

RADICAL LOVE IN A TIME OF HETERONORMATIVITY: Radical Love in a time of Heteronormativity: Glee, Gaga and Getting Better

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Abstract

Media coverage of LGBT teen bullying and suicides portrays a national crisis. If students “read the world” (Freire, 1998, p. 76) around them, they understand a world that often does not bother to recognize their humanity, and worse, vilifies them. Freire imagines a different way, one where “progressive education. . . must never eradicate the learner’s sense of pride and self worth” (Freire, 2004, p. 8). At the essence of many of Freire’s writings was the idea of our collective humanity in the classroom and as we re-imagined the world together. It is here where radical love becomes a powerful force within education.

In the absence of meaningful and “safe” learning spaces for queer students, we maintain that alternate curricula, those within the realm of popular culture offer possibilities of resistance to these dangerous climates. As Giroux and Simon (1988) write, “popular culture is appropriated by students and helps authorize their voices and experiences while pedagogy authorizes the voices of the adult world, the world of teachers and administrators” (p. 11). The intersection of the student and adult worlds offers a pop culture pedagogy, a tool for alternative learning and a site of resistance. This intersection reveals a significant impact on societal views, ultimately leading to advocacy and action. While there are many examples of these sites of resistance, for the purposes of this piece, we focus on three: the television series, *Glee*, the music and advocacy work of Lady Gaga, and the It Gets Better project.

Keywords: cultural studies, queer studies, popular culture, Freire, radical love, *Glee*, It Gets Better, critical pedagogy, Lady Gaga

It's impossible to talk of respect for students for the dignity that is in the process of coming to be, for the identities that are in the process of construction, without taking into consideration the conditions in which they are living and the importance of the knowledge derived from their life experience, which they bring with them to school (Freire, 1998, p. 62)

Paulo Freire's idea of understanding students in their "process of coming to be" offers a vision of school as a place of acceptance. Who we are matters. Our experiences matter. His desire to recognize the whole student remains a cornerstone to radical love, accepting individuality and difference. Unfortunately, for many students, Freire's vision does not match their day-to-day realities at school, nor their realities at home. This is particularly palpable for LGBT youth as they face assimilation into heteronormative environments, often compromising their safety and resulting in ridicule, humiliation, injury, or death.

Media coverage of LGBT teen bullying and suicides portrays a national crisis. While some schools choose to enact no-tolerance policies on bullying behavior of any kind, it is the social curriculum of heteronormativity that gives freedom to bullies. If students "read the world" (Freire, 1998, p. 76) around them, they understand a world that often does not bother to recognize their humanity, and worse, vilifies them. Freire imagines a different way, one where "progressive education. . . must never eradicate the learner's sense of pride and self worth" (Freire, 2004, p. 8). At the essence of many of Freire's writings was the idea of our collective humanity in the classroom and as we re-imagined the world together. It is here where radical love becomes a powerful force within education, an "armed love" (Darder, 2002, p. 31). Schools have offered LGBT students limited "safe spaces," even so far as to designate physical spaces with a decal. However well-intentioned these designated spaces may be, shouldn't all spaces be safe? Achieving this safety within schools requires a radical pedagogy, one that works through "how genuine the struggle is and how possible change is" (Freire, 1992, p. 19).

Such a pedagogy often emerges from sources located outside of the traditional curriculum. Pop culture offers alternatives and represents sites of resistance for LGBT youth. Giroux and Simon (1988) write, ". . . popular culture represents not only a contradictory terrain of struggle, but also a significant pedagogical site that raises important questions about the elements that organize the basis of students, subjectivity and experience" (p. 11). This piece will examine three examples of popular culture as "significant pedagogical sites," serving as evidence of a radical love towards LGBT students in isolation, struggle, and crisis, ultimately moving towards a humanizing experience for all students and influencing advocacy for a change in school climates.

