

GRADES K-5

CREATING SAFE AND WELCOMING CLASSROOMS FOR LGBTQ+ STUDENTS

SCOTT SUNDSTROM

HEINEMANN | PORTSMOUTH, NH

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Acknowledgments continue on page 139.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sundstrom, Scott author

Title: Creating safe and welcoming classrooms for LGBTQ+ students / Scott Sundstrom.

Description: Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann, [2026] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2026004737 (print) | LCCN 2026004738 (ebook) | ISBN 9798202097409 paperback | ISBN 9798202194689 epub | ISBN 9798202194689 adobe pdf

Subjects: LCSH: Sexual minority students—United States | Sexual minority children—Education—United States | Education and state—United States | Multicultural education—United States | Inclusive education—United States

Classification: LCC LC2574 .S86 2026 (print) | LCC LC2574 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026004737>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026004738>

Printed in the USA

ISBN-13: 979-8-202-09740-9

r6.26
4500935262

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To the teachers holding
this book—thank you for
creating safer, more inclusive
classrooms. Your courage and
commitment save lives.





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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this book has been both a challenge and a rewarding experience. While I strongly believe that queer lives will continue to get better, we are also living through a time of tremendous pushback against LGBTQ+ people—a time when the queer community has once again been scapegoated and villainized in political rhetoric, legislation, and media. And yet, despite being portrayed as a threat, it is *we* who live in fear for our safety, our rights, and our futures. Each day brings new uncertainty about which law or court ruling will attempt to strip away more of our humanity.

Because of this, I have felt a wide array of emotions each time I've sat down to write this book. But as I type these words, I am left with hope.

Hope that queer lives will continue to get better.

That hope comes from the dozens of educators, school administrators, advocates, community members, and young people I have connected with along this journey—queer people and allies alike who have sought to create a safer and more inclusive world for everyone. You have put courage and commitment over discomfort to advocate for the young people in your care.

There are so many people to acknowledge and thank for making this book possible.

To Tobey Antao, my editor: I feel so lucky to have gotten the opportunity to work with you. This book turned out quite different than we both anticipated, and I couldn't have made it a success without you. Your attention, care, and dedication to this book went far beyond my expectations. Your wisdom, compassion, and teacher-centered outlook made this project come to life. I looked forward to our weekly check-ins, because I always left feeling grounded, confident, and inspired to keep moving forward. Thank you for believing in me and helping make this the best book it could be. Truly, you are the best.

To Lisa Fowler: If you hadn't taken the time to meet with me for an informational interview, none of this would have been possible. Thank you for introducing me to Tobey.

To my family for always loving and supporting me.

To my parents, Jack and Traci: You've been the greatest role models. I try to emulate your service-minded outlook on life every single day. You make everyone's lives around you better.

To my sisters, Maggie and Jenna, and my brother-in-law, Ben: You are staunch allies of the LGBTQ+ community and some of my greatest supporters.

To my late grandfather, Ken, a career teacher: I strive to be as strong an advocate for young people as you were.

To my mentors at the University of Minnesota—J.B. Mayo Jr., Keitha-Gail Martin-Kerr, Jehanne Beaton, and Jana LoBello Miller: You challenged my thinking and helped me become a better thinker, writer, and educator. I wouldn't have pursued this book project without your guidance and encouragement.

To Laurie Hahn Ganser, mother scholar and dear friend: From the moment we met in graduate school, I knew that we'd be instant friends, writing buddies, thought partners, and steady encouragers of each other's work. You are the kind of teacher I aspire to be. I hope we get the opportunity to write together again.

To Jill Hermann-Wilmarth and Caitlin Ryan, two seminal scholars in the field of LGBTQ-inclusive practices in the elementary classroom: I am grateful for your work and have

learned so much from your writing, practice, and leadership in the field. Your work has no doubt impacted thousands of LGBTQ+ students across the country.

To the Heinemann team—Amanda Bondi, Kim Cahill, Sarah Fournier, Tessa Hathaway, Victoria Merecki, Kelsey Roy, Elizabeth Silvis, Jaime Spaulding, Roderick Spelman, Dave Stockdale, Catrina Swasey, and Brett Whitmarsh: Thank you for believing in this project and helping bring it into the world.

To the LGBTQ+ organizations whose advocacy work saves lives—Glisten, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), The Trevor Project, GLAAD, Transgender Law Center, and the ACLU of Minnesota—thank you for your tireless efforts. I'm honored to have connected with you during the writing of this book.

To the teachers included in this book: Thank you for creating safe and inclusive learning environments and for affirming LGBTQ+ students. I've learned so much from your teaching practices and am continually inspired by your work. This book came to life because of what you do in your classrooms every day.

To you, the reader: Thank you for taking the time to engage with this work. I hope it supports, challenges, and inspires you in your efforts toward creating safer and more inclusive classrooms and affirming LGBTQ+ students.

And, finally, to John, my calm and steady supporter: This book is for you.



