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Eda Koning

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# Moving Beyond Just Teaching Tolerance

EDA KONING

**A**s a teacher, the most important subjects I teach, or rather nurture, are metacognition and social living. I want my students to develop into strong individuals who constantly self evaluate and contribute to society in positive ways, and I dare say I'm not alone in that. These lessons occur daily: in class, at lunch, and in the hallways. When I have to interrupt another class to borrow something, the other teacher and I try and model a good working relationship. When a student gets frustrated, I pull them aside and talk about all of the things that could be contributing to the frustration and how it can have a domino effect. My colleagues and I sit at lunch tables with the students and model community building over a meal. When I pass a student in the hall, I ask them how they are doing or check in about something I know is going on with them. When I overhear a negative or hurtful comment as I pass by two students talking, I stop and talk to them about it and make them aware of how hurtful it is. Even beyond these conscious efforts I make, I must constantly be aware of everything I say and do as I model adult life. My words and actions as a teacher have a bigger effect than I often think.

In my teacher training, the significance of teaching our students to be tolerant was emphasized. This involved helping them recognize that others are different from themselves and to allow for those differences. The message was that it's okay to disagree with another person's beliefs, but it is not okay to treat that person differently because of them. While tolerance has a place, we as teachers need to go one step further. Our goal as teachers should be to create inclusive environments that allow students to safely explore their identity and their interactions with others. They must feel like they are valued for who they are inside and feel supported in discovering who that is. Adolescence is preparation for adulthood, and in order to create a society of balanced, confident, contributing individuals, then we must create an environment that allows them to develop into just that. If that truly is our

goal, then we must look critically at the many inherent messages of our words and actions.

As Inga Musico suggests (2002), "words hurt, soothe, inspire, demean, demand, incite, pacify, teach, romance, pervert, unite, divide. Words be powerful" (p.8). Words are powerful because of the greater context surrounding them and their positive and negative connotations. While there are many ways to say the same thing, each word or phrase we could choose carries a different implied meaning; the words we choose can inadvertently reveal how we feel about a person and a situation.

For example, when responding to a hurtful comment one student makes to another, two possible responses are "that behavior is unacceptable here" or "it sounds like you are frustrated, but is there a more respectful way you could phrase that?" In the former, the message focuses on following a rule for the sake of a rule, whereas the latter attempts to raise awareness and encourage the student to make a change. The latter shows a value for building community and treating others with respect regardless of disagreements. A third response would be to leave the situation unaddressed, which by default sends a message to the student that their comment was acceptable. The messages behind our words and actions, whether positive or negative, exist whether we are aware of them or not.

Most veteran teachers have had a moment when a former student reconnects with them years later to share a memory that affected them positively. For me, a memorable incidence of this is when one of my former students recently contacted me on social media in order to come out to me as gay. For three years, I worked in a medium-sized public school of about 500 7th and 8th graders in small town Kansas. At the time when I took a position with this school district, my wife and I were in the process of adding our first child to our family. This made coming out to those around us imperative: I knew I didn't want my future children to think that being gay was something to hide, so I was open and

honest with my colleagues and my students about my family. However, even without thinking of my future children, I knew that I did not want to live a lie. We had moved from a larger city where being gay was a non-issue, so we presented ourselves as though our relationship was indeed a non-issue. Therefore, most of our acquaintances followed suit. I had pictures of my wife and daughter on my bulletin board, but most of the students paid no attention and were oblivious to my personal life. On National Coming Out Day, I talked with all of my classes about how they have people in their lives who are gay and not all of them are out. I made sure they were aware that they all knew at least one gay person for sure, and that was me. I also explained why it is hurtful to use phrases like, “that’s so gay.”

One particular student had been in my English class for one year as well as my improv team for two years. Afterwards, when he moved on to high school, I would see him every once in awhile and he would update me on what he was doing. Although I thought we had a good relationship, he never opened up to me while I was there. It was six years after that day in his 7th grade year that he contacted me again on social media. He told me that what I said on that National Coming Out Day has never left him; it had given him the strength to come out in high school in small town rural Kansas. My hope is that by being open about my loving family, I helped raise awareness in that small town so that people like my former student can feel safe and comfortable with who they are.

