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As co-directors of A Queer Endeavor—a university-based initiative that works in partnership with school districts to implement equitable policy and practice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth, families, and staff—we have had the privilege of supporting thousands of educators as they move toward affirming gender, sexual, and family diversity. As part of that work, we facilitate gender and sexuality-focused professional learning experiences that engage teachers, counselors, and school and district administrators in knowledge building, critical self-reflection, dialogue, action, and practice (Leonardi & Staley, 2015). Elementary educators are the folks who show up most consistently to join us in that work. We have been humbled by their deep commitments to honoring students' identities and learning to change their everyday practices so that they may create safer, more affirming learning environments in which LGBTQ youth can thrive. In one of our partner districts, we organize learning experiences that span the school year, and as investigators of educator learning, we have become sensitive to the rhythms that punctuate their processes. That is to say, as educators begin to recognize their role in the historical silence surrounding LGBTQ identities in PreK-12 and higher education, and as we guide them to take stock of cultural norms that maintain cis-heteronormativity in their unique school contexts, they experience a push and pull of emotions.¹ On the one hand, growing awareness of the ways in which schools can be unwelcoming, unsafe places for LGBTQ youth seems to enliven educators' desires to enact affirming practices. Concomitantly, there is also an emotional charge that builds as educators prepare to interrupt harmful norms and that sometimes tempers their efforts to break the silence around gender, sexual, and family diversity. In our experience, and as research supports, moving toward this kind of engaged practice very often provokes agitation and excitement alongside fear and uncertainty. Digging into these emotional dimensions has become a crucial component of

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our work with educators and our research. We dig in here so that we may better support teachers and school leaders to take action, even as they grapple with conflicting emotions.

Grounding in What We Know: Preparing GSD-Inclusive Educators

In the context of these efforts, we have turned to Meyer, Taylor, and Peter's (2014) conception of gender and sexual diversity- (GSD-) inclusive education. GSD-inclusive practitioners seek not only to disrupt normative thinking and systems related to gender and sexuality, but also to think through an intersectional lens, thereby aiming to acknowledge and disrupt privilege and oppression in multiple forms. As a form of anti-oppressive education, GSD-inclusive education makes an important move toward complicating an additive model of inclusion by centering "the silences and misconceptions that allow homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of oppression to exist" (Meyer, Taylor, & Peter, 2014, p. 2). In other words, GSD-inclusive education moves beyond merely adding LGBTQ people and history to a curriculum that has long ignored such topics. Centrally influenced by Kevin Kumashiro's (2002) work, GSD-inclusive education also supports learners as they critically examine oppressive systems and norms and the inequities they produce. In essence, embodying GSD-inclusive praxis involves disrupting normativity across several domains, including the personal, pedagogical, curricular, social, and institutional domains of schooling.

As a theoretical construct, GSD-inclusive education is fairly straightforward, but bringing theory into practice is a complex endeavor. Simply put, preparing for and enacting GSD-inclusive educational practices are difficult processes. But, what makes them so? Existing literature provides some clues. Studies have inquired into factors that enable, constrain, and complicate educators' willingness and ability to take GSD-inclusive action. For example, studies point to the influence of internal factors, such as educators' negative attitudes and beliefs about

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LGBTQ people (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Sears, 1991) and their own identities and experiences in school. Scholars have also found that LGBTQ educators' identities, specifically, function as important internal influences that mediate whether and how they take action (Lugg & Tooms, 2010; Meyer, 2008). The literature also has paid considerable attention to external factors and structural barriers as influences on the degree to which teachers address GSD in the curriculum and/or intervene in anti-LGBTQ behavior such as bullying and harassment. Those influences include administrative support and training, social norms and values of schools, cumbersome curriculum demands, and the absence of anti-bullying and/or non-discrimination policies (Meyer, 2008). In light of these findings, research has called for teacher education programs to take a leading role in supporting pre-service teachers (Jennings & Sherwin, 2008; Mudrey-Camino & Medina-Adams, 2006) and providing in-service teachers with GSD-focused professional development opportunities (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Payne & Smith, 2011; Smith & Payne, 2016).

