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# Beyond Tomboys, Sissies, and ‘That’s So Gay’

New Ways To Think About Gender and Sexuality In PreK-12 Education

—Jennifer Bryan, Ph.D.

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*We assume sex to be naturally given and apparent, but when pushed to define it, we fall down the rabbit hole and can’t say definitively what biological sex actually is, or exactly how it relates to the social categories we call “women” and “men.” Is sex in the gonads, the chromosomes or the brain? Can it be defined by socialization, or by the assertion of a profoundly felt identity? Is it immutable, or can it be changed by a scalpel or stroke of a pen?*

—Susan Stryker, Associate Professor of Gender and Women’s Studies,  
University of Arizona

*Although athletics events are divided into discrete male and female categories, sex in humans is not simply binary... As it was put during the hearing: ‘Nature is not neat.’ There is no single determinant of sex.*

—The Court of Arbitration for Sport<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

*We nurture our students and help them grow intellectually, physically, socially and emotionally.*

PreK-12 educators make this promise at the beginning of every school year and hope to succeed with each and every student in their charge. Yet Education’s outdated understanding of what healthy identity development looks like in relation to gender and sexuality for children and adolescents is a fundamental obstacle to this goal. Teachers are hampered by a paradigm that predicts a “typical” profile for boys and girls, and sets narrow expectations about who students can and should be in the world. This paper offers a different paradigm. Gender and Sexuality Diversity (GSD) is an inclusive, theoretically grounded, and now empirically supported framework for understanding these essential parts of human identity in our students and ourselves.

With politicians, the Supreme Court, social advocacy groups, medical professionals and scholars driving the gender and sexuality discourse, it is easy to lose sight of the

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<sup>1</sup> Dutee Chand, *Female Sprinter With High Testosterone Level, Wins Right to Compete*, John Branch, *The New York Times*, July 27, 2015

practical and pedagogical imperatives of PreK-12 schooling. We aspire to (1) nurture the whole child, (2) cultivate safe, inclusive learning communities, (3) foster curiosity and a life-long love of inquiry, and (4) develop the critical thinking skills students need to navigate our increasingly complex, rapidly changing global world. By making the Gender and Sexuality Diversity paradigm shift proposed in this paper, we will substantially enhance our ability to attain each of these fundamental educational goals.

## DEFINING THE PROBLEM

I've just finished reading *The Different Dragon* to the Listening Lynx, a 1st grade class in Seattle. Our discussion has shifted from whether it's okay for the dragon in the story to discontinue being fierce (he'd rather be "just regular"), to whether Target should organize toy aisles differently. One boy is insistent. "If they don't put the boy toys in one aisle and the girl toys in another, we can't find the ones we want."

*So if a girl wants a water squirter she should just go over to the boys' aisle?* I ask. Several children nod. A girl wearing a plaid jumper and braided pigtails who is sitting right next to my chair pops up onto her knees and says, "I have a pink super soaker!"

This starts a chorus of who has any kind of gun, and several of the Listening Lynx begin wiggling around on the reading rug. The teacher and I exchange a look, as I quickly redirect.

*And if a boy wants a doll, he should just go over to the girls' aisle?* It's mostly girls who call out "Yeasss," and I notice a couple of boys who shake their heads no.

I make eye contact with a brown-haired, slight boy in a Seahawks t-shirt. *No?* I ask him. He doesn't say anything but shakes his head steadily from side-to-side and then looks away.

I decide to share. *Well, I know that one time when I wanted matchbox cars for my birthday, some kids made fun of me. Has anybody been teased for playing with a boy toy or a girl toy?* The girl in the plaid jumper says, "Girls can like cars."

From the back of the group an eager Lynx says rather loudly, “I used to have a Hello Kitty lunch box and my sister made fun of me. I like Hello Kitty.” The group turns and looks at this boy who is stretching his arm way up in the air as he speaks, an exaggerated raising-of-the-hand. With most eyes on him, he suddenly seems a bit self-conscious. “I’m just...just sharing some things about my life, just sharing, you know.” He shrugs his shoulders and does a little spin around on the rug, like a mini breakdancer. The teacher nearby puts a gentle hand on his knee and whispers something in his ear. The boy settles back into the requisite criss-cross-apple-sauce position. He adds, “I don’t have that lunchbox any more.”

