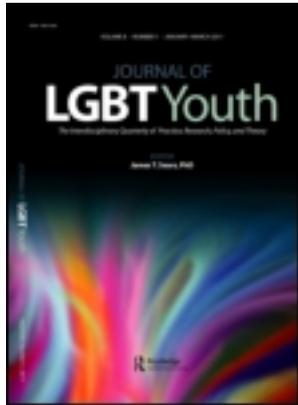


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Is This the Right Elementary School for My Gender Nonconforming Child?

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Is This the Right Elementary School for My Gender Nonconforming Child?

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This article describes what followed after a mother wondered if the school in her neighborhood was the right elementary school for her gender nonconforming young child. It includes collective and individual narratives from four key players: the mom and teacher educator (Slesaransky-Poe), the school's guidance counselor (Ruzzi), the principal (DiMedio), and the consultant who led the initial professional development (Stanley). It documents and reflects on the work done over five years to transform a great school into a welcoming and inclusive one for gender nonconforming and transgender students.

KEYWORDS *Elementary school, family–school collaboration, gender nonconformity, gender variance, Welcoming Schools*

ASKING THE QUESTION

The spring when my son Martin¹ was four and a half years old, I was paying very close attention to a particular conversation thread taking place on the listserv of the Gender and Sexuality Advocacy and Education Program (GSAEP), an online community of parents raising children who have gender-variant interests and behaviors or who are transgender. The thread was about

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their children transitioning from preschool to elementary school. The parents had many questions, worries, and anxieties about their children's safety in elementary school.

Children who have nonconforming gender identities and expressions or who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning/queer (LGBTQ) are common targets of bullying and harassment. I recall reading at that time that more than 40% of students who participated in a National School Climate Survey (Harris Interactive & Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2005) felt unsafe at school because of their gender expression and that one-quarter (26%) of the students reported having been physically harassed during the previous year because of their gender expression.

The numbers hold true today. A recent survey of elementary school students (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012) found that only 42% of gender nonconforming students feel safe at school, compared to 62% of their gender conforming counterparts. Over one-third (35%) of the gender nonconforming students also indicated that they did not want to attend school because they felt afraid and unsafe. It is therefore not surprising that over half (56%) of the gender nonconforming students also experienced name-calling and bullying at times by other students in their schools in relation to their gender expressions.

I knew that the parents' worries about their young children's safety and well-being were reasonable and justified. Martin had one and a half more years left at his preschool program, yet I found myself already worrying about him transitioning into a new school. At that time, my daughter Veronica was in second grade at Cynwyd Elementary, our neighborhood school. Thus far, Cynwyd Elementary had been a great school for Veronica and for us as a family. Cynwyd Elementary is well-known for its caring and effective educators and administrators, academic excellence, extracurricular activities, clean and well-equipped environment, and an atmosphere conducive to learning. But this time it was different. We needed to keep our son safe. I began to wonder if Cynwyd Elementary would be the right school for him. I needed to know if he would be physically and emotionally safe; feel welcomed, respected, and fully embraced; and be able to focus on learning.

I decided to meet with Lisa Ruzzi, the school guidance counselor. Based on my previous interactions with Lisa, I knew that she would answer my questions honestly. At the meeting, I described my son to her, illustrating how he challenged our (and society's) understanding and expectations of what it means to be a boy through his attitudes, behaviors, and desires. I introduced and explained the terms *gender variance* and *gender nonconformity*, terms that I had learned only recently myself. I told Lisa that my husband, Phil, and I were learning a lot from, and with, our children, and that there were many things we still did not know and were uncertain about, but there were some we knew for sure. We knew that we loved and fully embraced our son the way he was, despite the criticisms we were getting from others not

walking in our shoes, and that we needed a school that would be affirming and protective of Martin. I told Lisa how Phil and I were learning to become “facilitative parents;” that is, parents who strive to allow their children to express themselves in their own unique gender ways while helping them to adapt to a world that will not necessarily embrace that way of being (Ehrensaft, 2007).