LETTER TO TEACHERS

Recently, I was having dinner with a group of close friends when the conversation turned to our experiences in elementary school. Everyone at the table could recall a teacher who had made them feel seen and accepted. One friend spoke about a teacher who celebrated her love of sports and never questioned her choice to play with the boys at recess. Another remembered a teacher who defended him when other kids made cruel and demeaning comments. Mine was my third-grade teacher, who fostered my love of reading and writing and always had a book at the ready for me. As a gay educator myself, I know how powerful it is to have just one adult who creates space for your authentic self. These weren't dramatic interventions—they were small, steady acts of inclusion that left lasting impressions.

What struck me most was how vividly we all remembered these moments, decades later. These teachers probably had no idea how their teaching practices would leave such a positive, lasting impression on all of us. But for each of us, having just one adult who created space for our authentic selves made all the difference.

Yet as we shared these stories, I couldn't help but think about the students who have never had that teacher—particularly

LGBTQ+ youth, many of whom spend their school years feeling invisible, unsafe, or ashamed. The contrast bothers me: Some children leave school with memories of being celebrated for who they are, while others carry wounds from years of hiding essential parts of themselves.

I reflect on my early years as an educator, when I believed good intentions were enough—that simply wanting to create inclusive classrooms would protect and affirm LGBTQ+ students. Like many teachers, I worried about saying the wrong thing or overstepping boundaries. But I’ve learned that silence often speaks louder than words, and good intentions without action rarely help marginalized students. I’ve since shifted my work to prioritize LGBTQ+ student safety and affirmation, discovering that meaningful change starts with small, deliberate steps that build our capacity for transformation.

For the past several years, I’ve had the privilege of working directly in schools, training teachers and helping districts develop policies that better support LGBTQ+ students. This work has shown me both the power of inclusive practices and the dedication of educators committed to creating safe spaces for all their students.

The memories my friends and I shared that evening stand in stark contrast to the reality many LGBTQ+ students face today. While we reminisced about teachers who affirmed us, attacks on queer youth continue to intensify across the country. I’ve found myself responding to harmful rhetoric with frustration: *That is not what that means! Queer people are not recruiting or grooming young people. This is about support. This is about protection.*

Queer youth face disproportionately higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide. At the same time, research shows how just one affirming adult can drastically reduce those risks. That adult can be a teacher.

I had one of those teachers—and I remember.

That’s why this work matters.

I don’t mean to sound alarmist, but I do mean to be clear: **This work saves lives.** Creating safer, more inclusive classrooms—and affirming LGBTQ+ kids—saves lives. When young people feel

seen, valued, and safe to be themselves, it reduces the isolation, fear, and shame that can lead to depression and suicide. According to The Trevor Project® (2023a) LGBTQ+ youth who have access to affirming schools are 37 percent less likely to attempt suicide. And having just one accepting adult in their life—whether at school, home, or elsewhere—lowers that risk by 40 percent.

And like many queer people from my generation and before, I can't help but think: Wouldn't it have been incredible to grow up as our full, true, authentic selves? If queerness had been normalized, we wouldn't have had to wait until adulthood to come out of the closet.

We could have just lived.

The slogan "It gets better" shouldn't have to be necessary because queer people shouldn't have to wait for adulthood for things to get better. I don't want young people to have to wait. I want them to be seen—especially those who live at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities: queer students of color, transgender and nonbinary youth, and others whose experiences are too often erased or misunderstood.

We cannot ignore where we are right now. In this moment, queer existence is under threat in many ways. As I sit down to write this letter, the landscape continues to shift, and often in ways that feel increasingly hostile.

The purpose of this book is to counter that, to help create classrooms where LGBTQ+ youth are affirmed, seen, valued, and celebrated. And this isn't just about LGBTQ+ students—when we create these inclusive spaces, *every* child benefits. Affirming LGBTQ+ students

- creates safer, more supportive learning environments for all students
- models respect, empathy, and kindness toward all identities
- supports mental health and reduces anxiety for all
- encourages all children to be authentic and confident in who they are
- prepares students to thrive in a diverse and inclusive society.

In the chapters ahead, you'll find practical strategies, reflective questions, real classroom examples, and insights from educators

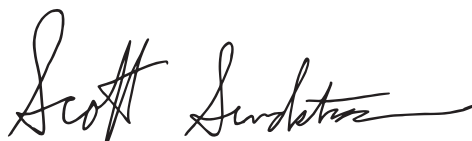
doing this work every day. This book is meant to be both a resource and a companion—something you can return to as you grow your practice and deepen your commitment to creating safe and inclusive classrooms and to affirming LGBTQ+ students.

I am grateful that you have chosen to pick up this book and join me on this journey. You're here because you care—about your students, about justice, and about creating a better world for everyone. Whether you're just starting or have been doing the work for years, I hope this book offers something meaningful for you.

I'll end with this: Every small step you take to affirm LGBTQ+ students makes a difference. As an educator, you hold power—the power to shape a classroom where every child feels seen, valued, and safe. You have the agency to lead with compassion, to challenge injustice, and to build something better. You can be the teacher a student remembers, reminiscing with friends around the dinner table—recounting what you did to affirm them.

