



Gender Identity Awareness and Inclusion — Developing and Implementing a K-5 Lesson Plan Trajectory to Support All Students

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In 2016, California AB-329 was enacted to support a healthy and supportive learning environment for all students regarding sexuality and the inclusion of all people regardless of sexual preferences. Section 6-51933-6 pointedly states that “instruction and materials shall teach pupils about gender, gender expression, gender identity, and explore the harm of negative gender stereotypes.” While families can choose to opt out of comprehensive sexual health education, California Education Code 51932b does not allow the opt out option for instruction outside the context of sexual health education, including lessons on gender diversity. This policy allows professionals the ability to address gender diversity in a safe classroom environment, ensuring accurate information is disseminated using age appropriate language and instructional methods.

Due to the dedication of national and California lawmakers, we have made much progress in addressing the needs and interests of our gender diverse communities and classrooms. This paper will demonstrate how one small California school district is expanding upon the framework that has been mandated by the state to also protect and educate our youngest students and create a foundation in their school and community for acceptance and equity.

Oak Park Unified School District (OPUSD) is located in a micropolitan area in Ventura County and consists of three elementary schools, a middle school, a traditional high school, an independent learning K-12 school, and a continuation high school. The authors of this article, Holly Baxter, an elementary counselor and the coordinator for diversity and equity for OPUSD, and Talya Drescher, a teacher educator and parent of OPUSD students, came together for reasons both personal and professional to share the work of OPUSD regarding the implementation of a gender diversity program. A brief history of OPUSD’s work in this arena, lessons learned, and a description of the curriculum are presented along with general guidelines which provide a compass for those undertaking this work.

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OPUSD began considering the need for an elementary level gender diversity lesson plan in Fall, 2018 in response to ongoing concerns for the support and well-being of gender nonconforming students in the elementary school setting. Merriam Webster defines *gender nonconforming* (Gender Nonconforming, n.d.) as “exhibiting behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits that do not correspond with the traits typically associated with one's sex : having a gender expression that does not conform to gender norms.” This definition encompasses many students, including transgender, non-binary, and gender fluid students. It also includes students who challenge gender stereotypes, such as girls who wear their hair short and prefer sports during recess and boys who enjoy art and theatre or have their ears pierced. Human Rights Campaign released the California LGBTQ Youth Report (p. 11, 2018) which states that only 10% of California LGBTQ youth report that their school staff is supportive; that 50% report being teased or bullied due to their sexual or gender identity (HRC, p. 13); and 28% have been threatened with physical violence (HRC, p. 13). OPUSD serves gender nonconforming students at every elementary site and in most grade levels and also works with students who have gender nonconforming family members. Due to the possibility of negative outcomes after self-identification, it is difficult to determine exact numbers of gender nonconforming students or families in the district, however the wide variety of gender expression in OPUSD students merited acknowledgement and acceptance.

These students and their families had worked closely with their school counselors, teachers, and principals over the preceding two years to develop individualized strategies and supports to ensure well-being, safety, and inclusion. As these students matured, it became clear to the teachers, counselors, and principals that their needs could no longer be met without involving the larger student body in the conversation about gender diversity. For example, comments about students’ actual and perceived gender identity were being made on the playground and during before-and-after school times. Transgender and non-binary students and their families were expressing concerns about safety in the wake of bullying, and staff reported overhearing disturbing conversations between students that included the use of derogatory terms for gender diverse individuals. In light of these developments, and to ensure the safety of all students, OPUSD deemed it imperative that the topic of gender diversity must expand beyond merely working with individual students and their classes of immediate peers.

With encouragement from the district Superintendent, a small committee was formed in December of 2018 to investigate and develop a program to support gender nonconforming students and educate all students in the district’s elementary schools. The committee that was formed to address the needs of these students consisted of the co-author, the OPUSD Director of Student Safety and Support, and the OPUSD Director of Curriculum. Over a period of approximately three months, the format and content of a K-5 (Kindergarten through fifth grade) lesson plan began to take shape. For this work, the committee looked to organizations such as Teaching Tolerance, The Human Rights Campaign, GLSEN, and Welcoming Schools for suggestions as to lesson topics and framework. The advocacy and diversity work of San Francisco Public Schools, Palo Alto Unified School District, Seattle Public Schools, and British Columbia public schools were also looked to as models for integration into classroom learning and staff involvement. In this review, it appeared to the committee that, although there were recommendations for teacher-led lessons and classroom activities, there was not yet a district that had implemented a comprehensive, social-emotional learning driven, district-wide lesson plan for each elementary

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classroom which specifically promoted inclusion, acceptance, and celebration of gender nonconforming individuals.

Understanding that without a community and culture of acceptance, gender non-conforming youth suffer much higher rates of mental illness, suicidal ideation, and bullying, a parallel initiative of teacher and staff education was also undertaken (Rafferty, 2018; Toomey et al, 2010). It was the opinion of OPUSD that without staff support and understanding of gender diversity, neither the proposed gender diversity program nor our gender-diverse students could flourish. Over the period of the following year, administrators, teachers, and other selected supervisory personnel participated in three mandatory and one optional training focused on gender diversity, acceptance, and inclusion.