In a Gay, Lesbian Educational Support Network (GLESN) 2013 National School Climate Survey, nearly six in ten LGBT students reported feeling unsafe because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw et al., p. 11). As Letts and Sears

(1999) argue, “although homosexuality is more open in our culture, the timidity of curriculum developers and the lure of the closet mean that today’s queer youth still experience the feeling of being ‘the only one in the world’” (p. 3). The GLESN report portrays a bleak picture of school climates for LGBT students. Students are subject to both verbal and physical assault and homophobic remarks from classmates, and many are not permitted to research or write on assignments related to LGBT topics (Kosciw et al., p. 39). These actions continue to marginalize LGBT students, fostering a dangerous environment, one of isolation. As one student interviewed in the GLESN report remarks, “I really want to come out. Hiding feels terrible, but I’m afraid. It would be really helpful if my school could be more supportive of LGBT students. No one at my school is out, so I feel like I’m really alone” (Kosciw et al., 2013, p. 50).

It must be passionate teachers and students who will disrupt these practices and structures designed to marginalize those outside of the dominant culture. Indeed, “. . . schools are significant sites of struggle and . . . teachers, who embrace an ethical responsibility as citizens and subjects of history, are in an ideal position to collectively fight for the reinvention of the world” (Darder, 2002, p. 31). This “reinvention of the world” begins with the teacher as a passionate being, one engaged in a critical pedagogy that transcends the current realities. The work of Paulo Freire offers a pedagogy of possibility and hope. For Freire (1998), hope allows for imagination and an opportunity to envision what our world could be; indeed, “hope is an essential component and not an intruder” in our existence (p. 69).

The classroom should be the place where the fire of hope is first sparked and students can see the possibility of a changed world before them. Unfortunately, this spark is often extinguished by a system designed to maintain a dominant order, one where the lived experiences of students and teachers remain silenced and forced to assimilate. Difference is not celebrated; instead students often feel marginalized, and, as H. Mark Krank and Stanley Steiner (2000) write, “embedded in academic cultures for which they are unable to find personal referents” (p. xii).

This feeling of isolation is particularly palpable for LGBT students. As Gerald Walton (2005) explains, “The implicit ‘rule’ that students should be heterosexual and are to conduct themselves as such in school environments becomes glaringly obvious when some students adopt expressions of gender non-conformity or ‘come out’ as gay, lesbian or bisexual” (p. 26). Students are consistently subjected to a heteronormative meta-dialogue, one intolerant of any deviation. Such a heterosexist framework feeds very real and sustained threats. While anti-bullying campaigns permeate school systems around the United States, the message is clear that “school cultures of heterosexuality, to the exclusion of other positionalities, remain entrenched” (Walton, 2005, p. 28).

Changing these circumstances requires an examination of school climates. Dominant culture “norms” infiltrate classrooms, leaving many students subject to experience both the prescribed and the hidden curricula. It is through a radical love that these circumstances must change, offering students a sense of community, hope and possibility. To begin, we must be awake and aware to the world around us. Freire (1998) stresses “. . . our being in the world is far more than just ‘being.’ It is a ‘presence,’ a ‘presence’ that is relational to the world and to others” (p. 25). Such a sense of “presence” means that who we are must be accounted for and recognized in the classroom. This means changing circumstances so that schools may create a true community. As Freire (1998) writes, it is the “. . . responsibility on the teacher, or more correctly on the school. . .to respect the kinds of knowledge socially constructed in communitarian praxis” (p. 36).

It is only through this “communitarian praxis” that co-created knowledge can become the centerpiece of school curricula. Indeed, “. . . educators, students and prospective teachers should together be conversant with other forms of knowledge that are seldom part of the curriculum” (Freire, 1998, p. 58). Other forms of knowledge must inform what we learn in the classroom revealing “the teacher is no longer the only knowledge base. Nor is the current knowledge base sufficient for teaching” (Bahruth & Steiner, 2000, p. 121). Curriculum is an active experience and not something that passively happens to students. For middle and high school students, perhaps the most meaningful curricula exist outside of the classroom. Often LGBT students do not recognize or see reflected in school curricula anything that has to do with their lives, experiences, or difficulties they may face at home, in the community, in the world. Indeed, as Linné (2006) writes,

. . . fewer schools actively include queer texts as part of the general classroom curriculum for all. Such selective censorship communicates the idea that while queer people may be tolerated in a private, individual way, the voices of young lesbians and gays are not truly honored as valuable contributors to our culture as a whole. (p. 260)

