SEX?
SEXUAL ORIENTATION?
GENDER IDENTITY?
GENDER EXPRESSION?

Knowing the difference can make *all* the difference
to students who do not conform to binary norms.

By Joel Baum and Kim Westheimer
Illustration by Mark McGinnis

IF YOU'RE AN EDUCATOR, chances are you have struggled to support students who question their sexual identity or don't fit neatly into social expectations of what it means to be a boy or a girl. Perhaps you can relate to situations like these:

One of my students wants to be referred to as a boy. The student's mother is adamant: "My daughter is a girl!"

My 7-year-old is tired of students constantly questioning why he plays with dolls. I am supportive of him, but I don't know what to do.

Two colleagues in the teachers' room discussed a boy who is sensitive and not into sports. One of them said, "He's going to be gay for sure."

At the heart of these scenarios lies confusion about the nature of gender, sex and sexual orientation. When adults don't understand the complexity of these concepts, young people must navigate these and other challenging situations by themselves.

In a recent blog post titled, "I'm An 18-Year-Old Boy Who Wears Blue Nail Polish—Get Over It," blogger Nasir Fleming wrote: "Enforced gender roles do not only affect those who break them,

Spectrums make room for anyone whose experiences do not narrowly fit into binary choices such as man/woman, feminine/masculine or straight/gay.

but also those who give their blood, sweat and health just to fit in with them."

Fleming's choice of words is not an exaggeration. Imagine being a transgender student who dehydrates himself to avoid using the girls' bathroom all day, or a student who is ready to drop out of school because she is bombarded with verbal or physical abuse about her perceived sexual orientation. Imagine being one of the nameless students represented in studies that document the disproportionate risks for assault, rejection and self-harm in schools that are not accepting of fluid gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation.

A Binary System

A significant barrier to creating fully inclusive schools is the presumption that sex, gender and sexual orientation fit neatly into a binary model.

This binary world is populated by boys and girls who are viewed as polar opposites. This world conflates biology, gender expression, gender identity and sexual orientation, relegating people to rigid categories: male or female, gay or straight.

Schools have a history of reinforcing binary perceptions of sex and gender. Even before children enter most schools for the first time, parents or guardians are asked to check *male* or *female* boxes on registration forms. On the first day of school, teachers might shepherd students to class in boy and girl lines. Restrooms are designated for boys and girls. Everywhere there are expectations about what kind of imaginative play and dress-up is appropriate for whom, about who is naturally

rambunctious and who is predestined to quiet studying. As students get older, they are subjected to gendered expectations about extracurricular activities, dating and dress—even what colleges and careers they're encouraged to pursue after graduation.

If we truly want to include all students, we need to look beyond binaries to create practices that include school communities' diverse representation of biological sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation.

Biological Sex

Sex refers to a person's anatomy, physical attributes such as external sex organs, sex chromosomes and internal reproductive structures.

For most people, the anatomical indicators of sex line up in a way that is typically understood as male or female. However, intersex conditions also occur naturally in all species, including humans. *Intersex* refers to a variety of conditions in which an individual is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the typical understanding of female or male bodies.

In the past three decades, more than 25 genes have been identified that were once believed to be associated solely with male or female biology, but in fact exhibit more complex, nonbinary variations. With the advent of

new scientific knowledge, it is increasingly evident that biological sex does not fit a binary model. Intersex conditions are increasingly being recognized as naturally occurring variations of human physiology.

Following years of organizing by intersex activists, momentum is growing to end what was once a standard practice of "gender-normalizing surgery" performed on intersex infants with ambiguous genitalia. In 2013, the United Nations condemned the use of this unnecessary surgery on infants, putting it in the same category as involuntary sterilization, unethical experimentation or reparative therapy when enforced or administered without the free and informed consent of the person receiving the surgery.

Gender Identity

Gender identity is an individual's deeply held sense of being male, female or another gender. This is separate from biological sex.

Some children become aware at a very young age that their gender identity does not align with their physical sex characteristics, even expressing the disconnect as soon as they can talk. Other transgender and gender-expansive people recognize their gender identity during adolescence or adulthood.