You don't have to do this alone; there's a community ready to support you. Thank you for showing up, for being willing to grow, and for taking this journey with me.

Let's get to work, together.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Scott Sordet". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

CHAPTER 3

DISRUPTIVE TINKERING

SMALL SHIFTS THAT MOVE CLASSROOMS TOWARD INCLUSIVITY

Now that we've seen how heteronormativity can harm students in schools, you may be thinking, *What's next? What do I do with my students? How can I get better at interrupting and disrupting heteronormativity in my teaching?* You might feel excited to make changes and jump right in; you may even be looking forward to partnering with a colleague to plan together. On the other hand, you might be feeling overwhelmed or anxious about trying something new, worried that things could go wrong. Or maybe you find yourself somewhere in between. Whatever you're feeling is completely okay. What matters is that you are here, with this book in your hands, ready to create a more inclusive classroom for all your students.

This is an important first step.

And now, the work begins—gradually, intentionally, and with a lot of heart.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide examples of how to disrupt heteronormativity by introducing inclusive alternatives through *disruptive tinkering*. These small shifts in language, student grouping, partnerships, and classroom practices are a starting point for creating a safer, more inclusive environment for all students. In the next chapter, “Building New Pathways to Increase Inclusivity,” we’ll explore strategies that require more intentional

planning and deeper reflection. Together, these approaches will help you not only disrupt heteronormativity but also create a space where all students feel seen, valued, and respected.

In my experience working with teachers, I know that some changes will be easier to make than others. I also know that this is an ongoing process of teaching, reflecting, and refining. There are ups and downs. Moments of two steps forward and one step back. It can be messy and complex. For many of us, our teaching practices and procedures—the classroom policies and classroom management choices that shape our days—are an amalgamation of our experiences as students, our personal experiences, our professional learning, and insights gained from mentors—all things that can feel central to who we are as teachers. You do not need to implement all the ideas in this chapter all at once—that is not the intent: No one can do something new perfectly from the start. Instead, as you read, think of a handful of things that you could start doing in your classroom tomorrow.

As a teacher, I know that you have a lot on your plate: multiple subjects to prep for. Another staff meeting after school. A never-ending list of emails to respond to . . . and now this book calls for even more to do!

I get it.

Really, I do.

So, rather than asking you to do something entirely new, let's try a few simple replacements, switching out a current practice with a more inclusive alternative. This chapter will focus on a few areas in which I often see heteronormativity at work in classrooms: the language we use when we talk to and about students and their families, the ways in which we call on students, and the ways in which we group students and assign seats, as well as color coding by gender, managing uniforms and dress codes, determining bathroom policies, and using curriculum.

As you read, you may find that some alternatives are already part of your practice, while others may be new ideas to try with your students. If, as you're reading, you see that a practice that you've been using could be causing harm, be gentle with yourself. This isn't about exposing or embarrassing you but about finding

DISRUPTIVE TINKERING

Borrowing from Jon Wargo's (2019) ideas on "tinkering" and Kevin Kumashiro's (2000) ideas on "disruptive education," **disruptive tinkering** is a way to make small but meaningful shifts to inclusivity. It means tweaking or adjusting routines to interrupt gender binaries, challenge what is considered "normal," and disrupt the status quo.

opportunities for being more inclusive and creating a safer, more welcoming environment for all students.

THE LANGUAGE WE USE TO TALK TO AND ABOUT STUDENTS

“Language, which plays a central role in human cognition and behavior, is one of the most common mechanisms by which gender is constructed and reinforced. The words that people use to describe others or objects are often unintentionally but unquestionably based in implicit cultural biases, including biases that privilege the gender binary.” (NCTE 2018)

—NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

As a literacy consultant, I traveled throughout the upper Midwest and visited many, many elementary classrooms. Part of my job involved conducting walk-throughs, where I moved from classroom to classroom, silently observing the teacher as they instructed. Afterward, we discussed the lesson, celebrating the positives and collaborating on ways to improve. Although the teachers differed from classroom to classroom, school to school, and district to district—whether I was in a rural district in northern Wisconsin, a suburban district near Chicago, or an urban district in Minneapolis—I often heard teachers refer to their elementary-aged students as “boys and girls.” Regardless of the background of the teacher, in many classrooms, I heard something along the lines of the following:

- “Now, boys and girls, as I read, I’d like you to notice where I pause.”
- “Okay, boys and girls, will you please quietly grab your book box and begin your reading job?”
- “Shh—boys and girls, let’s try to be at a voice volume two when we are reading with our partners.”

In my head, I always picture the great circus ringmaster at the beginning of the performance yelling out to the crowd, “Ladies

and gentlemen, boys and girls, children of all ages. Step right up!” This phrasing is ingrained in our culture when addressing young people, so it’s understandable that we often hear it in classrooms. Unfortunately, it draws students’ attention to gender, and it may lead students to believe that there really are significant, identity-defining differences between boys and girls that assign them a role in life. According to psychologist and researcher Dr. Rebecca Bigler (2005), “when teachers use noun labels rather than adjectives to describe any group of people—girls, Native Americans, Catholics—children are likely to believe the people in that group share meaningful and unseen characteristics. That, then, is how the seeds of stereotyping are planted.”