Lisa listened attentively. I then asked the question: “Do you think that Cynwyd Elementary is the right school for my son?” To be frank, I was not exactly sure what I was expecting from Lisa, but her response felt just right. She said, “We are not ready yet, but we will work together to make sure we are ready for him.” We agreed that the next step would be a meeting with Connie DiMedio, the school principal, and my husband. I gave Lisa some reading materials and resources that we had found helpful in understanding Martin’s gender nonconformity, as well as information that could be useful for the school. When I arrived home I posted on the GSAEP listserv: “Great initial step! I feel hopeful and optimistic.”

I later learned that Lisa’s sentiments about that meeting were somewhat different from mine. This is how she recalls the meeting:

I really can’t remember the exact words Graciela used to describe Martin. What I clearly remember was my reaction—a bit of panic and worry, though I was very careful not to transmit to her my concerns. She described how, when Martin was very young, he identified both as a boy and as a girl. She spoke about how, since he was three years old, most of Martin’s play would be considered “girls’ play,” such as princess dress-up; how he pretended to have long hair by wearing a blanket or a long-sleeved shirt on his head, and many other examples of her son’s interests and activities. So many thoughts flashed through my mind. . . . I thought about the teasing, bullying, teacher and parent reactions, and keeping Martin safe. I was also worried that I had no previous experience with situations like this. At that time, I didn’t have the strategies to share with her about what we would do to help him feel welcome in our school. So, when Graciela asked if we were prepared to have Martin attend Cynwyd Elementary School, I knew we were not ready yet, but I saw no reason why we couldn’t be, and I knew we had a responsibility to become the right school for Martin.

Lisa informed Connie, the principal, about our conversation. This is Connie’s reflection and recollection:

When I learned from Ms. Ruzzi that a student with gender-variant behaviors would be a first grader at Cynwyd Elementary School in a year and a half, I experienced a level of professional anxiety that was both challenging and frightening. What do I know about gender identity? Am

I informed enough on the subject to be able to identify and provide the support that is needed for the student, the parents, and the staff?

Building principals feel most comfortable in their positions when they are able to make informed decisions based on knowledge, data/research, and experience. Students, staff, and parents/guardians rely on principals to utilize all of their knowledge, skills, experience, and dispositions to provide a safe, nurturing, supportive, and healthy learning environment for all children. For 39 years in education and 32 as an administrator, I worked with my colleagues on creating a school climate built on respecting, embracing, and celebrating the uniqueness of everyone in the school community. But this was new to me. I thought: *I don't know enough to know what I don't know.*

FIRST TEAM MEETING: COLLABORATIVE PLANNING

As planned, in early fall, a year before Martin would start Cynwyd Elementary, Connie, Lisa, Phil, and I met to plan for Martin's transition into elementary school. Phil and I spoke about Martin and gave Connie a copy of the same resources that we had shared with Lisa. Connie recalls that meeting in the following way:

At our parent meeting, the counselor and I had the pleasure of listening to both parents describe their love and support of their child "just the way he is" and their willingness to work with us to plan for his social, emotional, and educational experiences at Cynwyd Elementary. The parents talked about his interests and talents, his loving and kind personality, his experiences in his preschool and summer camps, and their life at home. Several times in the conversation, the mom reassured us that "we were all learning together."

At that meeting, Phil and I felt grateful for Connie's and Lisa's disposition, openness, and readiness to start working with us to make this a successful experience for our son and our family. Looking back, Connie remembers thinking:

That meeting was the beginning of a collaboration between the parents and the school personnel that has fostered a loving school environment for their child for the past five years. What the parents gave to the school personnel at that first meeting was their trust, their commitment, and the advantage of time. There was an opportunity to plan, collaborate, and reflect prior to his arrival. We were no longer talking about a label, but instead a wonderful child whom we would be welcoming to our school family.