## Gender, Gender Everywhere

There is nothing unique about this moment. Conversations about and manifestations of all-things-gender are ubiquitous in PreK-12 education. Yet our national dialogues about everything from testing reform, bullying intervention programs, and troublesome trends in STEM pursuits for girls can’t quite bring the gendered elements of these challenges into true focus.

Like a photographer twisting her camera lens this way and that, we keep trying to zero in on our subject—Gender—but in truth, we’re not really sure what we’re looking at.

...to this day, how you define and use the terms *sex* and *gender* may depend on whether you are a natural scientist, a social constructionist or a grammarian.

## What is Sex? What is Gender?

And our confusion about Gender isn’t new. John Money introduced the distinction between *biological sex* (hormones, DNA, reproductive anatomy) and *gender identity* (personal, subjective sense of one’s gender in a particular context) in the mid 1950’s while studying “hermaphrodites” (i.e. intersex individuals). Money’s theories about gender socialization have been fully discredited,<sup>2</sup> but to this day how you define and use the terms *sex* and *gender* may depend on whether you are a natural scientist, a social constructionist or a grammarian.

Definitions also depend on where you live in the world. The World Health Organization tells us that aspects of *sex* will not vary substantially between different human societies (e.g. women menstruate, men do not), while aspects of *gender* may vary greatly (e.g. men can

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<sup>2</sup> See John Colapinto’s *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised As A Girl* (2000)

drive cars in Saudi Arabia while women cannot). Even though they are not synonymous *sex* and *gender* are used interchangeably in the United States for everything from tax returns to SAT's to ordinary day-to-day communication. Think about the last time you filled out a form at the doctor's office. When you checked the box that said  Male or  Female, were you providing information about your sex? Your gender? Both? Does this matter?

If you care about PreK-12 Education, the answer to this question is yes, it does matter. When adults confound sex and gender, we reinforce the idea that there is a “natural order” of things that goes well beyond the natural order of reproduction. Boys are stronger; girls are weaker. Boys are active; girls are passive. Boys are stoic; girls are emotional. Boys are providers; girls are caregivers.

Reader, are you saying this to yourself *These are totally outdated stereotypes. Girls can do more than they ever could. Boys are not pigeon-holed the way they used to be.*

If you are thinking this way, you are right. And if you are thinking this way, you are also wrong. Welcome to our current contradictory relationship with gender.

## Gender Role Stereotypes

For the past 40 years media and marketing industries have been targeting increasingly narrow and segmented portions of the child and adolescent “market share.”<sup>3</sup> This strategy has not only generated towering corporate profits but has also fabricated an entirely spurious developmental stage! “Tween” is a marketing concept. In reality socio-emotional development takes just as much time today as it ever did. Ten year-old girls wear inappropriately sexualized clothing in 2015 not because they are more mature; they wear short shorts and revealing tops because the consumer industry wants them to.

As this elementary teacher observes, gender programming starts long before students begin formal schooling.

*My 1st graders arrive fully indoctrinated in the idea that pink is a ‘girl color’ and blue is a ‘boy color,’ that boys don’t play with dolls, etc. Right from the beginning, I’m behind the eight ball. It’s frustrating to work so hard just to convince the children that it’s okay to explore and like a wide range of colors, clothes, activities and toys.* —First Grade Teacher

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3 “The Problem With Separate Toys For Girls And Boys”, Rebecca Haines, *The Boston Globe*, 02/27/15

Mega companies like Disney and LEGO make billions of dollars with gender specific toy campaigns that are entrenched in our most shallow gender stereotypes. Even historically gender-neutral classics like Radio Flyer and Tinkertoys have adopted this same marketing strategy. The result is that today, we have fewer non-gendered toys available for children than in any previous era.<sup>4</sup> And the impact of this kind of gender bias on the identity development of children and adolescents is profound.

## Gender Stereotypes at School

Gender stereotypes infiltrate and influence every aspect of PreK-12 policy, programming and curriculum as well. Currently, researchers are busy exploring an array of problems and questions related to the long-term consequences of gender role stereotyping in schools.

