Creating Safe Space:
LGBTQ Singers in the Choral Classroom

#ChoirIsSafe

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Tyler Clementi
"Please don't be sad, it's for the better. The life I would've lived isn't worth living in...because I'm transgender. I feel like a girl trapped in a boy's body, and I've felt that way ever since I was four. I never knew there was a word for that feeling...I just continued to do traditionally 'boyish' things to try to fit in."
Because we are educators and mentors, we care about teaching and teaching is about loving and caring for singers/students.
“I think a lot of the times, people in choral environments don't talk about LGBTQ+ issues because they think, ‘It’s performing arts. So many people are gay in this industry that if you're in any kind of performing art, naturally you're accepting.’ But the truth is that not everyone is. And if you assume that people are accepting just because they're into performing arts, that makes it difficult to move forward and create a safe space because everyone is assuming acceptance and therefore no one is talking...
Not only that, by not making clear it's a safe space, people also continue to believe a lot of stereotypes in the industry (especially with males) (...) If teachers in middle school and high school were more open about their acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals, not only would it create a safe space but it would create a gateway to help disband stereotypes.”
Assumptions:

Singers need openness.
Singers need dialogue.
Singers need love and acceptance.
Singers need community.
We believe…

• Arts participation creates safe space for all kinds of students.
  – In fact, six of ten LGBTQ students report being members of high school music ensembles (GLSEN, 2011).

• Many choral directors care deeply about creating safe space.

• We should all want our singers to feel safer.

• We don’t always know exactly what to do, so…

• We decided to let the students tell us.
Survey Method

- Survey of collegiate singers who self-identify as LGBTQ.
- $N = 1,123$
- Explored their perceived levels of safety and support within their secondary school choral programs.
Terms

• L = Lesbian
• G = Gay
• B = Bisexual
• T = Trans* (Transgender)
• Q = Queer/Questioning

• 1,123 valid responses in total
Terms & Demographics

• Orientation (who one is attracted to)
  – Gay (442 respondents)
  – Bisexual (351 respondents)
  – Lesbian (115 respondents)
  – Straight (7, but still LGBTQ)
  – Not listed (147)
• Gender Identity and Gender Expression
  – Binary: Male/Female, inherently limiting
It's a girl. What is cisgender???

A simple explanation is that if you identify with the gender you were assigned at birth, you are cis.

Cis comes from Latin and means 'on this side of'. For example: cis-atlantic ~ this side of the Atlantic. Cis is also used in chemistry.

By using cisgender to describe the gender of those who are not trans, we break down structures that posit cis individuals as "normal", when neither is more "normal" than the other.

Pearly
Terms

• Gender Identity and Gender Expression
  – **Trans**: includes transgender, gender non-conforming, gender-questioning, etc.
  – **133** of our respondents express gender in ways that are outside the traditional gender binary (11.84%).
Terms

• Much of this is based on gender norms and gender roles.
Survey Gender Options

- Cisgender female
- Cisgender male
- Transgender
  - Intersex
- Gender Non-conforming
  - Questioning
  - Not Listed
SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS: WHAT WE ASKED AND WHAT THEY SAID
• Did you experience bullying/harassment by peers during activities sponsored by the choral department (e.g., rehearsals, concerts, tours, etc.)?  
  – 22% said yes.

• Were you bullied or harassed by choral peers while outside of the choral environment (at lunch, after school, between classes)?  
  – 37% said yes.
Safe Space

• But...only 19% of respondents actually disclosed their LGBTQ identity to a choral teacher while in secondary school.
• This means that, however many LGBTQ students are “out” to us, there are likely more than double that number in our choirs.
The Middle School Choral Experience

• Did your middle school choral teacher(s) have rules prohibiting hate speech toward LGBTQ people?
  – 57% said no

• Did you have a middle school choral teacher who openly encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people while teaching their classes?
  – 21% said yes
The Middle School Choral Experience

• Would you suggest that a questioning student at your junior high/middle school confide in the choral teacher?
  – 68% said no
The Middle School Choral Experience

• **30%** describe the choir room (the physical space) as a place where they felt safe as an LGBTQ student in junior high or middle school.
The Middle School Choral Experience

• “My middle school choir director always challenged our ways of thinking, taught us that there were many types of love, and encouraged us to accept others.”

• “Middle school was hell. People harassed me verbally and made me feel like I was broken.”
The High School Choral Experience

• Did your high school choral teacher(s) have rules prohibiting hate speech toward LGBTQ people?
  – 51% said no.

• Did you have a high school choral teacher who openly encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people while teaching their classes?
  – 52% said yes.
The High School Choral Experience

• **48%** felt safe expressing their LGBTQ identity within their high school choral programs.
• **65%** describe the choir room (the physical space) as a place where they felt safe as an LGBTQ student in high school.
The High School Choral Experience

• Would you suggest that a questioning student at your high school confide in the choral teacher?
  – 53% said they would not

• 44% report their high school choral teacher openly discouraging hate speech directed toward LGTBQ people.
Quotes from Survey Respondents

• “While the accepting atmosphere created by the students was amazing, it would have been reinforced by open acknowledgement and encouragement from our instructor.”

