

Some Considerations When Working with LGBT Students of Color

All students deserve a safe and affirming school environment. More than 20 years of GLSEN work and research proves that 1) supportive school staff, 2) inclusive curriculum, 3) GSAs (and other student-led clubs) and 4) comprehensive and enumerated policies help to improve school climate, academic achievement and student well-being.

When working with LGBT students of color¹, there are a number of additional concerns that should be taken into consideration. It is crucial to see students through a holistic lens, one that recognizes and tries to understand the complex identities and experiences that shape each individual.

The following considerations are meant to help you think more deeply about the experiences of LGBT students of color and their needs. It is not an exhaustive list, but one that was created in hopes of inspiring additional thoughts and questions amongst school staff.

We encourage you to read, consider and try out some of the suggestions on the following pages.



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TALK ABOUT IT

The Need:

LGBT students of color face multiple forms of oppression in their lives and may feel isolated and/or invisible at school. Challenging all forms of oppression and empowering students and staff begins with recognizing existing issues of bias and facilitating open dialogue about how these biases affect others. Bringing these topics out into the open allows for healthy and productive opportunities for students and colleagues to ask questions, share their own personal feelings and experiences, and learn from each other.

The Challenge:

In a school setting, discussing issues of prejudice, discrimination, and oppression can be intimidating. You may have concerns that by bringing these topics up, especially as they relate to your students, you do more harm than good. It may seem like you are opening a can of worms or that you might lose control, with challenging student responses, potentially angry parents and unsupportive school leadership.

Try This:

- Reflect on your school climate and culture with colleagues, paying close attention to the experience of LGBT students of color at your school and how institutional oppression and individual acts of bias and prejudice may impact them.
- Talk about anti-LGBT bias, racism and other forms of oppression with students in your school. Ask open ended questions in the classroom, allowing students to share their thoughts and personalize their feelings and experiences.
- Develop discussion groups with other staff in your school where you can talk about and work through questions of diversity, challenges regarding bias, and strategies for engagement.

¹LGBT students of color are defined as those students who identify as both having an LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning) and person of color identity. The term "person of color" is; 1) regarded as acceptable when groups or individuals use it to name themselves; 2) often refers to African-American/black, Latino/Hispanic, Native American/First Nation, Asian and Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern and people of mixed ancestry as people of color; 3) an expression in English usage for any nonwhite category.

AFFIRM COMPLEX IDENTITIES

The Need:

All students benefit from learning environments in which they are seen as a whole person, and where their various identities, experiences, abilities and needs are taken into account.

LGBT students of color, like all students, are not a monolithic group; they represent a diverse range of race, ethnicity, religion, community and culture. Even within a particular ethnic group, student experiences may vary widely. Also, LGBT students of color may feel conflicted about acknowledging all parts of themselves and struggle in their efforts to combine their racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, sexual and gender identities.

The Challenge:

The identities and needs of LGBT students of color vary widely depending on their environmental context (access to resources, experiences affirmation/discrimination, sources of support, etc.). You may be unfamiliar with the nuances of your students' racial, ethnic, religious, cultural sexual and gender identities. Additionally, you may feel that you lack the resources to meet the needs of such a diverse population.

Try This:

- Step out of the “box” and search out opportunities to experience cultures, traditions, and communities different than your own. Take on the task of becoming culturally aware. Work to recognize and challenge your own personal biases and misconceptions.
- Learn from your students and their families. Ask questions about their cultures, traditions, communities, experiences, and feelings to ensure that your behavior is respectful and inclusive. At the same time, ensure that these conversations do not tokenize or place the full burden of explanation on students and their families.
- Acknowledge the fact that each student comes with a unique personal story and set of experiences. Seek to affirm each aspect of their identity and model a way in which they can do the same for themselves.

¹Meyer, I.H. (2010). Identity, Stress, and Resilience in Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals of Color. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 38 (3), 442-454.

