STATEMENT ON GENDER AND LANGUAGE

DATE: October 25, 2018

OVERVIEW:

As both a product and an engine of human culture, language is inherently dynamic and ever-evolving. Regarding the intersection of language, gender, and equity, the English language has been in a period of active shift for several decades. That dynamism is reflected in the evolution of NCTE's position statements on gender and language through the last forty years. In 1978, NCTE published the first predecessor of this statement with the help of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Workplace. Originally titled "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications," the document was revised first in 1985, and again in 2002, when the Women in Literacy and Life Assembly (WILLA) renamed it "Guidelines for Gender-Fair Use of Language." At that time, the statement explored the ways in which language reflects and shapes understandings of gender, and it offered examples of ways in which language might promote the fair treatment of women and girls in early-childhood, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary educational settings. The current document, "Statement on Gender and Language" (2018), reflects NCTE's ongoing commitment to gender equity in education, and also builds on contemporary understandings of gender that include identities and expressions beyond a woman/man binary. Rather than reinscribe the gender binary or cisnormativity (the assumption that each person's gender identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth), this document aims to support people of all genders. This statement will discuss how *gender* differs from *sex* and *sexuality*; will explain what is meant by the term *gender binary*; will recommend ways educators might use language to reflect the reality of gender diversity and support gender diverse students; and will highlight resources English language arts educators at any level may use to support more nuanced and inclusive understandings and discussions of gender in classrooms, schools, and broader communities.

ISSUE DEFINED:

Often, people unintentionally confuse *gender* with *sex* or *sexuality*. *Gender* is distinct from *sex assigned at birth*, which may be designated with categories such as female, male, or intersex. *Sex* is distinct from *sexuality*, which is about desire: to whom one is attracted emotionally and/or physically. *Gender*, distinct from both *sex* and *sexuality*, is a socially created and regularly reinforced cultural construct. As such, gender is vulnerable to social reinscriptions that sometimes perpetuate problematic and even discriminatory notions of how people should look, sound, express, or behave. This document focuses on the ways that gender matters in language, specifically within and across educational spaces. This document also recognizes that gender constructs are dynamic and vary by context, culture, language, and usage.

The most common concepts of gender are based on the long-perpetuated notion that gender is a binary matter, and that it always aligns with a binary designation of sex (male/female). Yet contemporary understandings of gender clarify that gender identity and expression occur along a broad spectrum that is not limited to two binary alternatives, such as woman/man or girl/boy. The previous NCTE "Guidelines for Gender-Fair Use of Language" (2002) was grounded in a traditionally binary concept of gender, and was thus limited by that binary in its discussion, for example, of she/he pronouns. The "Statement on Gender and Language" (2018), based in the contemporary understanding that gender is a cultural construct that is not limited to binary categories, recommends usage that moves beyond the gender binary in order to include individuals whose identities might otherwise be unacknowledged or devalued.

There are several terms that people might use when discussing gender. Some of the most common ones include the following:
- *Gender identity:* an individual's feeling about, relationship with, and understanding of gender as it pertains to their sense of self. An individual's gender identity may or may not be related to the sex that individual was assigned at birth.
- *Gender expression:* external presentation of one's gender identity, often through behavior, clothing, haircut, or voice, which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine.
- *Gender binary:* a conceptual framework that defines gender as consisting solely of two categories (termed "woman" and "man") that are biologically based ("female" and "male") and unchangeable, and

that denies the existence of other nonbinary variations of gender or anatomy.

- *Cisgender:* of or relating to a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth.
- *Transgender:* of or relating to a person whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. This umbrella term may refer to someone whose gender identity is woman or man, or to someone whose gender identity is nonbinary (see below).
- *Nonbinary:* of or relating to a person who does not identify, or identify solely, as either a woman or a man. More specific nonbinary identifiers include but are not limited to terms such as *agender* and *gender fluid* (see below).
- *Gender fluid:* of or relating to individuals whose identity shifts among genders. This term overlaps with terms such as *genderqueer* and *bigender,* implying movement among gender identities and/or presentations.
- *Agender:* of or relating to a person who does not identify with any gender, or who identifies as neutral or genderless.