- Is unconscious teacher bias affecting girls' proficiency in math?<sup>5</sup>
- Does the fact that boys spend more time than girls in the block area matter?<sup>6</sup>
- How much does gender-related stereotype threat affect student performance on standardized tests?<sup>7</sup>
- How does the bias that teen boys, teen girls and mothers have against girls/ women in leadership positions contribute to the gender gap?<sup>8</sup>

Yet for all our expressed concern about gender stereotypes, we have been unsuccessful in creating school cultures where this kind of bias is effectively disrupted. In part, that is because we don't really understand or know how to think differently about gender.

Why else have we been unsuccessful? When we disrupt these stereotypes, we disrupt the status quo. Changing business-as-usual means we make room for all kinds of possibilities for girls and boys, men and women. And as with any systemic change, there is resistance and relief when we start reworking the old model. Everyone in the school community must contend with the opposing forces of resistance and relief, both internally and externally. *I want to change this but it will take a lot of work. We may think this is a good idea but our parents will never go for it.*

And as with any systemic change, there is resistance and relief when we start reworking the old model.

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4 Ibid.

5 "How Elementary School Teachers' Biases Can Discourage Girls From Math and Science", Claire Cain Miller, *The New York Times*, 02/06/15

6 "Research on Spatial Skills and Block Building in Girls and Boys", Joanne Kersh, Beth M. Casey, Jessica Mercer Young, *Contemporary Perspectives on Mathematics in Early Childhood Education*

7 "Stereotype Threat in Applied Settings Re-examined", Kelly Danaher, Christian S. Crandall, *Perspectives Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 2008

8 "Leaning Out: Teen Girls and Leadership Biases" Richard Weissbourd, Making Caring Common Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2015

## Who's Afraid of Gender?

*We have a situation in the second grade where a girl who has always been more “boyish” since kindergarten is now insisting she’s a boy and even wants to change her name. Her parents are incredibly loving but at a loss about what to do. Here at school people have very little information and lots of opinions. Everyone is in a panic about bathrooms. Are there resources available to help our community understand this child? And what should we, as a school, be doing?* —Elementary School Counselor

Addressing sex, gender and sexuality in a school setting is a fraught enterprise. The topic frightens and unsettles just about everyone involved in PreK-12 Education. At the same time, teachers, parents and students long for information and greater understanding. As a consultant who helps schools navigate this complexity and anxiety, I readily disclose that I don't even always agree with myself about these issues. While my *parent* self is appalled at what my teenage daughter is wearing, my *psychologist* self suggests I pick my battles. The *teacher* in me wants to stick with the lesson plan; the *consultant* supports diverging from said plan and deftly unpacking that 7th grader's sexist comment instead.

Not surprisingly, everyone who is attuned to these issues and who works with children and adolescents is full of similar internal tensions. In any given moment what's the right thing to do? Say? Not say? *How can Liam have two dads? Where's his mom?* In the past 30 years my own perspective about sex, gender and sexuality has shifted, broadened and collided with itself many times over. The contradictory experience of (a) achieving greater clarity and (b) feeling more perplexed about these issues, promises to be the new normal for concerned educators and parents for some time to come.

## SHIFTING THE PARADIGM

### All Students Need Us

When I began consulting on these issues 15 years ago, the goal was to help schools open their hearts and minds to working with children and adolescents who were diverse in terms of their gender and sexuality. At the time, using the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) framework was the standard approach. Even if teachers weren't comfortable saying the words themselves, LGBT was a recognizable acronym that organized thinking and actions. The limitations of this approach gradually emerged, as the

LGBT—and eventually, LGBTQQIA<sup>9</sup>—framework drove conversations into the margins and kept the focus on a particular subgroup, rather than on the healthy gender and sexual identity development of all students.

To be clear, paying attention to the particular needs of LGBTQ students is not misguided. These students continue to experience pervasive discrimination; hostile school climate negatively affects academic success and socio-emotional wellbeing.<sup>10</sup> In 2015 transgender youth are particularly vulnerable, struggling with “...a variety of issues in seeking to be authentically seen, including the fear of social rejection and mistreatment or abuse from peers. As a result, many of these students hope to escape notice and to simply survive rather than flourish.”<sup>11</sup>

Today what we understand more clearly is that every single member of a PreK-12 school community has a sex, gender and sexuality, and every member of the community is affected by confining and inaccurate understandings of these parts of our human identity. Whether you are a boy who loves to sing or a girl who wants to wear pink and be a firefighter, the heteronormative organization of school dissuades many from doing what is natural, namely exploring countless interests, passions, and possibilities.

