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## From Tolerance and Diversity to Inclusion and Celebration; New Horizons for Infusing Queer Theory into Communities

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“Do you feel included?” I ask my students ... and myself. What does it mean to be included, seen, heard, and respected for the unique and intrinsic value each of us brings to the table as a human being? In the following essay, I wish to explore this question. I share my experiences as an educator in middle schools, high schools, and institutions of higher education, where my students teach me more than I could ever impart to them. I will compare these lessons with the research I conducted in 2015 for my doctoral dissertation and conclude with my thoughts on how blending this information leads me to the concept of radical brave inclusion for all. I hope that this will be a starting point for conversation and action to making educational and communal spaces inclusive and celebratory of all experiences and identities.

Two years ago, in 2015, LGBTQ rights were moving at an unprecedented and history-making pace. While I was writing my doctoral dissertation on LGBTQ youth experiences in health education, the world was celebrating a rise in national and global marriage equality as the United States, Ireland, and Finland all legalized same sex marriage within a few months of one another. In the final chapter of my dissertation, I wrote of pathways for the future inclusion of marginalized populations with a sense of hope and a clear path for queering educational systems. Then 2016 came, and the citizens of the United States watched as the pendulum swung in the other direction, with the increased visibility of extreme right ideologies, the Orlando Pulse massacre, and the election of Donald Trump. Now, in 2017, the need for LGBTQ visibility, inclusion, and celebration seems to have taken a front seat in national civil rights platforms as our once grasped rights are being ripped away by the new administration and its supporters.

I have worked with LGBTQ teens and young adults for my entire career. In my first job, I worked in a one-room schoolhouse for teen mothers run by a Catholic organization in Florida. The founder and CEO was fiercely homophobic and had no qualms about sharing her hatred of and prejudice against queer people. While confined to the framework of the school's morality, I still voiced my opposing lens of inclusion to students. One day after school, a student came to meet with me privately. She shared that her pregnancy was not the result of a consensual experience and that she had been homeless before coming to the campus. She wanted to keep the baby but felt scared and overwhelmed as a rape survivor and lesbian. I am a certified doula and rape crisis advocate, so we spoke for a while that day about options, self-advocacy, and finding support. I bought her a book on giving birth as a survivor and believed she would make it off the streets and into an authentic and safe reality. Unfortunately, the founder discovered her lesbian identity and swiftly put her back onto the streets. This act caused me to resign from my position and begin my work with teen girls who were either within or in danger of becoming part of the juvenile justice system. To date, I have carried my message of promoting the stories, experiences,

and realities of LGBTQ youth and teen trauma survivors in multiple middle school, high school, and university settings. Their stories are woven into the fabric of my soul, and through my research and publishing I seek to enlighten others regarding avenues of the inclusion and celebration of all students.

In my dissertation, entitled *Seen but Not Heard: Pathways to Improve Inclusion of LGBT Persons and Sexual Trauma Survivors in Sexual Health Education*, I looked at the marginalization and inclusion of the two populations I had worked most closely with: sexual trauma survivors and LGBTQ youth (McGuire, 2015). This mixed methods study was intended to look at national data, but because of the interconnectedness of the Internet, it became an international study. The participants ( $n=34$ ) self-identified as sexual trauma survivors (76%), LGBT (53%), or both (29%). For the purposes of article paper, I focus on the results of the LGBTQ topic questions and my on-the-ground experiences with students.

Marginalization and exclusion are all too prevalent in youth education and in service organizations and systems. This is true for a myriad of minority populations, and in my experience it is especially true for LGBTQ youth. In my study, I found not only that students' experiences were excluded, but also that if they were ever mentioned, it was almost always in a negative light. When asked if LGBTQ issues had ever been discussed in school health education, 75% ( $n=9$ ) of the 18- to 24-year-olds and 77% ( $n=17$ ) of the 25- to 40-year-olds said they had never been discussed. Of those who did hear the topic mentioned, 63% ( $n=10$ ) stated that LGBT topics had been discussed negatively in high school, and 38% ( $n=6$ ) said that they had been discussed positively. Thirty-one percent ( $n=5$ ) said that they had heard homosexuality discussed negatively in middle school, and 6% ( $n=1$ ) said it had been discussed positively. Twenty-five percent ( $n=4$ ) said homosexuality had been discussed negatively in elementary school. All participants wanted more information in at least one domain of sexual health education; 68% ( $n=23$ ) of participants wanted more information on sexual orientation and gender.

Nearly every day, I am presented with a new happily-ever-after fairytale story of a young person who is celebrated after "coming out" on social media or in a viral human interest story. As empowering and hopeful as these stories may be, my grassroots reality is starkly different. Whether conducting private consultations with tearful young adults or reading essays from my teen students, I swim in a sea of familial and organizational homophobia. Many of my young clients, now a generation removed from my own youthful experiences, are faced with exactly the same stigma and mythology that I experienced when I was struggling with coming out. Their families, most often people of color and recent immigrants, are not tolerant, much less accepting or celebratory, of their child's newly found truth. My students fear going home only to be emotionally abused by friends and family because of their sexual orientations or gender identities. For this reason, many of them then decide to go back into the closet, so that they

can maintain their community connections and support systems. As a secondary school teacher, I have had students tell me that they do not feel comfortable around “those gay people” because they have been told that homosexuality is against their religion. I regularly also hear students relay their personal turmoil about what they hear at home and what they observe in the world around them. They are told consistently and with great passion that homosexuality and transgender identity are sinful, unnatural, and disgusting. Yet when they meet LGBTQ adults and peers and hear their stories, they feel conflicted over their parents’ and families’ demands for hatred.