➤ DID YOU KNOW? ◄

The rainbow flag is a widely recognized symbol of gay pride, but did you know that the purple, white and green striped flag represents non-binary pride? Visit this blog post to learn more about flags and symbols embraced by individuals from across spectrums of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

Individuals whose biological sex and gender identity "match" rarely think about the alignment of biology and identity because they have the privilege of being considered normal by society. People whose gender identity and biological sex align are called *cisgender*. Cisgender is an important word because it names the dominant experience rather than simply seeing it as the default.

Individuals living comfortably outside of typical male/female expectations and identities are found in every region of the globe. The *calabai* and *calalai* of Indonesia, the two-spirit Native Americans found in some First Nation cultures, and the *hijra* of India all represent more complex understandings of gender than a binary gender model allows. At least seven countries—including Australia, Bangladesh, Germany, India, Nepal, New Zealand and Pakistan—recognize a third gender for legal documents. As people around the world use a growing variety of terms to communicate their gender identities, Facebook now offers its users 52 options with which to define their gender.

Gender Expression

Gender expression can be defined as the way we show our gender to the world around us. Societal expectations of gender expression are reinforced in almost every area of life. Even very young children are clear about the gendered choices that boys and girls are "supposed to" make in relation to toys, colors, clothes, games and activities.

Girls whose gender expression is seen as somewhat masculine are often considered tomboys. Depending on the context and the degree to which they transgress norms, tomboys might be seen positively, neutrally or negatively. For example, a girl who identifies as a gamer geek, cuts her hair short and wears clothing perceived as masculine may be labeled as a "cute tomboy" or met with words intended to hurt, such as *dyke* or *freak*.
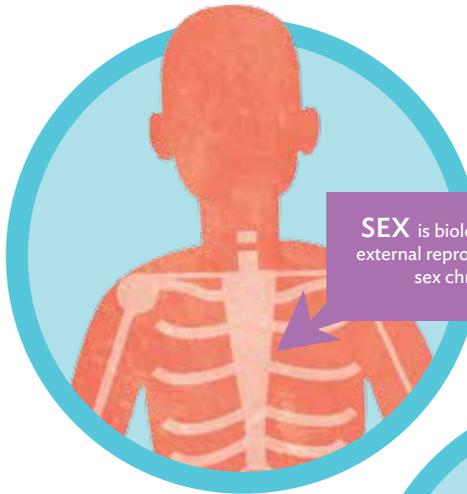
SEX is biological: internal and external reproductive organs and sex chromosomes.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION is our physical, emotional or romantic attraction to others.
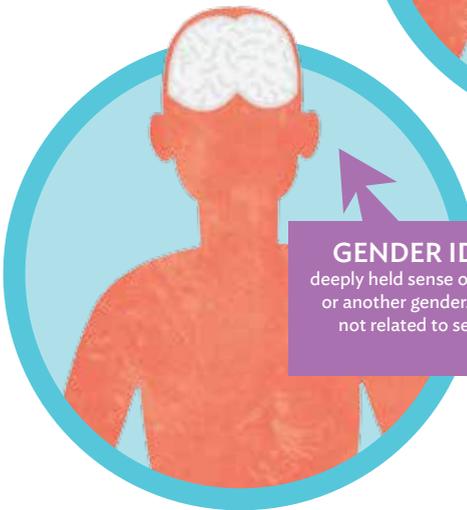
GENDER IDENTITY is a deeply held sense of being male, female or another gender. Gender identity is not related to sexual orientation.

GENDER EXPRESSION is the way individuals show their gender to the world. Gender expression is not related to sexual orientation.

Positive or neutral labels are harder to come by for boys whose sex and gender expression are seen as incongruent. Common words used to describe such boys tend to be delivered with negative—sometimes hateful—intentions, words like *sissy* and *faggot*. There also is little room for boys to expand their gender expression. Just wearing a scarf or walking in a stereotypically feminine way can lead to abuse from peers, educators or family members.

Bias related to race, economic status, religion and other identities also influences responses to young people who break out of gender constraints. School-discipline data provide a disturbing example of this, as seen in the report Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected. The report reveals that African-American girls who act in ways considered stereotypically masculine are far more likely to be disciplined by their teachers than white girls who exhibit similar behaviors.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation is about our physical, emotional and/or romantic attractions to others. Like gender identity, sexual orientation is internally held knowledge. In multiple studies, LGBT youth reported being aware of their sexual orientation during elementary school, but waited to disclose their orientation to others until middle or high school.