“A challenge I face is catching myself in old habits, like saying ‘boys and girls,’ which can be harmful, so then adjusting to say ‘kindergarteners’ instead.”

—AMY COOPER, KINDERGARTEN TEACHER

The same issue arises when we use the words *mom* and *dad* instinctively when referring to the adults who are raising the children in our care. Early in my teaching career, at the start of the school year, I asked students in my reading class to practice a paired fluency reading exercise at home. I don’t recall exactly what I said, but it was something like: “Tonight, ask your mom or dad to sit down with you for ten minutes to practice your fluency, speed, and accuracy.”

Immediately, a student’s hand shot up, and I called on him.

“What if we don’t have a dad?” he said matter-of-factly.

I paused for a moment and then replied, “Oh, that’s all right, ask your mom.”

“Moms,” he corrected. “I have two.”

I had assumed that every student in my classroom had a mom and a dad. In doing so, I was unconsciously perpetuating heteronormative assumption about what families “should” look like—perhaps the white mom and dad, two kids, and a dog that dominate the literature, movies, TV shows, and commercials children encounter every day. I didn’t even consider the fact that if I ever have children, they will have a dad and a dad! And, of

LGBTQ+ young people are significantly less likely to have thoughts of suicide when they are called by their chosen name and correct pronouns (The Trevor Project 2019).

Yet . . .

Fewer than 1 in 6 (15.6%) transgender and gender expansive youth are always referred to by the correct pronoun at school. (HRC Foundation 2023).

and

Only 1 in 3 (37.9%) transgender and gender expansive youth report that others “always” use their correct name. (HRC Foundation 2023).

course, there were many other students in my classroom who didn't have both—or only—a mom and a dad at home. Some were raised by grandparents, others by a single parent, several by stepparents, and one by two moms. I also had students in foster care and students with a parent who was absent for long stretches because of military service. My students came from a variety of family structures. I had simply defaulted to language I had heard my teachers use growing up, and my student—thankfully!—interrupted this practice.

Heteronormativism also emerges in how we talk to students based on their gender. For example, a boy skins his knee and starts to cry. The teacher says, “Toughen up. You’re all right.” The same thing happens to a girl, and the teacher rushes over, asks, “Are you all right?” and puts on a bandage. In another situation, a teacher compliments a boy and a girl for doing the same thing but praises them differently. The teacher says, “Johnny is being a leader” and “Suzy is being kind.” It’s true that individual differences between children might merit these differences in responses in some cases: Perhaps Johnny rarely takes leadership roles, for example, or Suzy is not often demonstratively kind, and the teacher is trying to encourage these signs of growth. However, the patterns I see most often are responses that reify gender expectations.

Heteronormative practices also appear in how we teach pronouns and refer to people. For example, strict adherence to *he* or *she* when referring to a singular, neutral person, emphasizes the gender binary and makes individuals who might go by *they/them* pronouns invisible.

Another custom—often subtle and unnoticed—is the use of *he* as the universal pronoun. Past generations were taught to default to the masculine pronoun *he* when referring to a singular, neutral person—as advised in Strunk and White’s (1999) *The Elements of Style*. For example, in the sentence “Every lawyer should bring *his* briefcase.”

What do we learn about lawyers in this sentence?

That they carry briefcases. And that they’re *men*.

“I had a student who was gender fluid a few years ago and it got me thinking about how I addressed my students. I have a ladybug theme in my classroom and thought of calling my

students ‘lovebugs,’ which is mostly the way I address them now. I also use ‘first graders.’ These ways are inclusive of all my students, and using ‘lovebugs’ centers on positivity and connection, which is something I try to give to all my students.”

—NICOLA DERRYBERRY MAURER, FIRST-GRADE TEACHER

Good Morning Lovebugs,

Today is Wednesday. You will go to the library for media. I am looking forward to meeting with your grown ups tonight and tomorrow! I love talking about all the GREAT things you are doing!

Love,
Mrs. Derryberry

Language in Your Classroom

Take a moment to reflect on how your current language practices might reinforce heteronormativity. Consider answering these questions to get started:

- How do you address your students? Do you refer to them as *boys and girls*? Do you call a gender-diverse group of students *guys*?
- How do you refer to parents/families/caregivers? Do you refer to them as *mom and dad*?
- Does the language you use with students differ based on their gender? If so, how?
- Do students have an opportunity to express what they would like to be called? Are students given a chance to share their pronouns if they wish to do so? If so, how?
- When you provide examples to your students, what pronouns do you default to or use most often? Do you use the pronouns that students use for themselves? Do you find yourself using *he* as a universal pronoun?

Disruptive Tinkering in Language

Inclusive language is essential for the well-being not only of gender-expansive students but for *all* students. Using inclusive language cultivates a welcoming environment where students perceive that their different identities, backgrounds, and home lives are respected and valued in the classroom, and that they belong.

