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Creating Safe Space: LGBTQ Singers in the Choral Classroom A Summary of Research and Implications for Practice

Quote from a survey respondent: *"I am one of the suicidal singers you are hoping to help. My choir director saved me. I hope your research can save more."*

Research Methodology

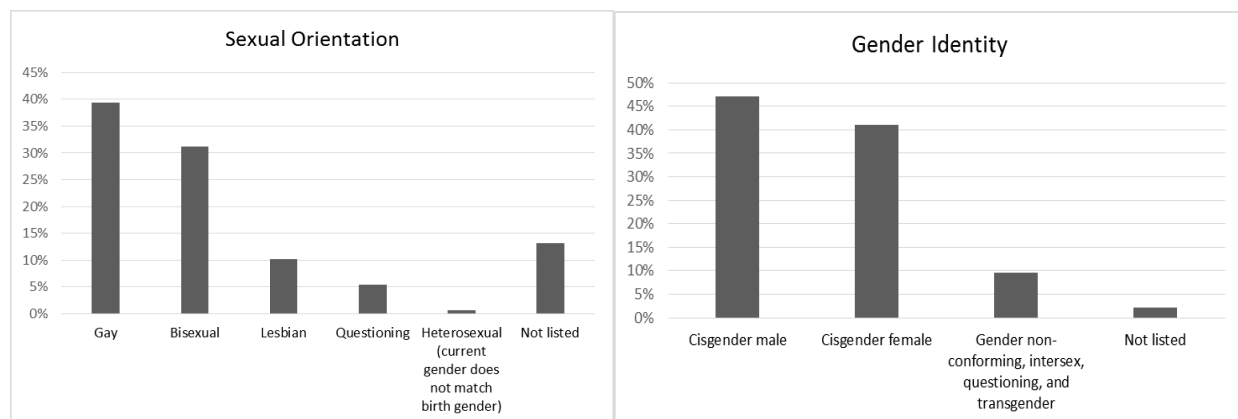
Survey Monkey was used to gather data from collegiate LGBTQ choral singers. The survey explored perceived levels of safety and support experienced by respondents within their secondary school choral programs. It comprised true/false, Likert scale, and open-ended questions. Respondents provided information regarding their sexual orientation, gender expression, geographic region, and other demographic markers.

Survey Highlights

1,123 responses fit the research criteria (collegiate LGBTQ choral singers). The sample represents astounding diversity regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. 442 respondents identify as gay. 351 report that they are bisexual. 115 are lesbian. 61 identify as questioning. Seven respondents are heterosexual, but due to their gender identity and/or expression, they are considered LGBTQ.

A significant number (147, or 13.09%) of respondents selected "not listed" when answering the question about sexual orientation.

The survey's second question explored the issue of gender identity. 47.11% of respondents are cisgender¹ male. 41.05% are cisgender female. 9.61% (108 respondents) identify as gender non-conforming, intersex, questioning, or transgender. 25 respondents (2.23%) selected "not listed" from the choices offered for gender identity.



¹ Cisgender: denoting or relating to a person whose self-identity conforms with the gender that corresponds to their biological sex; not transgender.

General indicators of safety within secondary school choral programs

- Respondents were asked if they experienced bullying/harassment by peers during activities sponsored by the choral department.

22% said yes. 69% said no. 9% selected “not applicable.”

- Respondents were asked if they were bullied or harassed by choral peers while outside of the choral environment (at lunch, after school, between classes).

37% said yes. 55% said no. 7% selected “not applicable.”

- 52% said they had at least one choral teacher in secondary school who established an environment where LGBTQ students felt welcome and safe.