In January, 2019, a proposed initial K-5 lesson plan trajectory was determined by the committee. This consisted of six distinct lessons, one for each grade level. All but one was accompanied by fictional literature that introduced the topic and sparked the conversation in a developmentally appropriate and accessible manner. The kindergarten lesson (see Table 1) focused on acceptance of one and all, including different genders, abilities, and races. The third grade lesson expanded upon concepts of gender diversity with the introduction of a character who does not conform to gender norms in clothing. The gender spectrum as a concept was introduced in the third grade and this proposed lesson plan trajectory concluded in the fifth grade with a definition of transgender and non-binary descriptors. Each lesson also contained an art component or activity which allowed students to express their own relationship to the material.

It is important to note that the implementation and delivery of the lessons intentionally falls under the umbrella of the school counseling department and its existing Character Counts lesson plan format. Elementary counselors in the OPUSD already visit classrooms monthly to deliver lessons on topics such as kindness, determination, responsibility, and to provide anti-bullying training and conflict resolution skills. These lessons are incorporated into this existing structure and are taught by the school counselors rather than classroom teachers. This delivery format allows for the topics to be addressed in a social-emotional context and provides assurance to elementary faculty that they are not required to become experts in a new field.

Once the initial lesson plan trajectory was determined by the committee, every care was taken to ensure that all stakeholders had the ability to review and understand its content. The committee presented the lesson plan content to district standing entities such as the Safe Kids Task Force, the Curriculum Council, District Leadership, the Parent Faculty Association, and, ultimately the School Board, which approved its implementation with a unanimous vote. After this stage, there were no changes made to the lesson plan from what had been originally developed by the committee and all stakeholders voiced their support for the initiative.

The lesson plan trajectory was then publicized on district websites, garnered attention in local news media, and was available for viewing at every elementary school site and elementary Back to School Night with parents and community in attendance. It was during this process that voices in opposition first asked to be heard and the decision was made to delay implementation of the proposed lesson plan until the committee and district leadership felt that the community was able to express their concerns.

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Many individuals were invited to meet personally with an appropriate staff or board member to discuss their concerns; close to two-dozen such meetings were held. Individuals who were not directly associated with OPUSD were informed of the board meeting calendar and the ability to voice any concerns to the Board directly. In addition, the district added a parent/community information evening to the calendar which provided education not only about the proposed lesson plan, but also allowed an outside expert to educate the community about gender diversity. Over 300 parents were in attendance. At the parent/community information evening, many questions were answered in a public forum and those that could not be answered due to time constraints were answered by email and then published on the district website. Concerns generally focused on age appropriateness, religious viewpoints, and how the school would respond if questions about biology or sexual identity were raised by the students during lessons. Throughout the process of hearing parent and staff feedback and comment, the committee continued to evaluate the proposed lesson plans and make changes which would better reflect the community of stakeholders and their concerns.

As a result of these communications, an initial change was the removal of a music video that was originally proposed for the fourth grade lesson and a refocus on literature for this lesson. This change was made in order to better control the content of the lessons and its interpretation. After much deliberation, it was also decided that the proposed book for the fifth grade lesson would be removed as we evaluated whether each definition given in the proposed book was developmentally appropriate for our students. To solve both of these concerns, a single book was adopted for use in the fourth and fifth grades with slight differences in how it would be presented to the differing age groups.

Lastly, the first and second grade lessons were swapped because the committee determined that the introduction of non-binary concepts would be more developmentally appropriate for second graders (see included Table 1 for links to the final lessons per grade). It was also decided through this process that the lesson schedule would be posted publicly and that families would be directly informed of the date and content of their class lesson one week prior to its delivery. Despite requests to do so, in accordance with California Education Code, an opt-out provision was not provided to parents.

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Table 1

Grade	Literature	Topics Introduced
<u>K</u>	“It’s Okay To Be Different” by Todd Parr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Diversity in all forms, including gender ● Kindness towards others
<u>1st</u>	“Red, A Crayon’s Story” by Michael Hall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Difference between internal and external expression ● Our “outsides” might not reflect what is on the “inside” ● We all express our gender differently
<u>2nd</u>	“Neither” by Airlie Anderson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Discussion of exclusion vs. inclusion ● Introduction of binary vs. non-binary concepts ● Acceptance of all
<u>3rd</u>	“Sparkle Boy” by Lesléa Newman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The meaning of gender ● The gender spectrum ● Gender stereotypes ● Being an ally
<u>4th</u>	“Jamie is Jamie” by Afsaneh Moradian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The gender spectrum ● Non-binary individuals ● Acceptance and inclusion ● Being an ally
<u>5th</u>	“Jamie is Jamie” by Afsaneh Moradian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The gender spectrum ● Non-binary individuals ● Acceptance and inclusion ● Being an ally ● Pronouns

In October, 2019, the first lesson was delivered in one fourth grade classroom. Students actively engaged in the lesson, asking pertinent questions, rooting for the characters in the story, and employing critical thinking to challenge biases. The counselors leading the lessons reported student observations

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such as, “That’s a gender stereotype!” and “I can be who I want; my gender doesn’t define me.” In one classroom, a student exclaimed to the class that the focal character in the book was similar to their classmate. This classmate they were referencing later wrote a thank you card describing that moment as “one of the best days of my life” and went on to say, “The kids in my class now know that not all kids are just boys or girls. I’m proud to be in this school district.”

