

Educating the LGBTQ Student in the 21st Century

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For nearly 30 years I have worked with young people. I have been an educational counselor for young people of many races, nationalities, abilities, and socioeconomic circumstances.

I have counseled students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ); HIV

positive; homeless; abused; undocumented; gifted and talented; mentally ill; and addicted. I have worked with those who are refugees, who have been affected by gangs, and who are coming out of correction facilities. Whether they are in elite prep schools, suburban public high schools, or GED programs for homeless teens in the Bronx, each student is a universe unto him- or herself. I share my story to help support your work with students in the LGBTQ community.

As acceptance for gay people gains national legal and cultural recognition, the backlash to the movement has created increased violence and painful rhetoric targeting the gay community, specifically its youth. The 24-hour media cycle exploits those conflicting narratives, barraging watchers until they are numbed to the destructive intent of the message. Although the conversations can be shocking, the fact that they are happening so publicly can be a positive thing because it exposes hateful agendas. But I have to wonder, How does a young person in the process of exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity react to this kind of constant mixed messaging? I feel fear, and I wonder if they do too.

A Safe Space

As a youth, I was very sensitive to the opinions of others and my peers. As part of my personality development, I looked to people surrounding me for role models and encouragement. For gay youth, there seemed to be only two options for self-preservation: to retreat inside or to rebel with vigor. I chose the vigorous route. Adults interpreted my teenage persona and behavior in ways that usually resulted in suggestions for me to conform (for my own safety) so that my soul could be saved or so that I would not encourage other "different" youth, like me, to question and challenge authority structures. It never occurred to anyone that

it might not be me that needed to change, but instead their own behavior and beliefs.

As a sophomore in a remedial class reserved for youth who confronted the status quo, I met the educator who changed my life and my trajectory. She created a safe space in her classroom where I could escape the beatings, share my feelings openly, and engage in critical thinking about the world. She recognized something special in me, something worth nurturing and defending. She allowed me to take off the armor, breathe, and be a vulnerable teenager. She also helped me understand how profoundly gifted I was as a young man, as an activist, and as an intellectual. To be very direct, she saved my life. She understood that my *resistance* was actually a reflection of amazing *resilience*, and she became the conduit to opportunity and college.

Self-Awareness

If 1 out of 10 people are on the LGBTQ spectrum, current educators are already working with this target population with various levels of success. Like any other population that continues to experience marginalization, discrimination, judgment, or unequal treatment, a best practice for one group is likely to be a general best practice for another. For the sake of this discussion, I am going to focus on the gay community, but I feel that gay could be substituted with female, Muslim, Black, poor, disabled, foreign, and so on.

Many educators are distracted by what they can readily observe about a young person and use a visual identity marker as an initial point of reference. For identities that cannot be seen, it is necessary to engage other methods. What process do you have in place to explore apparent or unapparent aspects of identity? If you are talking to me as a White man, an easy visual marker, and I answer as a gay man, would you be aware enough to shift your focus? What are your own experiences with the diversity of human identity? How might you benefit from revisiting your own biases or opinions that are informed by your age, gender, class, race, region, religion, upbringing, or experience? Do you have someone to process this exploration with?

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children, and some have likely given inconsistent messages over time about how they feel about gay people. Their level of awareness regarding this dynamic and its influence may not be very evolved, or they may feel guilt and respond by overcompensating or overprotecting. In my experience, one parent is likely to be more supportive and the other the more critical. A young person's sexual orientation— and anything else they share in confidence— is not the property of their parents. It can be a difficult dance balancing the integrity of the relationship with your young person (the client) while still meeting the needs of the parents (your customer).

Colleges

There are many resources [*see list at the end of this article*] that explore how open and welcoming various universities are to gay people. Schools that have bad reputations with gay issues and safety are not viewed, in general, as socially or academically progressive, and are thus less desirable. That makes sense. If gay people are not safe, it is usually reflective of a campus atmosphere where other groups are at risk, including women, minorities of color, and international students. This can mean that to keep a high rating, colleges and universities underreport abuses, inflate reputations for diversity, and project public images that are very different than the lived reality of their students.

Sad to say, but different regions of the country have very different interpretations of what gay friendly means. There is a difference between being actively tolerated and being empowered and included. Investigating the reality of diversity on campus has to involve an organization's entire faculty, staff, and funders. There are many masks of inclusion worn by colleges and universities that have a shameful lack of diversity hiding at upper levels of decision making.

College Essays

I support the desire for young people to explore their sexual orientation or gender identity through writing. They should never receive the message, no matter how subtle, that disclosure is somehow inappropriate. Rather, anchoring the exploration of identity and the process of self-awareness in a larger context is key. Colleges are looking for critical thinkers

who can engage complex ideas and concepts. In short, being gay is not more instructive than any other minority group, it is how the student interprets their world that gives it power and relevance.

Another way to address an identity issue in the college application without having to claim any singular identity is to write about a leader in the gay community and his or her journey, impact, and strengths. You do not need to be gay to find a parallel with a gay narrative. For a young person who is still exploring, it can be very powerful to give them permission to choose another minority group that they admire. Comparing and contrasting different groups' challenges and opportunities can show maturity and expanded thinking. Finally, it is crucial for the student to share what more they want to learn; what questions they hope to explore about themselves and the world; and how those inquiries speak directly to the college's learning community, values, and academic strengths.

Breathe

If you do your homework, build your LGBTQ professional allies, increase your fluency with gay culture, and find your unique connection to difference, you will do great. Gay people are resilient, adaptable, and like many other minority groups, responsive to those who make the effort to authentically connect. Mistakes will happen, misinterpretations will occur, but you and your young person will survive.

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Resources:

Campus Pride: www.campusprideindex.org/default.aspx

"The Gay and Lesbian Guide to College Life" www.randomhouse.com/princetonreview/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780307945013

LGBTQ scholarships: www.finaid.org/otheraid/lgbt.phtml

Point Foundation (National LGBTQ Scholarship Fund):
www.pointfoundation.org