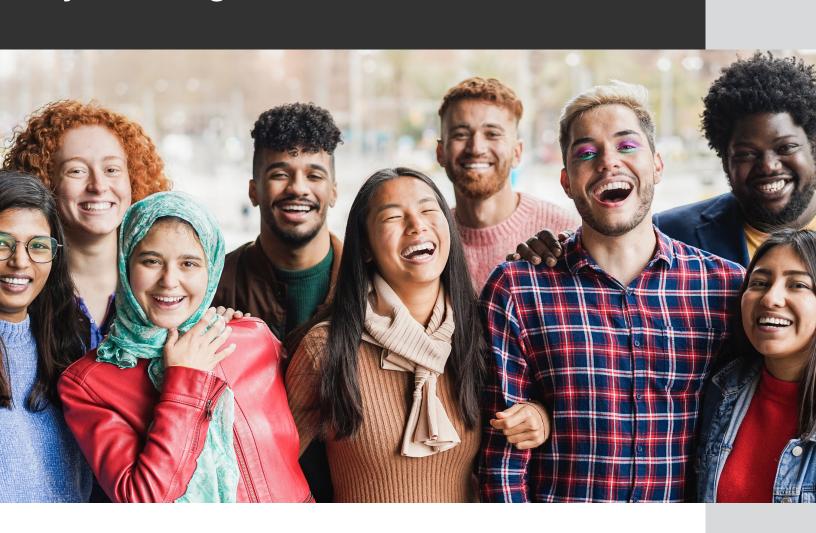# CREATING AFFIRMING CLASSROOMS FOR LGBTQ STUDENTS OF COLOR

By James Bridgeforth, Ph.D.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Bridgeforth, Ph.D.
Author

James C. Bridgeforth is an educator, researcher, and policy advocate. He has extensive experience collaborating with practitioners and conducting equity-focused, policy-oriented educational research. Drawing on his professional experiences across K-12 and higher education contexts, his nationally recognized scholarship critically examines issues of racism, power, leadership, and learning in K-12 schools. James holds a PhD in Urban Education Policy (University of Southern California '23), an MEd in Educational Administration and Policy (University of Georgia '17), and a B.A. in Political Science and Sociology (Georgia College & State University '13).

ABOUT THE SERIES

This practice brief is one of eight in a series of resources published by USC Race and Equity Center for every K-12 school and teacher education program across America. Guidance is offered to educators who are serious about achieving equitable learning conditions and outcomes for students, families, and teachers of color, despite increasing public scrutiny, executive gag orders, and legislative censorship. Each brief introduces research, practical examples, reflective questions, and useful strategies for educators advancing racial equity.

Creating Affirming Classrooms for LGBTQ Students of Color

As of June 6, 2023, the Center for Public Integrity noted that more than 550 anti-transgender bills have been filed across almost every state in the United States (Garnand, 2023). According to the American Civil Liberties Union, at least 235 bills specifically targeting LGBTQ+ identifying staff and students in education have been filed by state legislators during the 2023 legislative session (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.). While not all of these bills will ultimately become law, the bills are illustrative of the broader current sociopolitical context, including at the local level. Following the elections of politically conservative school board members, K-12 school districts across the nation have sought to ban LGBTQ pride flags from school buildings, to remove books containing LGBTQ stories from libraries, and to force teachers to potentially out trans students through parental notification policies.

The Trevor Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting LGBTQ youth, found that the cumulative nature of these debates and policies have had a negative effect on the mental health of LGBTQ youth (Sylvester, 2023). It is important to note that the impacts of these more recent legislative attacks on LGBTQ communities come as LGBTQ youth of color have long reported negative experiences in schools due to the confluence of racism and homophobia (Brockenbrough, 2016; Diaz & Kosciw, 2009).