## Learning to Love Singing

Because it's hard  
And I would always tell myself  
not to:  
Be like the other guys, and  
pretend you hate it  
Because I love to do it,  
I know that people will make fun  
of me,  
Telling me that I shouldn't  
Or I Can't,  
Or it's not a "guy" thing  
Because when I sing, I am  
somewhere else,  
I enjoy it, more than I ever  
thought I would,  
I forget about everything that's  
going on, and I just sing  
And while the last couple notes  
of the song come out of my  
mouth,  
The song is over,  
And it's back to hiding  
What I love to do.

Ping Promrat  
7th grade student

NB: Heteronormativity is the belief that there are distinct, complementary gender roles and that heterosexual pairing is the desired norm.

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<sup>9</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Queer, Intersex, Asexual

<sup>10</sup> The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's School, GLSEN, 2013 National School Climate Survey

<sup>11</sup> New Guide for Supporting Transgender Students in K-12 Schools, <http://www.hrc.org/topics/transgender-children-youth> (2015)

## Gender and Sexuality Diversity (GSD)

In my book for educators and parents, *From The Dress-Up Corner To The Senior Prom: Navigating Gender and Sexuality Diversity in PreK-12 Schools* (Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2012), I introduce a framework that—unlike the LGBTQ acronym—includes all sexes, genders and sexualities. Gender and Sexuality Diversity (GSD) is a broad construct that allows us to consider the multiple, complex, inter-related components that make up biological sex, gender and sexuality for everyone.

There are several advantages to using an expansive, rather than binary, schema. The GSD framework (1) contextualizes our understanding of sex, gender and sexuality, and (2) organizes our thinking about these separate yet related aspects of who we are. GSD also (3) validates the multiple influences of biology, environment and socialization. Finally, GSD (4) recognizes our human need for categories and simultaneously (5) accommodates the messiness of nature.

The fundamental premise of GSD is that a binary view of our biology, gender and sexuality is inaccurate. These aspects of our identity, expression and behavior are varied and continuous. The inherent diversity of who we are on these dimensions is more fully represented by a collection of spectrums, instead of either/or boxes. (e.g., you are either a man or a woman).

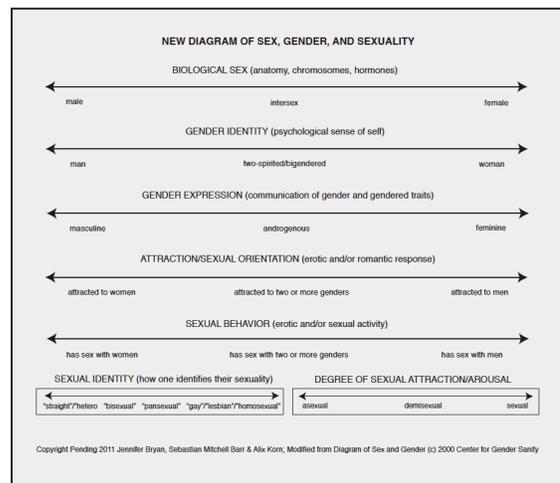
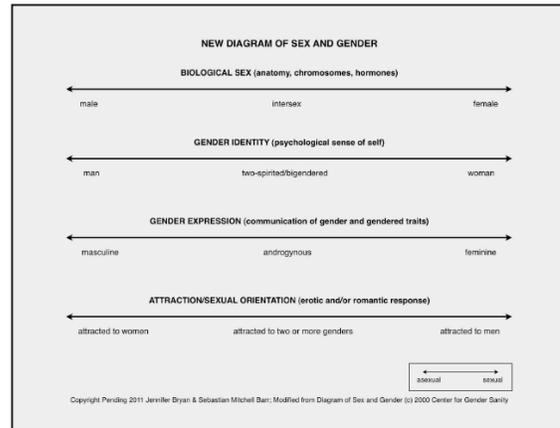
Gender and Sexuality Diversity (GSD) is a broad construct that allows us to consider the multiple, complex, inter-related components that make up biological sex, gender and sexuality. GSD is based on the following tenets. Sex, gender and sexuality:

