'Critical Questions' Series
February 2016
<u>How Can the Use of Inclusive Language Reduce Bullying</u>?

Words can be a bridge or a barrier to a student's successful school experience. How teachers and administrators use words to describe the lived experience of their students, families, community members, and culture can invite a student into a dialogue, push them out, or ignore them entirely. Inclusive language is an invitation and is about more than just words – it is about respect, creating space for students to succeed, and recognizing the unique needs of each student. However, changing the way we communicate can be challenging - it requires thoughtfulness and intentionality. We probably don't realize that many of the words, examples, and practices we use perpetuate bias, bigotry and, therefore, bullying. Communicating in an inclusive way requires patience of oneself and others and we must learn to think and speak differently by challenging our own norms of communicating and use of language. This advancement is essential if we aim to provide equity in teaching and learning.

The term "inclusive", when used to modify "education", addresses the need to provide instruction that is representative of all populations including, but not limited to, people of different races and ethnicities, cultural or religious values, genders, sexual orientations, disabilities, gender identities, or gender expressions. While people who identify with any one or more of these groups are protected by our state's anti-discrimination laws, they are often underrepresented or invisible during instruction. Inclusive instruction ensures that each student has access to education that is equitable and representative.

What does inclusive language look like? It includes the use of the word "partner" rather than boyfriend or girlfriend; the phrase "he, she or they" rather than the use of one assumed gender pronoun; words like "if" rather than "when" in reference to marriage or having children; parent or caregiver instead of mother or father; examples of historical figures in social studies that represent diversity of gender, sexual orientation, religious values, disability, and gender. The use of inclusive language recognizes the wide range of expressions that are possible at different points in one's life, helps challenge limiting and potentially harmful stereotypes, and encourages students to consider viewpoints and experiences beyond their own. It expands rather than limits the possibilities for students and for education, and it suggests openness rather than restriction. There is no negative consequence to students when this shift in practice is made – only a benefit to more students.

All students deserve to learn about all subjects in settings that are safe and supportive. No one deserves to be bullied. We know that LGBTQ students experience a highly disproportionate rate of bullying. In Washington, according to GLSEN's <u>2013 National School Climate Survey</u>, the vast

majority of LGBT students regularly heard anti-LGBT remarks, and most had been victimized at school. In these instances, inclusivity not only improves the learning experience, it decreases health disparities. The Human Rights Campaign, in a recent "call to action," addresses the specific needs of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) youth related to sexual health education:

For LGBTQ youth to experience comparable health benefits to their non-LGBTQ peers, sex education programs must be LGBTQ-inclusive. Inclusive programs are those that help youth understand gender identity and sexual orientation with age-appropriate and medically accurate information; incorporate positive examples of LGBTQ individuals, romantic relationships and families; emphasize the need for protection during sex for people of all identities; and dispel common myths and stereotypes about behavior and identity.

How can the use of inclusive language reduce bullying?
- Using inclusive language is a critical component of creating a safe and supportive school environment for all students and staff. Building and classroom conversations about the importance of language should be regular and on-going, as a way to support staff and students in developing a new, common vocabulary and approach to communication.
- Observing teachers, staff and students using inclusive language reinforces its importance and its impact. It helps create expectations for student behavior and helps everyone in the school community develop competence as they try out new ways of communicating ideas and feelings.
- Hearing inclusive language helps vulnerable students feel safe and respected. In addition to seeing real-time application of the values expressed in most school policies and procedures, it lets students know it's safe to report or intervene when abusive or harassing language is used. Knowing that adults and peers care enough to change their language provides students with the confidence to challenge hurtful and harmful interactions.

It's not enough to limit derogatory language, although that should be a goal in all schools. If we truly want to reduce bullying and increase school safety and equity, we all must commit to examining and changing our own use of language and move toward including every student in a positive way. We need to be willing to intervene when we hear hurtful language being used, but more importantly, to move toward communication that brings us together and helps each member of the school community feel recognized and valued for exactly who they are as individuals. This could make all the difference – to one or one thousand of your students.

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