# *Advocating for*

# *Intersectional Inclusion*

**Disabled students often have atypical gender identities that can benefit from a variety of supports**

**BY JULES CSILLAG AND ALLIE SAYRE**

*T*he term "inclusive classroom" often refers to disability inclusion, but in recent years, the term has also been used to refer to gender inclusion.

Unfortunately, there's a lack of collaboration between educators who support these two types of inclusion, which is concerning given that disabled LGBTQ students exist and might have overlapping experiences and relevant supports. It can also result in students being labeled "disabled" for being queer or disabled LGBTQ students being targeted for disciplinary actions disproportionately.

Multiple studies have shown that educators—particularly special educators—feel ill-equipped to incorporate valid, affirming, and gender-inclusive supports in their classrooms. Sexuality and gender are rarely discussed during graduate study, and if they are, it isn't always constructive. Given this lack of training, educators often make the default assumption that disabled students are all asexual or all heterosexual. Neither is true. Certain disabled communities have higher rates of LGBTQ individuals, in fact; for instance, autistic people are more likely to be queer and/or trans than neurotypicals, according to recent research.

Sadly, schools aren't the only spaces where inadequate disability inclusion happens. The authors can attest to seeing it in adult queer spaces, and the problem has been noted by disability advocates and queer scholars alike. But schools can and should be a place to advocate for and model inclusion for disabled LGBTQ persons so they might feel safe and whole, and have a sense of belonging.

"To me, disability is not a monolith, nor is it a clear-cut binary of disabled and nondisabled," disabled disability activist Alice Wong (she/her) writes in her book *Disability Visibility*. *"*Disability is mutable and ever-evolving. Disability is both apparent and nonapparent." These ideas can also be applied to gender identity or sexuality. Therefore, we encourage educators to view disability and gender identity as fluid identities that are not necessarily binary and are informed by development and context.

### The Real Reveal

Children develop a gender identity around kindergarten, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, and questioning can begin around that time, as well. But that doesn't imply a certainty or sustainability around gender identity. Similarly, disabilities can be acquired or revealed over time. Teachers might not know which of their students are disabled, queer, and/or trans, so we invite educators to act as though all students might be disabled, queer, and trans (aka what Sayre calls a "multiplicity of unseeable possibilities").

For instance, when people discuss trans issues, their minds seem to inevitably turn to bathrooms. Accessible restrooms are often single-stall, and they can easily be made gender-neutral. Using gender-neutral accessible bathrooms doesn't disadvantage cis or nondisabled students, but having inaccessible restrooms or gendered restrooms (especially if they're not gender-affirming) disadvantages disabled and gender-expansive students.

Creating gender-neutral restrooms can be accomplished by changing a few signs and adjusting the way educators talk about gender. But an absence of gendered restrooms does not go far enough to provide reasonable accommodations for nonbinary children. Given the fluidity surrounding gender identity, children shouldn't need to somehow officially "declare" their gender identity to use a restroom; they should simply be allowed to choose where to go.

The case for fluidity doesn't negate the need to consider identity development. We must be intersectional in this work because there's no "separating out" students' identities, writer and activist Phoenix Gray (they/them) says: "I cannot separate my nonbinary genderqueer identity from my Black identity. I cannot separate my Black identity and my genderqueer identity from my disabled identity."

Here are five considerations based on research and the authors' own personal experiences as a queer, trans, autistic, and disabled advocate and speaker (Sayre), and a queer, cis, nondisabled educator (Csillag).

