



Gegi's Tips for Creating a Classroom that Welcomes and Sustains Gender Diversity

Adapted from Dr. Lee Airton's books *Gender: Your Guide* (www.genderyourguide.com) and *Teaching about Gender Diversity: Teacher-Tested Lesson Plans for K-12 Classrooms* (www.genderdiversitycurriculum.com) edited with Dr. Susan Woolley, as well as their *Education Canada* article (<https://www.edcan.ca/articles/gender-friendly-classroom/>).

- 1. Teach as though there is always gender diversity in the room.** Do not wait to change or add to your practice until you know *for sure* that you have a transgender student. Rather, each year from go, assume that some of your students are (invisibly) transgender, may be gender conforming at school but not outside of school, may have transgender and/or gender nonconforming family members or friends, may come to understand themselves as transgender later in life, and so on.
- 2. Show, not just tell, your students and their loved ones that you are here for this.** When you introduce yourself on the first day of school, or send home an email to introduce yourself to students, include your own pronouns (even and perhaps especially if no one has ever gotten them wrong). In bulletins about special events or upcoming field trips, source and include information on washrooms, including accessible and all-gender options. These small things will be overlooked by many, but for those who need them in order to stay and be okay, they will shine like a beacon.
- 3. Honour all students as the authority on who they are, starting with their names.** For many people under the transgender umbrella, the information present in (and absent from) our school record tells an incorrect story of who we are. It is a good idea to just take the standard "roll call" right off the table. Some teachers have students create name tags right away with their preferred name (and sometimes pronouns—more on this below), which students collect upon entering the room each day and have the right to alter as needed (while letting the teacher know). A first-day strategy is having students share their preferred names (and sometimes pronouns) during a quick go-around, with you writing them down for now and later comparing them with the attendance list when the students are occupied (which means incorporating this time into your plan). If there are preferred names that you cannot attach to a listed name, you can then ask students more privately as needed.
- 4. Maintain a resource binder with a loud and proud label, and display it in a prominent place in the classroom.** Include information on accessible, free, and both local in-person or online supports related to various groups and communities your students could be part of (remembering tip number one above), and include supports related to gender and sexual diversity. Include things that are age-appropriate and culturally responsive, taking your students' social positions into account (e.g., spoken language, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, etc.). Talk about these supports often and remind students that the binder is there. **gegi.ca** has plenty of resources, links to external resources, and an entire page dedicated to local resources and supports in/around your (Ontario) school board.



5. Begin to see your classroom through a gender lens. Whether consciously or not, school-age children and youth are constantly accessing local gender norms (i.e., invisible standards for what boys or girls should do, look like, etc.) as they negotiate power, belonging, and popularity. In your classroom, there are students whom you might think of as ‘power centres,’ or, boys or girls who are highly sought-after as play partners, buddies, friends, dates or crushes. Conversely, there are students who are on the ‘opposite’ end of the power spectrum, to the extent that other students do not want to be associated with them (e.g., as table or team mates). Very often, students who do not do gender like the others (whether or not they come to understand themselves as transgender) are in the latter group. Monitoring how students react to each other when, for example, you group students together for an activity, is a powerful way to see how gender is operating in your classroom. This sort of classroom power dynamic analysis can help you recognize a pattern of gender expression discrimination, which can look like what many teachers might think of as frivolous conflict.

6. Position students as active participants in creating and sustaining your community. Gegi recommends that teachers interested in welcoming and sustaining gender diversity integrate mindfulness practices into their classroom routine, and establish restorative conflict resolution practices, so that students can learn to articulate needs and boundaries in a positive way. This work might include working with students to create agreements about your classroom community, including themes of basic respect for others as well as an openness toward topics and ideas with which students (and perhaps you as the teacher) are not yet familiar, or that make them uncomfortable. What does this have to do with gender, you say? Well, learning to recognize and take care of one’s discomfort in a positive way helps one to react neutrally to information one did not expect, gender-wise, from others. And setting boundaries about one’s personal space, and expressing this positively, is a hop-skip-and-jump away from articulating one’s pronouns, gendered interests, or preferred name.