- are naturally, inherently diverse aspects of human identity
- can be complex, fluid and variable
- are comprised of several inter-related components— identity, expression, behavior
- exist on distinct, inter-related spectrums
- are essential aspects of identity for all people
- are central to the identity development of children and adolescents

# The New Diagram of Sex, Gender and Sexuality

For teaching purposes about ten years ago, I began using a schema called the Diagram of Sex and Gender, which was originally developed by The Center for Gender Sanity in 2000. In collaboration with my colleague Sebastian Barr, we created the New Diagram of Sex, Gender and Sexuality (NDSGS) to make the concepts and definitions of GSD accessible for educators, parents and students. Based on feedback and inquiry from viewers, users and colleagues over the years, we have revised the NDSGS half a dozen times (and we're not done yet). Each incarnation has been illuminating, as the various spectrums, when considered individually and collectively, consistently present possibilities *and* limitations.

Educators typically respond to the Gender and Sexuality Diversity framework and the New Diagram of Sex, Gender and Sexuality with cautious enthusiasm. Some may be perplexed at first, but teachers are quick to recognize a paradigm that adequately encompasses every student and every family they work with. Instead of thinking about a student as “not fitting into the box,” teachers find that student along a spectrum of possibilities. As with all our traits—height, hair color, body type, skin tone—“differences” are manifest by a matter of degrees. Why couldn't one's gender and sexuality be as nuanced as other aspects of human identity?



## WHERE'S THE PROOF?

*...there's never been a better time to be a questioner—because it is so much easier now to begin a journey of inquiry, with so many places you can turn for information, help, ideas, feedback, or even to find possible collaborators who might be interested in the same question.*

—Warren Berger, *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas*

### Questioning The Questions

Not long ago two of my colleagues convinced me that it was time to formally test our fundamental questions about sex, gender and sexuality. *Our qualitative and anecdotal evidence is abundant and broad, but where's the quantitative proof?* Chris Overtree, then a Psychologist at the University of Massachusetts, proposed turning the NDSGS into a measure and using it as an assessment tool with adults. Psychology doctoral candidate Sebastian Barr was already fully immersed in the challenges of measuring complex variables such as transgender identity in his own research at University of Louisville. Together we launched a project to explore what would happen if we asked essential questions about sex, gender and sexuality in a different way.

The initial pilot study with college students offered a striking affirmation of our hypothesis. When given the option, a significant percentage of subjects rejected binary classifications of sex, gender and sexuality and opted for points on a spectrum. So we went further. Our current project consists of two studies with large samples, 742 adults and 385 college students.<sup>12</sup> As compelling as the findings from these studies are, the sex, gender and sexuality paradigm shift we support is most keenly represented in *how* we asked our questions.

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<sup>12</sup> An executive summary of *Letting Go of the Binary: Comparing Continuous Versus Categorical Measures of Sex, Gender and Sexuality*, 2015, (Bryan, J., Barr, S., and Overtree, C.) is forthcoming. A copy of the complete paper will be available from the authors.

## Asking Questions Differently

After subjects completed standard demographics questions (e.g. Figure 1), they were given an opportunity to consider the same questions using different parameters (e.g. Figure 2). What happens when people are given non-binary options?

