

Guest Columnist: Nikos Giannopoulos, Special Education Teacher and GSA Advisor, ngiannopoulos@beaconart.org

ON GENDER IN THE CLASSROOM, EMPOWER STUDENTS TO LEAD

As a queer educator, I often find myself in networking or professional development situations where I am the only member of the LGBTQ+ community.

In these situations, conversations about educational equity can quickly turn into a Q&A about the emerging visibility and unique needs of trans and gender nonconforming youth. Though queer students have always been in American classrooms, students now feel freer to express their identities or presentations in educational and social environments.

During the 10 years that I've worked at Beacon Charter High School for the Arts in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, our school has earned a reputation for being a safe and supportive place for trans and gender nonconforming youth. Students and families seek out Beacon because its culture respects and celebrates every child's unique identity.

On the question of how to best support trans and gender nonconforming youth, the answer is to ask the students themselves. I polled the members of our gay-straight alliance on what specifically makes them feel included. Consider the following suggestions when trying to create environments where young people feel safe to be open and honest about their identities:

- **Normalize talking about LGBTQ+ identities.** Considering certain identities taboo can exaggerate the isolation that many trans and gender nonconforming youth already feel.
- **Ask about pronouns and affirm chosen names.** As a follow-up, ask when and with whom it is okay to use preferred pronouns or chosen

names. For some, these may be simple questions on an intake form, but for others, this gesture can open the door for more meaningful conversations about gender. When you affirm a child's pronouns and chosen name, it shows you respect your students' identities.

- **Get comfortable with being corrected.** Students usually don't mind if you make a mistake, as long as you are trying. If you slip up, apologize briefly and correct course.
- **Recognize that presentation does not equal identity.** Just like their cis-gender peers, many transgender youth like to explore gender nonconformity through makeup and clothing. Students want to feel affirmed in their identities but not confined to rigid expectations of binary gender expression.
- **Shut down any gossip among colleagues regarding a student's gender or presentation.** Students are often more attuned to discussion between colleagues than we give them credit for, and we owe it to them to respect their pronouns and chosen names even when we think they aren't listening.
- **Prioritize representation.** As teachers of the arts, integrating LGBTQ+ representation should be seamless! From Marcel Duchamp to Andy Warhol to Greer Lankton and more, there's no shortage of artists who address gender through their work.
- **Be comfortable in your ability to be a role model.** As an LGBTQ+ educator, you may have students who have never met an adult who reflects their own experience. Being open about your experiences shows youth that there are adults who have been where they are, survived, and thrived.
- **Identify your blind spots and seek any necessary education on those topics.** Everyone has room to grow in this area, and you owe it to your students to do your homework.

In a classroom culture that allows students to feel truly included and supported, their potential is limitless. As artists, our identities often shape our work. When students explore their relationship with their gender, their artwork can take on new dimensions and become more personal. If trans and gender nonconforming students feel safe to explore their identity through art, it can start a chain reaction of students digging deeper and unpacking what makes them who they are, regardless of their background. A true culture of diversity can encourage all students to reach new heights.

At Beacon, our trans and gender nonconforming student artists have been able to accomplish great things that likely would never have been possible at their previous schools. Whether leading student government, earning academic honors, creating award-winning artwork, or even being on the prom court, students of all genders and presentations have found their own version of success here.

When it comes to building better a school culture for trans and gender nonconforming students, we must amplify the voices of our youth advocates to enact the change they need to see.

Educators, administrators, district leaders, and policy makers have much to learn from these students. If we can translate youth activism into actionable policy, we can improve the climate for these students and help create a brighter future for students of all genders. ■

Carlos Cruz

President. Unified Arts Learning Facilitator, Evolutions High School, Providence, RI. Email: carlosacruz77@gmail.com

Tara Rousseau

Co-President-Elect. Visual Arts Teacher, Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, OISE, University of Toronto. Email: tara.rousseau@utoronto.ca

Jess Graff

Co-President-Elect. Teaching Artist, Curator, and Consultant. Email: jessgraffcreative@gmail.com

Barry Morang

LGBTQ+ Past President. Email: bwmorang@gmail.com