In the absence of meaningful and “safe” learning spaces for queer students, we maintain that alternate curricula, those within the realm of popular culture offer possibilities of resistance to these dangerous climates. If pop culture is a site of “significant pedagogy” (Giroux & Simon, 1988), it must permeate school environments, including teachers and students, ultimately disrupting heteronormative structures. As Giroux and Simon (1988) write, “popular culture is appropriated by students and helps authorize their voices and experiences while pedagogy authorizes the voices of the adult world, the world of teachers and administrators” (p. 11). The intersection of the student and adult worlds offers a pop culture pedagogy, a tool for alternative learning and a site of resistance. This intersection reveals a significant impact on societal views, ultimately leading to advocacy and

action. While there are many examples of these sites of resistance, for the purposes of this piece, we focus on three: the television series, *Glee*, the music and advocacy work of Lady Gaga, and the It Gets Better project.

Glee

The television/musical phenomenon of *Glee* centers on members of the William McKinley High School glee club, New Directions. In the social hierarchy of McKinley, the Glee Club is a black hole; the yearbook photo of the Glee Club is regularly vandalized and club members are targets of hallway slushies. While *Glee* is replete with high school stereotypes such as jocks, cheerleaders, Goths and drama queens, it offers a poignant, yet significant portrayal of students' experiences. As Ryan Murphy, the show's creator, said, "It is about there being great joy to being different, and great pain" (as cited in Hedegaard, 2011, n.p.). Stereotypes are problematized in the Glee Club space as its membership blurs social boundaries between the popular students and others. In the beginning of the series, Kurt Hummel identifies as the only "out" gay student at McKinley. Navigating his identity in a heteronormative space is a daily reality for him. The arc of Kurt's character mirrors experiences many students face, allowing for an exploration of relationships with his father and peers, a discovering spaces of acceptance and identity, and a confronting the realities of oppression and bullies.

Burt Hummel, Kurt's father, is portrayed as a stereotyped "man's man," an auto mechanic with a love of beer and football. The opposite of his father in many ways, Kurt longs for approval, at times changing his own interests and choices for those deemed more socially acceptable within a heteronormative context: donning denim coveralls to work with his dad and joining the football team, to name a few. Kurt's need for acceptance is something with which all of us, especially middle and high school students, could identify. In *Preggers* (1.4), Kurt comes out to his father, who acknowledges he has always known and says, "If that's who you are, there's nothing I can do about it and I love you just as much." Burt's acceptance of Kurt in *Glee's* initial episodes reveals his simultaneous feelings of support and uneasiness. This tension offers a space for growth between father and son as they navigate their relationship.

It is at the end of the first season where we see a distinct disruption of dominant culture in a confrontation between Burt and Finn Hudson (his future stepson). Finn Hudson, the quarterback of the football team embodies the heteronormative culture found in high school. He is one of the most popular students at McKinley, despite his membership in New Directions. Through many of the earlier episodes, Finn is uncomfortable with Kurt, especially upon discovering Kurt's crush on him. This feeling intensifies when their parents decide to co-habitate, thereby making roommates out of Finn and Kurt. In *Theatricality* (1.20), Finn openly expresses his discomfort with this living situation, telling Kurt, "Why

is it so hard for you to understand? I don't want to get dressed in front of you. . . . I don't want to have to worry about that stuff in my own room."

Ultimately, this exchange escalates into a verbal attack on their newly designed room, planned by Kurt as a way to welcome Finn. Finn calls the pillows and lamps "faggy," falling into a heterosexist, yet socially acceptable high school vernacular. Visibly stung by this slur, Kurt is silent. Overhearing this exchange, Burt confronts Finn in the following scene:

Burt Hummel: What did you just call him? You used that word, you are talking about him. . . . You start seeing the hate in people's hearts, even the best people. You use the N-word?

Finn Hudson: Of course not.

Burt Hummel: How about retard? You call that nice girl on the Cheerios retard?

Finn: No! Becky's my friend. She's got Down Syndrome. I'd never call her that.

Burt Hummel: It's OK to come in my house and say 'faggy'?

Finn Hudson: I didn't mean it like that.