This was a very positive moment that I could feel proud of. However, we don’t usually find out about the negative effects our words and actions can have. I know this from personal experience. As a student, I remember reading between the lines of everything my teachers and professors said to try and decipher if they would be supportive of me. When they would make comments that referenced heterosexual norms, I would sit quietly in the classroom, feeling hurt and ostracized. It could be as simple as a teacher jesting with a boy in the class about trying to get all the attention from the ladies, the assumption being that he is in fact trying to get only that type of attention.

Now that I am confident in who I am, I am not as sensitive personally to comments like this, however, when I was in my path of self discovery, these sorts of comments lead to thoughts like, “what is wrong with me; why am I not like everyone else?” Any words or phrases that pointed out how I was different pierced my confidence and spurred self-hatred. As Adrienne Rich so poignantly describes: “When someone

with the authority of a teacher describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing” (as ctd. in Gender Spectrum website, 2014).

The teachers weren’t even saying anything hateful and I’m sure they had no idea the effect their words had on me. I hold on to these feelings to help remind me to be aware of my own word choice at school.

I currently work at a Montessori junior high program. The purpose of a Montessori adolescent program (which should be the purpose of all junior high programs) is to offer adolescents an environment that meets the needs that are particular to their stage of development, in which to explore the world, orient to society, generate ideas, create social bonds, think critically, and develop personality/individuality. This is done in many ways. A main part of society is production and exchange; therefore, the Montessori adolescent curriculum has a microeconomy program which allows students to create goods and sell them. The students are completely in charge of the program, including handling the money and deciding what to use it for.

As adolescence is also a time to develop creativity and explore all aspects of the world, students are offered creative expression classes taught by professionals in different artistic fields, such as woodworking, pottery, jewelry making, and soap making. Many of the products made in these classes are then sold by the students at a local farmer’s market. Being able to sell something they made to the public offers students “valorization.” Maria Montessori (2007) describes this in *From Childhood to Adolescence*, “for this would result in a ‘valorization’ of his personality, in making him feel himself capable of succeeding in life by his own efforts and on his own merits, and at the same time it would put him in direct contact with the supreme reality of social life” (p.64). This one aspect of the program teaches the students academic lessons in math and humanities, helps them explore new activities and build their personality, as well as helps them build independence through the power of self-sufficiency.

This idea of independence and self-sufficiency is a key focus for development of Montessori students. In order to foster this, students are offered choice. These choices span controlling the budget to selecting classes to selecting how they will portray their understanding of a topic. Montessori

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(2007) explains, “young people must have enough freedom to allow them to act on individual initiative. [...] From all of this the result will be not only self-discipline but a proof that self-discipline is an aspect of individual liberty and the chief factor of success in life” (p.73). Self-discipline and initiative are two qualities highly valued in adult society, so it only makes sense that we help foster those in our students.

The Montessori Junior high seeks the development of independent, unique, strong, reflective individuals in becoming life long learners and productive contributors to humanity. Maria Montessori (2007) states, “adolescence is the time when the child enters on the state of manhood and becomes a member of society” (p.60). When a student is able to think about their own thinking, their transition out of childhood and in to adolescence is evident.

## Metacognition and Gender

Metacognition was a buzz word thrown around in both my teacher prep program and my Montessori training. Simply defined, metacognition is the awareness or analysis of one’s own learning or thinking processes. The obvious importance of helping students develop this ability is seen in the many mainstream programs in schools which focus on it, such as Mindful Schools, Room To Breathe, and Mindful Moments, to name a few. Focusing on this social and emotional learning is essential in educating the whole child. In order to productively contribute to society, students need to be fully aware of their own thoughts, feelings, and desires. As their brains become capable of this, we want to provide them with a community that values self-reflection and offers opportunities to practice, as well as patience for them when the ability isn’t developed quite yet. As Montessori (1992) explains in *Education and Peace*, “education must foster both the development of individuality and that of society. Society cannot develop unless the individual develops” (p.56). However, to nurture students in the development and sharpening of metacognition, adults need to practice it themselves first. In fact, it is even more important that we are aware of the words and actions we choose as we want to make all students feel welcome and cared for.