Language, which plays a central role in human cognition and behavior, is one of the most common mechanisms by which gender is constructed and reinforced. The words that people use to describe others or objects are often unintentionally but unquestionably based in implicit cultural biases, including biases that privilege the gender binary. We can see such bias reinforced in professional language use: in curriculum and pedagogy; in papers and publications; in handouts and other materials used in presentations; and in speaking in and beyond our classrooms. NCTE is concerned about the critical role that language plays in perpetuating gender bias, including binary understandings of gender and gender norms. Through careful attention to language as it relates to gender, NCTE members have the opportunity to influence inclusive and supportive thought and behavior both directly and indirectly.

Understanding that, despite the dominant cultural force of cisnormativity, there is a full spectrum of gender identities that are not confined to the gender binary, we provide recommendations for gender-expansive language in practice in the next section. We base these recommendations on the principle that all students have the right to their own gender identities and gender expressions. We urge members of NCTE to engage in deep reflection on traditional understandings of gender in hopes that this reflection will contribute to the ongoing work of supporting the safety, growth, and learning of students of all gender identities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

I. General Usage Guidelines

A. Avoid using *he* as a universal pronoun; likewise, avoid using binary alternatives such as *he/she*, *he or she,* or *(s)he.*
B. As the editors of the recent editions of the *Chicago Manual of Style* (2017), the *Associated Press Stylebook* (2018), and other style guides affirm, the pronoun *they* is appropriate to use in writing when referring to singular antecedents, including when writing for publication.
C. Unless the gender of a singular personal antecedent is otherwise specified, use the gender-neutral singular pronouns *they, them, their,* and *theirs.*
D. The *Chicago Manual of Style* affirms that the pronoun *themself* may be used to signal a singular antecedent; that some people may alternatively prefer to use *themselves* to signal a singular antecedent; and that a person's stated preference should be respected.
E. *Are* is the present-tense verb for the singular pronoun *they,* just as *are* is the present-tense verb for the singular pronoun *you.*
F. When referring to any individual, respect that individual's chosen pronoun usage, or lack thereof. (Note: while the singular *they* is the most common nonbinary pronoun, there are others, including but not limited to *ey / em / eirs* and *ze / hir / hirs.* See the University of Minnesota's "Nonbinary Gender Pronouns" declension and usage chart, linked in the Resources section below, for further details.)

Some Usage Examples:

Exclusionary (binary):
Every cast member should know **his or her** lines by Friday.
Inclusive (any gender):
Each cast member should know **their** lines by Friday.
Inclusive (student whose chosen pronouns are *they/ them / theirs*):
Alex needs to learn **their** lines by Friday.

Exclusionary (binary):
Each should wait until **he / she** is notified of **his / her** test results.
Inclusive (any gender):
Each should wait until **they** are notified of **their** test results.
Inclusive (student whose chosen pronouns are *they/ them / theirs*):
Janani should wait until **they** are notified of **their** test results.

II. Recommendations for Working with Students

A. Regarding Grammar and Usage

1. Observe all of the General Usage Guidelines in Section I above when exploring language usage in classrooms, communicating with students, preparing curriculum and materials, designing class activities, and responding to student writing.
2. Frame instruction in grammar and usage conventions with ongoing discussion of the inherently dynamic and evolving nature of language, rather than asserting, implicitly or explicitly, that grammar and usage rules are timeless, universal, or absolute. Language shifts; make that part of the classroom conversation.
3. When the gender of a singular antecedent is unknown, allow and encourage students to use the gender-neutral singular pronouns *they, them, their,* and *theirs*, rather than using binary alternatives such as *he/she, he or she,* or *(s)he.*
4. Allow students who choose not to refer to themselves with any pronouns to self-describe as they see fit, according to context.
5. Note that while a rising number of major print-language authorities such as those noted in section I now embrace the use of the singular pronoun *they*, makers of most standardized tests have not yet adopted this policy. Track the treatment of the singular *they* in the standardized tests your students may be taking and apprise students accordingly, contextualizing differences among language authorities in a larger, ongoing discussion of language and usage as dynamic and evolving, not absolute or static.