Burt Hummel: I know what you meant. What? You think I didn't use that word when I was your age? You know some kid got clocked in practice, we'd tell him to stop being such a fag and just shake it off. We meant it exactly the way you meant it. That being gay is wrong, like its some kind of punishable offense. I really thought you were different, Finn. You know I thought that being in Glee Club and being raised by your mom, that you were some new generation who thinks differently, who came into the world knowing what its taken me years of struggling to figure out. I guess I was wrong. This is our home. He is my son. Out in the world, you do what you want, but not under my roof. (1.20)

The power of this exchange cannot be underestimated. Burt Hummel, in an act to protect his son, offers acceptance and understanding of difference, reflecting Freire's (1998) words, "nothing can justify the degradation of human beings. Nothing." (p. 93). This dialogue named oppression and offered a space of resistance, a rejection of LGBT-focused slurs as a matter of fact. In that moment, *Glee* offered thousands of viewers an example of hope and acceptance from a parent, of confronting the language of bullies and hate—an act of love, an act of social justice. While he is supported at home, however, Kurt, like many students, struggles to find this acceptance at school. He forms close friendships with some of the *Glee* students, but often feels alone. This sense of isolation is compounded by the routine bullying in the hallways. Kurt's one "safe space" is in the choir room with the *Glee* Club reinforcing the reality described by Hackford-Peer (2010) that

“queer-affirming spaces within the schools exist, but the school in its entirety is not understood to be queer-affirming, or even safe” (p. 550). Within this space, *Glee* portrays another level of acceptance by Kurt’s peers. For example, at the wedding of Kurt’s father to Finn’s mother, Finn sings “Just the Way you Are” to Kurt as an apology for past issues (Furt, 2.8). He brings him to the dance floor and dances with him and other club members surround the couple. This scene created a space, a community where students could re-imagine their realities and dreams. As one blogger commented on this scene:

In this case, it sent the message to both gay kids and straight kids, that this is the world someone wants for them. Whether or not it will ever come true, someone out there wants you to live in a world of total love and acceptance. It may never happen, but the dream of it is powerful and again, we can’t imagine what it would have been like for us, for countless other people who grew up gay, to have someone offer us that dream when we were young. Cheesey? Unapologetically. Preachy? You’re damn right, especially since no one else on TV is preaching this particular sermon in this manner. (<http://tomandlorenzo2.blogspot.com/2010/11/glee-s2e8-furt.html>).

Glee names this world and offers it as a possibility; within a Freirian framework, viewers are able to “read the world” from an accessible and inviting example.

Where *Glee* portrays radical love and possibility, it also shares the realities faced by many LGBT youth in middle and high school grades. Kurt is a target of homophobia. However loving and accepting feelings come from *Glee* Club friendships, Kurt cannot escape the daily threats and physical violence from football player Dave Karofsky. As the intimidation escalates against Kurt, the male members of *Glee* Club (all football players) confront Karofsky and demand an end to the bullying. Ultimately, their straight, male privilege fails as their physical confrontations with the bully (and the remaining football players) result in black eyes, bruises, and imposed confinement in a portable toilet. Ironically, when Kurt does stand up to Karofsky, Karofsky responds by kissing Kurt. Revealing the bully as LGBT addresses issues of identity for Karofsky’s character, leaving us to wonder if his own self-hate manifests as terrorizing Kurt and, we also wonder about his own isolation in a heteronormative environment.

Glee continues to explore areas of difference, not all with positive outcomes. One character, Santana, explores her sexuality with men and women, ultimately coming out to her grandmother who shuns her. Unique Adams is a transgender student looking for acceptance within McKinley High School. In a recent episode, the football coach reveals her gender dysphoria and her plans to transition from a woman to a man saying, “This is not about who I want to go to bed with; its about who I want to go to bed as” (Jagged Little Tapestry, 6.3). The impact of these storylines cannot be underestimated. For some LGBT youth, as Linné

(2006) writes, “they may not know any openly gay individuals of experience close contact with a lesbian or gay household. The world for many youth questioning their sexuality or working through the coming-out process remains a very isolated and isolating place “ (p. 259). Access to a television program offers a glimpse at a representation of difference, of an opportunity to see oneself on television, to identify with a community, perhaps feeling a sense of belonging for the first time.

Glee is an important element in the pop culture curriculum as it troubles the heteronormative environment of McKinley High School, reflected in thousands of high schools across the country. Glee portrays spaces for resistance and love, a space for LGBT students to see a character on television who may be like them, questioning, exploring and afraid. While Glee disrupts the normative boundaries on television, Kurt and others cannot escape the reality that many queer teens face: pockets of resistance do not allow for a blanket acceptance, nor for safety.

