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## Understanding Students' LGBTQ+ Identities and Terminology

When people do not know how to talk about a person or group of people, they often avoid meaningful discussions or interactions. Educators who have the language to communicate with and about LGBTQ+ students, families, co-workers, and other community members can create environments that affirm and support a broader group of individuals. This is particularly important to build school communities where all students feel accepted and can focus on learning.

To help educators gain fluency in terminology related to LGBTQ+ student identities, *this In Brief includes an overview of the distinctions between three elements of every person's identity: sex, gender, and attraction orientation*. Some individuals may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, or other identities included within the LGBTQ+ community, depending upon how they identify across these elements.<sup>1</sup>

The identity terminology of the LGBTQ+ community can feel overwhelming for those who are new to it, but it is accessible with a general understanding of the concepts of sex, gender, and attraction orientation.

### Elements of Student Identity

Many students use specific terms to identify themselves according to their sex, their gender, and, particularly as they approach adolescence, their attraction orientation. As young people learn about their identity and reflect that identity to the outside world, these terms may be important tools for them to do so. Educators who know these terms related to sex, gender and attraction orientation are better suited to understand the identities of LGBTQ+ students.

**Sex** refers to a person's body, typically based on physical distinctions.

- When born, most individuals are ascribed a sex of either male, female, or intersex based most often on their external body features—this is considered one's **Sex Assigned at Birth**, or SAB.
- **Anatomical** or **biological sex** uses sex traits such as hormones, chromosomes, and other body characteristics that may not be visible to the naked eye to determine a person's identity. Anatomical sex may change through life based on discovered<sup>2</sup> or medically induced changes.<sup>3</sup>
- **Intersex** is an umbrella term to describe individuals who are born within a wide range of body variations that do not fit neatly in a male or female category.

**Gender** is not about a person's physical body characteristics; it is a social construction of masculine and feminine characteristics that is comprised of two elements:

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<sup>1</sup> An *In Focus* on Understanding LGBTQ+ Identities provides additional information about some high-frequency terms used within the LGBTQ+ community and a primer on preferred pronoun usage.

<sup>2</sup> Some people are born with biological sex characteristics that are discovered later in life. For example, people who are assigned female-at-birth might learn they have XY chromosomes (androgen insensitivity) or those assigned male-at-birth may have XX chromosomes (Klinefelter's Condition). Some even discover later in life that they have internal organs such as ovaries and testes that do not correspond with the person's external body features or sex assigned at birth.

<sup>3</sup> Medically induced changes can occur with the use of hormone therapy, surgery, or other procedures to alter the anatomical appearance and/or functions of a person's sex characteristics.

- **Gender expression**, how one *presents themselves* to others in terms of socially understood masculine and/or feminine traits, and
- **Gender identity**, how one *perceives themselves* in terms of socially understood masculine and/or feminine traits.

Individuals whose gender expression and identity align with their sex assigned at birth are **cisgender**; however, there are many situations where sex (ranging from male to female, including intersex) and gender (ranging from masculine to feminine) do not entirely align. As such, gender identity and expression are described on continua. In other words, people may identify in degrees of masculinity, femininity, or even as **androgynous** (neither masculine nor feminine). While many people still identify gender as male or female and corresponding to a person’s sex assigned at birth, conceptualizing gender on a spectrum is evidence-based and supports the use of terms such as “non-binary” and “genderfluid” to help some individuals accurately self-identify.

**Attraction orientation** was formerly referred to as sexual orientation. Now, attraction is understood in at least two different ways: sexual and romantic attraction.

- “**Sexual attraction** is the want, need, or desire for physical sexual contact and relationships.
- **Romantic attraction** is an affinity and love for others and the desire for emotional relationships.”<sup>4</sup>

It is possible for people to feel romantic attraction without feeling sexual attraction and vice versa. Similar to gender, attraction orientations exist on continua and include being attracted to individuals with many other types of sex and gender identities. Particularly as young people enter adolescence, these identities come into focus in powerful ways and impact the way a young person defines themselves in relationship to others.

The prefixes below are often used to describe different attraction orientations.

Prefix	Experiences romantic and/or sexual attraction....
Bi-	... towards the same gender as well as to other gender(s) than their own (a subset of poly-).
Pan-	...towards all genders, regardless of gender.
Poly-	...towards multiple (but not necessarily all or one’s own) genders.
A-	Does NOT experience attraction.

Sex, gender, and attraction orientation are all aspects of every person’s identity. References to **straight** people typically indicate those who have identities that reflect dominant social norms, for example: a man who appeared as male at birth, identifying as masculine and romantically and sexually attracted to women. When referring to the LGBTQ+ community most mean anyone whose sex, gender, and/or attraction orientations as defined above are not entirely aligned with dominant social norms.

### Summary

Every person has a sex, gender, and attraction orientation that can be described with accurate terminology. Educators can build stronger relationships and support students’ social and emotional well-being by understanding students as they develop and express their personal identities. Students who can be themselves at school are more able to focus on learning and thrive.<sup>5</sup>

### For more Information

This *In Brief* is supported with an *In Focus* that examines additional language around LGBTQ+ identities. Further training is available at [PSEA’s Center for Professional Learning](https://www.psea.org/center-for-professional-learning) including [Supporting LGBTQ+ Students Microcredentials](#). You also can contact Gina Gullo in PSEA’s Education Services Division with additional questions or training needs, [GGullo@PSEA.org](mailto:GGullo@PSEA.org).

<sup>4</sup> Killerman, S. (2015, Mar 27). Breaking through the binary: Gender explained using continuums. (p. 8) <https://www.genderbread.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Breaking-through-the-Binary-by-Sam-Killermann.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> All educators are capable of understanding and affirming student identities; personal beliefs about whether identities are ‘appropriate’ should not limit the supportive relationships educators develop with students.