B. Regarding Classroom Culture

1. Work to establish and maintain classrooms and school communities where students of all gender identities feel visible, heard, valued, and protected.
2. A student's pronouns intersect profoundly with their gender identity and their sense of self; accordingly, as early as possible in any given term, give each student a private way to let you know their name and chosen pronouns. This process could be as simple as including the following questions on a basic student information sheet a student can fill out confidentially: "What name would you like me to use in referring to you in class?" and "What pronouns would you like me to use in referring to you in class?"
3. Respect each student's chosen name and pronouns.
4. As any student does, LGBTQ students have a right to privacy, which includes the right not to be "outed." As an article in the Fall 2018 issue of *Teaching Tolerance* makes clear, "Even if people within the school know about a student's sexual orientation or gender identity, educators cannot disclose a student's private

information without consent. Outing LGBTQ students has led to tragic, even fatal consequences, and violates their constitutional rights" (Collins 26).

   In short, it is imperative to respect a student's privacy and keep a student's communication about gender identity confidential. A transgender student may or may not feel comfortable or safe having their gender identity known in all contexts, and therefore may not use the same pronouns in all contexts, even within one school. Maintain confidentiality, attention, and discretion in communicating with and about the student, and do not disclose any student's gender identity in any setting without the student's clear consent.

5. Because, like other elements of identity, a student's gender identity may be fluid rather than static, remain attuned to and supportive of possible shifts in a student's chosen name and pronouns; again, maintain confidentiality and do not disclose any shift in a student's gender identity without the student's consent.

C. Regarding Curriculum Creation

1. Create lessons and materials that discuss gender as a spectrum, and that include a range of gender identities, rather than inadvertently perpetuating a binary concept of gender or excluding transgender students through curricular and instructional choices.
   For example:
   - Seize and create classroom opportunities to discuss and challenge gender assumptions, particularly binary assumptions about gender.
   - Avoid assuming binary gender identities by designing activities that divide the class into boys and girls.
   - Avoid assuming binary gender identities when assigning readers or roles for texts being read aloud or performed.
   - When facilitating discussions of the impact of gender identity on personal, social, or political experience, move beyond binary terms that compare and contrast the experiences of women and men to ensure that such explorations consider experiences of those with nonbinary identities as well.

2. Understand that a student's gender identity may impact their engagement with certain texts and/or participation in certain conversations.

III.   Recommendations for Working with ELA Colleagues

A. Observe all of the General Usage Guidelines in Section I above when working with ELA colleagues in any professional capacity.
B. Become conversant with recent official affirmations of the singular *they* by usage and style authorities such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* (2017) and *The Associated Press Stylebook* (2018), and update colleagues on this area of active, ongoing language shift.
C. When providing leadership to ELA teachers (for example, as an official or unofficial mentor, a department and division head, a curriculum coordinator, a principal, or a teacher-educator), provide instruction and support, where needed, as trainees and colleagues expand their competency in using and teaching language that is free of gender bias. This NCTE position statement, as well as the resources listed at the end of it, can aid in that ongoing effort.
D. When collaborating with other ELA colleagues in designing curriculum, implementing instruction, and selecting texts, materials, and media, observe the following practices:
    1. When teaching or discussing gender or identity, do not limit discussions to a binary understanding of gender and gender identity.
    2. Represent gender diversity in text selection, seeking to include not only books by or about cisgender people, but also texts written by transgender and nonbinary authors about transgender and nonbinary characters and experiences.
    3. Remain alert to the emergence of implicit or explicit gender bias in any given text, and engage with colleagues and in acknowledging, contextualizing, and challenging such discriminatory notions of gender, just as ELA colleagues work to acknowledge, contextualize, and challenge racial bias when it emerges in curricular texts. Such ongoing discussions with colleagues will inform essential critical discussions with students.

IV.   Recommendations for Administrators

A. Observe all of the General Usage Guidelines in Section I above when working with, speaking with, writing for, or presenting to students at large, parents, or other school community members.
B. Provide support to ELA professionals as those professionals in turn provide guidance in using language in a way that is free of gender bias.
C. Conduct an internal audit of written material representing the school and/or district and, where needed, direct the revision of material to eliminate binary language.

