It's OK to Be Neither: Teaching That Supports Gender-Variant Children

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Allie arrived at our first-grade classroom wearing a sweatshirt with a hood. I asked her to take off her hood, and she refused. I thought she was just being difficult and ignored it. After breakfast we got in line for art, and I noticed that she still had not removed her hood. When we arrived at the art room, I said, "Allie, I'm not playing. It's time for art. The rule is no hoods or hats in school."

She looked up with tears in her eyes, and I realized there was something wrong. Her classmates went into the art room, and we moved to the art storage area so that her classmates wouldn't hear our conversation. I softened my tone and asked her if she'd like to tell me what was wrong.

"My ponytail," she cried.

"Can I see?" I asked.

She nodded and pulled down her hood. Allie's braids had come undone overnight, and there hadn't been time to redo them in the morning, so they had to be put back in a ponytail. It was high up on the back of her head like those of many girls in our class, but I could see that to Allie it just felt wrong. With Allie's permission, I took the elastic out and re-braided
her hair so that it could hang down.

"How's that?" I asked.

She smiled. "Good," she said and skipped off to join her friends in art.

'Why Do You Look Like a Boy?'

Allison was biologically a girl but felt more comfortable wearing Tony Hawk long-sleeved T-shirts, baggy jeans, and black tennis shoes. Her parents were accepting and supportive. Her mother braided her hair in cornrows because Allie thought it made her look like Will Smith's son Jaden in the remake of The Karate Kid. She preferred to be called Allie. The first day of school, children who hadn't been in Allie's class in kindergarten referred to her as "he."

I didn't want to assume I knew how Allie wanted me to respond to the continual gender mistakes, so I made a phone call home, and Allie's mom put me on speakerphone.

"Allie," she said, "Ms. Melissa is on the phone. She would like to know if you want her to correct your classmates when they say you are a boy, or if you would rather that she just doesn't say anything."

Allie was shy on the phone. "Um... tell them that I am a girl," she whispered.

The next day when I corrected classmates and told them that Allie was a girl, they asked her a lot of questions that she wasn't prepared for: "Why do you look like a boy?" "If you're a girl, why do you always wear boys' clothes?" Some even told her that she wasn't supposed to wear boys' clothes if
she was a girl. It became evident that I would have to address gender directly in order to make the classroom environment more comfortable for Allie and to squash the gender stereotypes that my first graders had absorbed in their short lives.

**Gender Training Starts Early**

Gender is not a subject that I would have broached in primary grades a few years ago. In fact, I remember scoffing with colleagues when we heard about a young kindergarten teacher who taught gender-related curriculum. We thought her lessons were a waste of instructional time and laughed at her "girl and boy" lessons.

My own thoughts about gender curriculum shifted when I became a mother. As I shopped for infant clothes for my first daughter, I was disgusted that almost everything was pink and there was no mistaking the boys' section of the store for the girls' section. I refused to make my baby daughter fit in the box that society had created for her. "What if she doesn't like pink?" I thought. "What if she likes tigers and dinosaurs?"

As my two daughters grew, I talked with them about gender stereotypes. I let them choose "boys'" clothes if they wanted to (and often encouraged them, because they are more practical). The first week of kindergarten, my younger daughter's teacher told me that my daughter had had a heated argument with a boy while they played dress up. "She insisted that boys can wear dresses if they want to," the teacher told me. I beamed with pride.

Unfortunately, it wasn't until I had a child dealing with gender
variance (defined as "behavior or gender expression that does not conform to dominant gender norms of male and female") in my classroom that I realized how important it is to teach about gender and break down gender stereotypes. Why did I wait so long? I should have taken a hint from that kindergarten teacher years ago. As I thought about how to approach the topic, I realized that the lessons I was developing weren't just for Allie. She had sparked my thinking, but all the children in my class needed to learn to think critically about gender stereotypes and gender nonconformity.

We started off with a lesson about toys, because it's a simple topic that I knew my students thought they had clear ideas about. The class gathered on the carpet, and I read William's Doll, which is about a boy who, against the wishes of his father, wants a doll more than anything.

After we read the story, I taped up two large pieces of paper and wrote "Boys" on one and "Girls" on the other. "Students," I said, "what are some toys that are for boys?" Eagerly, the students began to shout out their answers: Legos! Hot Wheels! Skateboards! Bikes! The list grew quite long. "OK," I said, "now tell me some toys that are for girls." Baby dolls! Nail polish! Barbies! Makeup!

When we had two extensive lists, I read both lists out loud to the class and then studied them carefully.

"Hmm," I said. "Here it says that Legos are for boys. Can girls play with Legos?"

"Yes!" most of them replied without hesitation.

"I wonder if any of the girls in our class like to play with Hot
Wheels?"

"I do! I do!" blurted out some of the girls. We continued with the rest of the items on our "Boys" list, making a check mark next to each one as it was declared acceptable for girls.

Then we went on to the "Girls" list. We started with baby dolls. Because we had just read and discussed *William's Doll*, the children were OK with boys playing with dolls. "It's great practice for boys who want to be daddies when they grow up," I mentioned.

But when we got to nail polish and makeup, the children were unsure. "There are some very famous rock 'n' roll bands," I said, "and the men in those bands wear a lot of makeup." Some of the children gasped.

Then Isabela raised her hand: "Sometimes my uncle wears black nail polish." The students took a moment to think about this.