Connie also recalls:

Once we acquired more knowledge, Lisa and I were prepared to create a preliminary plan of action to ensure a smooth transition for the child and his family and a plan for staff development to raise their awareness and knowledge of gender variance. Our planned tasks included the following:

- Consult with the superintendent and the director of guidance and counseling for the approval of staff development for the Cynwyd Elementary staff. Suggest that all of the district administrators be trained.
- Schedule staff development training with the Bryson Institute, a nonprofit organization that conducts ally training for individuals who work with LGBTQ youth. The training would include a discussion of LGBTQ youth development with a particular focus on gender identity and expression; experiential learning exercises to increase understanding and empathy for LGBTQ youth; and strategies for working with and supporting LGBTQ youth and families. (A more detailed description of this initial professional development session is included in the next section.)
- Plan for a presentation by the mother to the school staff.
- Facilitate faculty meeting discussions on how teachers could model gender-inclusive language, as well as ways to avoid gender stereotyping in the classroom and school settings.
- Have both parents share helpful and insightful information about their child with their children's classroom teachers and the entire staff. The parents prepared a packet for the teachers that provided information about gender variance and some practices they did at home which would also be helpful at school. The packet included suggestions for addressing name-calling and teasing, helping their child be his own advocate, avoiding the promotion and expectation of gender-stereotypical roles by the students, using gender-inclusive grouping practices, and responding to students' questions and comments. (A copy of the letter that accompanied the packet given to Martin's and Veronica's teachers is found in the appendix.)
- Ensure careful classroom placement of Martin and Veronica each year, and review classroom and teacher practices to ensure a successful and happy school year for the students.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We all agreed that effective professional development was a critical component in this process. In particular, the success of the initial training would be important to the future implementation and success of our goals.

Jeanne Stanley, then director of the Bryson Institute, led an initial professional development session for schoolteachers, administrators, and staff. Although I was involved with the planning, we decided that it would be best if I was not present at that initial training to enable the school staff to ask questions freely and openly. The Bryson Institute of the Attic Youth Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was founded in 2003 with the purpose of providing educational trainings and consultation services to adults about the best practices for supporting LGBTQ youth. Jeanne captured the process as follows:

In 2007, Cynwyd Elementary School requested an educational training on transgender youth. In our experience, it was unheard-of for an elementary school to ask for assistance for transgender students. High schools and community agencies were beginning to request transgender-youth-based trainings. Yet of the 200-plus trainings provided by the Bryson Institute since its inception, no elementary school had ever requested training specifically about gender nonconforming students. I was therefore very excited to provide professional development in an elementary school setting and remember feeling such a strong interest from the group to learn about gender variance and transgender issues facing youth.

It is important for an outside agency or consultant to conduct research on the school to tie into the work of the institution and to identify its unique climate. The Cynwyd Elementary mission statement was integrated into the professional development to make the connection between the training and the values of the school. Its mission is for students:

to develop a love of learning, a sense of social responsibility, and a belief in the value of every individual. In partnership with school, home, and community, students will work toward becoming creative and critical thinkers, problem solvers, and decision makers. By promoting the student's responsibility in the learning process, we encourage each individual to become a contributing member of society.

These words became the foundation for the professional development in that all members of the school community are responsible for creating and fostering a belief in the value of every individual.

The three-hour in-service session was held in the school's library for 26 of the school's teachers, administrators, and school counselors. The in-service consisted of both didactic and experiential learning. The attendees were informed at the outset that the session might stretch their understanding of gender, as they would be reexamining and, at times, relearning concepts around gender that they had likely been taught since infancy.

The didactic portion of the training was placed early in the in-service to give the participants an opportunity to develop a shared language and

to build comfort with the topic. To this end, *sexual orientation* and *sexual identity* were defined and differentiated from gender identity. Gender concepts were then addressed, beginning with a brief overview of biological sex terminology (*male*, *female*, and *intersex*). Related but separate is *gender identity*, which is how individuals perceive themselves as male, female, somewhere in between, or as no gender at all. A brief activity asked participants to write down when they were first aware of their gender, which was then followed by a discussion; these components were used to help the school staff understand that individuals who question their gender identity have often done so from a young age but have frequently had to hide their feelings for fear of being perceived as different or being rejected.

Gender roles and gender expressions were addressed in interactive exercises, which helped the participants better understand the day-to-day ways that people consciously and unconsciously express their gender. The learning then progressed to personal learning, with each participant being asked to complete a survey about the messages which they received around gender growing up and which they receive today. Staff members were given the opportunity to share their responses, which were grouped into different themes.

