

**GOLDSTEIN, T. Teaching Gender and Sexuality at School: Letters to Teachers. New York, NY: Routledge. (2019). 221 pp. \$48.95 (Paperback). (ISBN 978-1-138-38714-0)**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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## BOOK REVIEW / COMPTE-RENDU

GOLDSTEIN, T. *Teaching Gender and Sexuality at School: Letters to Teachers*. New York, NY: Routledge. (2019). 221 pp. \$48.95 (Paperback). (ISBN 978-1-138-38714-0).

The experiences of the families and students in *Teaching Gender and Sexuality at School: Letters to Teachers* are powerful narratives for educators who strive to build inclusive school communities. This book is highly informative and provides many opportunities for educators to pause and reflect on their own pedagogies of inclusion. Tara Goldstein, the author, is a professor at the University of Toronto in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning.

*Teaching Gender and Sexuality at School* is a synthesis of the discussions Goldstein has had with her LGBTQ students at university, and with the LGBTQ families who participated in her research projects. She wrote this book for K-12 educators, both teachers and administrators, as well as for LGBTQ families with school-aged children. The acronym LGBTQ referred to throughout the book represents lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans, and queer people, which Goldstein says includes “people who identify as transgender, transsexual, Two-Spirit, questioning, and/pangender” (p. 1).

*Teaching Gender and Sexuality at School* is an important read for educators as LGBTQ families and students continue to be marginalized members of school communities. Their lesser status in schools is highlighted in the text when a school administrator is worried about the parental backlash she will have to negotiate as she realizes that she has a duty to grant the request from her teachers to celebrate Pride Week at school. Goldstein explains:

When teachers ask the question “What will the parents say?”, they are usually thinking about concerns from straight, cisgender parents raising straight, cisgender children (or children who they think will grow up to be straight and cisgender). They aren’t thinking of parents who identify as LGBTQ or parents with children who identify as LGBTQ. (p. 26)

Educators must work to decenter the expectations to be straight and cisgender in schools. In her book, Goldstein has given LGBTQ folks agency, inviting

her readers to witness at first-hand their experiences in interacting with the schooling system.

A second importance of this book for educators is that the LGBTQ family experiences – which are both positive and negative – implicate schools. Schools are sites where gender and sexuality discourses are often policed. A study by Ryan (2016) revealed the complicity of students and teachers in maintaining heteronormativity. Teasing and bullying are some of the ways in which children police each other's gender and sexual identity in classrooms and on the playground. Goldstein and her students and families offer ways for educators to disrupt these discourses.

Each of the 22 chapters in *Teaching Gender and Sexuality at School* is written as a letter from Goldstein to her readers. Each letter shares a student's or family's experience with the school system. In the concluding chapter, Goldstein offers pedagogical suggestions for educators. Her advice summarizes the common themes that were woven throughout the letters, four of which are more prominent in being helpful to educators.

The first theme is intersectionality. Goldstein has highlighted the experiences of many ethnoculturally diverse families, with several of her book's chapters devoted to the stories of Indigenous families. Intersectionality is a framework that addresses one's interconnected identities. Goldstein advocates that teachers must understand the different and manifold ways in which students and families can be marginalized if they are going to be able to create welcoming spaces at school.

The second theme is allyship. Goldstein frames her definition of allyship within several of her students' and families' narratives, as well as through a podcast entitled *Code Switch*. In essence, to be an ally is to act. Goldstein thus calls on educators to build positive relationships with LGBTQ families with the understanding that their needs may require novel approaches.

The third theme is the ever-present struggle between religious beliefs and a teacher's professional obligation to support equity initiatives. Goldstein draws upon her study's participants to share how they personally experienced this tension in their own lives. She presents how some of her student teachers live in this tension. She also references a documentary film to demonstrate how a rabbi worked to create an inclusive space for a Gay-Straight Alliance club at his school. Goldstein embraces the rabbi's realization that the goal should not be to resolve the differences between religion and LGBTQ equity, but rather to live in the tension of the differences.

The fourth theme is bullying. Goldstein pens several letters on this topic, and she proposes a three-level framework to address occurrences of bullying in schools. She works with the premise of bullying as prosocial behaviour, rather than the more common belief that it is antisocial behaviour. The words and actions of bullies serve to communicate and reinforce the socially accepted norms for

gender and sexuality. LGBTQ youth are targeted by bullies because they do not conform to these socially agreed-upon, idealized modes of masculine male, feminine female, or heterosexuality.

In writing such an accessible book for educators, it becomes possible to begin addressing larger systemic barriers impeding the inclusion of LGBTQ students and families in school communities. Entrenched dominant gender and sexuality discourses are embedded structures that require concerted efforts to be challenged and disrupted. Educators need further guided opportunities to identify the presence of these discourses in themselves, their students, and their schools. Published works by Jen Gilbert, Lee Airton, Mindy Blaise, and Clare Bartholomaeus are significant resources for educators to read alongside Goldstein's text. Together, their respective research encompasses students' gender and sexual identity experiences from the preschool setting to those of teacher candidates in university. Like Goldstein, these scholars have also worked with families and educators, learning from their first-hand experiences how the education system can better support LGBTQ students, educators, and families.

*Teaching Gender and Sexuality at School: Letters to Teachers* is a worthy resource that, through the knowledge and pedagogical advice Goldstein and her LGBTQ students and families impart, offers educators concrete ways by which to create more inclusive school communities.

#### REFERENCES

Ryan, C. L. (2016). Kissing brides and loving hotvampires: Children's construction and perpetuation of heteronormativity in elementary school classrooms. *Sex Education*, 16(1), 77-90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2015.1052874>