Ellen Isaacs, a kindergarten teacher, told me recently that a former student of hers—now a third grader—has decided to go by *they/them* pronouns. This student visits Ellen every morning before the school day starts because they see Ellen as a trusted adult. Ellen built a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment, and

Disney®—to be more inclusive—changed the introductory greeting of the Magic Kingdom® Happily Ever After™ fireworks show from “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, dreamers of all ages” to “Good evening, dreamers of all ages” (Thomas 2022). This small but significant change reflects how many organizations are on their own journeys to becoming more inclusive of all people.

this student remembers. I give this example because while you might not have a student who comes out to you when they are a student of yours, you may still have gender-expansive students in your classroom. Using inclusive language in your teaching shows students you care about them and their identity matters.

A 2018 study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that transgender youth who could use correct names and pronouns experienced fewer depressive symptoms and less suicidal thoughts (Russell et al. 2018). That said, never force students to reveal their pronouns. Instead, create an environment that signals to students that it is a safe place to share if they so choose. If you happen to make a mistake and misgender a student, correct yourself, apologize, and move on. Katherine Locke's (2021) picture book *What Are Your Words?* can be used to anchor conversations about pronouns.

When you model how to ask people what they are called and what pronouns they go by, you make this an ordinary practice for your students when they meet someone new. You can also model for your students what to do when you make a mistake, because sometimes we might refer to someone by the wrong name or use the wrong pronoun.

To reiterate: When you make a mistake, correct yourself, apologize, and move on. And when students make a mistake, don't make it punitive; instead, use it as a learning opportunity.

First and foremost, use the names and pronouns that students tell you they want to be addressed by. You have probably heard in the news or seen on social media the recent attention surrounding using inclusive language (specifically *they/them* pronouns) with young people. It has been treated as a political issue. In truth, it is a safety issue: Calling children by their chosen name and using their correct pronouns (I say *correct* instead of *preferred* as *preferred* implies flexibility) literally saves lives. LGBTQ+ young people are significantly less likely to have thoughts of suicide when they are called by their chosen name and correct pronouns (The Trevor Project 2019). Unfortunately, only one in five middle school—and high school—aged gender-expansive students said that their teachers did this (HRC Foundation 2023).

“Respecting a person’s pronouns is one way to provide a protective, inclusive space, promote well-being and reduce their risk of suicide by helping them feel like they belong.”

—MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH (2022)

And, finally, let’s consider alternatives to the universal *he/him*. I have heard teachers replacing *his* with *her* to challenge gender-based stereotypes. So, when applied to the previous example, the teacher would say, “Every lawyer should bring *her* briefcase.” In some cases, I’ve even heard people trying to use the awkward construction *his or her*. But why do we need to assign the masculine or feminine (or both)? Why can’t we simply say *them* instead?

I know, I know—I can hear grammar-minded people saying, “But, wait, that’s not grammatically correct! I’ve checked *The Elements of Style*, and *they* cannot be used for a singular pronoun.” You can rest assured that the singular *they* is no longer universally restricted. In 2017, *The Associated Press*® *Stylebook* began permitting the use of singular *they* (Easton 2017), and the American Psychological Association® followed suit in 2020, when it released the seventh edition of its *Publication Manual*. With this guidance in mind, our sentence becomes, “Every lawyer should bring *their* briefcase.”

It’s easy—in theory—to make these changes. After all, it’s just using one word instead of another, right? In reality, you might catch yourself slipping back into saying *boys and girls*, *mom and dad*, and the universal *he*. Instead of being hard on yourself, try to catch yourself in the moment and address your students again with a more inclusive alternative (see page 40 for some suggestions).

ALTERNATIVE WORDING

When you're trying to make a shift in language, it can be helpful to have alternative wording at the ready. To avoid using *boys and girls* or *ladies and gentlemen*, you might try . . .

Kindergarteners
(or Second
Graders or
Fourth Graders)

Mathematicians

Scientists

Scholars

Friends

Readers

Class

To avoid referring to the adults who are raising your students only as *mom and dad*, you might try . . .

Grown-Ups

Who-takes-care-
of-you-at-home

Guardians

Raisin' (the
person "raising"
a child)

Your adult(s)

THE WAY WE CALL ON STUDENTS

"I use sticks with students' names on them to call on students during class. It keeps everyone on their toes because they know they might be called on at any time. It also helps me make sure

I'm hearing from a mix of students each day, not just the ones who always raise their hands."