The session then turned to specific strategies for supporting gender nonconforming and transgender students (whether out, not out, or questioning) in their classes and during the school day. The attendees gave examples of approaches they had used at Cynwyd Elementary to support LGBTQ students, which helped to generate further ideas for affirming gender nonconforming and transgender students.

Other key points addressed in the session included the question of when it is developmentally appropriate to introduce gender nonconforming and transgender identities in the classroom. Developmentally, children are aware of the concept of gender by the time they are toddlers. The topic needs to be addressed in an age-appropriate way but does not have to be ignored in elementary and secondary schools. For example, it is important to emphasize throughout elementary school that we all have similarities and differences in how we express our gender and that this gender expression may go against traditional gender roles and expectations.

At the conclusion of the session, the group was reminded that it takes time to expand our understanding of gender, since traditional gender beliefs are so deeply ingrained in all of us. The participants were asked to be patient with themselves while they were relearning, and to continue to learn and grow through additional professional development opportunities on LGBTQ issues. The session concluded with the staff being provided with handouts and links to additional information for supporting and affirming gender nonconforming and transgender students.

PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT AND CONTRIBUTIONS

During the first week of Martin's first grade, Phil and I met with his teacher and gave her a packet containing a letter (reprinted in the appendix) that described his personality, interests, and behaviors and provided examples of what had worked for our family in responding to other students' comments, such as "Why does Martin like pink?" or "Why does he always play with girls?"² In addition, the letter offered language we found helpful in explaining gender variance to Martin, his sister, and other people in his life. When Martin was very young, we learned to explain gender variance in simple, concrete, and easily understandable terms. We said that there were three different ways of being a boy—there were boys who liked boys' stuff, boys who liked boys' and girls' stuff, and boys who liked girls' stuff—and that all were okay ways of being a boy. Over time, we replaced "three ways" with "many ways" of being a boy or a girl; that is, "There are many ways of being a boy (or a girl), and all are okay ways of being a boy (or a girl)."

The packet also contained two articles that educators have found useful in understanding and discussing gender and gender stereotyping with their students: "Good Morning, Boys and Girls" (Bigler, 2005) and "Not True! Gender Doesn't Limit You!" (Moss, 2007). Finally, it included a brochure titled "If You Are You Concerned With Your Child's Gender Behaviors: A Guide for Parents" (Children's National Medical Center, Outreach Program for Children With Gender-Variant Behaviors and Their Families, 2003). We met with Veronica's fourth-grade teacher and gave her a copy of the packet as well.

Phil and I have been and continue to be present and involved in our children's lives at Cynwyd Elementary School. We approached the staff at Cynwyd Elementary as our partners and made sure that they knew we were always available to talk with them and figure things out together, since this was new territory for all of us. In addition, because of my connection to the Welcoming Schools program (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2010), an LGBTQ-inclusive, evidence-based approach for K–5 schools, I was able to refer counselors, teachers, and administrators to resources already available online (<http://www.welcomingschools.org>).

Cynwyd Elementary School's climate was already fertile for the work ahead. There was a palpable sense of friendliness, respect, and school pride shared by the members of the community. Cynwyd Elementary had previously adopted Second Step (Committee for Children, 2007), an evidence-based social skills program that teaches students empathy, problem solving, and impulse control skills, and helps them apply these skills when they are angry, upset, or not getting along with others. Because the Welcoming Schools curricula could be integrated within the Second Step framework, educators did not feel that it was a completely new and different initiative but rather that it complemented what was already in place. There was

a clear, shared goal; a sense of purpose; a willingness to be successful; and noticeable respect, recognition, excitement, and gratitude for everyone's contributions.

CREATION OF A SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITY

The more involved Cynwyd Elementary became with supporting Martin, the more opportunities for authentic learning experiences were created in very organic and natural ways. Led by Lisa, a group of educators began to meet regularly to deepen their knowledge and understanding of gender nonconforming and transgender children and youth, and to devise knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that would make Cynwyd Elementary a more welcoming, inclusive, and affirming school for children like our son.