Lady Gaga

Lady Gaga, a pop culture phenomenon, creates community through her music and social advocacy. She is often recognized for her controversial outfits and theatrical performances, calling her fans “little monsters.” Her actions and music are unapologetically political and she has confronted issues such as the “Don’t ask Don’t tell” policy in the military as well as immigration rights. Perhaps her most significant advocacy work is in empowerment of youth to combat bullying and find self-acceptance. Her advocacy begins in her music, where her fans receive messages of love, courage and validation of who they are.

Her 2011 single “Born This Way” reinforces this message of acceptance. Excerpts of the lyrics include:

I’m beautiful in my way
 ‘Cause God makes no mistakes
 I’m on the right track, baby
 I was born this way
 Don’t hide yourself in regret
 Just love yourself and you’re set
 I’m on the right track, baby
 I was born this way

Don’t be a drag, just be a queen
 Whether you’re broke or evergreen
 You’re black, white, beige, chola descent
 You’re Lebanese, you’re orient
 Whether life’s disabilities
 Left you outcast, bullied, or teased

Rejoice and love yourself today
 ‘cause baby you were born this way

No matter gay, straight, or bi,
 Lesbian, transgendered life,
 I’m on the right track baby,
 I was born to survive.
 No matter black, white or beige
 Chola or orient made,
 I’m on the right track baby,
 I was born to be brave.
 (Lady Gaga, 2011)

Her message is clear to youth—who you are matters; you are not a mistake. For LGBT youth and others suffering from isolation and bullying, this song is a powerful anthem, a celebration of acceptance. She names differences and offers a message that some students will not encounter at school or at home. Even at the risk of alienating potential fans, revenue, and success, Lady Gaga is authentic with her word, “utilizing certain basic contradictions” to “pose this existential, concrete, present situation to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response—not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of action” (Freire, 1997). Her status as a pop star brings the discussion outside of intellectual discourse and into a realm of action. Her art evolved to advocacy.

In 2012, Lady Gaga and her mother entered this realm of action by founding the Born this Way Foundation, an organization dedicated to youth empowerment, safety, and social justice. The Foundation’s mission is “We believe that everyone has the right to feel safe, to be empowered and to make a difference in the world. Together we will move towards acceptance, bravery and love” (www.bornthiswayfoundation.org). This online community is yet another example of radical love, of a shared community offering resources, a space to share personal stories and ways to get involved towards changing the dominant culture. The Foundation’s three pillars of safety, skills, and opportunity offer opportunities for students to be directly involved in the work of organizing and advocacy around youth empowerment. Through the creation of this foundation and its online presence, Gaga offers validation to youth, listening to them and their struggles while also understanding they are the change agents in the transformation of their environments.

Her fame affords her a platform to bring attention to the issues of love and acceptance for LGBT youth and others. Also significant is the Foundation’s partnership with Harvard University and its Berkman Center for Internet and Society, representing an intersection of youth and adult pedagogies. Youth look to her

for acceptance and to be acknowledged. Not only does this foundation put them at the center of the dialogue, she pursued her agenda to the mainstream of a very traditional institutional culture in Harvard University. Often considered on the “fringe,” Lady Gaga blurs the lines between these two cultures, focusing attention on changing school environments, supporting students and institutional research endeavors to prevent teen suicides and violence against others, and creating a changed landscape.

Using the terrain of pop culture and celebrity to advocate for change in schools, Lady Gaga brings attention to the treatment of LGBT students, acknowledging their struggles and offering hope for a “kinder and braver world” (www.bornthiswayfoundation.org). Lady Gaga uses her platform and community of fans, her “little monsters,” to work towards youth empowerment and safety—towards acceptance. The creation of this Foundation and online community makes real the lyrics in her song “I was born to be brave,” particularly as students form a community, understanding Freire’s words, “The struggle for hope is permanent, and it becomes intensified when one realizes it is not a solitary struggle” (1997, p. 106)