Although these data paint a bleak picture of the enduring nature of marginalization in schools and the unique challenges that LGBTQ youth of color continue to face, opportunities for educators to develop and maintain LGBTQ affirming educational spaces still remain. This brief offers key strategies and practices that can be utilized by educators to cultivate classrooms centered on affirming queer youth of color.

Expand Awareness of the Breadth of LGBTQ Narratives and Experiences

As previously written, the negative experiences of LGBTQ youth of color in schools are well documented in the existing literature. Even as narratives of violence, exclusion, and harm remain prevalent (and real) in schools, it is also important for educators to recognize that these narratives are not the only experiences for LGBTQ youth of color. Rather, queer youth of color live dynamic, multifaceted lives full of rich experiences that also deserve to be told (Reid, 2022).

For example, Fields et al. (2014) describe the Beyond Bullying Project as an opportunity to "solicit and share stories beyond victimization and bullying and to provoke new ways of understanding LGBTQ sexualities in schools" (p. 81). This project invited queer and non-queer youth, teachers, and staff to share anonymous stories regarding LGBTQ experiences, whether the experiences were personal or anecdotal. By leaving the prompt anonymous and open to interpretation, the research team offered an opportunity for participants to shape their own narratives and understandings of queerness, rather than have the only stories of queerness

be those of violence, loss, and marginalization. Providing opportunities similar to the Beyond Bullying Project are important because they have the capacity to elevate the power of storytelling and counternarratives. These opportunities may be especially useful in school contexts where intentional misunderstandings and misinterpretations of queerness are most prevalent.

The importance of expanding narratives of queer histories and experiences in society is particularly important for queer youth of color, who already regularly experience racialized exclusion of nuanced narratives of people of color in coursework and curricula (King & Woodson, 2017; Kohli et al., 2017; Paris, 2012). Reid (2023) explains that this phenomenon occurs even when LGBTQ inclusive curricula are offered, as curricular materials predictably center White-normative narratives and experiences. Engaging in storytelling allows participants to expand, complicate, and affirm various versions of new understandings of queer experiences, while simultaneously creating new possibilities for connection and belonging that are counter to predominant modes of exclusion in schools (e.g., lack of LGBTQ representation in curricula, limited queer affinity spaces).

Questions for Consideration

1 Critically reflect on your own knowledge of LGBTQ narratives in society. What are the predominant stories that emerge for you?

  a. Where did they come from?

  b. Are they deficit-oriented and focused on struggle?

  c. Whose experiences are represented and whose are missing?

Consider where you might go to deepen your own expertise.

2 As a teacher or teacher educator, how might you design opportunities to expand understandings of LGBTQ histories and futures within the school community? Do any opportunities currently exist within course syllabi or curricula? Are there community partners who could be helpful in developing this work?

Consider Queer Culturally Responsive Pedagogies in Informal Education

Similar to teaching about race and racism in schools, both in-service and pre-service teachers recognize that teacher preparation programs often leave them unprepared to meaningfully engage with students around LGBTQ histories and issues (Dykes & Delport, 2018). For example, Schneider and Dimito (2008) observed that 82% of teachers reported extremely limited formal engagement with LGBTQ issues during their teacher preparation program. Given that most educator preparation programs, as currently structured, are unlikely to provide opportunities for teachers to learn about LGBTQ-affirming pedagogies, it may be helpful for educators to learn about queer culturally responsive pedagogies outside of formal educational spaces.
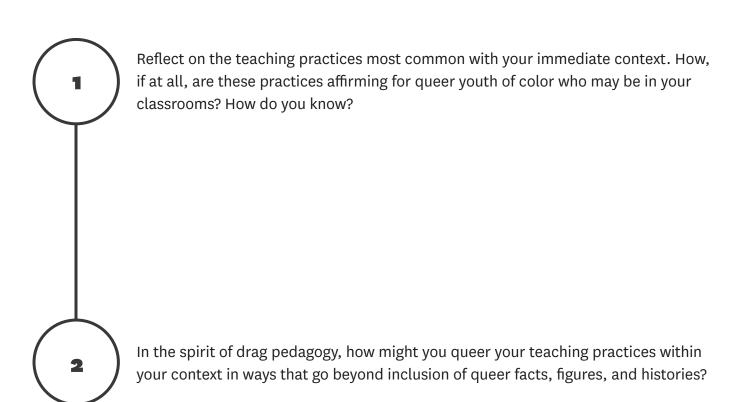
Reid (2023) explains that scholars have previously argued that queer youth of color "are sometimes better served in community-based organizations and out-of-school programs that do not have to adhere to the same pressures and mandates that are present in traditional schooling spaces" (p. 108). This framing is important for several reasons. First, it allows for a more expansive understanding of where and how learning can occur. Second, it honors queer of color legacies of innovation in creating spaces outside of the norms of heterosexuality. Lastly, it acknowledges the reality that even in the most progressive political contexts, teachers in formal school settings may be limited in their autonomy as compared to nontraditional educational settings.