This small learning community called themselves the Welcoming Schools committee. The momentum created by the enthusiasm and engagement of the Welcoming Schools committee at Cynwyd Elementary, in addition to various other initiatives taking place throughout the district at the time, resulted in the creation of a Welcoming Schools committee in other schools throughout the district. In addition, district administrators, including the district superintendent, became involved and supported a district-wide Welcoming Schools committee that continues to oversee and coordinate policies, procedures, and practices to support the work of schools in becoming more affirming, welcoming, and safer for gender nonconforming, transgender, and LGBTQ students, families, and educators.

The work of the Welcoming Schools committees and other similar initiatives to create more LGBTQ-inclusive classroom, school, and district climates also resulted in some unexpected outcomes. For example, a few families who were thought to be headed by single parents began to attend school functions and meetings with their same-sex partners. In addition, a few faculty and staff disclosed that they were gay or lesbian.

MY ROLES AS A MOM AND TEACHER EDUCATOR

The Welcoming Schools committee invited me to meet with them on several occasions to share personal stories and family experiences that gave texture and insight into the texts they were reading. Later, I was invited to do a presentation for the staff (educators and noneducator personnel) at Cynwyd, three other elementary schools, and one middle school in the district, as well as to the superintendent's cabinet, which consisted of central district administrators and principals and assistant principals from each of the district's ten schools. These presentations contained information about our family's journey and gender nonconformity. They included a series of activities that

challenged educators to think about gender as a continuum, rather than a binary, and to recognize gender as a social construction (Slesaransky-Poe & García, 2009). In addition, the presentations provided examples that questioned the gender-normative and heteronormative assumptions and practices of schools and society more generally (García & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Slesaransky-Poe & García, 2009).

TEN Cs OF CYNWYD ELEMENTARY

In conclusion, the following ten *Cs* could be used to summarize what contributed to Martin's successful schooling at Cynwyd Elementary:

1. *Collaboration*. We consider collaboration to be the most important one. The collaborative and respectful approach that was embraced since the very beginning set the tone for a true team approach between family and school. No one could have done it without the others.
2. *Consultation*. Other key contributions were made by the consultants, who provided professional development and technical assistance, and the parents, who were always available to problem-solve any situation that arose and to provide resources, information, and support.
3. *Confidence*. Since the beginning of the collaboration, there was a clear sense of confidence and trust in one another. We all had one goal in mind: that Martin and his sister would be educated in a school in which they would feel safe and be free of teasing and harassment, so that they could fully engage in learning.
4. *Change*. Teachers and staff were, at their own pace, embracing change in ways that began to be noticeable. These changes were evident in how morning greetings, classroom practices, recess, choice of professional development trainings, and wording used in forms and consents became more sensitive toward, and inclusive of, gender nonconforming students and the LGBT community at large.
5. *Climate*. Another important factor in this success was the careful attention the principal and counselor paid to maintaining a positive and welcoming school climate that stressed orderly respect, caring, and acceptance of each member of the school community.
6. *Courage*. It was courageous of the parents to be proactive and open in determining whether Cynwyd Elementary was the right school for their son. It was courageous of the school counselor to steward this effort with such passion, perseverance, and determination and to become a very strong district leader and expert in gender-variance matters. It was courageous of the school principal to admit that she had a lot to learn about gender nonconformity and to lead the school in embracing

gender diversity in every aspect of school life, even if this move could be controversial.

7. *Curiosity*. It took curiosity on the part of the school counselor and the other educators who formed Welcoming Schools, the small learning community which led the school and the district into a deeper understanding and knowledge of what it means to be a gender nonconforming individual or to be transgender.
8. *Community*. As the African proverb states, “It takes a village to raise a child” and the whole community to educate and support that person. The visible and invisible work that took place at Cynwyd Elementary strengthened its sense of community.
9. *Compassion*. It took compassion by the whole school community to accept, celebrate, and embrace Martin just the way he is.
10. *Commitment*. It took commitment from all parties to make this a successful experience for all.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Guidance Counselor’s Reflection

As a guidance counselor, I was recently asked to do the difficult task of summarizing in one sentence why I choose to go into school counseling. I believe I need to be an advocate for those children who cannot be advocates for themselves. We have a responsibility in public schools to make safe places for children to learn and thrive, and to create environments where everyone is respected. Thinking back on this experience with Martin, which I consider to be one of the most challenging, thought-provoking experiences of my life, there are some suggestions I would make to school counselors who may be helping and working with students who are gender nonconforming or transgender.

