

Discussing Trans Identities in the Classroom

Despite the longstanding existence of numerous traditions of gender diversity in cultures around the world, for many youth in Canada, in-school discussions of trans identities may be a new experience. With this in mind, it is important to consider the steps one can take as an educator to prepare the environment and oneself for such a discussion. Here are some suggested preparations.

- Reflect on your level of understanding regarding transgender identities
- Reflect on your potential biases and cisgender privilege
- Gauge your school's culture and level of inclusiveness
- Consider speaking with your principle and vice principal(s)
- Consider the availability of preliminary learning resources
- Be ready to name and challenge stereotypes and inappropriate language
- Create group discussion guidelines
- Consider the individual impact of group activities regarding trans identities
- Prepare some follow-up resources
- Explore potential follow-up opportunities for consistent and cross-subject learning

Reflect on your level of understanding regarding transgender identities

Consider which topics you feel confident addressing in class, and which you'd like to learn more about. Review Egale's *Professional Learning E-Modules: An Introduction to Gender Diversity and Trans Identities* including sections on Discussion of Gender and Components of Human Identity, Trans 101, and Systems of Privilege and Oppression to refresh your learning around trans identities, and prepare for questions students may have.

Reflect on your potential biases and cisgender privilege

It is important to first reflect on your own biases and privilege so as to feel confident in consciously addressing and challenging potential student stereotypes and inappropriate language regarding trans people. Refer to the Reflecting on Bias and Privilege section in the Educator's Self-Reflection section of the Resource Guide that will help you on your journey of allyship.

Gauging school culture and level of inclusiveness

Have your students discussed trans identities in school before? It may be worthwhile to connect with coworkers to gauge the degree to which gender diversity has been included in other classrooms, and perhaps draw from this when activating previous learning amongst students. It may also be worthwhile to deepen your understanding of your school's overall climate regarding trans inclusion. Is there an active GSA (Gay Straight-Alliance or Gender-Sexuality Alliance)? Are there out trans youth at your school? If there are out trans youth, are their gender identities respected, or do they

experience bullying and discrimination? In observing language, are homo-negative phrases such as “that’s so gay!” or casual use of homo-negative words such as “faggot” or “dyke” pervasive in the hallways, lunch rooms, etc.?

For further reflection, consider the reaction you receive as a result of chatting with co-workers regarding trans material. Their responses may be largely indicative of the level of acceptance and exposure that students have to trans positive materials. Finally, are there existing policies and/or practices around accommodating and including LGBTQ students generally, and trans students specifically?

Consider speaking with your principal and vice principal(s)

Would it be possible to speak with administration about your plans to lead an activity discussing transphobic violence prevention? Is your administration prepared to collaboratively address students who make harmfully inappropriate transphobic remarks in the classroom? Is your administration willing to support a zero tolerance stance on transphobia, homophobia, sexual violence and misogyny? Is there a plan in place regarding administration’s response to calls from parents concerned about discussions of trans inclusion and safer schools?

Consider the availability of preliminary learning resources

Before engaging in the lesson plans, it may be worthwhile to dedicate time to establishing a common knowledge base within the classroom regarding trans persons, and/or the LGBTQ community more generally. Is there a community centre in your area that would be willing to provide a trans or LGBTQ introductory presentation to your class? Is there a co-worker at your school who is a strong ally, or who identifies as a member of the LGBTQ community, and may be willing to collaboratively lead an introductory session with you, and/or share stories of lived experiences of LGBTQ or trans persons? Would members of your school’s GSA be willing to collaboratively lead a 101 session with you in preparation for the upcoming activities, and/or share insights from their lived experience? Visit Egale.ca for further resources and professional development regarding LGBTQ safer and inclusive schools.

Be ready to name and challenge stereotypes and inappropriate language

Refer to *Responding to Sexism, Homophobia and Transphobia with Younger Children* in the Resource Section for more information on how to effectively interrupt and intervene when potentially harmful language is used.

Create group discussion guidelines

If these don’t already exist, prepare to create a classroom agreement where you clearly outline the elements of a respectful and safer discussion within the classroom. If these guidelines already exist, review them to ensure that they include points about respecting

diversity and how homophobic/transphobic attitudes are not tolerated. Refer to the document Safer Spaces Classroom Agreement for an example.

Consider the individual impact of group activities regarding trans identities

Considering the impact of these conversations should include acknowledging the potential impacts of these discussions on individual students. There may be students in the class who identify as trans but are not out, or who are not open about the status of a trans sibling or parent. As a result, it is important to prepare yourself for the potential triggering of some students, and establish a safer learning environment for all students who may feel personally connected to the material. Refer to the Safer Space Classroom Agreement and Resource section for further consideration.

Prepare some follow-up resources.

Consider identifying and engaging whatever supports exist within your school in advance of any classroom activities. Does your school have a safer space club like a GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance or Gender-Sexuality Alliance) where students can seek further information and support? Are there further materials on the subject in the library? Is there someone who might offer counselling or support if a student requires it? If not, can you work to create access to those supports? Taking stock of available resources may also help inform a potential follow-up activity for the students. For example, if the library contains trans-inclusive materials, students could potentially create a library display that showcases these items.

Explore potential follow-up opportunities for consistent and cross-subject learning

During your informal gauging of the school climate and the level of allyship amongst co-workers, you may have noticed that some stand out as allies with potential for collaboration in creating a safer, more trans-inclusive school community. Connect with these individuals about the potential of signalling a desire in the school community for consistency in learning, as well as the importance of the subject matter. Is there an opportunity for a co-worker to integrate the subject of preventing transphobia into their own material? Perhaps a co-worker could engage the students in a follow-up activity through their own particular class subjects? For example, could the English teacher choose a novel with a trans character for the next literature study? Could the law teacher discuss the current legal status of human rights protections for trans persons in Canada, federally and provincially, and relevant court cases? Could the drama teacher integrate a trans character into the next school play, or explore issues of gender fluidity and creativity?