²Positive Youth Development (PYD) is an area of research, a modality of practice and a framework of perspective which posits that when youth are engaged from their strengths they build the necessary skill for a healthy transition into adulthood. For more information, visit: http://www.actforouryouth.net/youth_development/development/

SUPPORT STUDENT RESILIENCE

The Need:

LGBT students of color face multiple forms of oppression in their daily lives, based on their real or perceived racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, sexual and gender identities. Because of these experiences and learned coping skills from family and community, one study finds that LGB students are often more resilient when faced with adversity than their white LGB counterparts. LGBT students of color need educators who recognize and affirm all parts of their identity and the internal resilience and resources they possess.

The Challenge:

Despite common misconceptions, LGBT students of color, as with LGBT students in general, do not necessarily need counseling or therapy, but instead opportunities and encouragement to build upon their existing internal resilience factors, coping strategies and leadership skills. Supports that are developed should be strengths-based and informed by Positive Youth Development³ approaches.

While LGBT students of color are often targeted for their real or perceived identities, many are capable of being quite strong in the face of adversity. As an educator, it can be difficult to find a balance between intervention (protecting/saving) and empowerment (affirming/encouraging).²

Try This:

- Assess the extent to which LGBT students of color engage in extra-curricular activities. Encourage your LGBT students of color to take on leadership roles within the school, including student government, sports, and other extra-curricular activities.
- Expose your students to the lives and stories of LGBT people of color who may serve as role models by including them in curriculum, school presentations and displays.
- Be a faculty sponsor for your school's GSA, diversity club and/or other student-led groups.
- When a student confides in you about their identity, thank them, listen to their story and ask if/how you can help. When a student comes forward to report bullying, intervene immediately.

INTERVENE AND PREVENT

The Need:

LGBT students of color, and all students, deserve learning environments that are safe and affirming. They may face bullying and harassment at school based on a number of factors relating to their multiple identities. It is not unusual for LGBT students of color to be the targets of racist and homophobic/transphobic acts. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that LGBT and non-LGBT students of color are disproportionately impacted by criminalization and harmful policing practices.^{4,5,6} Only safe and supportive environments provide opportunities for students to achieve at their highest potential. You must be prepared to intervene appropriately when bias-based incidents occur and take proactive steps to create and sustain a healthy and respectful school environment.

The Challenge:

If you are like most school staff, you have many responsibilities and never enough time to focus solely on any single one. Test scores, standards, IEPs and other systemic factors can make it hard enough to focus on academic learning, let alone school climate. Adding the need for culturally responsive intervention and prevention strategies can seem like an additional and impossible challenge.

Try This:

- When you witness bias-based behavior of any kind, stop it and name it.
- Consider the ways your school's intervention policies and practices impact LGBT students of color.
- Work to support efforts to replace Zero-Tolerance policies with those that allow for nuance, education and growth, such as restorative practices or positive behavioral interventions and supports.⁷ Apply these practices to your interaction with students.

⁴Stout, Brett G., Michelle Fine, and Madeline Fox. "Growing Up Policed in the Age of Aggressive Policing Policies." *New York Law School Law Review* 56 (2011): 1331-370. Print.

⁵Grant, Jaime M., Lisa A. Mottet, Justin Tanis, Jack Harrison, Jody L. Herman, and Mara Keisling. *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2011.

⁶Rios, Victor M. "The Hyper-Criminalization of Black and Latino Male Youth in the Era of Mass Incarceration." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 8, no. 2 (2006): 40-54.

⁷For more information, please view: http://www.dignityinschools.org/sites/default/files/Creating_Positive_Discipline_Fact_Sheet.pdf

PARTNER WITH EXTERNAL RESOURCES

The Need:

While your school has the obligation to serve each student as comprehensively as possible, it may not be possible to provide the entire social-emotional supports to LGBT students of color within the school environment. You should know which outside agencies to refer LGBT students of color to for support that cannot be offered within your school and you should know when it is appropriate.

The Challenge:

Referring students to an outside agency for support can be a challenge, especially if you are unfamiliar with the services offered within your community, or their culture and/or language. You may also face resistance from school leadership.

Try This:

- If a student expresses the need for support within a racial/ethnic/religious community that you may not share, reach out to colleagues and/or community leaders of a similar identity. Invite them to be a source of affirmation and support to the student.
- Reach out to the school counselor, school social worker and other school staff who are familiar with youth service agencies and can assist you in making a referral.
- Contact your local LGBT center and ask for specific programs aimed at reaching the community your student belongs to.