The emotional state of feeling recognized and valued for who we are is an essential pre-requisite for learning. As teachers, it is important to our students avoid psychic disequilibrium so that they feel valued and capable and can engage in the material instead of worrying about feeling excluded. Mary Hanrahan (2001) from the Queensland University of

Technology conducted a study titled, “the Art and Science of ‘Recognition of Difference’ in Junior Secondary Science Classrooms.” She looked at how valuing differences and being inclusive is often forgotten in the push for intellectual quality, leading to a lack of diversity in the field of science. She states, “In some subjects, the stylistic norms of culture (cf. Lemke 1990) result in many students feeling excluded from legitimate belonging and hence full access. This can result in lowered intellectual engagement and poor retention rates in the subject.” This social emotional aspect is integral to learning and applies to sexual orientation and gender identity as well.

I’ve recently started educating myself on gender identity and am realizing that my awareness of language needs to extend beyond just sexuality stereotypes. As a society, we place a lot of pressure on students to follow gender norms through our language alone. Now that I have raised my awareness, I notice myself making assumptions every day, and I witness others making them as well. I have a ten-month-old daughter who has very little hair and is often mistaken for a boy. People in the store will say, “He’s flirting with me! He’s so handsome.” Then when they find out that she is female, they apologize. One woman actually said, “And I thought he was flirting with me.” It was as if she thought babies actually distinguish between males and females when trying to get attention. My response is always, “A baby is a baby.” I don’t know what gender my daughter will identify as when she is older. As a parent, I make it my goal to protect her from society’s gender stereotypes as much as I can, so she can grow into whoever she wants to be. We can only hope that our children’s teachers will be sensitive to the language they use as well.

These gender and sexuality stereotypes are ever present in our schools- in classes, in the hallways, and at lunch. When calling a class to attention, we often use phrases such as “hey guys,” which ostracizes all students other than guys, and “boys and girls,” which emphasizes the gender binary. Instead, we could say, “class,” or “May I have everyone’s attention?” It is also common to reference certain traits stereotypical to a specific gender with a comment such as, “now I know you boys have trouble sitting still, but just give me two more minutes of your time.” Another common stereotype: a teacher asks if there are any strong boys who can help carry something heavy. Both of these examples perpetuate societal gender stereotypes and make students believe they must behave a certain way. Tara Culp-Ressler (2014) in her article, “Forcing Kids to Stick to Gender Roles Can

Actually Be Harmful to Their Health,” describes the result of a study that looked at the interactions among 14-year-olds over a three-month period. She quotes the study as concluding that “this constant effort to manage one’s everyday life in line with gender norms produces significant anxiety, insecurity, stress and low self-esteem for both boys and girls, and both for ‘popular’ young people and those who have lower status in the school.” As a way to open up the dialogue, the students at my school read this article and discussed it in small groups in a Socratic seminar.

Socratic seminars are an excellent format for helping students talk about various issues. Every other week on Fridays, our school devotes about an hour to Socratic seminar. When staff members come across an article that would work well, they put it in a resource binder for a later date. If there is an issue that needs to be addressed in our community, we sometimes seek out an article on that specific topic. The key is for students to meet in groups of about 8-12. The students read the article either before the seminar as homework or, if it is short, at the beginning of the session.

After the article is read, each student writes down one to two questions for discussion. We often begin with each person sharing a question and deciding as a group which question to start with. Seminars are student-led: the students bring up the questions and discuss the answers with one another. There is no hand raising. Instead, students are asked to sense when someone wants to speak and to be aware enough to allow each person their opportunity. The seminar ends with a summary and conclusion of the discussion. In the case of the seminar on gender roles, reading about and discussing the experiences of others their age hopefully led students to begin thinking about their own expectations.

