NAGC SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP (SIG)

MISSION

We in NAGC's GLBTQ SIG dedicate ourselves to NAGC's openness, its support of marginalized groups, and its broad perspective. The SIG will be broadly open to those parents, educators, other professionals, and community leaders who stand behind gifted GLBTQ students, as these youth strive to do their best in a sometimes less-than-accepting world. Each day, we will embody NAGC's ongoing development of policies and practices that back widely-varied marginalized groups. Like NAGC, we will encourage research, staff development, advocacy, communication, and collaborative efforts on behalf of several groups, our gifted GLBTQ youth, other high-potential students, and the youth whom our students will encounter.

Welcome!

Terry Friedrichs, Ph.D., Ed.D., Coordinator, NAGC GLBTQ SIG

A Very Brief History of, and Challenge to Current Involvement in, GLBTQ Advocacy in NAGC

As we begin any great new endeavor, such as this NAGC GLBTQ SIG Newsletter, it is useful to see where we as a SIG have been. While there have long been persons concerned with sexual-minority youth in NAGC, it has only been since 1992 that there has been an organized effort on their behalf. That year featured an NAGC Special Populations Division session on the needs of gifted GLBT youth. In 1995, there was a standing-room-only, combined session of the NAGC Special Populations and Counseling/Guidance Divisions on these students. In 1998, through the initiative of GLBT members, NAGC adopted a nondiscrimination resolution within the organization, providing equity based on race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other aspects. It also empowered an NAGC-GLBT Task Force within NAGC to look into sexual-minority issues. (This group ran until about 2007.) The year 2011 saw the advent of a Special Interest Group -- the first official NAGC group which GLBTQ and Allied individuals actually ran themselves. The year 2014 witnessed SIG's members' well-received presentation to the NAGC Board on GLBTQ issues -- a session requested by NAGC's President.

The future is replete with challenges but also with possibilities for gifted GLBTQ youth and their supporters. While not all has been easy in NAGC for GLBTQ advocates, there has been unmistakable progress for a group that had started 22 years ago with a single convention session. In a more direct and powerful way than ever before, SIG members can assist long-standing GLBTQ efforts inside and outside NAGC. They can provide this assistance through the SIG's official committees. An outcome of committee participation is that members can (through the NAGC GLBTQ SIG Governance Committee, which makes the SIG run as smoothly as possible) spread helpful information about our students, their parents, and their educators, throughout the increasing numbers of networks and SIGs within NAGC. The Social Committee brings parents and educators together for celebration. The Advocacy Committee lifts high the banner of our students to an increasing number of state and national gifted organizations. We hope that you will read more about these committee opportunities elsewhere in this newsletter and that you will consider participating in them. You can take part by contacting me, as SIG Coordinator and Governance Chair, or by contacting the other relevant Committee Chairs, Teresa Manzella (Advocacy), Sue Fischer (Social), or PJ Sedillo (Communications). We very much look forward to seeing you and to encouraging your own significant historical contribution toward our SIG.

HEADLINE-WHAT'S NEW THAT'S NEWS FOR GIFTED?

The GLBTQ Special Interest Group will be meeting Thursday, November 13, 2014 from 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. at the NAGC Conference in Baltimore, Maryland.

Come meet your NAGC GLBTQ SIG officers and help our group’s movement within the NAGC. These leaders' bios are located on the second page of this newsletter. We will also be discussing how our Special Interest Group can move positively into the new year and beyond. Come join your fellow SIG members. They are an exciting group who support practices of equitable, sensitive treatment of GLBT youth and who recommend that educators demonstrate equity toward gifted GLBTQ students!
**NAGC SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP (SIG)**

ELECTED BOARD AND HIGHLIGHTED MEMBERS

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### NAGC GLBTQ SIG

We’re on the Web! [www.nagc.org](http://www.nagc.org)

Would you like to submit an item for the newsletter? Contact PJ Sedillo pjosedillo@nmhu.edu

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**YOUR COORDINATOR**

Terry Friedrichs, Ph.D., Ed.D.  
(612) 859-9676

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**TERRY FRIEDRICHSS**

Member Spotlight

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**YOUR SOCIAL SECRETARY**

**Sue Fischer, MA**

Sue taught in the public schools in Washington and Oregon for 30 years, mostly in elementary and middle schools. The last twenty years exclusively involved the gifted. At the same time, she was an adjunct in the Gifted Master’s program at Whitworth College.

After retiring from that job, she went to teach Math and Science Methods at Gonzaga University in Spokane. She retired again and moved to Maryland with her wife and is now coordinating gifted programs for Johns Hopkins School of Education on a part-time basis.

She currently has no children, nine cats, and four dogs. She enjoys gardening and reading. She provides Destination Immigration (DI) training, coordinates DI Science learning, and coordinates John’s Hopkins’ graduate gifted-education training program.

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**YOUR COMMUNICATION OFFICER**

**PJ Sedillo, Ph.D.**

PJ Sedillo, a native of Albuquerque, NM, received his BA degree in Elem. Ed. from NMHU, and his Masters and Ph.D. in Special Ed., with an emphasis in gifted, from UNM. He taught for the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) for 24 years and is currently an Assistant Professor of Special Education/Gifted at NMHU.

