



What Educators Can Learn from the Mr. Potato Head Controversy

By Educator Barnes – February 27, 2021

Gender and identity have been prominent in the media lately especially due to a conflict between two Congresswomen at Capitol Hill. Marie Newman, Illinois Democratic

Congresswoman, shared a personal reason for why she supports the Equality Act. [Her daughter is transgender.](#)

She also placed a transgender pride flag outside of her office. Georgia's Republican Congresswoman, Marjorie Taylor Greene, disagreed with Newman's views and the flag she hung. She retaliated by hanging a sign that read, "There are two genders: MALE & FEMALE 'Trust the Science!'"

In addition to this [feud](#), there are concerns about transgender females participating in women's sports. The controversy centers around the fairness of a person who was born a biological male competing against women who identify as women and were born female. Can a woman beat a person who was born a biological male? The other side of the debate takes gender at birth off of the table and leaves the focus on discrimination. The reason why some people want transgender females to participate in women's sports is that they believe it is discrimination against this group of females to ban them.

Now, the Mr. Potato Head toy has entered the gender debate. Mr. Potato Head is a customizable toy. Originally children had to provide their own potato. When Hasbro acquired the toy, it provided a plastic potato. There is also Mrs. Potato Head and the Potato Head children. When Hasbro announced that it was dropping the Mr. and making the potato gender-neutral, some people cheered for this change and other people condemned it. The Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head toys will still be sold even though the name of the brand is changing and Hasbro is going to release a new set without the Mr. and Mrs. designations so children can make the potato they desire.

As a child who had these toys, I applauded the change but was quickly chastised by Christians. Although I am a Christian, I do not believe this change is an attack on Christianity or anyone. It is about being more inclusive. I have always been a tomboy. I was never interested in the heels on Mrs. Potato Head or heels outside of the toy box. Wanting to have Mr. Potato Head's tennis shoes did not make me confused about my gender and sexuality. The toy is a potato. Why did it need a gender in the first place especially since the toy was customizable? I'm sure I'm not the only kid who had the family of Mr. Potato Head and mixed up the parts.

Children need exploration, and children need to feel like they are included. When I think about recess, the curriculum, and activities in schools, I wonder if we are doing enough to

make sure students of various gender identities have options and are represented. [It makes me think of the words of Democratic Representative Al Green:](#)

You used God to enslave my foreparents. You used God to segregate me in school. You used God to put me in the back of the bus. Have you no shame? ... This is not about God. This about men choosing to discriminate against other people because they have the power to do so.

Educators have authority; they have power. They have the power to make sure students are included, or they have the power to make students feel as if they have no value. Inclusivity can be as simple as eliminating boys and girls lines, and instead having two lines with students of any gender. Being divided by gender is not necessary since the purpose of being in a line is getting from point a to point b. Being in line by gender is not necessary to achieve that goal.

Another way educators can promote gender inclusivity is by not forcing boys away from toys that are typically used by girls or forcing girls away from toys typically used by boys during recess. Exploration of centers in the younger grades or different toys during recess help children decide what they like regardless of gender. I still think about the boys in elementary school who were told to find other activities when they wanted to play the New Kids on the Block board game with the girls.

Last, gender can be included in literature children read. Many of my former middle school students will tell you that I paired two stories together, "[I'm Glad I'm a Boy! I'm Glad I'm a Girl!](#)" by Whitney Darrow, Jr. and "[X: A fabulous child's story](#)" by Lois Gould. I typically split the class in half and had students choral read "I'm Glad I'm a Boy! I'm Glad I'm a Girl!" before we read "X." I applied the standards I needed to cover to the text. For example, I used this paired text during a unit about how to craft an essay using strong arguments and persuasive techniques. Many students told me that "X" was one of the favorite short stories they had read. We even discussed why Darrow's book is no longer in print. I also, at times, included these texts in a college course I used to teach to show teachers how to use texts with topics that some may find offensive while ensuring students are still learning academic standards.

The Mr. Potato Head controversy shows that people can still have gender-based toys and have options for children to explore without having gender be a focus. Educators can provide these same options in the classroom. Inclusion seems to be the part of DEI work that some people struggle with simply because they do not want to change the traditions of how things

used to be. This mindset needs to change. People who are using the Bible to uphold excluding people are clearly skipping verses in the Good Book about how we should treat others.