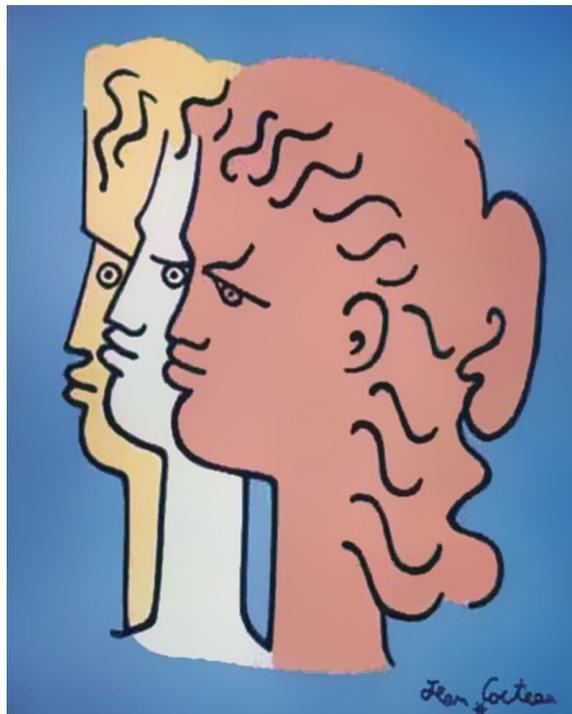
Gender is more than just a male/female binary. A person’s true gender is actually made up of 3 parts: their biological sex, the way they express their gender, and the

gender they feel inside. The organization Gender Spectrum (2014) describes this on their “Understanding Gender” page: “Together, the intersection of these three dimensions produces one’s authentic sense of gender, both in how people experience their own gender as well as how others perceive it.” As a society, we incorrectly use ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ interchangeably. This is especially evident when people ask a pregnant woman, “what is the gender of your baby?” There is no way for that mother to know the gender of her baby; she can however, know the biological sex of her baby. Furthermore, gendered interactions between parents and children often begin as soon as the sex of the baby is known.

Almost everything in society is gendered and high expectations are held for members of each sex. However, many people do not find themselves at either end of this binary but somewhere on the spectrum. Moreover, when people aren’t educated to look at gender from all three areas, that is when assumptions are made. For example, people often make assumptions about another person’s sexual preference based on their gender expression. Part of maintaining an inclusive environment is actively working to dispel assumptions.

As teachers, we need to be aware of this spectrum and do what we can to stop promoting the binary. However, because gender is a social construct introduced to us from birth, many of us find it hard to break free. Even when a student requests to be referred to with gender-neutral pronouns, such as ‘they,’ some people have trouble complying.

I’ve heard the excuse that it is because ‘they’ is not grammatically correct, but I argue that language is fluid and ever changing. We have to ask ourselves, is it more important to stick to dated grammar rules than to show respect for a student? Transgender activist Kate Bornstein stated in a video about the importance of transgender pronouns, “pronouns are important because they indicate a degree of respect” (as cited in Nichols, 2015). People have a right to define who they are and who they want to be identified as.



*Les Trois Profils, Jean Cocteau*

### Opening up a Dialogue

To raise awareness among my colleagues, I simply open up the dialogue. There have been some uncomfortable conversations, but I'm willing to engage in those, as my ultimate goal is to make our school a more inclusive environment for the students. In our school, a student as requested to be called by a more gender-neutral name, and for people to use 'they/them/their' when referring to them. This was first only communicated to the other students, but when I was leading a gender identity workshop, I became privy to the information. The workshop was actually requested by some students who were very interested in looking deeper into gender and gender identity. In order for the curriculum to be approved by my administrator, I was asked to keep the focus on gender roles and expectations over time and steer clear of discussing sexual orientation. This highlighted to me the common assumption of lumping gender identity and sexual identity together. I did address sexual identity in the class, however, by pointing out that we should not make assumptions about sexual orientation based on gender expression.