**\* Gender Identity**

Man

Woman

Non-binary/genderqueer

Figure 1

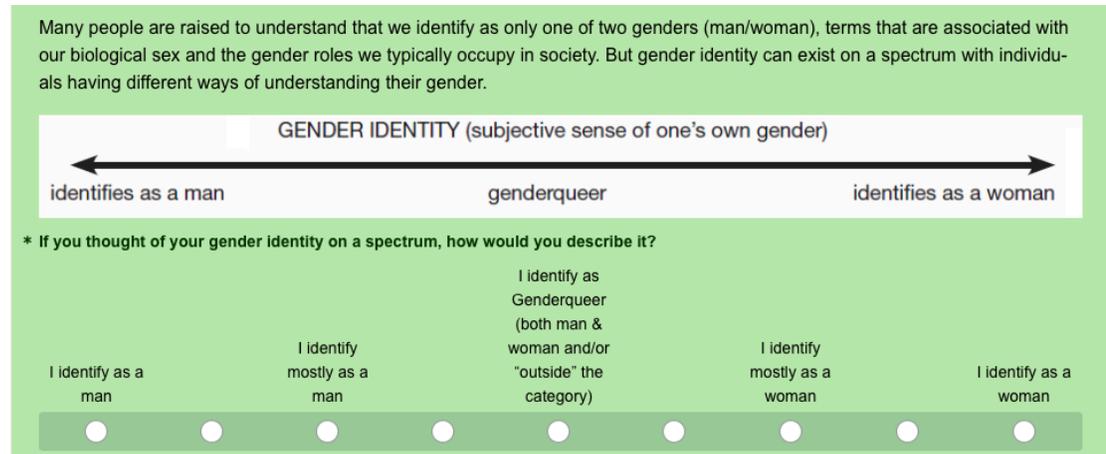


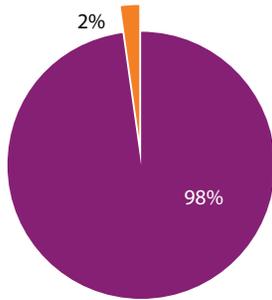
Figure 2

Our findings show that gender diversity is not limited to transgender people and that sexual diversity is not limited to LGBTQ people. In fact, a higher percentage of the overall population may be more diverse on these aspects of identity than our standard applications, medical forms and questionnaires recognize. When given a continuous measure, many individuals in these studies identified areas in which their sex, gender and sexuality are more diverse than standard binary categories can accommodate.

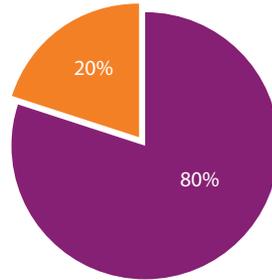
Our findings show that gender diversity is not limited to transgender people and that sexual diversity is not limited to LGBTQ people.

For example, when we used check boxes and asked college undergraduates to choose, *man*, *woman* or *non-binary*, 98% chose man or woman. But when we gave them a continuous 9 point spectrum, 20% chose somewhere between man and woman.

Gender Identity on Categorical Measure

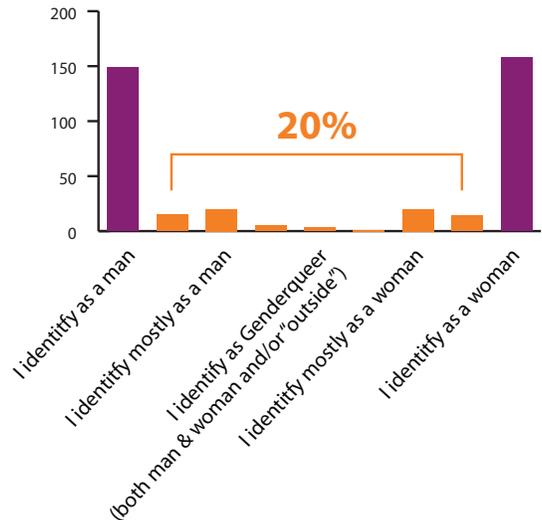


Gender Identity on Continuous Measure



● Binary ● Non-Binary

Gender Identity Distribution



Instead of just 2%, 20% of participants identified as non-binary. While it might be tempting to attribute the variation on the continuous measure of Gender Identity to the age of the college students in Study 2, we found similar variation in Study 1, where the average age of participants was 43. **In fact, we found meaningful variation across age groups on all 8 spectrums in both studies.**

## Statistics and Real Life

Statistically, these studies are full of important differences between categorical (boxes) and continuous (spectrums) measures of identity. After conducting the initial pilot, we nicknamed our project The Big Splash because the findings were even more robust than we had originally imagined. And because participants comments about the survey itself were particularly compelling.

“Although I am fairly ‘heteronormative’ and can fit reasonably well into check boxes, this opens up a better more nuanced way to understand both myself and others.”

“It actually taught me a lot simply to see the 7 spectrums.”