7. Notice and change the language you use. Using gender-inclusive language (e.g., students or children instead of boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, etc.) indicates your expectation that students will arrive who are doing gender in unexpected ways, or that a student’s gender is not the most important way in which they exist or interact within your classroom. In some situations this may also mean not assuming the gender of a student and assigning them he or she gender pronouns without getting to know them and how they refer to themselves (you can also start saying ‘themselves’ instead of ‘themselves,’ which is one way in which Standard English is mainstreaming singular they/them as a personal pronoun of reference). You can also start ‘hedging’ blanket statements about women, men, boys, and girls (e.g., “some women have breasts and a uterus,” where *some* is the hedge). Lastly, you can simply do these things, or you can *not* do them ‘by accident’ and then ‘correct yourself’ in order to make them visible to students in a teachable moment about our changing world of gender.

8. Practice using gender-neutral pronouns *before* you have a student who has gender-neutral personal pronouns. A growing number of younger transgender people have gender-neutral personal pronouns, most likely singular they/them (e.g., “Lee is getting their lunch but will be back in a second”), which reflects a nonbinary understanding of one’s gender: as neither neatly man *or* woman, boy *or* girl. If you have not already encountered a nonbinary student in your school, you will. Getting

ready means practicing singular they/them in advance. You already do this for a single individual you do not know (e.g., “FedEx came by, but I don’t know where they left my package,” where ‘they’ refers to the driver). Begin consciously using they/them to refer to people who you *do* know, but for whom gender is irrelevant to the topic at hand. Replace ‘he or she’ with ‘they’ in everyday speech and written communication. There is much more pronoun support in Dr. Lee Airton’s book *Gender: Your Guide*.

9. Make space for *every* student’s relationship with their gender to be voiced and explored (whether they are transgender or not). Gender norms are a source of anxiety for all students at one time or another, including cisgender (non-transgender) boys and girls. It is common for all young people to live or express their gender differently from parent or community standards, or to question whether and how they want to participate in their community’s gendered milestones or traditions. Every girl or woman’s degree and experience of femininity will fluctuate across time, and the same is true of boys and men in terms of masculinity. Creating opportunities for *all* students to talk about gender, to think about and share what they love or don’t love or don’t care about being a girl or a boy, for example, takes the heat off transgender and gender non-conforming students when gender topics come up. Don’t position the latter as ‘the experts’ on transgender people, whether by calling on them or making meaningful eye contact. Rather, let them decide when and how to participate.

10. Practice articulating that one of your legal responsibilities is mitigating gender-based discrimination in your classroom and school. In Ontario and other Canadian provinces and territories, creating a learning environment free from discrimination on the grounds of gender expression and gender identity is part of your job. In fact, doing otherwise would not be doing your job. While *how* you exercise this responsibility is a matter of your professional judgment, taking into account who your learners are and what they bring with them, welcoming gender diversity is part of your professional and legal responsibility (assuming you teach in a publicly-funded school). To the best of your ability, enter difficult conversations at work with an ‘of course,’ i.e., of course we are on the same page here, and this is all of our legal responsibility. Locating and quoting from your (Ontario) school board’s relevant policy documents (catalogued at gegi.ca) is a complementary strategy.

11. Defend your gender diversity-affirmative practices through connection, not polarization. Something many teachers find useful is walking beside parents (etc.) who are struggling with gender diversity-affirmative teaching; this happens when you situate this practice as one of many similar ways in which you support your students and their families. Be ready to offer concrete examples of how your classroom practices directly support students in other aspects of who they are (e.g., language spoken, faith, ethnicity, ability), particularly those of the parents (etc.) who have come to you concerned. This care you offer them is just as much a part of your job as the care you are offering to students and families whose ways of doing gender exceed many people’s expectations.



About gegi.ca

gegi.ca is an Ontario-based online knowledge mobilization hub about gender expression and gender identity human rights protections and advocacy created by Dr. Lee Airton (Faculty of Education, Queen’s University), Dr. Kyle Kirkup (Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa) and their research team. For more information, visit www.gegi.ca/about.