He is an “out” positive role model who has been an advocate for issues pertaining to human rights. In 1990, he attained job security for APS teachers with a non-discrimination policy for sexual-minority-inclusive that was written into all contracts. PJ and his spouse were married in 2001 in Canada and fought for full spousal benefits, which were obtained that year.

He has served on the Board of Directors of Common Bond as President and Communications Director and formed the APS GLBT Teacher Forum. As President of Albuquerque Pride, he also coordinated the Albuquerque GLBT Parade/Pridefest for 20 years.

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**YOUR ADVOCACY LIAISON**

**Teresa Ryan Manzella, MA**

Teresa is a Gifted Youth Coordinator, a Past President for Minnesota Mensa, and one of three founding members of the NAGC GLBTQ Special Interest Group. She is a member of the American Mensa National Gifted Youth Committee. Teresa is also a past member of the Maplewood, Minnesota Human Rights Commission.

Teresa holds a Master of Liberal Studies degree. Her focus has been on addressing the challenges facing youth who are gifted and GLBTQ. She has been published in the Virginia Association for the Gifted Newsletter, 2e: Twice Exceptional Newsletter, Parenting for High Potential, and Mensagenda.

For more information and resources specific to gifted GLBTQ children, please visit her website: [www.gsquaredyouthadvocate.com](http://www.gsquaredyouthadvocate.com)

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**Terry Friedrichs, PhD, EdD,** has spent 35 years as a teacher, youth group leader, and researcher for gifted GLBTQ youth in grades 7-12 and college, publishing 15 articles and chapters on these students’ artistic, creative, social, emotional, and academic needs. He offered the first gifted GLBTQ sessions in the histories of NAGC, AERA, CEC, and AEGUS in the early 1990s, and since then he has actively presented around the nation on meeting these youths’ home and school needs. He currently serves as NAGC’s GLBTQ Special Interest Group Coordinator.

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**Cabaret & Drag Bingo:**  
**A GLBTQ Extravaganza!**

**Friday, 11/14/14, 7-8:30 pm**

**Baltimore Hilton**

**Room—Holiday 1**

Have you ever attended the NAGC Convention, looking for something very different among the just “usually different?” Well, you’ve arrived at the right place! NAGC’s Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (GLBTQ) Special Interest Group (SIG) presents an evening of song, wit, and drag bingo, featuring performances from the Imperial Court of Washington, D.C. and from your Emcee from New Mexico, Miss Fontana DeVine. Other performers are from Old Mill High School’s GSA. Money raised from this event is slated to go to this local GSA in the Baltimore Area.

Don’t miss this  
**Celebration of Identity!**

Old Mill High School—GSA  
Imperial Court of Washington, D.C.

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**HIGHLIGHTED STORY**

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**Old Mill High School—GSA**  
**Imperial Court of Washington, D.C.**
NAGC Position Statement

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) periodically issues position statements and posts position papers that deal with issues, policies, and practices that have an impact on the education of gifted and talented students. Many educational groups, at the national, state, and local levels, are concerned about how best to meet the particular needs of students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT). NAGC, which has an organizational policy of non-discrimination toward GLBT persons, supports approaches involving equitable and sensitive treatment of GLBT youth. NAGC GLBTQ SIG and recommends that educators demonstrate understanding and equity toward gifted GLBT students in their schools. See the entire position statement at:


When it was first published in 2003, Kelly Huegel’s book on GLBTQ teens quickly became the indispensable resource for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning teens. This fully revised, updated edition retains all of the direct and practical advice of the original edition while providing a contemporary look at society and its growing acceptance of people who are GLBTQ. Included are updates on efforts to promote equality, including the current status of legislative initiatives concerning safe schools, marriage, equality, workplace non-discrimination, transgender expression, and Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. This book highlights issues-based information, and offers advice addressing coming out, prejudice, getting support, staying safe, making healthy choices, and thriving in school. This frank, sensitive book is written for young people who are beginning to question their sexual or gender identities, those who are ready to work for GLBTQ rights, and those who need advice, guidance, or reassurance that they are not alone.


Supporting Gifted LGBTQ College Students in Academically Competitive Environments

Patrick Lukingbeal & F. Richard Olenchak, Ph.D.
University of Houston, Department of Educational Psychology

Supporting gifted college students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) is critical for their long-term success and retention (Sanlo, 2004). While much research has been conducted to understand gifted students overall (Neumeister, 2004; Rinn, 2007), a limited number of studies have illuminated effective support strategies for the LGBTQ college population in an academically elite setting (Treat & Whittenberg, 2006). Recommendations will be outlined for campus community members, including approaches for the expansion of inclusive policies and services, and for the increased visibility of LGBTQ faculty and staff.