- Don’t be afraid to admit you have no knowledge or experience in helping children with a specific need, and don’t let that fear get in the way of helping a child.
- Be honest. We were honest with Graciela, and she was honest with us. We explained that we were not yet ready for Martin at school but, as a result of our conversation, plans were made for staff development, teacher placement, classroom arrangement, and classroom guidance lessons.
- Challenge yourself. Because I did not have knowledge about students who are gender nonconforming or transgender, I wanted to learn as much as I could about the topic. We began a small study group with the school psychologist. Other members of the staff joined us every other week to learn more about the topic. Our school district was also supportive of this work, as they allowed us to focus on this topic for staff development.

- Staff development is a very important step. Teachers need to be given information and strategies to help them make the most of teachable moments; they need to feel supported in their efforts to help create welcoming learning environments. After meetings that included the principal, we recognized the need for staff development in the area of gender identity. Specific strategies were developed that were not only put into use for Martin's classroom but also for the entire school setting, so that every child could benefit from them. Some strategies included changing teacher language to be inclusive not divisive (e.g., saying "Good morning, everyone" instead of "Good morning, boys and girls"), never dividing students according to gender, and giving teachers language with which to address bullying or comments that may lead to hurtful feelings. The needs of just one student were thus translated into a wave of advocacy for many, and the training that began at Cynwyd Elementary spread to the other schools in the district, as we recognized the need for staff development in all our schools.
- Recognize how the work you are doing now will help other children in the future. The time we invested in learning how to help Martin was an extraordinary help to us when our next student who was gender nonconforming or transgender walked through our doors. You must be willing to spend the time and effort, and know you are making a difference.

Principal's Reflection

My last thoughts are that we are now ready to transition Martin to the middle school and to have him share his many gifts with the Bala Cynwyd Middle School family. Although he will continue to face challenges related to issues of gender conformity, Martin is graduating as a happy, loving, and capable child who he has grown in his individuality and confidence.

Professional Development Trainer's Reflection

I never cease to be amazed by the impact that one person can make. A young student and his family changed an entire school district for the better. Giving this one training was also instrumental for me as a presenter in that it was by far one of the most welcoming groups out of thousands I have trained. I hold Martin's example as a reminder to this day of how change can occur by creating opportunities for personal and professional learning. This training was also the inroad for me to create trainings for the entire school district. Every employee in the district has participated in two years of trainings on supporting, affirming, and understanding the intersection of students' identities, including class, ability, ethnicity,

gender, gender expression, race, religion, and sexual identity. Again, it is amazing what one student can do for so many.

Mom's Reflection

At this time, my son is finishing fifth grade. In his five years at Cynwyd Elementary, as far as we know, he was never called names, bullied, or harassed. We owe it to the leadership and commitment of Connie, the school principal, and the tireless stewardship of Lisa, the school counselor. We owe it to the wonderful teachers and other school personnel who were open to learning with us and supporting our children in any way possible. We owe it to the vision and support of the district superintendent and the contributions that so many people made as a team to this successful work. But, just as important, we owe it to Martin. It was his own doing, with his gentle, funny, sensitive, thoughtful, and insightful ways, that he gained the heart and support of his peers and educators. By learning how to negotiate difficult situations and how not to take things personally, Martin was able to create his own safe space within this school. He gets along with many kids, and his small group of friends adore him and seek his company and friendship, so much so that this year, for the first time, he decided to run for student council—and he won! I can say clearly, loudly, and with confidence: Cynwyd Elementary was the right elementary school for my son.

NOTES

1. His name has been changed to protect confidentiality.
2. For a list of ways to answer children's and adults' questions about gender nonconformity and sexual orientation in a developmentally appropriate way, refer to Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2010).