Increasingly, educators are reporting positive attitudes and high levels of in-theory support for GSD-inclusive education (Taylor, Meyer, Peter, Ristock, Short, & Campbell, 2016), but as Meyer et al. (2014) found, few teachers seem to be taking action. Echoing findings described above, participants in that study named structural barriers as obstacles that precluded action. Similarly, Smith and Payne (2016) found that while educators who attended a professional development session about transgender identity felt responsible for the safety and learning of transgender students, they resisted recommendations to disrupt the ways in which the gender binary defined their school cultures. Smith & Payne report that, in their follow-up with educators after the professional development session, no participants seemed to be making efforts to disrupt cisnormativity in their schools. These findings raise questions about what

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educators need by way of supports that move beyond assistance in cultivating positive attitudes about GSD and one-shot professional development.

Complicating What We Know: Focusing on the Process of Becoming

The literature's focus on internal/external influences, structural barriers, and support has been further complicated, in our view, by our own deep, sustained work with educators. In our research, we have pursued what makes preparing for GSD-inclusive practice such a difficult process to engage. Without question, we agree that educators' positive and negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people and the degree to which certain barriers are present influence whether and how they take action. But, through our interviews and experiences with teachers, we have found there is also something visceral that importantly characterizes educators' *processes of becoming* GSD-inclusive. That is to say, the educators with whom we work, including the elementary educators, consistently experience a deeply personal, complex, vulnerable process as they engage in GSD-focused professional development. It is not as though the matter of learning to think differently about one's teaching practice vis-à-vis the intersections of gender, sexuality, and normativity is settled by participating in a few thoughtfully organized professional development sessions. In fact, it seems the longer we work with educators, and the deeper we go in our mutual exploration of GSD-inclusive education, the more unsettled some things become. In truth, the complexity, emotionality, and vulnerability of becoming teachers who enact GSD-inclusive praxis also resonates with our own experiences "queering" educational contexts as teacher-scholars who identify as queer and the messiness that this entails (Staley & Leonardi, 2016b). As facilitators, our identities are front and center, which brings both strength and vulnerability. For these reasons, we have become curious about and empathetic to the process that unfolds for educators who seek to become GSD-inclusive.

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In making sense of educators' processes, we have found Robert McRuer's (2004) theory of de-composition a productive lens. McRuer invites us to think about the *process of becoming* as engaged, messy, and disorienting acts of composing a GSD-inclusive self. Bringing this theoretical perspective to bear, we conceptualize *becoming* as a process that produces a certain agitation and resists following a neat trajectory that moves continuously forward. It is a process rich with moments of productive tension, uncertainty, and exciting possibility. Importantly, becoming GSD-inclusive also involves intellectual and emotional labor. Learning to disrupt heteronormativity necessarily involves "unlearning" (Kumashiro, 2000) and actively challenging what counts as 'normal' and 'appropriate' with respect to bodies, gender, sexuality, and relationships in the contexts of school and society. In other words, it involves learning to think differently about oneself and the surrounding world. To support educators to understand that point, in our professional development sessions, we use the metaphor of "winding back the tape" of cis-heteronormativity that has been subtly (and not so subtly) functioning as the soundtrack to our lives. Winding back the tape involves interrupting the cis-heteronormative mindset, which is a way of thinking, believing, and acting that promotes heterosexuality and binary gender as 'normal.' The cis-heteronormative mindset is deeply embedded in our social, cultural, and historical contexts, and when left undisrupted, it perpetuates taken-for-granted beliefs that elementary-aged students, for example, are too young to talk about gender and family diversity, that conversations about GSD are inappropriate for elementary classrooms, and that GSD-specific content is controversial (see Meyer et al., this issue, for example). Winding back the tape involves internalizing the understanding that affirming GSD in education is about affirming all young people and families. It's about believing that, as an elementary principal with whom we work emphatically states, "kids and families aren't controversial."