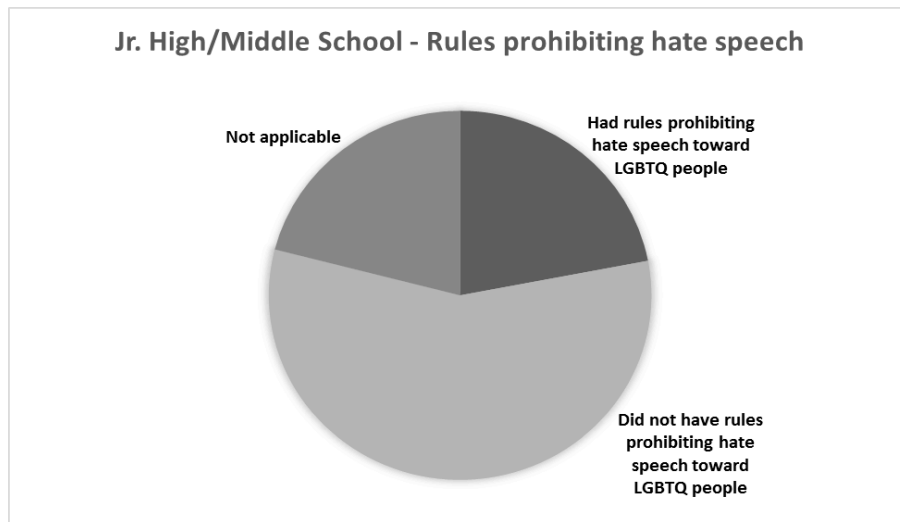
- 56% reported having at least one choral teacher with whom they felt they would have been safe sharing their LGBTQ identity. But in contrast, only 19% of respondents actually disclosed being LGBTQ to a choral teacher while in secondary school.

Examining the junior high/middle school choral experience

Survey data reveals that LGBTQ students perceived a lower level of safety in junior high/middle school than they did in high school. In some ways, this could be mitigated by choral teachers.

Whenever a question specifically examined the junior high/middle school experience, 21-26% of respondents selected “not applicable.” Presumably, they did not participate in choral music during those years.

- 22% said their junior high/middle school choral teachers had rules prohibiting hate speech toward LGBTQ people. 57% specifically indicated that such rules did not exist.



- 21% reported having a junior high/middle school choral teacher who openly encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people while teaching their classes. 55% said they did not.

- 25% reported having a junior high/middle school choral teacher who openly encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people outside of class. 49% said they did not.

- 68% said they would *not* suggest that a questioning student at their junior high/middle school confide in the choral teacher. Only 12% said they would refer such a student to their choral teacher. 20% marked this question as “not applicable.”

Likert scale questions rated perceived levels of safety within the junior high/middle school environment. The percentages cited below represent respondents who selected “agree” or “strongly agree” with specific statements about their junior high/middle school experience.

- 28% perceived the junior high/middle school program as a place of safety *prior* to enrollment.
- 27% described their junior high/middle school as being accepting of LGBTQ students.
- Similarly, 27% described their junior high/middle school as being accepting of LGBTQ teachers.
- 26% report their junior high/middle school choral teacher openly discouraging hate speech directed toward LGTBQ people.
- 15% felt safe expressing their LGBTQ identity within their middle school choral programs.
- 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.

Quotes from respondents reflecting on the junior high/middle school choral experience

“Hate speech, in general, was not tolerated. But there was no mention of LGBTQ.”

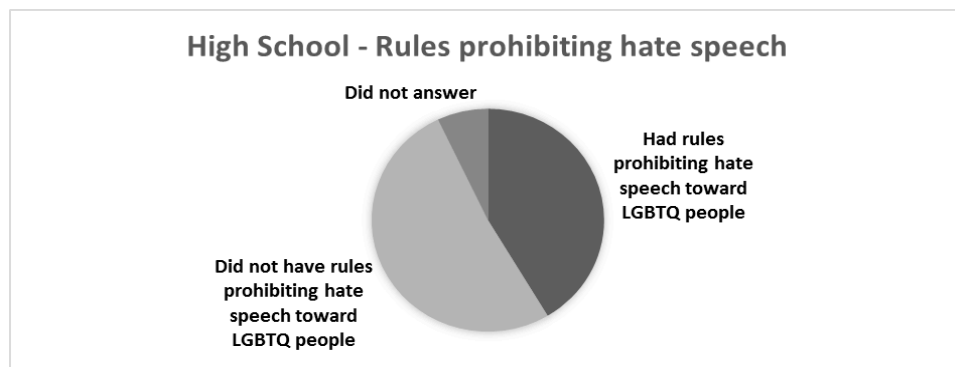
“My middle school choir director always challenged our ways of thinking, taught us that there were many types of love, and encouraged us to accept others.”

“Middle school was hell. People harassed me verbally and made me feel like I was broken.”

Examining the high school choral experience

When asked about the high school experience, not every respondent provided data for every question. So the percentages do not equal 100%.