Early adulthood can be a period of significant change for any individual, and that axiom is exceptionally true for someone who is LGBTQ. It is during this period that an individual may begin to, or may continue to, explore his/her sexual orientation or gender identity (McAleavey, Castonguay, & Locke, 2011). “Coming out” can occur simultaneously as a person figures out how to live with a roommate, chooses an academic major, and determines the overall direction he/she wishes to pursue in adulthood. This period, while exciting, can also spark a significant number of stressors. From stigmatization, victimization, and cyberbullying, to social isolation, LGBTQ people face more societal stressors than do heterosexual people (King et al., 2003; King et al., 2008; McLaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, Xuan, & Conron, 2012; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011). Some research has shown that, while LGBTQ people with high ability may face isolation, depression, and even suicidal ideation, they seem to flourish through high achievement and through extreme involvement in extracurricular activities (Peterson & Rischar, 2000). In a college setting, this need for intellectual stimulation may be demonstrated through academic conquests or through leadership pursuits.

For LGBTQ students who are gifted and are concurrently enrolled at an academically elite university, a supportive environment is essential. Faculty, staff, and administrators can enact and advocate for a wide range of support mechanisms, all designed to create a more inclusive environment that will translate into increased student well-being. First and foremost is the need to establish a program for purposeful education, both for and with LGBTQ populations. Whether accomplished through some sort of “Safe Zone” training program or “visibility project” with campus professionals, normalizing LGBTQ people into the campus community will enhance the likelihood that these students will feel part of the larger university. Programs such as these identify LGBTQ people and their allies across a university campus in an effort to provide LGBTQ students a safe haven and people with whom to connect. Both authors have made it a point to be visible and active in their university and local communities around LGBTQ issues. This has been done by being visible at LGBTQ community events on-campus or by having their names publically listed in the campus newspaper and website as LGBTQ allies. This direct involvement has translated into increased student contact and relationship-building.

From a campus perspective, university-wide pro-LGBTQ policies should be considered—from non-discrimination policies, to same-sex partner benefits, to policies supporting gender-neutral facilities and healthcare for transgender students. The more visible the advocacy work, the more welcome LGBTQ students are likely to feel. Inside the classroom, educators can weave LGBTQ themes into coursework and lecture topics. In addition, faculty can use inclusive language and pronouns for students who identify as transgender.

For campus administrators and student affairs personnel, creating welcoming support services should be a priority. Knowing that academically elite institutions often contain high-stress environments, campus counseling centers should be prepared to meet students’ scholastic demands and to address all different types of identities. Students may wish to discuss these identities with counselors when they are under academic pressure or other stress. Stress should be channeled into healthy activities and away from high-risk behaviors, such as binge drinking or risky sexual activity. Research has often shown that LGBTQ individuals can be more at-risk for such dangerous behaviors (King et al., 2003). As a result, campus professionals should be prepared to help students navigate whatever challenges they are struggling with at the time.

Academic and career advising areas that can also be helpful. For some people, their sexual orientations or gender identities may not play a role in their pre- or post-graduate plans, but for others they may. On one end, their academic interests may drive them into LGBTQ-related work, in which they can be completely open about their identities. On the other end, some students may find themselves in career fields where they are scared to be open about their identities, due to lack of workplace protections or because of fear of retaliation.

Finally, research such as that of Peterson and Rischar (2000) has shown that gifted LGBTQ students will frequently seek out high levels of involvement on their campus. Through a sense of connectedness, they may choose to engage in many university activities, including student government, new-student orientation, or peer mentoring. Both as a social outlet and as professional development, these engagements can bring forth a sense of pride. Enhanced pride through university involvement was the case for the first author. He found that connecting with both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ peers was an important transitional step to experiencing a fuller identity within a university setting. His involvement exposed him to many new surroundings and opportunities. Administrators should welcome the talents and skills of LGBTQ people in all of these extracurricular activities, since those assets bring with them a long list of immediate and long-term benefits to the entire university community.

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CONTINUED—Supporting Gifted LGBTQ College Students in Academically Competitive Environments

Individual or group mentoring can also play a significant role in supporting the development of LGBTQ-identified students. Connecting students to faculty and staff who share sexual orientations or gender identities provides the student with important personal and professional guidance. Mentoring has been shown to increase self-confidence, self-esteem, and personal growth; and has led to a better understanding of career advancement (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). Many sexual-minority students need growth in these areas (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004; Higgins, 2001; King et al., 2009). In high-stress academic environments, an LGBTQ mentor may help gifted students to focus on their research aspirations, career planning, and mid-career growth.

These recommendations should simply serve as a starting point. It should be the ongoing responsibility of all campus community members to uplift and support LGBTQ students, whether they have high abilities or not. Through intentional advocacy and education, real change can be made upon these existing recommendations, campus leaders can rest assured that they are creating welcoming, inclusive, and successful environments for sexual-minority students.

References


Patrick Lukingbeal serves as the Director of the Wellness Center at the University of Houston. He is also a third-year Ph.D. student in the Educational Psychology and Individual Differences Program at the University of Houston, specializing in higher education. His areas of focus include college student well-being and wellness, and he enjoys educating around topics such as sexual violence prevention and mental health. Previous to his role, he has served in student affairs capacities at Rice University, Georgetown University, and Texas A&M University.

