

## Supporting Students and Their Emerging Sense of Self

Jenni Bader

(with poetry by Phan)

As a newly minted teacher, I have begun to look back with fresh appreciation for my year of student teaching and the many people who helped shape and inform my ideas about education. Among those who left their impression on me is one student, Phan, who expanded my vision for the English classroom as a safe place to express and reflect. From this student I learned that a teacher can support by listening without judgment even when she or he does not fully understand.

During my first weeks in the classroom, Phan asked me if I could use plural pronouns or their last name only to address them. This request shocked me but I agreed to it. Confused about the request to be identified by pronouns meant for more than one person and worried what that might signal about the student's mental health, I consulted my university supervisor for advice. Dr. Cramer gave me several possibilities about what Phan's request could signify. She also reassured me that it most likely did not mean that Phan suffered from dissociative identity disorder. (I realize now how humorous that assumption may seem, but it was the only possibility in my mind at the time.) Dr. Cramer suggested that I continue to listen to and support Phan and allow them to reveal their reasons for this request in time and as they felt comfortable doing so.

The more I worked with the class and spoke with Phan, the more their singular personality and creativity shone through to me. When it came time for me to teach my unit on poetry, Phan responded with beautifully unique poetry and artwork that allowed me a greater window of understanding to that initial request that so shocked me. One poem in particular stood out to me. After seeing their rough draft, I told Phan that this was a new perspective for me and that I appreciated them sharing it. I asked—and they granted—permission to publish the poem to help others understand as well. Below is Phan's poem, revised and edited. All language and grammatical choices belong to the poet.

### "Boy or Girl"

They told me to choose only two  
Then came another world I never thought  
There's more than pink and blue  
It's a colorful spectrum  
That twinkles of different stars  
I learn of myself,  
I learn who I am  
But when I speak  
No one understands  
They hate, they push away.  
Disappointment and fear in their eyes  
It makes me want to cry  
"It's not a thing" they say.  
"It doesn't exist" they added  
And call me what they want to hear  
Not what I needed  
My sibling laughs and mocks me  
My parents don't support me

I only can rely on others from another  
Place who are like me  
They understand my pain  
I can fly so high there  
Yet in reality  
I listen and read to people like me  
Been kicked out of their home  
Yelled and abused even killed  
No wonder why there are some who are closeted  
Because no one wants to feel the pain  
Of being treated as an it  
What irony in for the land of equality  
That lowers groups like us down  
So they tell me "Boy or Girl"  
I say, "Neither."

In my written feedback to the rough draft of this poem, I told Phan that, although I identify as female, I do not always feel that the societal norms and expectations for women fit me. There are many more ways to be male or female than what society tries to dictate. I believe narrow, arbitrary definitions only force a feeling of otherness on those who do not fall neatly into that mold. Phan later presented this poem at our class coffee house, a great personal risk at any age but particularly for a teenager, and I applauded their courage.

Interestingly, two other students had written a two-voice poem on a similar issue. These two students do not identify as LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual) and I would point out that Phan has not specifically expressed such a designation either. The lesson for me is not in learning how to qualify or label students' gender identities or sexual orientations but in learning *not* to label or make assumptions. Rather, each of our students should be able to expect non-judgmental, unconditional care and support as students and as individuals. This should easily fit with any teacher's core beliefs.

### **Author Biography**

Jenni Bader is a recent Wichita State University College of Education graduate and a first-year English teacher at Winfield High School. She has felt the call to serve through teaching ever since first grade when she read about Anne Sullivan in a chapter book detailing the life of Helen Keller. Although her path to professional teaching has been long and winding, Jenni has found many opportunities to share her care for people and her joy in learning along the way. She looks forward to the possibility of each new day and helping each student realize his or her full potential. She can be reached at [nachalah@sbcglobal.net](mailto:nachalah@sbcglobal.net).