Researchers Keenan and Hot Mess (2020) offer drag pedagogy as a framework that moves beyond traditional inclusion of LGBTQ heroes and icons toward a "model for learning not simply about queer lives, but how to live queerly" (p. 444). Drag pedagogy, as practiced during Drag Queen Story Hours, offers an opportunity for queer and non-queer youth to counter restrictive, heteronormative practices through broadening understandings of the

world as it has been presented to them and the possibilities that they might imagine for themselves.

Similarly, Brockenbrough's (2016) foundational work on culturally responsive pedagogy for Black and Latinx queer youth provides key insights into how educators might learn to support and affirm queer youth of color from the lessons demonstrated in nontraditional educational spaces. Brockenbrough (2016) details how a youth of color-focused HIV/AIDS prevention nonprofit used a culturally responsive practice of developing health education workshops that empowered youth and affirmed their racialized realities, rather than using shame to force behavioral changes. In another example, a volunteer at the nonprofit engaged youth as collaborators in co-developing HIV/AIDS prevention curricula specifically geared toward other queer youth of color. Lastly, the nonprofit intentionally and authentically embraced Ballroom, a culture grounded in Black and Latinx queer and trans systems of support and belonging. Nonprofit leaders, some of whom were also active in Ballroom culture, recognized the importance of validating youth's ways of knowing and being through "culturally recognizable modes of care that extended into parental-like commitments to nurture youth" (Brockenbrough, 2016, p. 186).

Questions for Consideration

1 Reflect on the teaching practices most common with your immediate context. How, if at all, are these practices affirming for queer youth of color who may be in your classrooms? How do you know?

2 In the spirit of drag pedagogy, how might you queer your teaching practices within your context in ways that go beyond inclusion of queer facts, figures, and histories?

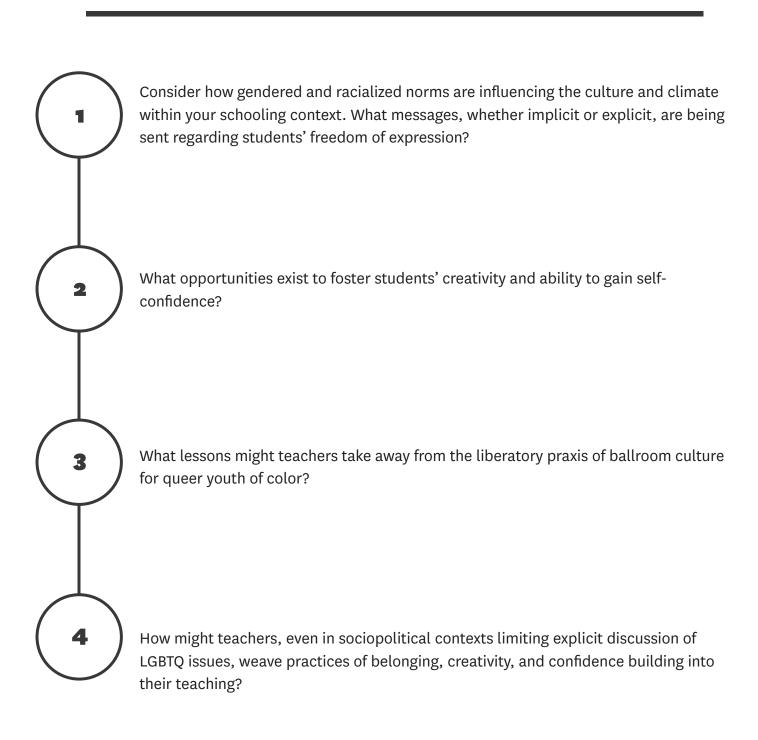# Expand Affirming Spaces & Systems of Belonging for Queer Youth of Color