D. In tandem with a language audit (C.), review other practices that may formally or informally press a nonbinary student conform to binary categories (example: male/female formal-wear requirements or expectations for graduation or dances).

E. Ensure that the all school / district buildings include accessible gender-inclusive restrooms, and that they are marked with signs phrased in nonbinary terms such as "All-Gender Restroom."

F. Provide regular opportunities for proactive professional development for all teachers and staff to promote understanding of the nature of gender as a spectrum, and to nurture a safe and supportive school community for all members—both students and adults—of all genders.

IV. Recommendations for Working with the Larger Professional Community

A. Observe General Usage Guidelines in Section I above when writing for NCTE publications including journal articles, lesson plans, and social media communications.

B. Participate in ongoing professional development for educators to succeed in countering bigotry, discrimination, and harassment of transgender students in education.

C. Support the enforcement of laws and policies that provide sanctions against discrimination and harassment in education.

D. Advocate for legislative reform that will lead to policies that provide sanctions against discrimination in education based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

E. Coordinate with educational constituents of various sorts—ELA teachers and other colleagues, members of the larger school community, and members of the larger professional community—to participate actively in public conversations about gender diversity and how to support students of all gender identities.

REFERENCES

The Associated Press Stylebook. The Associated Press, 2018.

The Chicago Manual of Style. 17th ed., The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Collins, Cory. "LGBTQ Best Practices Guide." *Teaching Tolerance,* Fall 2018, pp. 24-26.

"Guidelines for the Gender-Fair Use of Language." NCTE, 2002.

RESOURCES

Terminology

Corcione, Danielle. "How to Use Gender Neutral Words—and Why They're Important." *Teen Vogue,* 27 Aug 2018.
https://www.teenvogue.com/story/how-to-use-gender-neutral-words.
     Teen Vogue has become well known recently for in-depth reporting on serious topics that impact adolescents. This article presents a clear, accessible, and useful guide for both adults and "youth who aspire toward language use that is gender-neutral and gender-fair."

"Gender Pronouns and the Singular 'They'." The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL).
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/pronouns/gendered_pronouns_and_singular_they.html.
     The OWL, to which many teachers refer their students for guidelines on writing, grammar, usage, research, and documentation, added this helpful discussion of gender-inclusive language in 2017. This article discusses the use of singular *they* through centuries of English, as well as the importance of singular *they* today.

"The Gender Unicorn." *Trans Student Educational Resources.*
http://www.transstudent.org/gender/.
     The Gender Unicorn offers a visual explanation of how gender identity, gender expression, and sex assigned at birth are different identity categories. It also includes definitions of each term.

"Key Terms and Concepts in Understanding Gender Diversity and Sexual Orientation Among Students." American Psychological Association, 2015,
https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/programs/safe-supportive/lgbt/key-terms.pdf.
     This comprehensive terms guide is one pamphlet in a series, "Promoting Resiliency for Gender Diverse and Sexual Minority Students in Schools," which presents research-based best practices meeting the needs of LBGTQIA+ students.

"Nonbinary Gender Pronouns." University of Minnesota Student Writing Support. http://writing.umn.edu/sws/quickhelp/grammar/nonbinary.html
     Provides a declension chart of some of the most common nonbinary pronouns, including the singular *they,* as well as others such as *ze/zir/zirs* and *ey/em/eirs.*

"Pronouns: A Resource for Educators." GLSEN.
https://www.glsen.org/article/pronouns-resource-educators
     GLSEN is one of the most prominent LGBTQIA+ organizations working to support students, schools, GSAs, educators, and allies. This pronoun guide

directly supports and explores more inclusive language choices in the classroom. Other resources abound on the site.

"Resources." International Pronouns Day. https://pronounsday.org/resources/.
      Page includes helpful very short videos such as "Pronouns: How Do You Ask?"

Sojwal, Senti. "What Does 'Agender' Mean? 6 Things to Know About People with Non-Binary Identities." *Bustle.* 16 Sept 2015, https://www.bustle.com/articles/109255-what-does-agender-mean-6-things-to-know-about-people-with-non-binary-identities.
      Article discusses what it means to identify as agender.

