

2017 IBSC Annual Conference

Exploring Gender and Identity in Boys' Schools: A Roundtable Conversation

Workshop Block 2, Tuesday 27 June, 10:15 – 11:15 AM

Transgender Introduction by:

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Our cultures tend to conflate biology, gender expression, gender identity and sexual orientation. These are all very distinct concepts, and are worth clarifying early on in a discussion about supporting transgender students.

Let's start with biology. A person's **sex** refers to their biological status.

Typically we think of this as male or female. Sex is primarily associated with chromosomes, hormones, and anatomy. It's often the first thing our parents learned about us as humans - "it's a boy!" or, "it's a girl!"

Gender refers to the attitudes, feelings and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex. This is a socially constructed concept. Any given society has a set of roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that are considered appropriate for boys and men or girls and women. Gender is more culturally informed than biological sex, which tends to be defined similarly across cultures.

A person's **gender identity** is their deeply held sense of self as female, male, a combination of genders, or as something other than male or female. We all have a gender identity, though many of us haven't thought much about it. To be **cisgender** is to have a gender identity that corresponds with the sex you were assigned at birth.

Your **gender expression** is simply how you choose to share your gender identity with the world around you. Examples include the clothing you wear, how you style your hair, whether or not you wear makeup, how you speak, etc. To express a gender other than the sex assigned at birth does not necessarily mean that your gender identity also differs - people can choose to express themselves in diverse ways without going through an identity transition.

Sexual orientation is about our physical, emotional and/or romantic attractions to others. Gender is about *who we are*, and sexual orientation is about *who we're attracted to*.

Transgender is a general term that refers to someone whose assigned biological sex doesn't match their felt identity. This includes persons who do not feel they fit into a dichotomous sex structure through which they are identified as male or female. It's worth noting here that the term transgender can mean

different things to different people. Like a lot of aspects of who we are, there's no one way for transgender people to look and feel about themselves.

Being **gender nonconforming** simply means to not conform to gender stereotypes. Someone's dress, habits, hairstyle etc. might be considered more masculine or feminine than what's stereotypically associated with their gender. Gender nonconforming people may or may not be transgender - for example, someone raised as female may continue to identify as female while wearing masculine clothing and keeping her hair short. Similarly, transgender individuals can be gender conforming in that their expression matches the gender they identify with - a transgender woman may dress in very feminine ways and may act in line with what her culture expects a woman to act.

The term **gender diverse** is starting to be adopted more and may become the preferred umbrella descriptor to replace transgender. While "transgender" is a generally accepted term, there are individuals who are gender nonconforming who don't self identify as transgender and feel that the term "gender diverse" better captures the variety of identities that transgender currently aims to describe.

There is a long history of pathologizing individuals whose identity or expression doesn't conform with the norms, so there is some motivation to move away from the word transgender, which can insinuate "deviant from the norm." The idea of being variant or deviant is something that some of the gender diverse/transgender community and their allies may, understandably, be motivated to move away from.

You may also hear the terms **binary** and **nonbinary**. To be binary is simply to fit into one of the two culturally accepted genders - male or female. People who describe themselves as being nonbinary simply mean that their gender identity doesn't fit neatly into those categories.

The term **transitioning** in this context refers to someone who is taking steps to socially or physically feel more aligned with their identity.

- A *social* transition may include coming out as transgender or nonbinary, asking people to use different pronouns when referring to them, and/or using a different bathroom.
- A *physical* transition typically involves changing one's appearance, through clothes, makeup, hormones, and/or surgery.
- *to transition is not always to try and "pass" as one gender (though sometimes is). More about matching the external to the internal.
- This doesn't all happen at once and tends to be a gradual process.

To be an **ally** is to be someone who supports equal civil rights, gender equality, LGBT social movements, and challenges homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. I'll simplify it here into some important takeaways, with the caveat that this is by no means an exhaustive review of allyship. There's no one perfect way to be an ally. Different members of this community will have different needs and priorities. Do your best.

- You don't have to understand someone's identity to respect it. Some of us can get twisted around "not getting it," which gets in the way of seeing the person as human.
- When interacting with a transgender or gender diverse person, it's ok for you to not know the right pronouns to use, how to refer to them etc. Follow their lead and when in doubt, ask. If you're coming at it from a genuine, caring place, chances are that person will understand that. Don't ask a transgender person intrusive questions you wouldn't feel comfortable answering yourself - e.g., questions about your surgical history, body parts, or medication.
- Continue to educate yourself. There are a lot of great resources out there to help you along here. You're doing that right now.
- Be kind.