Scholars have long explained that one of the purposes of formal education is cultural reproduction, whereby schooling practices perpetuate normative ideals in society (Keenan, 2017). Creating affirming classrooms for LGBTQ students of color requires educators to intentionally foster educational spaces that are responsive to students' expressed needs and provide opportunities for positive, agentic expression. In theory, cultural affinity groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) could serve as protective, affirming spaces for LGBTQ students who describe their schooling experiences as restrictive or uninviting (Day et al., 2020; Poteat et al., 2017). However, we also know that GSAs have been described as unwelcoming for queer students of color (Baams & Russell, 2021). This can lead queer students of color to feel isolated as they attempt to navigate potential dangers within their schools by limiting the range of their self-expression.

In particular, Reid (2022) explains that Black LGBTQ students described school as "a confining space that required them to pour their agentive energy into suppressing their LGBTQ+ identities as a means of protecting themselves from discrimination" (p.11). Yet this same group of students described Ballroom spaces as liberatory. One participant shared:

> Seeing how liberated everybody in ballroom was did something to me. It just made me more comfortable within myself, and say, I gotta be me! In ballroom we don't conform. The culture is based off being true to oneself. Where you have systems and school systems that are more like, follow this and you'll succeed. So, it's, like, the structure's totally different where almost as school is too controlled whereas ballroom is like, let things be, you know. Like let them bloom on their own, and ballroom is the light. The sunlight I mean.

Relatedly, Reid (2022) identifies confidence building and creativity as key factors in what makes ballroom culture affirming and agentic for queer youth of color. Ballroom, then, becomes a counter-space allowing queer youth of color to experience psychological safety, take risks, be themselves, in opposition to the scripted, restrictive experience of traditional schooling.

Questions for Consideration

1 Consider how gendered and racialized norms are influencing the culture and climate within your schooling context. What messages, whether implicit or explicit, are being sent regarding students' freedom of expression?

2 What opportunities exist to foster students' creativity and ability to gain self-confidence?

3 What lessons might teachers take away from the liberatory praxis of ballroom culture for queer youth of color?

4 How might teachers, even in sociopolitical contexts limiting explicit discussion of LGBTQ issues, weave practices of belonging, creativity, and confidence building into their teaching?

This brief draws on the burgeoning empirical literature that details how educators can meaningfully support LGBTQ students of color throughout their educational journeys. Importantly, these strategies and recommendations are grounded in the lived experiences of LGBTQ youth of color and the nuances that exist as they continue to craft ways forward that both acknowledge the challenges that they face and the possibilities for justice and liberation (Reid, 2023).

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Shaun Harper and John Pascarella,
Project Directors

Shaun Harper, Ph.D.
Founder and Executive Director,
USC Race and Equity Center
Provost Professor of Education and Business
Clifford and Betty Allen Chair in Urban Leadership
sharper@usc.edu

John Pascarella, Ph.D.
Chief Academic Officer,
USC Race and Equity Center
Professor of Clinical Education
pascarel@usc.edu

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