F. Richard Olenchak serves as Associate Provost for Faculty Development and Faculty Affairs at the University of Houston (UH). A former NAGC President, he previously served as a department chair at two different universities, as a professor and researcher, as director of a research center, as a research associate at a state department of education, as a principal, as a director of gifted programs in two school districts, and as a teacher. Despite the complexities of his current university administrative role, he continues to teach, work with over a dozen doctoral students, and study a variety of topics associated with giftedness and talent development. Most recently, he has launched the new UH Center for Faculty Engagement and Development and the new Cougar Chairs Leadership Academy, both of which target talent development among UH Faculty.
Resources for GLBTQ Youth - Compiled by Teresa Ryan Manzella

ON THE WEB:
MN Perpich School for the Arts (http://www.mcae.k12.mn.us/index.php)
This public high school provides special opportunities for students dedicated to artistic (music, dance, visual arts, theater) endeavors. It is open only to Minnesota residents, but this site will provide many viewers with ideas for approaching their states’ education-focused legislators about starting an arts school.

The Trevor Project (http://www.thetrevorproject.org/)
The Trevor Project is the leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth. Often, artistically talented people are more sensitive to the world around them, and need to connect with people who have things in common. The site features a moderated chat room, where GLBTQ youth can connect in a space free from cyberbullies.

Quatrefoil Library: Coming Out Resources (https://www.qlibrary.org/reading-list/coming-out-resources/)
The library offers reading lists and has a search function that enables readers both to review books of potential interest and to request them at local libraries. There is also a link to a database of scholarly articles that might be helpful. However, membership is required to access this list.

G-Squared Youth Advocate (http://gsquaredyouthadvocate.com/index.html)
This site (established 2014) offers information and resources for gifted GLBTQ youth and the adults who care about them. Though not specifically geared toward artistically talented youth, this site might serve as a point of departure in researching related issues.

IN PRINT:
In her memoir, Brown explicates her life’s journey as a gifted, queer female author, emphasizing the importance of being true to one’s self, and the necessity of developing resiliency to counter discriminatory attitudes. This book is developmentally appropriate for young adult readers, and free from explicit material.

Covering issues from abusive relationships to youth resources, Huegel answers many of the common (and some not-so-common) questions that arise for GLBTQ teens, providing them with tools to advocate for themselves and to keep themselves healthy.

Teresa Ryan Manzella is Gifted Youth Coordinator and Past President for Minnesota Mensa, one of three founding members of the NAGC GLBTQ Special Interest Group, and a member of the American Mensa National Gifted Youth Committee. She is also a past member of the Maplewood, MN Human Rights Commission. She holds a Master of Liberal Studies degree, the focus of which addresses the challenges facing youth who are gifted and GLBTQ. For more information and resources specific to gifted-GLBTQ kids, please visit her website: www.gsquaredyouthadvocate.com.
Pas de Deux: Gifted and Gay Dancers—by Becky Whittenburg

There has long been an assumption in society that male dancers, especially ballet dancers, are predominantly gay. In a survey conducted by Dance Magazine (as cited in Hamilton, 1999), more than 50 percent of male respondents self-identified as gay. Northwestern University psychologist Michael Bailey’s studies (1998-2004) confirmed those findings. “There’s no obvious reason why sexual orientation should be associated with how masculine or feminine one is, but it is in our species. And it probably has to do with the causes of sexual orientation and early effects of hormones on the brain,” said Bailey, who studied human sexuality for several years. Sexual orientation is something people are born with, and this orientation makes some gay men more feminine. Bailey surveyed professional dancers and found that half the men were gay.

Why? The NAGC GLBT Task Force, which studied critical issues surrounding gifted GLBT youth from 1999 to 2007, has acknowledged that this complex question warrants further investigation. In this article, I explore what it means for an art form to be associated with a particular sexual orientation, and how changes in perception may affect the art form and artists belonging to the genre.

Historically renowned dancers such as Diaghilev, Nijinsky, and Nureyev were, for their time, openly gay. Carson Cressley from a popular television show Queer Eye (for the Straight Guy) (2003-2007), once said, “Whether you work... as an artist or a singer or a dancer, those are all really creative places where gay people are embraced.” Dancer Meredith Rainey has said, “People talk about it (being a gay male). It’s no big deal, and as a matter of fact, it’s almost celebrated if you’re gay. So what if there are a lot of gay men in dance? I think it’s a good thing.” In Understanding Creativity, Piirto (2004) asserts, “The point is not that there is a risk of homosexuality in being creative; the point is that following rigid sex-role stereotyping limits creativity.” Creativity is critically important in gifted education, so attitudes and fears that would impede the development of creativity in youth are antithetical to the aims of education.

Heterosexual dancers, in a field where the assumption is they are gay, are in the unusual position of defending, rationalizing, or at least explaining their straight sexual orientation. Zach Hench, a heterosexual Pennsylvania Ballet dancer, said the following in an interview on ABC News:

People assume that if you’re a male ballet dancer you’re gay. And I think it’s quite silly because let’s think about it: you work... as an artist or a singer or a dancer, those are all really creative places where gay people are embraced.