"My cousin wears nail polish, too!" said another student. Soon many students were eager to share examples of how people pushed the limits on gender. Our school engineer, Ms. Joan, drove a motorcycle. Jeremy liked to dance. I could see the gears turning in their brains as the gender lines started to blur.

**Supporting Gender Variance Every Day**

I knew that broadening my students' ideas of what was acceptable for boys and girls was an important first step, but to make Allie feel comfortable and proud of herself, I was going to have to go further.
For example, as teachers, we often use gender to divide students into groups or teams. It seems easy and obvious. Many of us do this when we line students up to go to the bathroom. In one conversation that I had with Allie's mother, she told me that Allie did not like using public bathrooms, because many times Allie had been accused of being in the wrong bathroom. As soon as she told me, I felt bad. By dividing the children into two lines by assigned gender, I had unintentionally made those children whose labels aren't so clear feel uncomfortable in more ways than one.

When we lined up to go to the bathroom, I kept my students in one line until we reached the bathroom, and then I let them separate to enter their bathrooms. Allie usually said she didn't need to use the bathroom. The few times that she did, I offered the bathroom around the corner, a single-stall bathroom that was usually unoccupied. When the kids came out of the bathroom, they wanted to line up as most classrooms do, in boys' and girls' lines. Instead, I thought up a new way for them to line up each day. For example: "If you like popsicles, line up here. If you like ice cream, line up here." They loved this, and it kept them entertained while they waited for their classmates. Here are a few more examples:

"Which would you choose?"

A skateboard or a bike?

Milk or juice?

Dogs or cats?
A hot day or a snow day?

Fiction or nonfiction?

Soccer or basketball?

A beach or a pool?

I also became very aware of using the phrase "boys and girls" to address my students. Instead, I used gender-neutral terms like "students" or "children." At first, the more I thought about it, the more frequently I'd say "boys and girls." I tried not to be too hard on myself when I slipped, and eventually I got out of the habit and used "students" regularly.

Around the same time, another child's mother told me that her son had been taunted for wearing a Hello Kitty Band-Aid. She mentioned that his sister was also teased at school for having a lunch bag with skulls on it. I planned more lessons to combat gender stereotypes in our classroom.

'It's OK to Be Different'

In order to deepen our discussion of gender, I selected another read-aloud. Before we read, I asked my students, "I would like to know, how many of you like to dance?" Most raised their hands.

"How many of you have been told you can't do something because it was 'only for boys' or 'only for girls'?' Many hands went up.
Then I read *Oliver Button Is a Sissy*. In the book, Oliver is bullied because he prefers dancing to sports. The students quickly realized that this was not fair and empathized with Oliver Button.

The following day we read *It's Okay to Be Different*, by Todd Parr. Parr's books are quite popular in the primary grades because they include an element of humor and simple, colorful illustrations. We read:

"It's OK to Wear Glasses"

"It's OK to Come from a Different Place"

"It's OK to Be a Different Color"

As we read, I asked questions to empower the students: "Who used to live in a different place?" Students proudly held up their hands. "Awesome!" I replied. "My mom comes from a different place, too. She used to live in Hong Kong."

Then I guided the direction of the conversation toward gender. As a class, we brainstormed a list of things that students thought were "OK" even though they might challenge society's gender norms. Monica told us very matter-of-factly, "It's OK for a girl to marry a girl," and Jordan said, "My dad carries a purse, and that's OK!" At that point I explained that my father and my friend Wayne both call their man purse a "murse." The children were fascinated.

Toward the end of the discussion, I explained, "People make all kinds of different decisions about gender. Sometimes, as we grow, we might not want to pick one or the other, and
that's OK; we don't have to." I wanted them to begin to see that our lessons were not only about expanding the gender boxes that we've been put into, but also about questioning or eliminating them altogether.

Afterward, I had the students do a simple write-and-respond exercise. I asked them to pick one activity that they associated with girls and one associated with boys to write about and illustrate. Monica drew two brides in beautiful wedding gowns. Miguel drew a man with a purse slung over his shoulder. I showed off the pictures on the hallway bulletin board around the words "It's OK to Be Different."

Although things were getting better for Allie, she still faced many challenges. At the end of the school year, Allie's mother told me a heartbreaking story. She said that for Allie's recent birthday party, her grandmother had bought her colorful, form-fitting clothes and then demanded them back when Allie did not like them. "Does she know she is a girl?" she had yelled and announced that she would never buy her clothes again.

It was so sad to hear this. I visualized Allie on her special day, excitedly ripping open gifts in front of her family and friends only to find, again and again, that the gifts were things that she would never be comfortable with. As a mother, the feeling of extreme disappointment was unbearable for me to imagine.

I have just begun to empathize with the challenges that gender-variant children deal with. For some it may seem inappropriate to address these issues in the classroom. My job is not to answer the questions "Why?" or "How?" (although asking those questions and doing some research
in order to better understand was definitely part of my process). Allie is the way she is. My job is not to judge but to teach, and I can't teach if the students in my class are distracted or uncomfortable. My job is also about preparing students to be a part of our society, ready to work and play with all kinds of people. I found that teaching about gender stereotypes is another social justice issue that needs to be addressed, like racism, immigrants' rights, or protecting the environment.

Later in the year, I opened my inbox one morning and read, "Andrew says he wants a Baby Alive doll, and he doesn't care if it's for girls. Thank you, Ms. Melissa!"


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