In our program, we have the luxury of offering short classes on student-requested topics in the form of workshops. Our workshops meet twice a week in the morning for 45 minutes. Because I had a group of students interested in exploring gender identity, I put together a workshop on the topic. In the class, after going over some simple definitions, such as gender identity, transgender, gender spectrum, gender binary, and cisgender, we created a list of society's stereotypes for males and females. The students arranged themselves in small groups and pulled from both lists to make up their ideal gender. They even came up with a name for the gender. What was interesting was that all of the created genders turned out to be quite similar to each other—a fairly even mix of traits from both lists.

During the subsequent classes, students researched the history of gender stereotypes and created a visual timeline. We began with the 1800's and made our way to the present, with students bringing in articles and videos that addressed gender. The final project was to plan and lead a Socratic seminar on gender. The students selected a short video and an article for the seminar and came up with possible discussion questions. This was an excellent way for them to bring awareness of the issue they had been studying to the rest of the community.

The workshop not only served to bring awareness to the idea of seeing gender as a spectrum rather than a binary,

but it also brought my own awareness to the preferences of one of our students. Once I found out about this one student's preferences, I then informed the other teachers. For the most part, students and teachers have made the switch in name; however, the pronoun request is not as commonly honored. Particularly among my colleagues, I sense a lot of hesitation. The transition is definitely much more difficult for the adults than the students. This is not surprising—adults have had many more years of societal messages ingrained, and their brains are less elastic. However, it is no excuse, and the dialogue needs to be continued in order to encourage inclusive language and subsequently an inclusive environment.

In addition to opening the dialogue, a few of my colleagues and I are trying to include gender identity as a topic in our sex education curriculum. Ideally, we wanted to begin the class by discussing the three aspects of gender identity as well as other aspects of building a strong self-image. Sex education classes can have the tendency to focus only on heterosexual relationships because of the fear of pregnancy. However, there are many other risks involved, particularly when you include other forms of sexuality. Furthermore, by only focusing on heterosexual sex, students who are questioning their own sexual orientation are made to feel like something is wrong with them.

Our goal was to start the class on a positive and inclusive note. Unfortunately, we were met with some resistance from other staff and administration. There seemed to be fear of parent backlash as well as an idea that we were somehow teaching our own values. We plan to look back at how we communicated the idea and revamp the way we describe the class content, as well as go into more detail in the plan. The goal is to better communicate that what we are attempting to teach is the value of being true to one's self, and we will keep trying. We owe it to the students.

Any way that we can raise awareness will move us forward as a society. There are some preschools in Sweden that have adopted a gender-neutral pronoun that is used for all students. This movement has really progressed in Sweden and they have now added the gender-neutral pronoun, 'hen,' to the country's national encyclopedia (Mathews, 2012). I hope a movement like that can happen in the U.S. As teachers, we have a duty to be inclusive in our language and supportive of all students. It is not our place to judge or treat one student differently than another based on our own personal beliefs of right or wrong. We must set aside our personal opinions and beliefs, but beyond that, we must prac-

tice metacognition ourselves; think about our own thinking, and consciously raise our own awareness of the culturally implicit stereotypes inherent in our language. Then we can change our words and beliefs in order to create inclusive environments for our students.

Maria Montessori (1992) says in *Education and Peace*, “Let us therefore unite our efforts to construct an environment that will allow the child and the adolescent to live an independent, individual life in order to fulfill the goal that all of us are pursuing—the development of personality, the formation of supernatural order, and the creation of a better society” (P.106). Many organizations are working towards this common goal of inclusivity and are providing training and resources for teachers and schools. Working together, we can move beyond just teaching tolerance and instead, actively create environments where we can support and assist students in becoming their true selves, whatever that might look like.

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**Eda Koning** teaches all subjects at a Montessori middle school program. She grew up in Michigan, where she attended Western Michigan University. She received her Masters in Educational Leadership through Fort Hays State University.