This defense mechanism was highlighted in The Turning Point, a film that garnered 11 Academy Award nominations. The character, Wayne, played by Tom Skerritt, is a former ballet dancer who admits years later that “he courted and impregnated (his then-wife) in order to prove to her and to himself that he was not gay” (Levy, 1977). Piirto says, “The presence of gays in many creative fields may represent the attitudes of creative people, who seem more tolerant of differences and more accepting of people whose beliefs and lifestyles differ.” Another important question posed by the NAGC GLBT Task Force is this: In these fields perceived to have high numbers of gifted, gay artists, is this higher representation because the environments are more welcoming of diverse sexual orientations or because there is something hard-wired in LGBT individuals that makes them more likely to have strengths in these artistic areas?

Another critically acclaimed dance film, Billy Elliot (2000), follows an eleven-year-old boy from a rough UK coal mining community who wins a spot (albeit against his reluctantly-supportive father’s wishes) at The Royal Ballet School. The film, which sets out to challenge the stereotype of male dancers as “poofs” (but falls somewhat short), ends not with Billy as a mainstream premier danseur but as a gender-bending lead in Matthew Bourne’s Swan Lake, which turns the traditional choreography on its head by casting men as the swans (among other alterations). A flood of less critically acclaimed, but still popular, teen dance films spotlights male dancers. They usher in the millennium with Center Stage (2000), Save the Last Dance (2001), Stomp the Yard (2007), and Dance Flick (2009), among others. In Nureyev: A Biography (1975), Percival reports that Rudolph Nureyev’s father did not want his son to become a dancer. The negativity of some parents, which has been documented in both fictional and biographical accounts, may be somewhat universal and intergenerational. Additionally, the complexity of families’ concerns increase when demographics such as ethnicity, religious faith, and geographic region, are considered. Such socio-cultural-based belief systems may account for a slower acceptance of male dancers and children pursuing dance study and career choices in some cultures than in others.
CONTINUED—Pas de Deux: Gifted and Gay Dancers

There have, however, been great strides made in dismantling stereotypes and calming anxieties among homophobic youth and their parents, especially in the areas of contemporary dance. Twelve-year-old Alfonso Ribeiro’s starring role in a 1984 Pepsi ad with Michael Jackson helped popularize breakdancing among boys, just as Jackson himself had popularized his signature moon walk among young men a few years prior. Girls only entered the world of breakdancing after boys had conquered the scene. Icons such as John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever (1977), Gregory Hines and Michael Baryshnikov in White Nights (1985), and various others helped open doors for male dancers in a wide range of styles. They made their particular characters’ orientations straight or ambiguous, thereby challenging the “dancer-as-gay-male” stereotype for dancers, just as Fred Astaire, Bill Robinson, and Gene Kelly had done in an earlier generation.

More recently, YouTube, music videos, and advertising have pushed male dancers even further into the popular-culture limelight. Some Levi’s ads (What could be more masculine than Levi’s jeans?) and the award-winning commercial series, The Gap (circa 2007), featured these wide-ranging elements: swing; hip-hop; choreographed martial arts; country line dancing; and modern ballet. Recently, contemporary iconic male dancers Will Kemp and Wade Robson were highlighted in ads that featured and targeted males. Current television shows, such as So You Think You Can Dance and Dancing with the Stars, have further mainstreamed the image of male dancers without making their orientation an issue.

Cultural change is a slow process and engages cross-generational currents. Riding the wave of change, there has been much made of boys-only dance classes (especially in ballet), which are taught by male role models who lead their young charges into the traditionally masculine aspects of dance, including pirouettes, jetés, variations, and lifts in pas de deux. Large schools including the prestigious School of American Ballet in New York City and the Pacific Northwest Ballet School in Seattle, as well as smaller dance schools in communities like Boulder, Colorado and Santa Monica, California, do not just recognize the great need for gifted male dancers to maintain the vibrancy of dance as an art form. They also initiate ways of making dance classes more inviting for emerging male talent.

While dance companies and schools willingly acknowledge that many male dancers are gay, they also challenge the misunderstanding that allowing one’s son to take dance classes will make him gay. They also tout the benefits (e.g., psychological, social-emotional, and physical) of dance for these children. Other outreach efforts target young children of color living in poverty. These efforts, which include Dance Chance in Seattle, Chicago, Atlanta, and Sydney, Australia, expose disadvantaged children to dance, allowing dormant talent to meet instruction and potentially flourish into artistic expertise.

Piirto (2004) states, “the creative home and school environment softens these stereotypes and expectations and children can come to understand that girls can be firefighters and boys can be ballet dancers.” Choreographer Kyle Abraham, a 2013 MacArthur Fellow, is known for transcending gender roles in his choreography (Chicago Dancing Festival blog, August 19, 2014). He states, “I generally don’t think about gender so much. I would hope that a woman could do anything a man can do, and a man could do anything a woman can do. And that anyone that wants to define themselves as anything other than those terms can do whatever they want to, too.”

