

## Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

---

### **Teaching Gender and Sexuality at School**

by Tara Goldstein

New York, NY: Routledge, 2019, 221 pages

ISBN: 978-1-138-38714-0 (paperback/hardcover)

### **Reviewed by/ Revu par**

Jen Gilbert

York University

Tara Goldstein's book *Teaching Gender and Sexuality at School* is structured as a series of encouraging letters for teachers about how to support LGBTQ students and families in schools. Goldstein centres the experiences of LGBTQ students and parents, often incorporating long excerpts from interviews she has conducted in her various research studies. In this book, we hear from Goldstein and from LGBTQ students and parents who have worked to make a place for themselves in schools. The stories are heart-breaking and celebratory. Goldstein is careful to document moments both when schools opened up to queer and trans families as well as times when the school refused to recognize the gender or sexuality of a student or family.

Divided into three parts—sexuality at school, gender at school, and LGBTQ families at school—the text tackles some broad issues: how to support young people who are transitioning genders at school, how to create a welcoming classroom for all families, and how to navigate tensions between religious communities and support for LGBTQ human rights, for instance. Underneath these explicit topics are subtle messages for teachers: why equity policies are important to implement in both schools and individual classrooms; how to gain the support of your administration for doing LGBTQ inclusive work; and why teachers must take responsibility for learning about gender and sexuality in schools, for instance.

This book speaks to one important audience. It is for teachers and teacher candidates who Goldstein understands as having a crucial role in making schools safer places for LGBTQ students and families. And more than that—this text is for nervous teachers who may not feel like they have the resources to incorporate LGBTQ issues

into their teaching or are worried that they do not know enough about the experiences of LGBTQ students and families to be good allies. The tone of the book is both encouraging and earnest. At every turn, Goldstein reminds the reader that there are resources available (beyond the text itself) to help teachers implement the kind of practice she is advocating. There are novels, picture books, research studies, photo exhibits, policy documents, even her own research-informed theatre scripts; to the anticipated worry of the reader, Goldstein offers this information and research.

The resources Goldstein offers are also examples of educational practices that she hopes will make schools and universities more LGBTQ inclusive. With the introduction of each person in the text, Goldstein offers their self-described identity—for example, cisgender, trans, White, Two-Spirit, Anglican or queer. All these terms are available, Goldstein implies, to help orient you in relation to gender and sexuality. While the strategy can feel somewhat contrived, Goldstein seems to be reassuring her reader -‘see, it isn’t hard to say these words and to use them to locate yourself in this on-going conversation?’ One important step towards making LGBTQ students and families feel welcome in schools is being able to use these terms—lesbian, straight, bisexual, trans—as descriptions, invitations even, and not only slurs muttered in hallways or covered over through the bland bureaucratic speak of diversity and difference.

But the strategy points to a limitation—as comprehensive as Goldstein attempts to be, the landscape of gender and sexuality is constantly shifting. Vernaculars are evolving, identities are emerging and receding, and for the teacher, these shifts can be profoundly unsettling. How can I know if this term or acronym is still current? How can I know that my words, however carefully chosen, won’t injure? While the text attempts to be exhaustive, Goldstein acknowledges that terms change even as students’ need for recognition doesn’t. In her letter explaining the use of the singular “they” pronoun, for instance, Goldstein admits that it took some getting used to and that she still makes mistakes occasionally. It is a thoughtful letter—Goldstein remembers the emergence of a new pronoun, how it required something of her to understand how to use it, and that even now she sometimes makes mistakes (p. 55-6). This is what she is asking of the teachers who might read her book, I think—that they might remain open to new and unanticipated forms of gender and sexuality, that they would work to understand what these new forms might require of them in their classrooms, and that they would be humble enough to risk not being perfect.

The strength of the text, ultimately, lies less in the voluminous information Goldstein includes—a fantastic “unicorn glossary,” her own theatre scripts, policy details, or her up-to-date overview of gender and sexuality issues in schools. Instead, I think the most significant contribution this text makes comes from some stylistic decisions. The casual tone of her letters tells the reader that gender and sexuality are topics we can talk about over coffee and not only in hushed voices away from the ears of children or principals. The incorporation of LGBTQ students’ and parents’ voices make the book a conversation between a teacher educator and the communities she is hoping to serve.

Goldstein's generous acknowledgments of her own intellectual debts—to her students, to artists, to other academics—tells the reader that we need to be thinking with others about gender and sexuality, that we don't have to figure this all out on our own. Occasionally, Goldstein may position the reader as too naïve and ignorant but that gesture can be overlooked given how willing she is to place herself, as well, in the position of a learner. As a teacher educator myself, I hope to embody the generous spirit of this text as I work to help my students understand and navigate the changing landscape of gender and sexuality in schools.