Snapshots of Becoming: Gabby and Ryane’s Processes

To illustrate the complex, personal nature of *becoming* that we have been sketching in broad strokes, we highlight snapshots of 2 teachers’ processes. Before we share Gabby and Ryane’s stories, we briefly explain the context in which these 2 educators teach. Roots Elementary is a public K-5 school that centers an arts-integrated curriculum and commitments to honoring students’ many modes of expression and to celebrating cultural diversity. Roots is located in a district that has been locally and nationally recognized for its explicit attention to gender, sexual, and family diversity. While many teachers in that district have joined us in our GSD-focused facilitations, Roots is one of the few schools at which staff have attempted to systematically interrogate climate, culture, and classroom practice. In the fall of 2014, the principal of Roots invited us to facilitate GSD-focused professional learning for all teachers. In the years that followed, several teachers at Roots collaborated to weave gender and family diversity across grade-level content. What’s more, Roots was the only school in the district that took us up on our offer to co-host a parent/family event. At that event, we worked in collaboration with Roots’ principal and teams of grade-level teachers, who shared with the parent/family community examples of what affirming gender and family diversity looks like. This amenable school context certainly influenced Gabby and Ryane’s choices and created openings for them to explore GSD-inclusive praxis in their elementary classrooms. And yet, even for these educators, engaging in that work was a messy, emotionally demanding process.

Gabby

A kindergarten teacher with nearly 20 years of elementary experience, Gabby believed in “the power of seeing children as individuals” who feel safe, loved, and cared for at school, and she was dedicated to building relationships of trust and transparency with parents. As she

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engaged in the process of becoming, those 2 commitments sometimes sat in tension with one another. During the first 2 years that we documented Gabby's process of becoming, she took important steps toward GSD-inclusive action. For example, she addressed gender diversity in the curriculum by reading children's literature with gender-expansive characters, including *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (dePaola, 1979) and *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014). During a unit on families, she read *The Family Book* (Parr, 2003), which celebrates the many sizes and shapes that families take, including 2-mom and 2-dad families. Gabby also used literature to address how her students were using the rules of the gender binary to police each other. When one kindergartner told another, "You can't wear pink!" on the day he had chosen to wear a pink shirt to school, Gabby read *The Boy with Pink Hair* (Hilton, 2011) and invited her students into a critical conversation around what counts as boys' and girls' colors.

At the same time that Gabby experienced those moments of success, she also grappled with fear and uncertainty around how students and parents would respond. Would she get pushback from parents? If she got pushback, how should she handle it? What was her responsibility to work *with* parents and to support them to understand gender as an expansive, fluid construct? She wondered: Was reading *I Am Jazz* (Herthel, Jennings, & McNichols, 2014) "developmentally appropriate"? Was it "my place" to teach this content? For Gabby, winding back the tape meant wrestling with taken-for-granted assumptions that GSD-inclusive education was inappropriate for the kindergarten classroom and that creating space for gender fluidity would confuse students or "make them transgender." Simply put, Gabby's process of becoming involved learning to recognize and question cis-heteronormativity as it operated in her own thinking as much as explicitly addressing gender and family diversity in her curriculum.

Ryane

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Ryane's motivation for becoming a GSD-inclusive educator was grounded in the ways that she saw gender, sexual, and family diversity functioning in the lives of her students. As a queer educator in her 11th year, Ryane's process was also informed and complicated by her own lived experience. She did not struggle to understand the complexities of cis-heteronormativity; instead, she admitted, "I get it, because I've lived it." These insights sat side-by-side with the challenges of disrupting cis-heteronormativity in her classroom. Ryane recognized and challenged normativity at work in conversations around gender rules, fashion policing (e.g., pink stripes and flowers are "for girls"), and what families look like, as well as in the ways that students problematically conflated sexuality and gender (e.g., one first grader told another, "You *look* gay!"). She took stock of the literature in her classroom and deliberately added texts that spoke back to what she was noticing. For example, she read *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005) to engage students in a conversation about love and family. To challenge students' gender-based assumptions about who is allowed to do what, she read *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman & Binch, 1991). For Ryane, it was also important to take advantage of what she called "organic moments" that arose in student-to-student interactions. When those moments emerged, she recognized that she had a choice either to stand back or to insert herself by starting a conversation. While Ryane spoke candidly about the unknowns in starting those conversations and the messiness involved, she consistently walked into those moments. Often, she relied on questioning as a productive strategy for disrupting students' thinking (e.g., Asking the question, "What do you mean when you say those are girls' socks?").