—NATE KNAPP-VASQUEZ, FIFTH-GRADE TEACHER

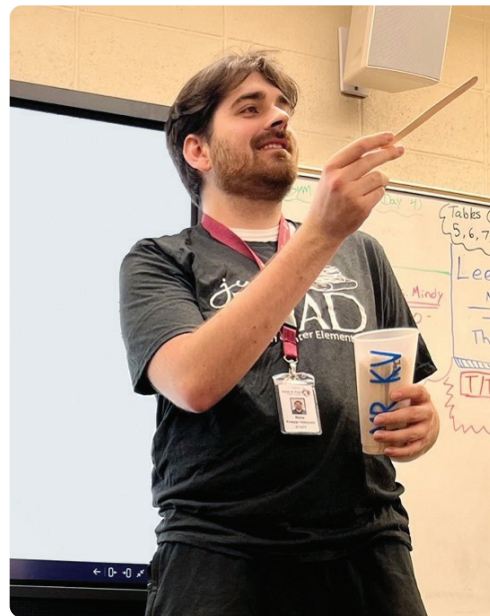
We have known for decades that the way we call on students matters. Over the last thirty years, several studies have examined student participation in elementary classrooms, and researchers have found similar results: teachers call on boys more than girls (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation 1992; Duffy et al. 2001; Musto 2019; Sadker et al. 2009). One twenty-year study showed elementary boys received eight times more classroom attention than girls! When boys called out without raising their hands, teachers listened. But when the girls did the same thing, they were told not to speak without raising their hands. Furthermore, teachers tend to compliment boys more than girls for answering *correctly*, but criticize girls more than boys for answering *incorrectly* (Delamont 1996; Golombok and Fivush 1994).

The ways in which we call on students can also perpetuate heteronormativity, whether we call on them individually to answer questions and share their opinions or collectively to engage in lessons. For example, individually, it might look like this:

- The teacher pauses during a science experiment and asks for a volunteer. Multiple hands shoot up—they're all boys'. The teacher calls on one of them to assist.
- George, Topher, and Samuel have been doing well, but Mr. King notices they've become restless, fidgeting on the carpet. During the reading lesson, he calls on them multiple times, hoping to keep them engaged and on task.
- Ms. Chu realizes she's been calling on boys more than girls, so she decides to alternate, calling on a boy, then a girl, throughout the class.

And, collectively, it might look like this:

- "Will the boys please count by twos while the girls listen?"



Nate Knapp-Vasquez uses name sticks to determine which student to call on next.

- “I’d like the girls to read this sentence together. Boys, listen and see if they’re reading smoothly and correctly.”
- “Boys, you can quietly return to your seats and start your reading job. All right, girls, it’s your turn to transition.”

While these methods of calling on students aren’t uncommon in classrooms, they are harmful. Specifically, they reinforce the gender binary by signaling to students that one belongs in a distinct category: either boy or girl. They perpetuate gender-based stereotypes, suggesting that boys and girls are naturally inclined toward certain behaviors—boys are perceived as restless and active, thus needing to be managed, while girls are perceived as more passive and cooperative. They socialize children into heteronormative roles, upholding gendered expectations about how boys and girls should behave, look, and take on specific responsibilities. They also implicitly exclude nonbinary or gender nonconforming students.

Calling on Students in Your Classroom

As you think about how you call on students in your classroom, ask yourself:

- How do I decide who to call on in class, and when?
- Do I call on a variety of students to contribute?
- Are there students who tend to dominate lessons and discussions? If so, who are they?
- Are there certain tasks or types of questions that I tend to call on girls for? on boys?

Disruptive Tinkering When Calling on Students

Rethinking how we call on students can create a more inclusive learning environment. It can not only interrupt the gender binary and challenge gender-based stereotypes, but also reduce anxiety, encourage more participation, and ensure all voices have an opportunity to be heard. Consider trying the following strategies:

- pulling sticks to have students respond but giving them the option to “pass” if they do not want to answer

- having your students turn and talk, listening in to what they have to say, and then calling on students who you know have a strong response to the question to share with the whole group
- giving more wait time to allow all students to process the question. Over time, you'll notice more students feeling comfortable raising their hands to participate.

HOW WE GROUP STUDENTS AND ASSIGN SEATS

“Norms perpetuate gender expectations and assumptions that might not actually be true. That spirit of inquiry that brings us to scholarship and teaching can be easily stifled by textbooks—and instructors—who fail to question assumptions. The discourses of heteronormativity that pervade our lives and studies need to be challenged continually.” (in Farrell et al. 2004, 18)

—SUSAN ADAMS DELANEY, PROFESSOR OF ACADEMIC WRITING, ITHACA COLLEGE

As educators, we spend a lot of time and energy deciding things like where students should sit on the carpet, where their desks should be, and how they should line up to leave the classroom. And, unless we're careful, these decisions could implicitly uphold heteronormativity. Let me share a few stories to illustrate this.

I am a rule follower. I always have been. My mom shares stories of how in preschool I constantly told on peers who colored outside the lines. Yes, I was that child. In school, I had a very difficult time when my peers did not follow directions, and I still remember my second-grade class because my teacher spent a lot of time having us practice walking in a line. We had to practice until we were perfect.

Eyes forward, mouth silent, quiet walking feet.

I can still hear my second-grade teacher saying “Will all the boys please line up? Show us that you can join the line quickly, quietly, and safely. Let's see if you can do that.”

We tried but often failed.

“Ah, close, but a few of you were talking and not joining the line safely. Please sit back down. Will the girls now try? See if you can do it. Remember the three things we are working on—eyes forward, mouth silent, and quiet walking feet. Go ahead.”