In the months following, the response from K-5 parents, students, and staff was overwhelmingly positive. Parent responses included, “I’m sure it’s going to make such an imperative difference in their lives and help kids grow into more kind individuals” and “Thank you to all of you for making the very best environment for not only my children but all of the children of Oak Park.” Teacher comments included “The lesson was meaningful and the conversations that happened were great,” and “I thought that the lesson was age appropriate and that the students responded positively to the lesson.” Additionally, the District was excited to receive inquiries from other Districts and even private schools to learn more about the program, the process that was undertaken to develop it, and suggestions for best practices in developing similar programs elsewhere.

When beginning initiatives in any social justice arena, there is bound to be debate, critique, and opposition. The development of this district’s gender diversity K-5 lesson plan was not exempt from such debate. Due to the smaller size of the district, it was possible to hear these concerns on an individual basis through personalized, individual meetings that allowed for connection and understanding, a hallmark of any social justice work. In these meetings, great care was taken to listen openly to all concerns, acknowledge the personal beliefs of the meeting attendants, and keep the meetings personable. At each meeting, the lesson materials were available for reference and review which often resulted in concerns being solved on the spot. Meetings such as these were not always easy but instrumental to address opposition to the message of acceptance and understanding. In fact, in some cases, despite differing opinions, the community was made stronger by these open and frank discussions as they allowed for open dialogue between school staff and the parents and the provision of factual information regarding the topics and content of the lessons.

Some of the unique attributes of this district in regards to size, existing programs, and surrounding community, created both hurdles and bridges for implementation of what might be perceived as a controversial lesson plan. However, common best practices can be derived from our process that can be considered for any district or school considering such an initiative. These are:

Be overt rather than covert. Processes and decision making should be readily accessible for any and all to see. In each step of the process, involve the necessary stakeholders to hear feedback and offer comments. Keep track of these efforts and publicize them to ensure families of the intention towards transparency and openness.

In OPUSD, the program was initially publicized to the community with a letter from the district superintendent which was sent electronically to all parents. A website containing all pertinent information, lesson descriptions, and lesson schedules was publicly available. To begin the school year, an information table was set up and staffed at each elementary site’s Back to School Night; the program was announced to attendees at these events. Brochures outlining the program were also available at

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each school. Prior to this, teachers were presented with the lesson plan at mandatory staff meetings, were given a printed Teacher Toolkit and were encouraged to review the materials and raise any concerns.

Build a base of internal support. Through education and information, identify the core group of allies who are able and willing to be stalwart supporters of the work that is being done. Utilize the many wonderful resources available online or in the community to educate staff members at staff meetings, through staff development opportunities, and in written form. Connect those members of the staff who voice positive support with each other and encourage them to share their thoughts with their respective grade level teams. Initiate the message of inclusion and acceptance from a district level to provide a level of assurance that staff will be supported as they introduce these topics in their classrooms. Consider creating a toolkit of materials for each staff member providing answers to commonly asked questions.

OPUSD was able to identify these allies by first looking to those who had been a part of previous individual discussions to support gender nonconforming students. The counseling department had already discussed the needs of these students in other forums and became important members of the implementation efforts. Teachers who had worked with transgender, non-binary, or gender fluid students in their classrooms were wonderful voices of support. Lastly, the parents of gender nonconforming students helped provide resources and personal perspective.

Keep the message clear and simple. All information about any new program should be readily available on your own website or common method of information dissemination. Information presented should be kept simple, highlighting the main points and written using accessible language. Translation should be considered depending on your community. Inquiries should be directed to this source to ensure continuity in the message. Avoid linking to other organizations or materials that you cannot control; this can confuse the message and erroneously suggest that other topics are being introduced or discussed.

OPUSD's program was specifically designed through a collaborative and organic process to meet the needs of its community. When links were provided to other organizations, community members easily became confused between what was part of the program being enacted in OPUSD classrooms and other organizations' materials that addressed topics such as sexual identity, transitioning youth, or biology and human development. Additionally, social media conversations would often provide erroneous information. Rather than engaging in this forum, OPUSD controlled the message by referring all inquiries to our website and the district controlled message provided there.

This article provides a brief overview of the process that one district took to create a gender diversity K-5 lesson plan trajectory and related lesson plans. Our hope is that by describing this process and deliberations, we provide material for further discussion, debate, and conversation within districts, communities, or school sites. It is our job as educators to support and educate all students under our care, even when it is not comfortable or easy; it is at those times that we know we are doing the most meaningful work.

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