It is not in dispute that a high percentage of male dancers are gay, and that dance offers a welcoming learning environment and career option for many gifted young artists who identify as gay. Increasingly, those who identify as straight, gay, or something altogether different, find that gender biases and roles are eroded, both within and outside the dance world. Through that erosion, many in the dance world have come to question archaic sexual orientation labels and look more broadly at matters of sexual orientation.
CONTINUED—Pas de Deux: Gifted and Gay Dancers

References


Becky Whittenburg is the Gifted Education Resource Specialist for the Boulder Valley School District. She has worked in the field of gifted education for 23 years and has been actively involved in issues of gifted/GLBTQ youth at the local, state, and national levels since the 1990s. She spent more than 20 years working in the dance field as an accompanist and is the parent of two children who became professional dancers.
The Hunted (and the Hunter): The Rise of Rob, a Depressed, Artistically-Gifted Gay Youth
Terence Paul Friedrichs, Ph.D., Ed.D.

Many Americans might hold stereotypical notions about gay males. However, my dissertation on four gifted gay and bisexual male adolescents at a state school for the arts (Friedrichs, 2005, 2007) actually revealed some differences, as well as similarities, in these students’ trait patterns, social and organizational barriers associated with those traits, solutions to those barriers, and outlooks for the pupils’ further prospects.

Each of these youth utilized the arts somewhat differently to deal with their challenges and their strengths. “Marco the Navigator,” a gifted dyslexic adolescent, used visual arts to steer gracefully around obstacles confronting his achievement and experience. “Jason, Shaper of Stones” created much social consternation (but also produced significant social progress) with performance art at his schools. “Carl the Field Wanderer” underachieved his ample potential, but began to achieve highly once he could explore varied and stimulating learning, leadership, and artistic opportunities, including the chance to indulge his love of drawing. Finally, “Rob the Hunter,” a searching (and hunted) high-potential, depressed student, was persecuted but was ultimately

inspired to confront his oppressive social circumstances through creative writing. The present article presents Rob’s particular intellectual, motivational, creative, and leadership traits. It also describes those gifted-, depression-, and gay-related social barriers that exacerbated his challenges, and explains workable solutions to his problems—or solutions that might have worked had they been implemented.

At about 5’4”, with short curly hair and a tight black t-shirt, Rob had, to all outward appearances, a seemingly inexhaustible well of energy. His hallmarks were his verbal gifts, emotional creative releases, and strong leadership ability among other GLBT youth. His active searching, however, often collided with strong human and institutional barriers, including anti-GLBT biases, harassment and violence, threats of segregated placements in Emotionally and Behaviorally Disordered (EBD) classrooms, and limited opportunities for creative writing and sexual minority leadership. He might have benefited from more-extensive classroom interactions with general education and gifted peers, from teacher protection, and from broader and deeper arts- and GLBT-related curricula. However, through his evolving self-realization beginning in high school, and through his move in college to a more GLBT- and arts-sensitive community in Chicago, his prospects have improved significantly.

Characteristics

Intellectually, Rob was an intense seeker of knowledge, as well as a creative writer with an ear for vocabulary, an eye for detail, and a hunger for reading and journaling. Haunted by years of daily anti-gay name-calling and physical abuse, his grades and his emotional well-being had been wounded by the young “hunters” (homophobes) at his school. But somehow, by his junior year, his dark moments had driven him toward bright, creative pathways. At the same time, he had developed special interests in reading about and discussing challenges that other school-aged GLBT victims and survivors had encountered. He aimed toward doing what he could, as a youthful leader, to help them.

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Emotionally, despite depression, Rob maintained the intellectual energy to be self-directed, vibrant, and even bouncy. Strong motivation was most apparent when he was surrounded by friends, by his involvement in anti-discrimination causes, and by his own self-reflective writing. Like James Baldwin (Weatherby, 1980), he also could be thoughtful about and sensitive to others' pain. Rob often dipped deeply into his depleted store of emotional energy, in fact, to reflect carefully before he wrote about his own and others' tragedies. Like many other sensitive gay or bisexual boys, he knew that he (and they) sometimes had plenty to be depressed about.

During Rob’s early teen years, his self-esteem collapsed when he was beaten by his classmates at school. Despite the school beatings, which were frequently accompanied by anti-gay epithets and occasionally done in public, his teachers did not call off the hunters. After one attack, during a well-attended high school football game, neither Rob’s principal nor the responding police officer even tried to interview the perpetrators or witnesses. Needless to say, Rob's depression increased, and he launched into attacks himself, making frequent, small cuts on his own wrists, one of which school personnel did not recognize as a sign of emotional distress.

Rob employed his creativity to escape those who hunted his body and sapped his spirit—or perhaps he did so simply just to grasp these hunters’ ways. Beginning in seventh grade, he painstakingly kept a journal, expressing insights on how it felt to be attacked. His journal, like those of other gifted students with emotional disorders, seemed to constitute his effort at self-preservation. It was an outlet for his private thoughts, which were publicly inexpressible because they would have led to further attacks. Rob’s journaling came to have a pre-professional purpose, too. He became so skilled at the writer's craft of “going to painful places” (a strength in many gifted GLBT youth) that he began to believe he might actually be good at writing. Despite his low self-esteem in other areas of life, he applied as a prospective writing major to Sky Blue’s highly selective State Arts High, and was admitted!