Almost every time the girls would do this perfectly, joining the line just as the teacher expected.

“Well done! Now the boys try again.”

We—the boys—would have to go through this process repeatedly until we could finally get it.

I walked away from this experience with two key takeaways.

One, that girls are obedient and quiet and do as they are told the first time, and that boys are assertive and loud and need multiple attempts to do something right.

And, two, that I felt like I belonged in the girl group. I followed the rules and did what I was told, yet I was still lumped into the boy group. I didn’t understand why we had to be separated by gender. At the time, I wondered, *Wouldn’t it make more sense for those who didn’t follow the three expectations to practice until they did it correctly?*

Today, my questions are different: *Why would we want to control children’s bodies by telling them exactly what to do with their eyes, mouths, and feet?* and *Why did we need two lines at all?* Perhaps this routine of lining up in boy and girl lines is to prepare students to get ready for another gendered place—the student bathrooms. Or perhaps it’s because it has become so embedded in elementary teaching that we don’t even think twice about it. Whatever the case, lining up in boy and girl lines reinforces gendered expectations and draws attention to the gender binary, therefore upholding heteronormativity.

Let me give you another example. This one is from a classroom I visited recently.

The teacher, who I’ll call Ms. Taylor, wraps up the whole-group literacy lesson and moves to the kidney-shaped table, where she’s neatly organized the reading materials for each of the three small groups she’ll meet with today. She calls her first group to the table, and five girls silently join her. She hands out copies of the novel, and the girls begin reading quietly. After every few pages, they pause to jot down something that resonates with them on a sticky

note. Ms. Taylor then guides them in a thoughtful discussion about what they've read. Once their small group ends, the girls return to their desks. Ms. Taylor calls her next group, and a few boys hurriedly take the girls' place at the table. Ms. Taylor takes a deep breath and slides a one-page passage in front of them.

What do students learn from this? Girls excel at reading; boys do not.

After lunch, it's math time, and today Ms. Taylor's students will rotate through workstations. She returns to the kidney-shaped table, sets out whiteboards, markers, and erasers, and calls her first group to join her—five boys. They rush to the table, eager to grab their markers, then tap them impatiently on the boards. Ms. Taylor hands them a series of two-digit multiplication problems, and they race through each one. Eyebrows furrowed and lips pressed together, the boys' markers glide smoothly across the whiteboards. Before they realize it, fifteen minutes have passed.

"Time's up! Rotate," Ms. Taylor says.

The boys move to an independent task, and a group of girls join Ms. Taylor at the table.

This time, the girls appear reluctant.

One bites her nails.

Another glances around the room.

A third's shoulders slump.

"All right, let's review our multiplication facts. I know these have been tricky, but we will keep practicing," Ms. Taylor says.

What do students learn from this? Boys excel at math; girls do not.

Sometimes these groupings just happen—all-boy groups and all-girl groups. In Ms. Taylor's classroom, the groupings were based on student performance, not gender. But here lies the problem: If we keep separating boys and girls into different reading and math groups, the idea that girls excel at reading and boys excel at math becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. In addition, ability grouping—or even perceived ability grouping—is problematic because marginalized students are more likely to be placed in "lower" groups. Once placed there, they often remain in these groups and receive less-rigorous instruction. This not only hurts motivation but also furthers a fixed mindset about ability. In contrast, mixed-ability grouping encourages collaboration and

peer modeling of strategies and skills, and leads to richer, more inclusive classroom experiences for everyone.

The practice of separating boys and girls into different groups reinforces gender-based stereotypes and adherence to traditional gender roles. It communicates to young people that boys are more suited to jobs that require being strong in math—data science, engineering, and accounting work—and that girls are more suited to jobs that require being strong in reading—teaching, public relations, and administrative work. These ideas become normalized from an early age, and many young people fall into these socialized patterns. In 2020, the Boston Consulting Group® reported that women make up just 15 to 22 percent of data scientists, while a 2023 National Center for Education Statistics report revealed that only 11 percent of elementary school teachers are male. Teachers’ expectations about and attitudes toward gender shape students’ career perceptions, often leading them to follow paths that align with traditional gender stereotypes.

The most frightening part of the way that children are often sorted by gender is that it’s often unintentional. As a classroom teacher, I spent hours mapping out seating arrangements. I’d take a blank sheet of paper, sketch boxes to represent each student’s desk or carpet spot, and then write, erase, and rewrite multiple times, trying to find the configuration that would enhance student engagement and participation while reducing off-task behavior. I’d find myself having thoughts like these:

- “Brody, Max, and Kevin must all be near the front.”
- “Lily, Savannah, and Grace can be in the back—they don’t need as much support.”
- “That’s not going to work. I can’t have that many boys seated next to each other.”
- “Maybe I should alternate boy/girl, so the boys don’t distract each other, but would the boys and girls work well together?”
- “I will try Sarah next to Dylan. She’s always on task and can keep him engaged and provide support when needed.”

See what I did?