It Gets Better

Glee and Lady Gaga’s work are just two examples of alternative curriculum for youth, opportunities to locate both resistance and hope. The It Gets Better Project, a community of video testimonials offering hope and encouragement for LGBT individuals, takes these messages and creates community. Founded in fall of 2010 after many published reports of gay teen suicides, Dan Savage, a syndicated columnist, decided to create a space for the sharing of experiences and stories of others who have words of encouragement for LGBT youth. Prior to the Project’s founding, Savage was often invited to speak at colleges and universities about his own experiences as a gay male, but not at middle and high schools. In a 2010 interview with the *New York Times*, Savage stated, “I would never get permission” to speak to that age group because there are “parents, preachers and teachers who believe they can terrorize gay children out of being gay as they grow up” (as cited in Stelter, 2010). However, this is precisely the age where students need to see examples of others who have rejected conformity to a heteronormative practice and environment.

The It Gets Better Project directly addresses and creates a community of acceptance, guidance, and radical love. Videos include pieces from celebrities and pop culture icons, but the majority are posted by non-celebrities, “regular” individuals from around the world, some sharing their personal stories and others offering words of encouragement all the while creating resistance to the hegemony of a heterosexist culture. What may have appeared to be on the fringe is also becoming more mainstream with the inclusion of videos from the President of

the United States and Google staff members. The Project offers a virtual space that transcends traditionally defined borders and boundaries found in educational settings and offers support where schools do not. Teens can access this site at any time, escaping the restrictive and very often dangerous environments leading to despair and isolation. Offering what is absent in other venues, the videos serve as a way to, Savage says,

. . . show your life and show your joy. That's what we kept saying to people. We want you to share your joy, not just your pain. They know it hurts. Share your joy, because a 15-year-old gay kid who kills himself, what he's saying is he can't picture a future with enough joy to compensate for the pain now. And I think that's very radical and revolutionary and subversive, not waiting for your permission anymore to talk to your kid and save your kid's life. We're going over your head, Mom and Dad. Over your head, bigoted school administrators. Over your head bigoted religious "leaders." We're going to talk to your kids and we're going to show them that what they're being told about being gay and lesbian or bi and trans is not true. (as cited in Corrigan, 2010)

The Project offers possibilities of a better future, of acceptance. Such possibilities are critical if we are to re-imagine our world, understanding "it is crucial that queer youth also have access to queer possibilities and futures so that they may flourish both in their current situations as well as assign their future participation in their communities as citizens" (Hackford-Pier, 2010, p.554). The community created by this project is an essential element of Freire's vision of radical love. The Project offers acceptance with its pledge:

Everyone deserves to be respected for who they are. I pledge to spread this message to my friends, family and neighbors. I'll speak up against hate and intolerance whenever I see it, at school and at work. I'll provide hope for lesbian, gay, bi, trans and other bullied teens by letting them know that "It Gets Better" (www.itgetsbetter.org).

These words offer an important foundation to share the vision of hope and possibilities for a changed world. Individuals speak without knowing who will watch, upload videos without knowing the impact of their experiences and their words. Such a community supports Freire's (2004) belief that ". . . one must take advantage of every opportunity to give testimony to one's commitment to the realization of a better world" (p. 8). Indeed, the It Gets Better Project offers a glimpse of what Lady Gaga and *Glee* offer—a praxis of radical love to re-imagine the world and current oppressive circumstances. This is not just for LGBT youth, but also to empower others, the bystanders in situations to cultivate an environment of safety.

While the Project does support Freire's notion of radical love and visions of hope, some critics have found the message impractical. As one blogger noted, "Youth need support to organize, not support to wait it out and hope it gets better. History has shown us it has only gotten better when we fight for it to be" (<http://www.southernersonnewground.org/2010/10/does-it-get-better-and-for-who/>).

However, as the Project's founder Dan Savage said,

This doesn't do everything so you shouldn't do it at all? Is that what the critics would have us do? Pull the whole site down because it doesn't solve the problem? Well you know, the breast cancer march didn't end breast cancer, right? Should we not have breast cancer awareness month and breast cancer marches? (as cited in Corrigan, 2010)

The Project's message of hope and possibility offers the foundations for spaces of resistance and creation. Classrooms and schools must become those spaces for students, to engage in knowledge creation to see their experiences and their identities reflected back to them in the academic and social curricula. The idea of getting better represents a dream of sorts; as Freire (2004) shares "dreams are visions for which one fights. Their realization cannot take place easily, without obstacles" (p. 32). These obstacles are there. However, this project recognizes the possibility of freedom and choice for the future, and the acknowledgement that LGBT adults experience these same situations; but in that recognition, we acknowledge the capacity for change, difference, and unity to actively work toward transformation.