At times, being an educator and agent of change feels like being a mountaineer who never gets to go downhill. The next hurdle is always in front of us, and plateaus are rare and seldom found. How do we enact true change in our classrooms, organizations, and communities, all the while caring for ourselves and maintaining momentum? What are our goals for these efforts, and what results do we seek to show progress?

Through the trial and error of teaching children, youth, and adults, I have created a foundation of principles for inclusive practices. Below are three of the main points I believe will shift paradigms around the inclusion of LGBTQ youth and create systemic change.

### **1. Move past tolerance and diversity to inclusion and celebration.**

Tolerance requires you simply to deal with another perspective and existence, whereas diversity means that multiple views and backgrounds are presented and accounted for in our work. Neither gives voice or equity to oppressed or marginalized populations. Inclusion does just that; it honors the silencing systems and frameworks that are forced upon minorities by amplifying the voices of those who have previously been ignored. Celebration evolves past all tolerance. It states that you are not a lesser being or that your existence is a privilege that your oppressors may take back. Instead, your existence is your gift to the community and something to be honored and valued. To create systems and spaces that are strong and sustainable requires inclusion and celebration. In systems that hold to these values, we see the strengths of all who are involved shine; their talents are used to fortify where others have weaknesses.

### **2. Be so they can see.**

As the American activist Marian Wright Edelman said, “It’s hard to be what you can’t see” (Edelman, 2015, para. 5). Visibility is lifesaving. The more often that LGBTQ community members and leaders stand up and share their experiences and truths, the more visibility the queer community receives. As a result, fewer people can continue to believe the falsehood that they have never met an LGBTQ person or one of good character. Furthermore, young queers can see examples of people they can become. Mythology and lies are exterminated by their showing up and speaking out; when faced with lived experiences, our ontology – our truth – is

reconstructed. What was once “known” for certain is forced to be re-examined. The experiences we had not faced firsthand sit before us in living speaking bodies.

So often in debate and discussion with students and peers alike, the statement of “in my experience” and “everything I’ve seen” is the foundation of a person’s truth. When such people are face to face with people who have lived life from a different lens and who have witnessed contrasting realities, they are forced to find out where their understanding has excluded the truths of others, and potentially remodel it to be more inclusive.

### **3. Be radically inclusive.**

This is the last and hardest step of all. Whereas inclusion means to be a part of a larger whole, to be radically inclusive means to hold this belief as applicable for all parties present. Radical inclusion is the stance that most often causes me to get pushback from within my own queer and liberal community, and yet I continue promoting its importance. If we want to be heard and seen, we must allow space to hear and see all. Truly all – yes, even those whose beliefs and values go against our own. We must allow opposition to clarify what we do believe and have space to be uncomfortable if all are to grow and evolve. That means that even homophobic students and families are safe in my classroom. They are heard and protected from violence, like all others. Their views are still challenged, however, and inconsistencies or fallacies are examined. This is true for all persons, no matter their belief system or perspective, when they enter the spaces I hold for them.

For instance, a few years ago I was sitting in a taxi with a driver who was familiar with my academic program. He was from Jordan and a concerned parent trying to understand the United States and the world his children would be growing up in. He asked me if his children would learn about gay marriage in school, if their teachers would tell them that this had been a good decision. My driver was sincerely terrified his children would grow up to be homosexuals and that this would be a tragedy he could not bear. He asked me because I am a teacher and mother, not knowing that I am also a queer woman. In perfect comedic irony, he was driving me to an LGBT caucus my school had organized. Many of my peers at the gathering asked if I had reprimanded him and corrected his misguided beliefs. I had not. That is his truth, his faith, his culture. Even his homophobia, though harmful in my world view, did not mean he is wrong in his beliefs. To interject such moral superiority would have been to colonialize his religion and sexual values. To shut him down would have halted the conversation and stopped us from understanding why we came to such different conclusions about a topic that was emotional and personal to both of us. Instead, I asked him more questions and corrected only what was medically or statistically inaccurate. I told him that the United States was moving toward being more inclusive of LGBT people and that schools in Chicago would likely move in that direction. I told him he might be more comfortable raising his children

in Jordan and that this was totally OK. At the end, he mentioned his frustration with how Muslim people are depicted in the media and how people do not take the time to get to know them. I said the same is true for the LGBT community, so maybe he could do the same for them.

This is an example of radical inclusion. This is dialogue that moves us forward. While righteous anger at injustices is healthy and can be productive, there must be time and space for true empathy and patience, even regarding those who do not see – may never see – the world the way we do. Spaces and places that challenge, engage, and celebrate diversity in brave and uncomfortable ways are my hope for my classroom, my community, and the world at large.

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