While Ryane's process of becoming was proactive, living GSD meant that she grappled with how her identity as a queer educator was implicated in her pedagogy and, therefore, also part of the curriculum. She questioned how much of herself to disclose: Should she come out or

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not? If she comes, out, when should she do it? How? And, how often? In a conversation about how queer-identified educators might be perceived as promoting an “agenda,” Ryane was clear that she wanted to be an out teacher, proud of her identity, and a role model for queer students. In fact, she used a first-grade unit on self as an entry point for coming out to students and families. And yet, alongside Ryane’s commitment to being out and visible to students, she continued to name the labor involved in “putting herself out there” and the discomfort and fear she felt with regard to parents and how she might be perceived. Ryane’s process of becoming was significantly shaped by questions about how to navigate GSD-inclusive education as a queer teacher and the emotions involved. While she embraced her queer identity and engaged her students in conversations about GSD, she admitted that she was never completely comfortable, and, at times, that the process was “terrifying.”

What Gabby and Ryane Can Teach Us

We highlight Gabby and Ryane’s stories, in part, to show what GSD-inclusive education looks like in elementary classrooms. In many ways, the work gets enacted in more mundane moments of classroom life. Certainly, GSD-inclusive praxis could look like well-orchestrated lessons in which teachers read LGBTQ-themed literature and organize critical conversations with students around gender norms, stereotypes, and biased thinking. But, as Gabby and Ryane’s stories demonstrate, it also looks like finding those organic moments to step into student conversations and posing open-ended questions that elicit students’ thinking about what counts as normal with respect to gender, sexuality, and families. We highlight these examples of GSD-inclusive teaching moves to encourage educators to begin taking those smaller steps, which may feel more comfortable than, say, reading *I Am Jazz* aloud to the whole class. Perhaps more important than providing models, though, we draw on Gabby and Ryane’s experiences to

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underscore the complex, emotional, and vulnerable processes of becoming that we expect educators to engage as they begin winding back the tape of cis-heteronormativity and making explicit moves to affirm GSD. In our work in the field, we expect educators to experience complexity and vulnerability, even when they are situated, as Gabby and Ryane were, in the most amenable contexts. Gabby and Ryane worked in a district and school that were explicitly supportive of GSD-inclusive education; they had access to sustained, GSD-focused professional learning; and they had colleagues who also demonstrated commitments to creating affirming classrooms. And yet, their processes of becoming were not without moments of fear, hesitation, agitation, and self-doubt.

What we have learned from Gabby and Ryane is the importance of naming the emotional dimensions of becoming a GSD-inclusive educator. Acknowledging the fear and discomfort that attends this work gives educators permission to relax into discomfort and work through it in productive ways, rather than to pretend it does not (or should not) exist. And, it is important to understand the complex ways that identity shapes how educators land in conversations about GSD-inclusive education. Ryane's story, for example, reflects the distinct nature of vulnerabilities and strengths that LGBTQ-identified educators bring to the work.

Implications for Educators

We conclude by sharing implications for educators seeking to do this work in their own unique contexts. First, we consider implications for district administrators. From our partnerships with local school districts, we have learned that when district leaders provide a concrete and consistent message that affirming GSD is a non-negotiable part of the work that public schools do to support all students, principals, teachers, counselors, and staff are more willing to be proactive. In this way, district-wide messaging is invaluable. We recommend that messages from

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district leadership be supplemented by the adoption of inclusive policies and district-wide provision of high-quality professional development opportunities that support educators and staff to learn and enact GSD-inclusive practices.