Steinmetz, Katy. "Beyond 'He' or 'She': The Changing Meaning of Gender and Sexuality. *Time.* 16 March 2017, http://time.com/4703309/gender-sexuality-changing/.
      Article considers understandings of gender and sexuality in relation to young people in schools and includes survey data from young adults.

Tobia, Jacob. "Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Gender-Neutral Pronouns." *Time.* 12 May 2016, http://time.com/4327915/gender-neutral-pronouns/.
      A helpful introductory guide to gender neutral pronouns in a question-and-answer format. For educators newer to the topic, this is a helpful place to start—with a piece that poses many common questions you may already be asking yourself—before exploring more robust sources.

Resources for Addressing Gender Diversity with Students

Butler-Wall, Annika, et al. *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality.* Rethinking Schools, 2016.
      This anthology contains suggestions for how to include topics such as gender, sexism, and feminism within a social justice curriculum.

Gittelman, Maya. "5 Ways to Help Kids Think Outside the Gender Binary." *The Body Is Not An Apology.* 27 July 2018, https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/5-ways-to-help-kids-think-outside-the-gender-binary/.
      Presents practical ways to help students consider gender beyond the binary.

Harbin, Brielle. "Teaching Beyond the Gender Binary in the University Classroom." Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-beyond-the-gender-binary-in-the-university-classroom/
     Although intended for university educators, this adaptable resource explains the significance of language use in the classroom, particularly in working with gender diverse students who are actively defining and expressing their identities, and seeking support from allies and educators.

Miller, s, editor. *Teaching, Affirming, and Recognizing Trans* and Gender Creative Youth: A Queer Literacy Framework*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
     In this award-winning anthology, ELA teachers of all levels can find examples from research and practice, as well as sample lessons for teaching about gender beyond the binary. A glossary is included for reference.

Miller, s. *Gender Identity Justice.* Teachers College Press, forthcoming (2019).
     This book seeks to disrupt the default through which a dominant gaze tends to view life through a cisgender and cisnormative lens and provides ways to change the exclusionary political, economic, and affective practices and their subsequent conditions that have created gender identity injustice in the first place. By moving away from presumptions that sustain cis-and gender identity normative defaults and resetting and recasting it to and through expansive lenses, it foregrounds new starting points for gender identity work.

Pennell, Summer Melody. "Training Secondary Teachers to Support LGBTQ+ Students: Practical Applications from Theory and Research." *The High School Journal*, vol. 101, no. 1, Jan. 2017, pp. 62-72.
     This article includes an easy-to-execute activity for exploring how our ideas of gender are shaped by our society.

Ryan, Caitlin L., and Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth. *Reading the Rainbow: LGBTQ-Inclusive Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Classroom*. Teachers College Press, 2018.
     Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth include examples from several elementary classrooms where teachers encourage students to challenge assumptions about gender, gender identity, and gender expression through working with books about LGBTQ+ and straight characters. Shared activities allow teachers to measure student progress toward essential literacy goals.

Tempel, Melissa Bollow. "It's OK to Be Neither." *Rethinking Schools,* vol. 26, no. 1, Fall 2011, https://www.rethinkingschools.org/articles/its-ok-to-be-neither-teaching-that-supports-gender-variant-children.

This article shares one teacher's story of supporting a gender variant student and offers suggestions for talking to early-elementary aged children about gender variance and stereotypes.

Advocacy Organizations

Gender Spectrum. https://www.genderspectrum.org/resources/education-2/#more-424

Gender Spectrum offers educators and school communities a wide variety of professional development tools, including language guides, a gender inclusive schools toolkit, and a sample gender support plan for administrators working to support gender diverse students.

Trans Student Educational Resources. http://www.transstudent.org/about/

Founded and led by trans youth, TSER is "dedicated to transforming the educational environment for trans and gender nonconforming students through advocacy and empowerment." Website includes links to many resources for students and those who support students.

Transparent USA. https://transparentusa.org/resources/educational-materials/.

Transparent's website includes links to a wide variety of helpful resources for families and educators.

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