I had fallen into the trap of overemphasizing gender in my decision-making. It wasn't intentional, but in placing students into a seating arrangement that I thought would increase student participation and lessen off-task behavior, I defaulted to gender as one of the major determining factors. I should have been thinking about what else I knew about my students that would help me decide where I should place them:

- “Brody, Lily, and Sarah prefer quiet, calm workspaces.”
- “Only Kevin and Dylan need to be separated—not *all* boys.”
- “Savannah and Andrew are reading at similar levels.”

Once I stopped stressing gender when creating seating arrangements, I noticed an improvement in student engagement. Students were more on task because I focused on factors that directly related to student participation, engagement, and performance.

Finally, the use of boy/girl/boy/girl seating arrangements to reduce talking in class deserves special mention here. When we place students into seats that alternate binary genders with the belief that it will reduce distractions, we're saying that gender is binary. We're also saying that students talk only to those who share the same gender identity. Instead, consider focusing on classroom culture, clear expectations, and consistent routines to minimize off-task behavior in more inclusive and effective ways.

Glisten (formerly known as GLSEN) and Harris Interactive Inc.'s *Playgrounds and Prejudice* (2012) reported that one in eight students did not conform to “traditional” gender roles, and that these children faced more hostile learning environments than their peers.

Grouping Students and Assigning Seats in Your Classroom

Take a moment to reflect on how your current classroom and school expectations might reinforce heteronormativity. Consider these questions to get started:

- How are your students situated at their table spots or desks?
- What is the seating arrangement on the carpet?
- How do you decide student groups and partnerships? Do they consistently result in single-gender groups, such as an all-girl reading group or an all-boy math group?
- How do your students travel in the hallways during the school day? Do they use “boy” and “girl” lines?

“Several years ago, I had a student share with me that I didn’t need to worry if she sometimes joined the boys’ group. It was the first time I considered why I was splitting the class into groups by gender in the first place. I wondered if there might be better ways I could form groups that could be just as quick. Now I group students by even/odd class number, age, shoe color, or even by their opinion on an interesting question.”

—ROBIN JINGJIT, SECOND-GRADE TEACHER



Lindsey Wilkening meets with a small group of fourth-grade students.

Disruptive Tinkering When Grouping Students and Assigning Seats

Your decisions regarding where students sit in your classroom directly impact who they work with during both whole-group instruction and independent practice—though they may have more flexibility in choosing partners for independent tasks. When you want to give students spots on the carpet or seats at tables or desks, try considering

- student readiness levels
- student personalities
- student work styles
- student choice.

When you need to organize the class into groups, try grouping by

- alphabetical order (dividing into equal groups)
- offering a choice between two favorite things (Admittedly, this takes a little thinking ahead of time: You’ll need to ensure that the favorite things don’t play into binary gender norms *and* that the class will be more or less equally divided about their favorites.)
- birthday months
- clothing color
- student interests
- student achievement on a particular skill or strategy (heterogeneously grouped)
- student choice.

These groupings work for any situation when you need to organize students into groups, large or small—including when it’s time to line up for a whole-class bathroom break. While it may feel more efficient to separate students into “boy” and “girl” lines for bathroom breaks when bathrooms are gendered, doing so reinforces the gender binary and can exclude nonbinary and gender-expansive students. By moving away from gendered separations, we foster inclusivity and send the message that all identities—regardless of gender—are safe and valued at school.

Finally, you will undoubtedly have students of the same gender who work well together or who may need to be separated, so you may find that you’re pairing up or splitting up students of the same gender. That’s fine. In those situations, you are making decisions based on your observations of the individual students, not their gender.

“When I call students to the carpet or to join the line, I use birthday months, clothing color, or table groups instead of focusing on gender. It’s a simple shift that makes for a more inclusive classroom.”

—KEVIN HOISINGTON, FIRST-GRADE TEACHER

When you need to organize students into partnerships, try

- random pairing using tools such as a wheel of names, name sticks, or playing cards (asking students to find the other person who has a card of the same color and number)
- strategic pairing to bring together students of different achievement levels or students who may not know each other well
- student choice.

“For some activities, I have students sit randomly on the carpet. When it’s partner time, I have them go back-to-back with each other to pair up. Then, they face toward each other to share their input and connection to the topic. We do multiple rotations of this so that they get to connect with multiple peers.”

—MATT CARLSON, ELEMENTARY ART TEACHER



Kindergarten students in Ms. Soviett’s class work on foundational literacy skills at their table spots.

Continually refreshing seating, grouping, and pairings helps to ensure that we are not sending harmful messages about gender. Moreover, it encourages students to collaborate with peers they might not otherwise interact with, helping to break down stereotypes and broaden everyone's perspectives. It also supports all students, regardless of gender, ability, or background, in meaningful interactions and learning from one another, building both respect and empathy. By considering students' unique strengths, we can create a dynamic, supportive space where every student can thrive.



Kindergarten students pair up for partner math activity.



Second-grade students work together to solve a math word problem.



Students choose their own spots to work independently during a literacy block.