girl groups or arranging seats boy, girl, boy, girl. See Teaching strategies: Grouping for ways to group students in a variety of ways.
- Replace binary language with more inclusive terms:

Instead of...	**Try...**
welcome ladies and gentlemen/boys and girls	welcome everyone/welcome teachers and students

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attention boys and girls	attention artists/scientists/writers
ok boys and girls	ok year fives
both boys and girls like...	all genders like...

- Puberty can be a particularly challenging time for people who are transgender and gender diverse. Being mindful that some lessons may be triggers for young people and ensure that you have created a safe space with a group agreement in place.
- Try to use inclusive language. Using words that are not absolute can go a long way to helping all people to feel more included (not just people who are transgender or gender diverse). Use words like ‘most’, ‘many’ and ‘some’ instead of ‘all’ or ‘everyone’. Regular reminders that there is a wide range of ‘normal’ helps too. For example,
    - "**Most** people with a uterus will get their period during puberty".
    - "Puberty can start as young as 8 for **some** people, for **some** it **may not** start until 16. **Most** people start puberty around 10 or 11."
    - "**Most** people with a uterus will then be able to make a baby."
- At the start of the year, invite ALL students to share the name and pronouns they use. You can include pronouns on name badges, email signatures, whiteboard, office door, student workbooks, etc.
- Teachers play an important role in modelling the correct use of someone's pronouns. If you make a mistake, address your mistake as quickly as possible and move on with the conversation/lesson. If you hear someone else make a mistake, quickly and politely correct them, and move on. For example,
    - "He was walking....sorry, they were walking down the corridor."
    - "Sorry, Jo uses the pronouns they/them/their."
- Ensure that school forms provide a space for students to identify their gender and pronouns. A simple way to do this is to provide a free text box rather than a checkbox. For example,
    - Title:_____ First name:_____ Surname:_____
      Gender: _____ Pronouns:_____
- Be aware that bullying, teasing and physical abuse for children and adolescents who express their gender in non-conforming ways can occur at schools. It is imperative that schools provide a supportive environment for these students, and develop and implement policies and practices which do not tolerate teasing and bullying. Inclusive Education

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(external site) and Equal Opportunities Commission - Guidelines for Supporting Sexual and Gender Diversity in Schools (external site) offer support and guidelines for this.

- Develop uniform policies that are not gender-based and allow all students to choose which uniform items they are most comfortable to wear (i.e. not stipulating skirts for girls and trousers for boys).
- Be senstive to the need for toilets and change rooms that are private and safe for transgender and gender diverse young people.
- Challenge gender-based put downs such as 'you throw like a girl' and 'boys don't cry'.
- Ensure that your students are aware of mental health and sexual health services that can support them:
    - School counsellor or school nurse
    - Kids helpline (external site)
    - Reachout (external site)
    - Headspace (external site)
    - Beyondblue - young people (external site)
    - Freedom Centre (external site)
    - QLife (external site)
    - TransFolk of WA (external site)
- Being an ally is about respecting individuals and allowing them to be the expert about themselves.
- Showing that you are an ally can be as simple as adding LGBTI+ stickers on your clipboard, notebook, door and displaying posters that show your classroom is a safe space (e.g. This is a safe space).
        - Videos and resources that offer personal stories and perspectives of LGBTI+ young people are listed below. Educators should preview all videos prior to presenting them to their class to determine the suitability for their students (Department of Education Policy: Use of texts in education settings (external site)). These videos should only be used by educators who know their class well and have the skills to facilitate safe and sensitive discussions and activities. Resources such as these can bring up issues for viewers who are struggling with their own gender identity or experiencing bullying or discrimination. Teachers and other staff members in the room need to be aware of protective interrupting techniques, how to deal with disclosures, and

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be familiar with school procedures/policies on how to refer young people who require further support.