Next, we share implications for principals and administrators. Administrators often set the stage for GSD-inclusive work to happen at the building level or not, and, as school leaders, they are responsible for promoting safe, affirming culture. But, conversations about improving school climate and culture are often focused on students. We want to encourage administrators to think about climate and culture with respect to adults as well. Becoming GSD-inclusive is messy and can provoke emotional “crisis” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 38), and we encourage administrators to name that emotionality, to create space for the processes of becoming that we expect educators to experience, and to provide learning opportunities for educators and staff that attend to multiple dimensions of the work. In other words, exposing faculty and staff to LGBTQ-specific terminology and troubling statistics is important, but so is creating opportunities for critical self-reflection and making time for colleagues to talk and to explore puzzles of practice together. Ideally, these learning opportunities are iterative and ongoing rather than one-off sessions that are checked off of to-do lists at the beginning of the school year. Supportive leaders also attend to the various ways in which this work lands on educators and, more specifically, on those who identify as LGBTQ, whether they choose to be out or not. Administrators can urge allies to take leading roles and to be vocal advocates in affirming GSD.

Because all members of the school community influence students’ experiences, GSD-focused learning opportunities should include all teachers, mental health specialists, social workers, and support staff. Additionally, this requires full participation from administrators. We recognize that all-staff meetings are few and far between and that professional development time

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is limited, so we encourage administrators to find creative ways to engage faculty and staff in these conversations through email exchanges, newsletters, short presentations by teacher leaders that show what the work looks like in practice, and heuristics for teachers to think through as they bring GSD into the curriculum. Over summer break, an elementary principal in one of our partner districts developed a lesson plan template that included a series of questions that she hoped would guide teachers' thinking as they incorporated GSD into everyday content. She used professional development time at the beginning of the school year to support her staff to understand, reflect on, and apply questions such as, What assumptions are embedded in this lesson's content? (Think about assumptions related not only to gender, sexuality, and families but also to race, ethnicity, social class, language, and ability.) What stereotypes are being upheld and disrupted in this lesson? Whose voices are missing from this lesson?

When district and school administrators are encouraging and proactive, it certainly makes GSD-inclusive education easier work for teachers to engage (Leonardi & Staley, 2018). However, it is often the case that administrators themselves have had little to no support to understand and enact GSD-inclusive policy and practice. We understand the vulnerability at play here. Therefore, we encourage administrators to "lean in" (Staley & Leonardi, 2016a) to the discomfort associated with the limitations of one's knowledge and experience with GSD and also to create a support team that leverages the available expertise of teacher leaders; school counselors, psychologists, and social workers; and district personnel. This team can function, on the one hand, as a crucial first line of support for students and families, as well as for faculty and staff, and, on the other, it can distribute the responsibility of generating building-level protocols and promising practices for meeting individual students' needs and transforming school culture. For instance, school counselors, social workers, and psychologists are often well positioned to

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provide one-on-one support for students who are navigating their coming out processes and the logistics of social transitions. They may also serve important roles during tender and sometimes volatile conversations between students and their families, advocating, for example, for students' requests to use preferred names and pronouns. Moreover, these specialists can be valuable resources in helping students and families navigate district- and school-wide policies and systems (e.g., registration processes that enable/constrain changes to students' names and pronouns) and in connecting students and families with community-based resources such as support groups. District personnel can advocate for the enumeration of nondiscrimination and harassment policies and creation of district-wide guidelines on supporting transgender and nonbinary youth, and they can keep educators and leaders at the building level abreast of progress and changes as they occur. Building-level support teams can deliberate together around how best to educate faculty and staff on district policies and guidelines and to engage them in critical conversations and GSD-specific professional learning.

