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Creating Gender Affirming Classroom Environments: A Resource Tool for Teachers

- ❖ The beginning of the year is all about setting the tone of your classroom. Here are some simple tips for how to cultivate a gender affirming classroom environment:
 - When you introduce yourself, do so with your name and your pronouns. This cues to students that it's ok and appropriate to share their pronouns with you. You can say something like, "My name is Mr. Sillins, I use he/him/his pronouns. You can call me Mr. S or Mr. Sillins. It is always ok to tell other people your pronouns in the classroom and what you'd like to be called while you're here. I'm passing out a quick "Get to Know You Survey" go ahead and fill it out and then everyone will get a chance to introduce themselves to the class."
 - Create a get to know you survey. Ask questions like:
 - Name you'd like me to use in this classroom:
 - Pronouns
 - Favorite thing to read (i.e. books, comics, cereal boxes, poetry, fiction, non-fiction, etc.)
 - What you'll miss most about summer
 - What you're excited about for the coming school year
 - One thing you'd like to learn about this year
 - Something you remember learning about last year
 - Best way to start your day at school
 - Set up classroom guidelines/agreements/rules as a group. Take the time to discuss what each item students come up with to identify what it practically means. Identify what will happen if a boundary/rule is transgressed (this can also be something that students develop) and ask all students to come to consensus and agree to them. You can even create a classroom contract or have all students sign the group agreements and keep them posted in the room.
 - Ask students to make and decorate name plates that will be on their desks for the first week of school. You can ask they include their name and pronouns.
- ❖ Challenge yourself to think about how to create an environment where all your students feel seen, validated, and appreciated for who they are. Think about ways to ensure your curriculum reflects the multitude of identities present (and not present!) in your classroom. Find ways to *enact* the concept of "celebrating difference and diversity." Consider posing that as a question to your students and make it a year-long study and be amazed with what they come up with.
 - For example, "We have said that we want to respect everyone in the classroom as one of our guidelines. What does respect look like? What does it feel like to give respect? What does it feel like to be respected? What does it mean to respect someone who is different than you? What does it look like/feel like when differences are acknowledged and celebrated?"

"When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing."

– Adrienne Rich, poet

Supporting a Student's Transition:

- ❖ This portion of the tool is intended to provide guidance and support for when someone shares a part of their identity with you, such as coming out as transgender or gender expansive.
- A guiding principle is to take an inquiry based approach and have a conversation with the student about their needs. Allow both their pacing and responses to influence your process. Here are some examples of questions you might want to pose to a student who has come out to you:
 - Is this something you would like to discuss with your classmates?
 - If yes:
 - Would you like to lead the discussion or would you like me to lead the discussion?
 - Would you like to be a part of the conversation or not?
 - What are the things you want to be sure your classmates know about? (some examples might be name, pronouns, etc.).
 - What are things you don't want to talk about (some examples might be body parts, appearance, sexual orientation, etc.).
 - If no:
 - Let the student know how you will respond to peer's potential questions about name, pronouns, identity.
 - "I know you remember last year you called Jane, "Jim." But Jane has told us she identifies as a girl and that she wants us to call her Jane. We can honor her identity by using the name and pronouns she has asked of us."
 - "Sometimes mistakes will happen and we might accidentally use the wrong name or pronoun. When that happens, go ahead and acknowledge it, apologize for the mistake, and keep the conversation moving."
 - If it seems like someone is using the wrong name and pronoun on purpose: "Respect is one of the pillars of our classroom. If you are unable to respect Jane's name and pronouns we will have to _____ (enforce whatever boundary exists when respect is broken in any context in the classroom)."
- ❖ Tip: Remember, don't pressure the student to talk about or not talk any particular thing. We want to keep in mind that students have the right to privacy about their identity and do not have to disclose things to their classmates, and on the flip side of that coin, students also have the right to openly discuss their identit(ies) at school. So it is essential to follow the student's lead, and remain flexible to the fact that a student's needs might change/shift over time.

Responding to Questions in the Classroom:

- ❖ Supporting one student in the classroom may spark other student's questions and it is important to be cognizant of how to maintain an affirming classroom environment. You want to remember that a peer having a question about a classmate's identity isn't inherently a negative thing. But having clear, direct answers is important. This means, answer questions simply. If the student has a follow up question, then answer that. As adults, we tend to travel into "hypothetical land," where the "what ifs...?" and "what abouts...?" are abundant. Remember, that our adult lens may add layers of complication that simply don't exist for our students. Listen carefully to what your students are asking and answer those questions. While it is important to think proactively, we also want to stay rooted in what the experiences of our students are and not shape the interaction with our own (adult) anxieties and concerns. As you are responding to student's questions, keep these things in mind:
 - Be cognizant about where classmates are directing their questions. If a transgender student has to spend a lot of time explaining their identity to their peers, that can have an impact on their ability to attend to learning. Be tuned in to when you can/should intervene in a conversation (i.e. the student is overwhelmed, hurt, angry, etc).
 - If a student asks a question you don't know the answer to, take that as a moment to learn together. "You know; I am learning about this right now too. Let's pick a time when we can find the answer together." Or "I am learning a lot about this too, and the wonderful thing is that there are so many good questions that I don't know the answers too. One of my favorite places to get information from is

_____ (i.e. www.genderspectrum.org, www.GLSEN.org, www.welcomingschools.org, etc.) Would you like to take a look at the website to see if you can find the answer to your question?"

- Think about classroom activities that are focused on all students understanding their own identities and celebrate and acknowledge differences. The goal of the activity will be to broaden student's understanding their own multiple and intersecting identities, as well as the identities of their peers. You can emphasize how some of those identities may be visible upon looking at someone (i.e. race, size, etc.) while others may not be visible (i.e. religion, sexual orientation, etc.)
 - Self-portraiture is a wonderful activity to revisit throughout the school year. Have students draw their portraits at the beginning of the year. Ask them to record their likes/dislikes and goals somehow in the project. Mid-year, ask them to do the project again without referring to their first version. And repeat at the end of the year and then have students compare the three different versions. What stayed the same? What changed?
 - Have students fold a piece of paper on the front have them write "How people see me on the outside" and on the inside write "Who I am on the inside." Then ask them to take some time to fill out the front and the inside. After students have had the chance to complete the activity, have them break into pairs to share what they made. Then bring the group back together and ask what people learned from the activity.

Gender affirming resources:

❖ Here is a starter list of resources to build your practice as an educator and to share with students:

- www.illinoissafeschools.org (connect students to other LGBTQ+ youth and look for educator resources as well)
- www.genderspectrum.org (One of the best in terms of accessing a variety of free and downloadable information. Different sections in the "resources" tab. For education, young people, parents, etc.)
- Minus18's five minute pronoun video: [What Are Pronouns](#)
- Trans United Fund's two minute video: [Meet My Child: Parents of Trans Kids Speak Out](#)
- Southern Poverty Law Center's [Know Your Rights](#) for LGBTQ+ students
- www.glsen.org (some great videos as well as school climate survey tools.)
 - GLSEN's thirty five minute webinar is a great 101 tool: [Educators! Support Trans and GNC Students!](#)
 - GLSEN's customizable school climate survey that can help gather information about student experience: [Local School Climate Survey](#)