### No. 1: Accurate, Developmentally Relevant Information

While allowing for fluidity of identities, it's important to use accurate, affirming, developmentally and culturally relevant information about bodies, consent, gender, and relationships. This begins with all school staff learning about intersectional issues related to disability and LGBTQ identity. This can be done through formal professional

development, and/or less formal learning, such as book or reading clubs, quote or self-advocate shares, and co-created resources. The important thing is to learn directly from disabled LGBTQ people. Resources include:

- The Disability Visibility Project: **bit.ly/37P8GlO**
- Queercafe.net: **queercafe.net/disabilities.htm**
- Respect Ability: **www.respectability.org/resources/lgbtq**
- Self Advocacy Info: **bit.ly/33RqqMa**
- "Why the LGBTQ+ Community Must Fight
  for Disability Rights": **bit.ly/2LkcNP6**

Research suggests that special educators are best equipped to create gender-inclusive materials for disabled students. Educators who are used to differentiating materials to make them more relevant and individualized for their students might indeed be relevant point persons, as long as they're willing and able to educate themselves on relevant topics with open hearts and minds. Some elementary-relevant resources include:

- Books from Welcoming Schools: **bit.ly/2JWQI8O**
- GLSEN's Elementary Toolkit, produced in partnership
  with NAESP: **bit.ly/2JVLJ8E**
- "Myths About Gender" from Gender Spectrum:
  **bit.ly/2IHQL88**
- New America's tips on gender-inclusive K–5
  distance learning: **bit.ly/3gESpUz**

You will likely see overlap between some of the strategies used for gender-inclusive teaching and those you already use with diverse learners.

## No. 2: Experimentation and Flexible Supports
Bridging from the idea of fluidity around identity, school should be a "recess" for gender and disability that offers freedom and self-direction. This means allowing experimentation and space to play in terms of gender expression, roles, names and pronouns, and more, as well as a community that's supportive of students who wish to do so. Even the most supportive educator can't see every interaction, and the best way to combat bullying of students who are questioning where they fit into the gender identity space is to create a community that understands why such a space needs to exist.

Fluidity and experimentation might already be a part of your practice if you work with disabled students. Sayre fondly recalls a teacher with whom she had a continuing working relationship around making school more accessible and friendly to her. This type of direct academic support should be available for all students, regardless of any formal diagnosis.

It's important for educators to accept that they can't and won't understand everything about a student and their experiences. That's OK! Build inclusive policies that evolve as you learn more, and be transparent about it; students benefit from knowing that these practices are built *for them* and that they have

a say in what they are, how they are applied, and whether they are truly supportive.

## No. 3: Affirmation and Relationships
Listening to students is part of disability and gender inclusion. This can manifest in actions such as creating spaces where students can connect their own experiences to classroom content, learning about students' interests in order to incorporate them meaningfully into learning spaces, and generally inviting students to have as much say as possible in what happens. Students' privacy, security, and development need to be respected, and building trust, validating, and listening should be your goal.

Teachers who build personal relationships with students also help pave the way for adults to affirm students, which should be done as often as possible. "I didn't have the ability to really define myself outside of what adults were saying I was," disabled disability professional Finn Gardiner (he/they) recalls of his childhood, while acknowledging trauma from "teaching methods that were focused on suppressing my autistic presentation instead of being empathetic." Gardiner highlights two important student needs: self-determination and the right to define oneself, and the need for empathy, acceptance, and affirmation of all intersectional identities.

Schools tend to communicate that only some students are worthy (e.g., cis, nondisabled, white students), and society broadly reinforces the same concept. As a result, schooling tends to attempt to force students who do not fit these privileged categories into the behaviors and qualities associated with them. This works about as well as trying to put a square peg into a round hole, so we must discard dehumanizing value systems and policies, and replace them with a recognition that all people are innately whole and valuable. Let's instead celebrate students for their interests, their unique perspectives, and the inherent gifts that come from their lived experiences.

## No. 4: Representation
Another way to help students feel valued is through inclusive representation. There aren't a lot of curricula that include disabled LGBTQ students, however, especially if other marginalized identities are added to the mix. A few resources that feature intersectional representations are:

- The *All Bodies Deserve* coloring book from the Center for
  Cultural Power: **bit.ly/3oL4F90**
- Sins Invalid's *Disability Justice From A-Z* coloring book (preview): **sinsinvalid.org/coloring-book**
- *They, She, He: Easy as ABC*: **bit.ly/3gDZULB**
- Affect the Verb's Disabled and Here project:
  **affecttheverb.com/disabledandhere**
- *M Is for Mustache: A Pride Book*: **vimeo.com/171147216**
- Transform Deaf Ed's ASL Booktime of *It's Okay to Be
  Different*: **bit.ly/3oIns4v**

You can also celebrate diverse role models, such as Marsha P. Johnson, Audre Lorde, or Frida Kahlo, all of whom were queer and/or trans, disabled femmes of color.