An often-cited challenge to creating supportive and inclusive school communities are parents and families of students who do not identify as LGBTQ. As educators and school leaders imagine doing GSD-inclusive work in their communities, feelings of fear and uncertainty with respect to how parents and families will respond tend to swirl. What we know is that, broadly speaking, parents and families have not been supported to understand what GSD-inclusive education involves, and there are a lot of misconceptions. Therefore, we encourage school communities to invite parents and families into the work by engaging them in education around GSD in PreK-12 schools. Having community events, as Roots did, to share what GSD-inclusive education is, what it looks like, and why it matters is one example of this kind of engagement. Another example involves messaging that typically goes out to parents and families as part of the

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advent of each new school year. As principals communicate the values that shape the school community, they might emphasize commitments to welcoming the diversity that we have in our community and to creating safe, affirming learning environments in which every child and family is valued for who they are. Elementary teachers might share that in their classes, students will learn about gender and family diversity as part of their regular study of identity, self, and community. While it may feel vulnerable, we recommend getting out in front of the conversation with parents and families rather than waiting for concern, complaints, and upset that might arise from misunderstanding. Also important to note, taking such action is a step toward building positive relationships and alliances with LGBTQ families and parents/families of LGBTQ youth. Often, these parents and families are strong and vocal advocates of GSD-inclusive education and can provide crucial counternarratives to pushback that frames GSD-inclusive education as inappropriate or controversial.

While these kinds of sweeping changes are desirable, we recognize that in some contexts they may not be viable. We want to emphasize that even without explicit administrative or district support, educators can still make changes to their practice by taking small steps to affirm gender, family, and sexual diversity. Become a visible ally by hanging a rainbow flag or wearing an “Ally” button. Add your gender pronouns (e.g., she/her/hers) to your email signature. When addressing students, avoid using labels such as “boys” and “girls” that divide students into two distinct gender categories. Instead, try out gender-inclusive labels such as “scientists,” “readers,” “thinkers,” or “mathematicians.” Find creative ways to group students that are based on birthdays, planets, or colors of the rainbow rather than on binary gender. Read books that affirm a range of families, gender identities, and expressions (visit www.aqueerendeavor.org/for-educators/ for LGBTQ-themed book lists), and invite students to complicate their thinking about

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what counts as ‘normal’. We know that while some school contexts are not amenable to making explicit moves to include LGBTQ people and topics (e.g., “no promo homo” states), students still need supportive allies in those spaces. We encourage teachers, counselors, and school leaders who work in those contexts to find small, safe ways to express support for LGBTQ youth, families, and staff. Take advantage of moments in your classrooms and schools to ask questions and to disrupt normative thinking. Find colleagues who are willing to work with you. And, no matter the context in which you do this work, be patient with the messiness and complexity involved. Above all, when you feel resistance, doubt, or uncertainty, frame those moments as generative growing pains in your own process of becoming.

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Notes

1. We use *cis-heteronormativity* to refer to *heteronormativity*, which privileges and normalizes heterosexuality, and *cisnormativity*, which privileges and normalizes a system of binary gender and the assumption that everyone's gender assigned at birth and gender identity align.

Additional Resources for Classroom Use

1. Meyer, E., & Pullen Sansfaçon, A. (2014). Supporting transgender and gender creative youth: Schools, families, and communities in action. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

This edited collection focuses on supporting transgender and gender creative youth in a variety of settings: educational, clinical, psychological, and community. Providing support for parents, families, educators, and practitioners, this book offers a combination of research and theory to highlight the issues and challenges faced by transgender and gender creative youth, as well as recommendations for improving youths' lived experiences.

2. Staley, S., & Leonardi, B. (2016). Leaning in to discomfort: Preparing literacy teachers for gender and sexual diversity. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 51, 209-229.

This article examines what happened when a group of preservice teachers engaged with topics of gender and sexual diversity in a university-based literacy methods course during teacher preparation. It highlights the emotional crisis that those teachers experienced along the way and offers "leaning in" as a strategy for coping with uncomfortable feelings that surface in gender and sexual diversity-inclusive education.

3. Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's "Supporting trans and gender nonconforming students" web site www.glsen.org/supporting-trans-and-gnc-students

This website offers resources that center the experiences of transgender and gender nonconforming students. Grounded in the personal experiences of these youth, these resources are meant to support learning of both educators and students around gender diversity, policies and students' rights, curriculum, and safe spaces.
