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TOWARD A QUEER-INCLUSIVE, QUEER-AFFIRMING INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

Toward a Queer-Inclusive, Queer-Affirming Independent School

Summer 2014

By Douglas Ray

If you mention the word “diversity” to most independent school professionals, “race” will probably be the first factor to receive attention. With America’s schools historically playing a crucial part in the broader movement for civil rights, this association of race with diversity is an apt one. But as an openly gay teacher at Indian Springs School, a boarding and day school in Birmingham, Alabama, I find myself often thinking about the ways we can celebrate our community’s diversity and curate meaningful conversations about our multiple identities/affinities — especially as they relate to LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus) issues.

Currently, I teach a senior English elective called Queer Literature and Theory. One of the questions we grapple with throughout the semester is how we are socialized to see some things as “normal” and, thus, acceptable, and some things as “other” and, thus, unacceptable. While we read Michel Foucault, Kate Bornstein, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and others, I’m thinking about how all of this theory applies to my practice as a teacher. In the past 20 years, we have made great strides in creating a more queer-friendly society, and my hope is that independent schools not only serve as reflections of progress, but also are at the vanguard of change.

Here are 16 considerations for making an independent school a more queer-friendly community for students, faculty, staff, families, and alumni.

Ask about preferred gender pronouns (PGPs).

First impressions can carry a good deal of weight; similarly, first classes can set the tone for an entire semester. One way to draw attention to the fact that “sex” and “gender” are not the same

concepts and create a classroom community more affirming to gender-nonconforming people is to ask students for their preferred gender pronouns during introductions. Whenever an instructor goes around the room asking each class member's name and other important information, a simple thing to add onto the list: "Also, please include your preferred gender pronouns." A bit of explanation will likely be necessary, and this is a great teaching opportunity. Some gender-nonconforming students may prefer to be referred to (in the singular) as "they, them, theirs" or "hir" or "sie." With a bit of research, teachers and administrators can become more comfortable and well versed in these nontraditional pronouns, which have seen increasing interest, especially from younger millennials.

Support an active Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA).

The brainchild of Kevin Jennings, a former independent school teacher and founder of the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), GSAs have sprung up all over the country at all types of schools. These groups offer students a space to understand the complexities of sexuality. At our school, the GSA has renamed itself Q & A (Queers and Allies) in an effort to include a spectrum of identities not represented by the terms "gay" and "straight." GSAs can serve as social groups, student activist hubs, service organizations, conduits for students connecting to the broader community, and more. For the past three years, our GSA has hosted GSAs from other schools in Alabama in order to discuss common issues and to create larger queer student networks. Visibility is key with the GSA. Having an institutionally supported organization that affirms a traditionally marginalized group is a step toward positive inclusion.

Why "Queer"?

I personally identify as gay, but I chose to use the term "queer" to be more inclusive of nonnormative sexualities, gender identities, and gender expressions. I use queer as an umbrella term to encompass, among others, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, genderqueer, queer, and questioning positionalities. As Eve Sedgwick says in her essay "Queer and Now," "[Q]ueer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically."

The term "queer" became used in academia in the early 1990s to describe an emerging field of study that blended gay and lesbian studies, women's studies, and poststructuralist and postmodern theoretical perspectives. The use of the term queer stands in opposition to what Cathy J. Cohen, professor of political science at the University of Chicago, calls in her article "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" "the normalizing tendencies of hegemonic sexuality rooted in ideas of static, stable sexual identities and behaviors."

What had been traditionally used as a pejorative was being reclaimed and repurposed. My hope is that the use of queer will continually resist strict definition in order for us, especially as educators, to reexamine our conceptions of gender and sexuality continually so that we do not marginalize or oppress nonnormative positionalities.

Include sexual orientation and gender identity and expression in nondiscrimination policies.

While the idea of sexual orientation is appearing more and more often in nondiscriminatory policies, gender identity and expression is less frequent. For transgender, genderqueer, and gender-nonconforming people, a direct statement of nondiscrimination would be a welcome signal.

Reach beyond nondiscrimination to values articulation.

A diversity policy or statement beyond that of nondiscrimination could turn the negative identification of “nondiscrimination” into a more positive, values-based statement akin to a school’s mission statement. While saying that a school does not discriminate based on x or y is important, it is even more telling when a school outlines its values for inclusion and details what it means by “diversity.”

Make the curriculum queer-inclusive.