Students might identify as bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual or use a host of other words that reflect their

SEX, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY AND GENDER EXPRESSION are distinct concepts, but they combine uniquely in each person to make us who we are. Understanding these terms—and how they do and do not intersect—can help us better appreciate and respect the diverse spectrum of our identities.
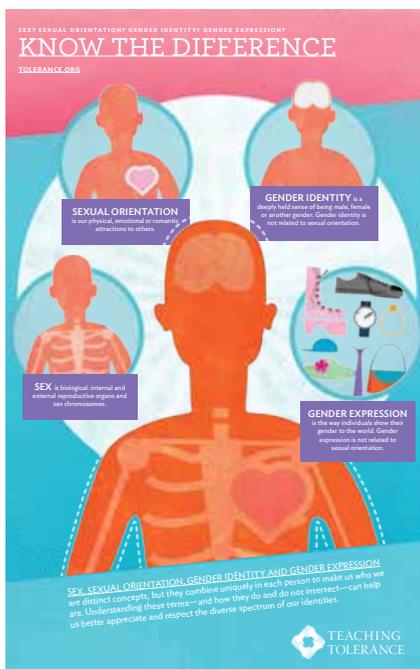
SHARE THE KNOWLEDGE!
Download and print this poster on 11x17 paper and hang it in your classroom or teacher's lounge.

capacity to be attracted to more than one sex or gender or not to feel sexual attraction at all. This emerging language illuminates a complex world in which simple either/or designations such as gay or straight are insufficient.

The overlap and conflation of gender identity and sexual orientation can be confusing for individuals trying to make sense of their own identities as well as for those who are clear about their identities. It can also be

complicated for anyone seeking to support them. In her book *Gender Born, Gender Made,* psychologist Diane Ehrensaft describes a teenage client who, over the course of a few weeks, identified in seemingly contradicting ways, including as androgynous, as a gay boy and—eventually—as a heterosexual transgender female. This young person was involved in a dynamic process that illustrated both the way sexual orientation and gender identity are intertwined and how they are separate.

Embracing a Spectrum Model

As we have seen, binary notions of gender, biology and sexual orientation exclude large swaths of human diversity. This diversity can be better understood by using spectrum-based models. Spectrums make room for anyone whose experiences do not narrowly fit into binary choices such as man/woman, feminine/masculine or straight/gay.

Gender-expansive and *genderqueer* are two of many terms used by people to describe themselves as somewhere on a gender spectrum —outside of the either/ or choices relating to sex and gender.

A spectrum model not only makes room for people who are gender-expansive but for those who are perceived to be more typical as well. A spectrum provides an avenue to a deeper understanding of the separate yet interrelated concepts of biological sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. For educators, this understanding is a critical first step toward changing school-based practices and toward being advocates for *all* students—regardless of where they fit on any spectrum. ◆

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Won't Students Get Confused?

Studies show that children of any age are able to understand that there are more than two gender categories when the concept is explained to them in a simple, age-appropriate manner. The same is true of diversity related to biological sex and sexual orientation.

Wondering how YOU might answer questions that parents and colleagues might have? See Gender Spectrum's responses **to Common Questions and Concerns from Parents and Guardians.**

TOOLKIT
Put this story into action! VISIT » **tolerance.org/sex-identity-expression**

Article: *Sex? Sexual Orientation? Gender Identity? Gender Expression?* From Teaching Tolerance Magazine, May 2015

Purpose
    Enlargement of understanding of a text, not the achievement of some particular understanding.

Ground Rules
    1. Listen actively.
    2. Build on what others say.
    3. Don't step on other's talk. Silences and pauses are OK.
    4. Let the conversation flow as much as possible without raising hands or using a speaker's list.
    5. Make the assumptions underlying your comments explicit to others.
    6. Emphasize clarification, amplification, and implications of ideas.
    7. Watch your own air time – how often you speak, and how much you say when you speak.
    8. Refer to the text; challenge others to go to the text.