Given the existing lack of relevant representation, you can also continue to affirm students by having them share their personal experiences. Students can create their own books, posters, websites, plays, and podcasts, and add them to classroom walls, libraries, etc. Being accepted enhances relevance, supports confidence, and builds connection. This paradigm of student-directed learning benefits the student by promoting their autonomy, the educator by exposing them to an element of the student's inner life, and the community by modeling a variety of interests and ways of being.

### No. 5: Building Community
Traditional anti-bullying policies are punitive and could end up perpetuating the very inequities we're trying to eradicate. The way to more meaningfully, authentically, and sustainably combat bullying is through community and connections, says disability advocate Ki'Tay Davidson (he/him): "There are so many different intersections between the disabled and LGBT community. If we are talking about our education system and bullying—and the high amounts in which both of those communities are experiencing bullying—we have to incorporate both of those lenses."

Many of the suggested strategies do that, and you can also provide opportunities for students to learn from and about each other, find similarities without ignoring differences, and engage in meaningful partner or group work where divergent thinking and experiences are valued. Community can also be built via affinity groups; these might be open to students regardless of identity (to allow for fluidity) and focus on developing friendships, leadership skills, and allyship.

All of these recommendations rely on administrator support. Administrators are essential for the necessary reflective work needed to learn about one's biases, privileges, and assumptions, especially if there are community members who have questions or concerns about inclusive teaching. Administrator support might be financial, if it means dedicating funding to more representative materials and professional development. But accepting students for who they are is absolutely free—and priceless. ●

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# The Vocabulary of Inclusion

***asexual:*** A person who doesn't experience sexual attraction. Asexuals might feel romantic attraction, aesthetic attraction, etc. This doesn't necessarily include people who are celibate.

***cis person:*** A person whose gender identity is the same as that which they were assigned at birth. Not *real boy/girl,* etc.

***folx (pronounced like "folks"):*** A gender-neutral term for a group of people that includes people of all identities, similar to collective nouns such as *y'all* or *students*. Use instead of *boys and girls* and *mom and dad*.

***gender-expansive*** **and** ***gender nonconforming:*** A person whose gender identity and/or expression (e.g., how they present themselves) doesn't easily fit within traditional norms for that gender. These norms are also informed by race and culture.

***identity-first vs. person-first language:*** Identity-first language claims identity as central to the self instead of highlighting individuals as "people first." Most disabled people prefer being called "disabled" instead of "person with a disability," for example, and the same goes for autistic, deaf, queer, trans, etc. When in doubt, use the terms people use for themselves.

***LGBTQ:*** An acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning. Sometimes you'll see it written as *LGBTQ2IA*, which includes two-spirit, intersex, and asexual persons, and sometimes there's a + at the end of it to include folx who don't use these terms but are under the queer umbrella. Not *homosexual*.

***nonbinary:*** A person whose gender doesn't fall wholly within the gender binary of male and female. Nonbinary people might identify as being both, neither, and/or genderfluid. Not *opposite gender*.

***pronouns:*** How we refer to each other in the third person. Some people use one set of pronouns (e.g., she/her), others use multiple sets of pronouns, and some don't like pronouns to be used in reference to themselves at all. Normalize including one's pronouns in attributions, email signatures, and so on.

***queer-antagonism, trans-antagonism, bi-antagonism:*** Individual, interpersonal, and/or systemic oppression of queer and/or trans people. Use instead of *homophobic, queerphobic, transphobic, biphobic.*

***questioning:*** A person who isn't sure, doesn't know, or is in the process of understanding their gender identity and/or sexual orientation in a different way than they currently do. Not *confused.*

***trans person:*** A person whose gender identity differs from that which they were assigned at birth. Not *transgendered* or *is a transgender.*

*—Jules Csillag and Allie Sayre*