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CONTRIBUTORS

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Jeanne Stanley, PhD, is a national trainer working with school districts, corporations, and colleges on the best practices for supporting various sociocultural identities.

APPENDIX: LETTER TO TEACHERS

Dear [Teacher's Name],

This packet includes some resources on gender variance that may help you gain a better understanding of the topic, as well as some recommended

classroom practices that could help all children break some of the gender stereotypes that are so ingrained in our culture. We've also included some ideas that reflect what we have learned as we were trying to figure things out, and that work at home. We thought that having them in writing might help serve as a reference.

As you know, Martin is a very sweet and smart child, but he is not a typical boy. Martin prefers to do many things that are usually associated with girls, and he loves to play with girls. Though we support him and love him just the way he is, we are aware that his behavior and preferences may make him subject to teasing. Here are the ideas organized in themes.

In thinking about gender:

- It would be great if Martin was not asked to play any gender-stereotypical roles. It works best for him when he is presented with choices and is allowed to select what he prefers.
- Materials we've read suggest that it would be helpful if kids are not organized or recognized as "boys" or "girls" or even addressed as "boys and girls." You could read more about this in the enclosed article, "Good Morning, Boys and Girls" (Bigler, 2005).

Suggested ways to respond:

- If it is helpful, the language we've learned to use with Martin is that there are many different ways of being a boy or a girl. At home, we discuss that there are different kinds of boys (or girls): boys who like boys' stuff, boys who like boys' and girls' stuff, and boys who like girls' stuff. All three ways are right ways of being a boy (or a girl).
- We also tell him that not everyone is aware of the fact that there are different ways of being a boy or a girl and that we have to help others learn about it. So, when someone says something that is not nice, it is not because they are trying to be mean but because they do not know about the different ways of being a boy or a girl.
- It is important that he hears from the significant adults in his life that there is nothing wrong with him. Like with any bullying victim, it is important to let him know that he is not causing the problem by being who he is, and that it's not his fault!

Addressing name-calling or teasing:

- If someone is teasing Martin or calling him names, it would help if you (or any other adult in charge) could say something along the lines of "That's not respectful" or "We don't talk like this to our friends"—like you would do if another child was being teased for other reasons. We would ask you to allow (and actually encourage) Martin to state in his own words how

he feels about the incident and express himself “loud and clear, feeling proud of himself.”

- We found the language and phrases used in the enclosed curriculum “Not True! Gender Doesn’t Limit You!” (Moss, 2007) very appropriate.
- And again, the language used in “Second Step” could be applicable here as well.

Helping Martin speak up for himself:

- Finally, we cannot stress enough how strongly we feel about Martin learning to speak up for himself. If he is being teased, we have been encouraging him to speak up, such as by telling them to stop, saying that his feelings are being hurt, etc. As he grows older, it is becoming easier for him to do. But sometimes he may need some extra help.
- When someone may ask him why he likes to play with girls, why he likes to play as a girl, or why he likes pink, etc., we have been teaching him to respond that “anyone can play what they want/like to play” or that “there are no girls’ colors or boys’ colors; colors are just colors.”
- Furthermore, as we learned from another boy with gender-variant behaviors and interests, when someone asked him, “Why do you play with that doll? Boys can’t play with dolls,” he responded: “Yes, they can! I am a boy, and I am playing with them!”

We understand that this is a lot to digest and a new way of looking at gender. We value so much that Cynwyd Elementary and you, in particular, are open to input from parents and that we have the opportunity to share this information with you. We would be more than happy to discuss this further anytime. Also, we anticipate situations may come up that may require some brainstorming on how to solve them. Please count on us. We recognize that this is a new topic for all of us, so we would be more than happy to think them through together.

We strongly believe in the importance of sharing this information with teachers and other school personnel, and we really appreciate your cooperation. It would be great if you also could share this information with other teaching and nonteaching staff, such as the art, music, and physical education teachers, librarians, nurses, recess helpers, perhaps even bus driver, etc., who may be part of Martin’s experience at Cynwyd Elementary.

We thank you for your understanding and we look forward to a great first year!

Graciela and Phil