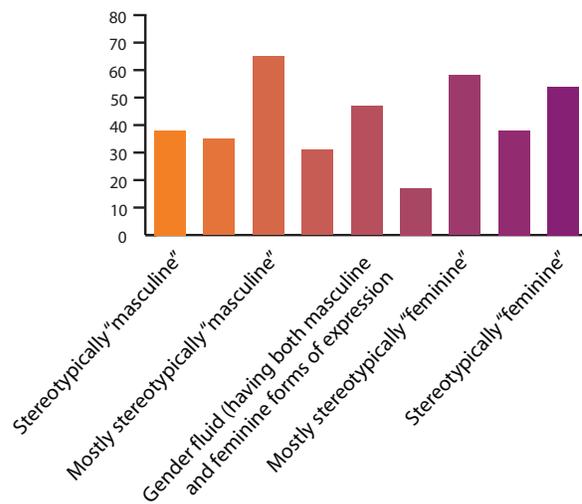
“I had not thought of asexual and sexual on a spectrum, nor thought of sexual orientation and sexual behavior as being different.”

“I like that there are different spectrums that make room to separate who you are mostly attracted to and who you are mostly sexual with. That’s an interesting place to notice.”

“I like it but don’t see it being implemented any time soon. Most people do not like change and changing something like this will stir up pro and against, media attention and political backlash.”

However, what's most important is that these research findings match what we see consistently in real life. The children, adolescents and adults we work with in PreK-12 schools are diverse in terms of their gender identity, expression and behavior. They are diverse in terms of their sexual identity, expression and behavior. Difficulties arise in our educational communities when—intentionally and unintentionally—these natural, inherent variations go unrecognized or are suppressed.

Gender Expression of College Students



## You Can Wear Pink When You're Older??

Participants in both studies—regardless of their gender identity—conveyed a striking degree of variation in their “stereotypically” masculine and “stereotypically” feminine expressions of gender. Yet our PreK-12 settings are averse to just this kind of variation. Many of the children and adolescents who are labeled as “gender non-conforming” are those who reject gender role stereotypes, the same gender role stereotypes identified as problematic earlier in this paper! Is a boy who paints his nails confused about his gender? Why is a girl who has short hair, wears pants, and plays hard at recess called a “tomboy”?

When students at various stages of gender identity formation engage in developmentally appropriate explorations and expressions, they are viewed by many as operating outside the box. Even if you are a teacher who supports a range of expressions and behaviors, if you conceptualize such students as being “outside the box,” you are still perpetuating this biased view. And the same is true for sexual identity development. LGB kids are not outside a box. They are part of the big picture of human sexuality, a picture that reflects our sexual diversity.

Even if you are a teacher who supports a range of expressions and behaviors, if you conceptualize such students as being “outside the box,” you are still perpetuating this biased view.

It is time for educators to recognize the fallacy of using identity boxes to quantify, organize and conceptualize these parts of who we are. Using binary concepts and measures in PreK-12 reinforces the belief that (a) these are the “standard” categories in which the majority of students belong and (b) it is a limited subgroup of the student population (i.e. LGBTQ individuals) that fall outside this “normative” organization of identity.

## CALL TO ACTION

*I've always been very concerned with democracy. If you can't imagine you could be wrong, what's the point of democracy? And if you can't imagine how or why others think differently, then how could you tolerate democracy?*

—Deborah Meier, Senior scholar at New York University's Steinhardt School of Education

## We Have Been Here Before

This isn't the first time our gender and sexuality paradigm has been challenged. Alfred Kinsey's discovery that a significant number of people did not fit into conventional heterosexual and heteronormative expectations of attraction and behavior, sent ideas about identity and intimate relationships boomeranging in the 1950's. Kinsey let the world know that in addition to people being attracted to the “opposite sex,” some people have varying degrees of attraction to the “same sex.”<sup>13</sup> These findings were labeled immoral and roundly dismissed. Kinsey was deemed a pervert and discredited professionally.

Sixty-five years later, the Supreme Court of the United States has just legalized same-sex marriage.

The field of Education has an opportunity to lead the way in this new era of expansive thinking about human identities. Possessing an informed, thoughtful and contemporary understanding of gender and sexuality is emerging as an indispensable 21st century skill. PreK-12 educators are naturally and uniquely positioned to teach that skill. Let's equip our teachers with the knowledge and support they need, as we make our way beyond binary concepts of who we are as human beings.

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13 Jones, J. (2004) *Kinsey: A Life*. New York: W.W. Norton