• “Bisexual women fly under the radar a lot. At that time, I assumed that I was wrong for feeling that way and I tried continually to change. So I never felt safe as an LGBTQ student in any respect.”
Quotes from Survey Respondents

“The people happened to be very accepting and open to the idea of LGBTQ students. Our director would read us segments called ‘This I Believe.’ These were writings submitted by students and read out loud anonymously to the class. Sometimes the topic of LGBTQ acceptance came up in a ‘This I Believe,’ which perhaps helped people express themselves or their experiences in a safe manner.”
• 11.84% (133 respondents) express their gender in ways that are outside the bounds of the traditional gender binary.

• Gender non-conforming, trans*, and gender-questioning respondents felt less safe than their other LGBTQ peers.
The director was great, but he was not educated in the area of gender issues.

Allow students to audition for solos regardless of gender definitions in the lyrics.
• “I think we could have talked about professional dress and not have had rules about ‘for men’ or ‘for women.’ People should be able to dress professionally without their gender expression being called out. A trans* woman singing in the men’s concert choir should not be forced to wear a tuxedo if that attire does not express her gender identity.”

• “I hated having to wear the dress. If you want a standard (i.e. gender specific) uniform, allow the singers to choose which one they wear.”
“A trope that has become standard choral parlance is referring to TB voices as ‘men’ and SA voices as ‘women.’ As a trans* person singing in a choir, this makes me feel awkward and uncomfortable. I sing in a section of men, but I am not a man and I don’t want to be called one. This misgendering [sic] has diminished and disregarded my identity in many facets of life. I would encourage choral teachers to abandon this vernacular.”
WHAT CONDUCTOR-TEACHERS CAN DO TO SUPPORT LGBTQ STUDENTS
“There was a blanket ‘no bullying/zero tolerance policy’ with no specifics. Talk about the issue. Generally, if people don’t talk about it, I assume they won’t be friendly toward us.”
POST A RULE OR POLICY REGARDING HATE SPEECH, BULLYING, OR HARASSMENT IN A PROMINENT PLACE. SPECIFICALLY INCLUDE SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER IDENTITY, AND GENDER EXPRESSION IN A LIST OF PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS.
Tim Estberg, New Trier High School [Illinois]

“If any student feels that our classroom is in any way uncomfortable, he or she is strongly encouraged to speak with me as soon as possible. Together, we will create an environment in which each of us can grow and learn in a safe place for everyone, regardless of gender, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation, class, level, or physical or mental ability.”
“One time in our select women’s choir, we were singing a love ballad and he was trying to get us to feel the music better. He said ‘Just imagine how you feel when you’re with that person you love. Think about how much you feel about that guy, or girl, or whomever you love. Just imagine the emotions.’ For him to not go to that automatic, hetero-normative idea of girls liking guys almost made me cry. I felt so safe there.”
WE CAN ALL SAY THINGS THAT ENCOURAGE AN ATMOSPHERE OF INCLUSIVITY.

This includes honoring the chosen names, pronouns, and attire choices of trans* students. A respectful, open dialogue about voice part assignment may be necessary.
“Our teacher had a no-tolerance policy and let us know that she had gay friends.”

“One of my high school choral teachers had a gay son.”

“My high school choir director was gay and tried to make sure we didn’t go through what he did.”
IF POSSIBLE, COME OUT TO YOUR STUDENTS...AS LGBTQ OR AS AN ALLY.
“It might sound silly, but the safe space sticker makes all the difference in the world. Even if you don’t talk about it, knowing your teacher won’t tolerate hate makes a world of emotional difference.”
POST “SAFE SPACE” STICKERS OR SIGNS OUTSIDE ALL ENTRANCES TO YOUR CLASSROOM
POST A PHOTO OF YOUR SAFE SPACE STICKER USING #CHOIRISSAFE ON FACEBOOK, TWITTER, INSTAGRAM, ETC.
“When a piece by a queer composer is done, or if the text is written by someone queer, mention it. Show queer youth that, yes, this beautiful work was written by someone who is queer. Allow their dreams to be as infinite and indestructible as non-queer kids.”
MENTION WHEN COMPOSERS ARE LGBTQ. THIS CAN BE AS ROUTINE AS MENTIONING WHEN COMPOSERS ARE WOMEN, AFRO-AMERICAN, ASIAN, IRISH, ETC.
MAKE AN IT GETS BETTER VIDEO. IF POSSIBLE, HAVE YOUR CHORUS MAKE ONE TO SUPPORT LGBTQ STUDENTS. LET YOUR STUDENTS KNOW THAT THE VIDEO IS POSTED ON ITGETSBETTER.ORG.
INCREASINGLY, CHORAL PROGRAMS WILL DISCOVER THE NEED TO EXAMINE REQUIREMENTS MANDATING GENDER-SPECIFIC CONCERT ATTIRE.
CHORAL DIRECTORS SHOULD HAVE A PLAN FOR WHAT TO DO WITH TRANS* SINGERS WHO WANT TO SING A VOICE PART THAT MATCHES THEIR GENDER IDENTITY.
Thank you!

Questions?

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Email Josh OR scan the QR code for the session handout and resource list.