Re-imagining educational spaces and the world

Unfortunately, those who believe in a society or a world with love and hope as the foundations for social change are often labeled as naïve and out of touch with reality. Michael Lerner (2006) criticizes this sense of "cynical realism" (p. 77) and cautions against the pervasive feelings of fear in our society:

We need to learn how to give each other the confidence to affirm publicly what we most deeply yearn for privately and to stand up against those who seek to humiliate anyone who wants to build a society based on [the] loving and compassionate teachings . . . (p. 28)

While schools can experiment with anti-bullying programs, they fail to problematize the heteronormative culture that permeates our classrooms. This is evident in Letts and Sears' (1999) argument when they state,

heterosexism and homophobia can be reduced through purposive intervention. Although most emphasis has been on bias reduction among college students and professionals, we must consider how to not instill, foster, or intensify these prejudices in the first place. ..queering elementary

education demands that we confront our prejudices inculcated through decades of heterosocialization. (p. 8)

If LGBT students do not see their experiences or their lives represented in the classroom and curriculum, they may remain marginalized, jeopardizing hope. bell hooks (2002) writes, “Despair is the greatest threat. When despair prevails we cannot create life-sustaining communities of resistance” (p. 12).

It is these “communities of resistance” that must be cultivated and nourished if true change is to happen. What does this mean in a re-imagined educational space? It places responsibility, as Freire (1998) writes, “on the teacher, or more correctly, on the school, not only to respect the kinds of knowledge socially constructed in communitarian praxis—discuss with the students the logic of these kinds of knowledge in relation to their contents” (p. 36). Schools must accept the experiences of students as valid and integral to learning. Elements of pop culture may form a pedagogy of possibility, one where students can not only feel safe, but also thrive. Our brief examination of *Glee*, Lady Gaga, and the It Gets Better project disrupt the dominant heterosexist culture and offer hope and possibility where a traditional curriculum may not. This alternate pedagogy reveals examples of Freire’s notion of radical love and critical hope. These are not naïve practices; indeed it is crucial if we are to re-imagine possibilities of a changed world. And while the examples from television characters, music lyrics, and advocacy may fall outside of the prescribed boundaries of a traditional curriculum and pedagogy, we must remember Giroux and Simon’s instruction that “Any practice which intentionally tries to influence the production of meaning is a pedagogical practice” (1988, p. 21).

Of course pop culture is not the sole solution to overcoming oppressive practices; however, it offers spaces and sites of resistance and hope for a changed future by becoming more mainstream, part of the fabric of schools and other environments. The advocacy and action spurred on by these cultural artifacts are acts of radical love, of changing what is, providing dignity to students and saving their lives. The 2013 GLESN study reveals LGBT students experience safer environments where schools have a supportive student club (such as a gay/straight alliance), a curriculum with positive representations of LGBT individuals and a staff trained to intervene to combat biased language and practices (Kosciw et al., p. 65). Even as the national conversation continues to move towards inclusion, sites of struggle remain. Advocacy found in television characters, pop stars and internet communities can make a difference.

These pop culture sites offer spaces of pedagogical resistance, of creating change in alternate spaces. *Glee*, Lady Gaga, and the It Gets Better project remain examples of radical love, of the notion of hope. Some may label popular culture as frivolous; however, these examples become sites of resistance, of spaces where being different is accepted, even defended. These examples create virtual spaces

and communities for youth. *Glee* portrays issues of bullying and of coming out. Lady Gaga takes music lyrics and her community and leads a foundation to eradicate bullying. It Gets Better offers acceptance and encouragement where there may be none. The heteronormative culture must be disrupted and shift towards one of love and hope. As Ramón Flecha (2013) writes, “Radical love is at the basis of the real transformation of education, societies and individuals. This will only be possible if critical educators dialogue with the people whose voices have been silenced, marginalized, disenfranchised” (p. 23). Perhaps pop culture can initiate these dialogues, offering LGBT youth and their allies a space for transformation, to being to respect all students in their process of “coming to be.”

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