When I taught primarily English (my teaching load is currently mostly Latin), I included texts that had queer characters and challenged societal norms. In response journals, I asked students for open-ended responses in which they could safely explore a text’s thematic concerns in their own lives. A fundamental view I harbor, as a humanities teacher, is that non-normative sexualities affect society as a whole — the “universalizing” view according to Eve Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet* — as opposed to nonnormative sexualities being relevant only to those who identify as such, the “minoritizing view.” We can expose our students, through the texts we choose, to a vast array of differences. The opportunities for LGBTQ+ students to read characters who mirror their own experiences can provide a meaningful, affirming experience.

Have gender-neutral restrooms.

I have read works by transgender activists talking about the anxieties that occur when needing to use the restroom in a public place. With at least one gender-neutral bathroom on campus, a school can shirk the controlling, oppressive gender binary and minimize some of the anxieties experienced by gender-nonconforming people.

Utilize the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network’s (GLSEN) resources.

GSAs can register with GLSEN. Schools can purchase “safe space” training kits through its website, and a good read through the available resources posted there can sensitize educators to gender and sexuality issues at work around them.

Start a network of LGBTQ+ alums.

Through various school events, I have met a talented group of LGBTQ+ alums, many of whom are willing to share their life experiences with current students. Our GSA has hosted several alumni speakers who have offered their support and encouragement both to the students and to the school’s efforts to be more inclusive.

Participate in No Name-Calling Week, LGBT History Month, National Coming Out Day, and Transgender Day of Remembrance.

All of these events can spark opportunities for learning and discussion: Who was Harvey Milk? Why is violence against transgender people so prevalent, especially trans people of color? How do speech acts constitute bullying, and how does bullying perpetuate a culture of violence? Participating in events such as these will let people know that it is not taboo to address LGBTQ+ issues.

Curate library collections to be LGBTQ+ inclusive.

Libraries are information and cultural hubs — the intellectual engines, along with classrooms, in an educational environment. Young adult and nonfiction sections should include titles relevant to LGBTQ+ experiences as well as queer classics, films, and periodicals. The Lambda Literary Foundation (www.lambdaliterary.org) even sponsors a dynamic LGBT Writers in the Schools project, which can offer amazing opportunities for students to interact with LGBTQ+ writers. The American Library Association has many resources available through its Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table (www.ala.org/glbtrt).

Have queer-positive symbols throughout campus.

Symbols carry a great amount of weight — for better or for worse. On the outside of my classroom, I display a rainbow triangle with the Web address of the Alabama Safe Schools Coalition. Some of my other colleagues do as well, which signals to students that my classroom is a safe space for them and that I am an adult ally. Similarly, parents of students and visitors can read that symbol as an open display of values.

Be willing to learn about nonnormative sexualities and gender issues.

Often the various acronyms like LGBTQ+ can seem overwhelming, nonstandard, and alphabet soup-esque. And that's a valid criticism, but it does not justify dismissal of the experiences and identities represented by the letters. As educators (and human beings who are charged with caring for other human beings), we should be open to developments in the fields of knowledge that concern gender and sexuality. We have to be willing to learn, to grow, and to change. If we see LGBTQQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and allies) and are unfamiliar with one of the terms, we should practice what we preach to our students: look it up and do some research. We live in a time of unlimited access to information. We should take advantage of that in the service of a more just world.

Don't be silent when you hear bigotry.

If an adult, a teacher especially, hears a student use “gay” as a pejorative, it is important to correct that student. Similarly, we should model affirming speech ourselves and be cognizant of the fact that we're actually modeling values.

Don't forget the “B” and “T.”

While popular culture and public discourse often reduce queer issues to lesbian and gay issues, we shouldn't forget about the experiences of bisexual and trans people.

Don't reduce the experience of queer people to issues of sex.

Being queer is about more than the body and more than sexual desire. Being queer shapes the way that one experiences the world; it is a framework through which much of experience is filtered. Be as sensitive to that as to any important identifying factor at work in your school community.

Remember that discussions about identities/affinities invite discussions of intersectionality.

Identity operates as a complex matrix of multiple factors. People belong to multiple groups, and we shouldn't expect people to check all but one aspect of their identity at the door when we bring people together.

I'm sure this list is incomplete, but my intention is to spur a discussion, to get people thinking about how gender and sexuality play a role in independent school education. The word innovation is frequently thrown around in discussions of what independent education is and can be. Innovation is related to poet Ezra Pound's dictum of writing: "Make it new." Having an equitable and just school in regard to gender and sexuality isn't just about making it new; it's about making it better.

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