Notes to Facilitators
Text-Based Seminars can be remarkably engaging and productive for both students and adults. A Text-Based Seminar facilitator has two primary tasks: posing the framing question and keeping the group focused without pushing any particular agenda.

Facilitating a seminar is not terribly difficult, but it can be challenging. A few tips might make the job easier:

    1. Invest time in creating the framing question. It needs to be substantive, clear, relevant to the participants' experience, and likely to push their thinking in new directions. Above all, constructing a response to the question should require close reading of the text. We recommend that the framing question be genuine for everyone, including the facilitator, so that the entire group is engaged in the inquiry. Framing questions are often based on a quote from the text, which begins to establish a pattern of using the document as a basis for the conversation. Some possible questions for this article are included, below.

    2. In addition to the framing question, create a few follow-up questions that seem to raise the level of participants' thinking. If the group takes off, you may never use them (or you may create new ones that come from the conversation itself), but it's a good idea to have something in your hip pocket, especially if you aren't very experienced at this kind of facilitation.

    3. Unless the entire group does Text-Based Seminars routinely, it is useful to share and go over the purposes and ground rules (below) before you begin. Because so many conversations (in school and out) are based more on opinion than evidence, and aim toward winning the argument rather than constructing new knowledge, it is often important to remind the group of the reason you're engaging in the discussion: *to work from a shared text* and *strive to enlarge your understanding.*

* adapted from Text-based Discussion (Developed by Gene Thompson-Grove) from National School Reform Faculty

4. Give the group time (about 15 minutes) to re-read the text with the framing question in mind.

5. The most common facilitation problems in this kind of seminar come from two kinds of participants: the folks who have to win, and those who want to express opinions independent of the text and will use any quote they can find as a springboard. Usually, a reminder of the ground rules will pull them back, although it is sometimes necessary to redirect the conversation if you are dealing with a particularly insistent "winner." With the "winner," asking the group to examine closely the assumptions underneath the arguments or opinions being presented sometimes helps. When someone doesn't stick to the text, it is often helpful to ask the group to look for evidence of the opinion being expressed in the text. What you *don't* want to do is ask these two types of participants a direct question, or ask them to cite the evidence in the text for their opinions (although you might be tempted to do so). The goal is to redirect the conversation away from these folks, not to get them to talk more!

6. It is sometimes useful to keep running notes of the conversation, and to periodically summarize for the group what has been said.

7. It is also sometimes useful (especially if you are nervous) to have a "plant" among the participants – someone who will model ideal participant behavior at an early point in the seminar.

8. As is always the case when facilitating, try to keep the conversation balanced. Don't let one or two people dominate. If there are many quiet people, asking them to speak in pairs for a few minutes on a particular point can sometimes give them an entry into the conversation when you come back to the large group. Sometimes you just have to say, "let's have someone who hasn't said much yet speak," and then use *lots* of wait time, event though it may feel somewhat uncomfortable to do so.

Text-based Seminar questions for *Sex? Sexual Orientation? Gender Identity? Gender Expression?*

Overall Inquiry for Discussion
❑ Why is a multi-dimensional understanding of gender important for the work we with students?

Guiding Questions
❑ In the article, blogger Nasir Fleming writes: "Enforced gender roles do not only affect those who break them, but also those who give their blood, sweat and health just to fit in with them." What are some of your thoughts about this quote?
❑ How are gender, sex and sexual orientation different from one another? How are they related?
❑ What are the challenges of using a binary model for thinking about gender? What are the challenges of using a spectrum model?
❑ What are some ways in which gender expression expectations have changed over time? Why is this important to understand as you work with your students?

Ground Rules For Text-Based Discussions

1. The purpose of a text-based discussion is not to debate, and not to come to a final consensus or conclusion. It is to gain new ideas and to deepen understanding.

2. Refer to the text whenever possible, citing page number and location in the passage you are referring to. Read the passage from the text to the group to help "ground" the conversation in the ideas presented in the text.

3. Speaking briefly from personal experience is welcomed, but not "war stories"!

4. Speak without raising your hand.

5. Speak to each other, not to the facilitator.

6. Monitor your own airtime (especially the extroverts!) Leave room for all.

7. If you want to depart from the current topic, you must say so. If others do not want to follow the departure you suggest, they can return to the previous discussion by saying so.