Once enrolled at State Arts—known widely both as a supportive site for creativity and an inspirational scene for self-assured GLBT youth—Rob became even more energized. Showing the resilience of many gifted youth with emotional challenges, he fearlessly sought out a leadership position in his new school's GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance). Slogging through marshes of local and national anti-GLBT biases, he helped to organize political activities that touted more GLBT-supportive laws. While adults kept quiet, Rob spoke up, fearlessly advocating in his home state for domestic-partner hospital visits and against the Defense of Marriage Act. However, without adult mentoring nurturing his ambitious and important efforts, Rob, like many bright young GLBT teens acting alone, was not always sure if he was organizing his fellow young seekers along the right path.

**Barriers**

As a young teen, Rob's high potential for leadership, creativity, and strengths were not at all clear. His ample vocabulary, keen social analysis, and constant carrying of books and journals did not endear him to his young male peers, some of whom had hunted him in grades 7 through 9. His sometimes-flowery language, similar to that of the young Oscar Wilde, made Rob fair game for homophobes. Peers’ taunting had exhausted this highly-aware young man at an early age. However, with his intermittent, adrenaline-fueled responses, he soon exhibited his passions for reading and creative writing.
CONTINUED—The Hunted (and the Hunter): The Rise of Rob, a Depressed, Artistically-Gifted Gay Youth

Unfortunately, Rob’s excellent abilities in language arts escaped gifted education authorities’ notice. Somewhat similarly, general education teachers, disturbed by Rob’s “there-then-gone” grade-point average, did not speak up for his strengths. They suggested, in fact, that Rob should be educated within the confines of an EBD school program, a special education placement especially poorly suited to him because EBD classes tend to place a primary philosophical emphasis on social-skills teaching rather than on grade-level academic instruction. (Advanced journaling or advanced literature can be especially rare in such settings.) Even more disconcertingly, EBD classes can sometimes have an atmosphere of persecution of gay youth, who may be viewed by EBD students as one of the few groups lower on the status scale than they themselves are. Fortunately, Rob stayed in mainstream classes, thereby avoiding the EBD room. Unfortunately, however, his intermittent bounciness still brought him ridicule as “gay” by peers.

Despite clear evidence that Rob’s self-esteem was declining and his depression was mounting, no adult fought back against the school-based name-calling. Not one teacher asked Rob what his wounds were about. His experience showed that, even in a state with gay-rights and hate-crimes laws, a gay youth could still endure multiple, blatant beatings laced with homophobic language. Rob learned well that such beatings could be ignored by authority figures, such as the school principal and the police. On other occasions, these figures could simply serve as “game wardens” who could choose to either restrict or approve the hunting of gay youth.

Rob’s safe, productive shelter from threats—that of creative writing—was disappointingly just a small portion of his junior high curriculum. Thus, despite his shining strengths in writing, Rob could not use those assets to lift himself to a different, more self-determined, and more positive state of mind. (He might have attained a more emotionally productive state through either multiple general-education writing courses or gifted-education language-arts classes.) Yet, later at State Arts, writing became a way by which Rob could establish a courageous, honest, artistic, and even gay identity. His developing identity gave certainty to his step and consistency to his life, just as the educational experiences of gay writers Baldwin and Wilde had motivated them to strive for both purpose and consistency in their writings and world views. (Admittedly, these writers’ efforts led to very different personal outcomes for them than Rob’s efforts did for him. Baldwin’s and Wilde’s struggles clearly ended up shaping them differently because of these writers’ rather fenced-in GLBT environments of 1950’s America and Victorian Britain.)

During his high school years, Rob took on an increasingly purposeful, self-assured role that demonstrated a moral dedication and strength that few other “hunted” students could easily take on—that of his school’s primary HIV/AIDS advocate. But as Rob moved to State Arts High School, ready for more thorough advocacy opportunities, he received just the same level of leadership opportunity as before. As he fought for GLBT partners’ legally sanctioned hospital visits and battled against the Defense of Marriage Act, Rob was left to himself to learn the new skill that he truly wished to acquire: to organize teens and adults outside his school. Without adult mentoring and correction, it was hard for him to find his way along the uncharted path of GLBT-teen activism. He, in fact, had gotten a bit lost. As a result, Rob took a hiatus from activism to devote his time to becoming an artist, a more widely-practiced area of endeavor that would offer him more job safety and security.

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Solutions

Rob might have benefited intellectually from more classroom contact with general education and gifted peers, motivationally from greater teacher protection from verbal tormentors, creatively from broader and deeper arts curricula, and in leadership from more-specialized GLBT and HIV/AIDS curricula. Intellectually, Rob was fortunate to remain within the more protective confines of the general classroom rather than to transfer to the more dangerous realm of special education. Being in the regular classroom gave him more time to engage in stimulating curriculum, and to receive more positive teacher comments regarding his oral language skills, insightful analyses, and bibliophilic inclinations. He was lucky to have escaped EBD classes, which for him were very possibly danger zones swarming with homophobic slings and arrows. However, Rob might have become even more empowered if, like other gifted youth with significant peer conflicts, he had been assigned to classes with advanced students. In those classes, there tended to be less anti-gay language, as well as more challenge. Whether in general or gifted classes, Rob could have benefitted from less homework as he tried to conserve depleted energy. He could have used time saved on homework to energize himself for things he enjoyed, such as journaling and reading. He might have also been granted course credit for knowledge attained outside of class. Intellectually isolated from (but nonetheless sensitive to) adults, he surely also could have benefitted from hearing at least one teacher come to the defense of GLBT people.

