

New Generations, New Identities

Being Responsive to LGBTQI Students in the ABE Classroom

Terah Crews

While there are stories of those who chose the ABE route of their own free will, in most cases, students come to ABE because somewhere along the line the system failed. It now falls to the ABE instructor and program to offer a road back to hope.

LGBTQI youth want what most youth want: a chance to express their true selves, an environment where they are not discriminated against, and a chance to pursue their dreams.

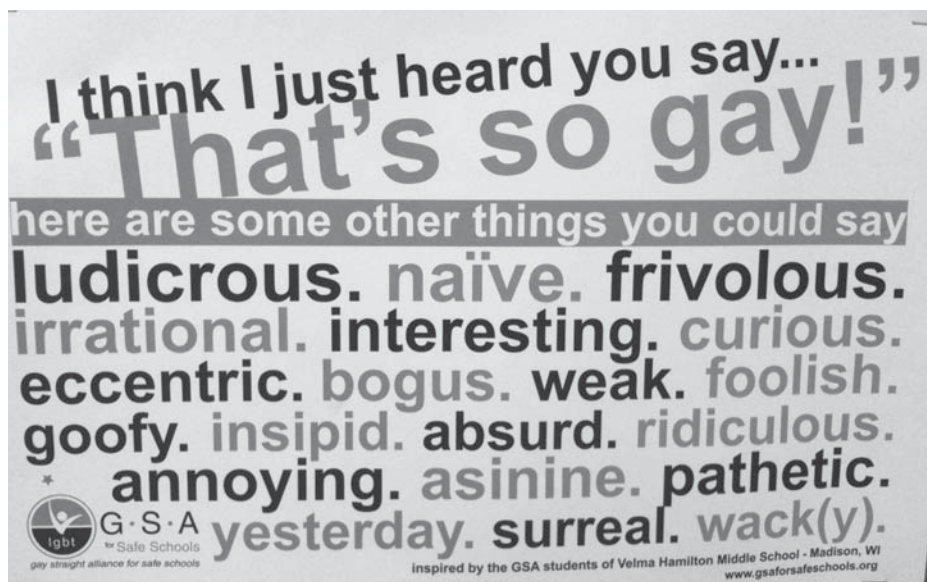
As an LGBT youth director in the South, I was often solicited by other youth programs, non-profits, homeless shelters, and schools. The question was always similar: how do we meet

the special needs of the LGBTQI population? That same question can arise in an ABE classroom, especially as more and more young people join older adults in ABE. Many LGBTQI kids may come to ABE after facing bullying or abuse in school or at home. They may be getting the message from parts of our society and culture that they don't belong. How can an ABE program make them feel at home?

As a youth director, I found that LGBTQI youth want what most youth want: a chance to express their true selves, an environment where they are not discriminated against, and

a chance to pursue their dreams. ABE programs should keep in mind the following:

- Assume you have LGBTQI students in your classroom.
- Think ahead of time and talk with other teachers about how to respond to homophobic comments in the classroom. (For ideas, see reprints of two *Change Agent* articles on this topic at <www.nelrc.org/changeagent/extras>.)
- Get the whole class to create ground rules together, ensuring the space feels safe and welcoming to all.
- See and evaluate each of your students individually.
- Let them know they are not alone. Help connect your students to resources in the community that will provide additional support.
- Integrate into your lesson plans LGBTQI-positive messages, heroes, and stories.



After a recent spate of gay youth suicides, dozens of videos went viral – with the message, “It Gets Better.” Those three words are designed to give people hope when they have none. They are powerful words, but the future is not the only place our LGBTQI students should find consolation. We can offer it to them today by taking a few steps in our ABE programs to make sure people of all sexual identities feel welcome.

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What Would You Do?

Use the space below to write some ground rules that could make your class feel safe and welcoming for all.

LGBTQI Definitions

LESBIAN: A woman who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to other women.

GAY: Men who are attracted emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually to men.

BISEXUAL: A person who is attracted to two sexes or two genders, but not necessarily simultaneously or equally.

TRANSGENDER: People whose “gender identity” differs from the social expectations for the physical sex they were born with. For example, a person who was born a female but has a masculine gender identity or who identifies as a man.

QUEER: An umbrella term to refer to all LGBTIQ people. (Some people feel the word has been hatefully used against them and are reluctant to embrace it.)

INTERSEX: People born with “sex chromosomes,” external genitalia, or internal reproductive systems that are not considered “standard” for either male or female. The existence of intersexuals shows that there are not just two sexes and that our ways of thinking about sex (trying to force everyone to fit into either the male box or the female box) is socially constructed.

Source: <www.uakron.edu/groups/lgbtu/Transgenderhome.php>