- Inclusive Education WA (external site) has a wide range of resources to help support schools and teachers to ensure their classrooms are safe and inclusive for students and staff that are transgender or gender diverse:
    - Using pronouns (external site)
    - 5 things trans and gender diverse student want school staff to know (external site)
    - Inclusive schools do better: supporting sexual diversity, intersex and gender diversity in schools (external site)
    - Supporting students to affirm their gender (external site)
    - Guide to hosting inclusive formals (external site)
    - Parent information (external site)

Cross curricular ideas

Disclaimer: Educators are required to preview all texts, videos and songs prior to use in class to determine the suitability for their students and school. see Department of Education Policy: Use of texts in education settings (external site)

English

- Persuasive writing/Debates
    - e.g. ‘Female AFL/football players should be paid as much as male AFL football players’ (Nike - Dream Further (external link) is a great stimulus for this debate)
    - e.g. 2 ‘Men should get as much parental leave as women’
- Grammar
    - Look at the history of pronouns – How were they used in Shakespearean times? How does language change over time? e.g The story of 'you' (external site)
- Viewing
    - Explore the ways that media portray gender and how gender is marketed to kids. For example:
        - Compare the colours, text and practicality of clothing for boys vs girls
        - Why is there a boys/girls section of clothing and toys?
        - How do adverts/music videos/billboards reinforce stereotypes? Why do they do this?

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    - Watch and discuss ‘Run like a girl’ (external site) and ‘We believe: The best men can be’ (external site).
- Examining and responding to literature
    - 37 Children’s books that crush gender stereotypes (external site)
    - Some of the best gender positive children’s books (external site)
    - Great diverse children’s books with transgender, non-binary and gender expansive children (external site)
    - 8 books that teach kids about the fluidity of gender and the importance of acceptance (external site)

The Arts

- Drama
    - Allow students to play any part in school productions/assemblies, rather than roles based on gender.
- Music
    - Listen to songs that celebrate non-stereotypical gender roles and gender diversity. (NB: Songs and video clips often contains sexualised content that may not be appropriate for student viewing).
    - Look at music artists that challenge gender stereotypes and roles. e.g. Pink
- Visual Arts
    - Explore artwork that explores concepts of gender.

Languages

- Explore the ways that different languages refer to gender. e.g. In French, pronouns, nouns and adjectives reflect the gender of the object they refer to.

Humanities and Social Sciences

- Look at the ways that gender is understood and celebrated in different cultures.
- Study places in the world that recognise third/fourth/multiple genders – map
- Explore historical figures who have challenged gender stereotypes and gender discrimination. For example:
    - suffragettes
    - women who have competed in ‘male only’ sports
    - men fighting for rights to use baby rooms to feed/change their children
    - sportspeople who identify as transgender.

Maths

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- Create a graph or chart showing how many times adverts represent stereotypical gender roles versus non-stereotypical roles. Analyse what impact this has on society.
- Look at survey statistics on how many people identify as transgender or gender diverse e.g 6th National Survey of Secondary School Students and Sexual Health (external link).

External resources

Guidelines

- Guidelines for Supporting Sexual and Gender Diversity in Schools, Equal Opportunity Commission WA

Services and resources

- Freedom Centre
    - Definitions for many terms related to diverse sexuality and gender can be found in the Glossary of the Freedom Centre website.
- Inclusive Education WA
    - A resource for WA schools and school staff who want to ensure that their school environment is safe and inclusive of LGBTI+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex or otherwise diverse in sex, sexuality or gender) or SSAIGD (same sex attracted, intersex, and gender diverse) students, staff and families.
    - This resource includes downloadable posters to show that your school/class is a safe space and LGBTI ally:
        - This is a safe space
        - You are loved
        - A safe space is everyone's responsibility
        - Need support? Let's talk.
- TransFolk of WA
    - A statewide support for and by transgender and gender diverse people, also offering support for familes.

Fact sheets/booklets/videos

- All of Us
    - A resource to help teachers discuss gender, diversity, sexual diversity and intersex topics in the classroom.
    - Includes personal stories from young people:
        - Nevo's story – 10.49 min video of a young person who is transgender.

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    - Lesson plans to accompany videos
- You're not alone - Info for lesbian, gay, bi, trans, intersex, queer and questioning young people, Freedom Centre
- Supporting and caring for transgender children – The Gender Centre
- The Gender Unicorn is a graphic developed by Trans Student Educational Resources (US) which helps to explain the differences between gender identity, gender expression, sex assigned at birth, physical attraction, and emotional attraction.

1. Telfer M, Tollit M, Pace C, Pang K 2018. Australian standards of care and treatment guidelines for transgender and gender diverse children and adolescents. Melbourne: Royal Children's Hospital.

Postscript

This Background Note relates to the following Learning Activities:

- Reproductive systems
- Gender expectations
- Puberty part 2
- Reproductive systems revision

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