As GLBT students do nationally (GLSEN, 2008), the highly-sensitive yet heavily-scrutinized Rob also desperately needed teachers to clamp down on the verbal ridicule that filled his schools’ halls. As Rob found out, anti-GLBT name calling, when unchecked, often escalates to more violent treatment, even in supposedly GLBT-protective schools, cities, and states. He obviously needed to feel that he had the same administrative and police protection that all youth, majority and minority, are supposed to experience (GLSEN, 2008). Lacking that protection, like Oscar Wilde at Oxford, Rob declined to report his persecutors for fear that the system would defend the guilty, rather than protect the victim. As with other gifted EBD and high-potential GLBT youth, Rob sank deeper and deeper into depression, both over his fate and over his school system's hypocrisies.

As a creative person concerned with far more than just physical safety or occasional despondency, Rob could have benefited from broader and deeper arts curricula in junior high, particularly in his specialty of creative writing. Such curricula could have bolstered him as he shared his depression (and his eventually liberated feelings), and as he strove to have students and educators more thoroughly support his artistic and gay identities. In gifted education writing classes, he also could have learned advanced autobiographical writing skills. These competencies would have allowed him to traverse far beyond the usual “sharing” and self-awareness competencies of autobiographies into the far more enlightening realms of self-definition and self-creation.

Finally, at the arts high school Rob could have benefited from more-advanced leadership opportunities in GLBT and HIV/AIDS advocacy. These opportunities seemed to be where his newly self-assured heart resided. State Arts staff could have at least guided Rob toward relevant leadership opportunities in other high schools and community agencies. (Youth at some national gay teen drop-in centers had already exercised such leadership.) With opportunities of this kind, Rob could have moved—in a developmentally healthy fashion—beyond merely acknowledging his gay identity toward the more advanced goals of embracing his own cultural group and of increasing his advocacy for them.
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Current Status and Future Prospects

After graduation from State Arts, Rob headed for an art-and-design college in Chicago. From an intellectual standpoint, the school was a good match. It valued not only art and design, but also the spoken word, outside reading, insightful journaling, and use of all these skills for social justice, such as GLBT advocacy. He was applauded for his verbal skills and his gay-related leadership competencies, and was not criticized and made to hide. He could obtain coursework for mainstream classes or at-home projects. Similarly, he could choose to be a part of the school mainstream or to fade into the background of Chicago’s large GLBT community.

Rob’s motivation was fed by Chicago, with its high energy and its many social justice causes in which to become involved. With his self-direction, he could easily become a part of any number of racially diverse, GLBT, or HIV/AIDS projects. He no longer faced as many minute-by-minute, soul-sapping discriminatory barriers as he had once encountered in his early high school years. He had been able to move from an arts school with a high percentage of gay students to an apartment in Chicago’s Wrigleyville (known to some in the GLBT community as “Boys Town”). At his college, sexual-minority creations as well as GLBT artists were promoted. Further, in his neighborhood, the police were consistently on the lookout for anti-gay violence.

Creatively, Rob could share his private thoughts more openly, frequently, and decisively in his new college. No longer were his language arts and social studies courses just about other people’s stories: they were now about his very own journaling, short stories, and reflective pieces on contemporary social issues. He could even work on autobiographical pieces in which he could craft solutions to society’s homophobia by devising solutions for his own life.

In Chicago, Rob found no lack of scandals to which he could contribute his leadership skills. Yet, for so many years, he had reacted to so many pressing needs that he now felt he needed to, and could, rest for a while. At State Arts, he lacked the advanced mentoring he needed to progress in GLBT and AIDS advocacy. However, in Chicago, there was no scarcity of mentoring available. Rather, there was an abundance of people to seek out his particular skills so that those competencies would be tapped. He was happy to know that, if and when he became active in Chicago, he would have an almost endless number of GLBT and HIV/AIDS causes in which to become involved.

Conclusion

Of all the subjects in my dissertation, Rob most closely embodied the struggles against harassment and for dignity that so many gay men from previous generations faced. Unfortunately, these are the same struggles that so many gay youth today still encounter in many areas of our country. Because of evolving community mores about GLBTQ people, and also because of his sheer self-determination to survive and thrive. Rob was successfully able to battle both homophobic forces and self-doubt. In doing so, he grew scholastically, motivationally, creatively, and in leadership. Despite external and internal struggles, Rob attained impressive achievement— and a pervasive sense of grace— that should hold him in good stead for the remainder of his courageous life.
CONTINUED—The Hunted (and the Hunter): The Rise of Rob, a Depressed, Artistically-Gifted Gay Youth

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