- 41% said their high school choral teachers had rules prohibiting hate speech toward LGBTQ people. 51% indicated that such rules did not exist.



- 52% of respondents reported having a high school choral teacher who openly encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people while teaching their classes. 41% said they did not.

- 58% reported having a high school choral teacher who openly encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people outside of class. 33% said they did not.
- 53% said they would *not* suggest that a questioning student at their high school confide in the choral teacher. 30% said they would refer such a student to their choral teacher. 7% marked this question as “not applicable.”

Likert scale questions rated perceived levels of safety within the high school environment. The percentages cited below represent respondents who selected “agree” or “strongly agree” with specific statements about their high school experience.

- 60% perceived the high school program as a place of safety *prior* to enrollment.
- 56% described their high school as being accepting of LGBTQ students.
- 49% described their high school as being accepting of LGBTQ teachers.
- 44% report their high school choral teacher openly discouraging hate speech directed toward LGTBQ people.
- 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.

Quotes from respondents reflecting on the high school choral experience

“We were expected to treat everyone well, but there was never an LGBTQ focus.”

“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 anonymously to the class. Sometimes LGBTQ acceptance came up in ‘This I Believe,’ which helped people express themselves in a safe manner.”

“The LGBTQ-friendly environment in my high school choir was more a product of my fellow students than of our teacher, who chose not to take a stance either for or against LGBTQ individuals in her class. However, many of her top-level singers identified as LGBTQ and helped make the class an accepting environment by encouraging open discussion during class downtime. “

“I felt safe to be me but I did not feel safe to be out.”

“It was a sanctuary. I just felt comfortable. The music room was where I belonged.”

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

“I realized I liked men in high school. But even before that, people would call me a girl, gay, faggot, and other words. Even before I noticed I liked men. I was too scared to tell.”

“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.

The choral experience of gender non-conforming, trans*², and questioning respondents

11.84% (133 respondents) express their gender in ways that are outside the bounds of traditional gender binary (male/female). This percentage warrants attention.

9.61% (108 respondents) identify as gender non-conforming, intersex, questioning, or transgender. 2.23% (25 respondents) selected “not listed” from the choices offered for gender identity.

Analysis of survey data indicates that gender non-conforming, trans*, and gender-questioning respondents felt less safe than their LGBTQ peers.

These numbers may be influenced by societal attitudes toward gender expressions which do not reflect binary identity.

Remember that these comments are from a group equaling 11.84% of 1,123 LGBTQ singers.

When asked how their choral programs contributed to a sense of safety:

“My director spoke to voice parts rather than to genders. He referred to basses as basses, not as men. He referred to sopranos and altos rather than women.”

When asked what their choral programs could have done to make them feel safer:

“Allow students to audition for solos regardless of gender definitions in the lyrics.”

“The topic of gender expression could have been openly discussed rather than avoided.”

“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.”*

“Queerness is still taboo. Discussing gender spectrums and allowing representations of it will allow kids to explore themselves more and to accept themselves and to not suppress anything that feels different.”

When asked if there was anything else they wanted to tell us about their experience as an LGTBQ singer in secondary school:

“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.”*

“The director was great, but he was not educated in the area of gender issues.”

² Trans* (with the asterisk): one word for a variety of identities that are incredibly diverse, but share one simple, common denominator: a trans* person is not a traditional cisgender man or cisgender woman. The * can stand for, but is not limited to: Transgender, Transsexual, Transvestite, Genderqueer, Genderfluid, Non-Binary, Genderless, Agender, Non-Gendered, Third Gender, Two-Spirit, Bi-Gender, Trans Man, Trans Woman.

"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."

Final thoughts from LGBTQ respondents

"I wish I had had more courage to speak out about myself, to be an advocate for others. But it's never too late. That would be my advice to any and all who feel the same. And by God, keep singing. Say what you need through music."

"My teacher was the best part of my high school choir experience. If it weren't for him, I may never have made it out in the amazing condition that I'm in today. I'm confident, energetic, and in in love with choir. And I will always thank my music teacher."

"It will get better. Singing and music in general have helped me stay calm and collected through the process of coming out. Be who you are."

Acknowledgements

We'd like to thank all the singers who shared their experiences with us, and all the college and university professors who put our survey into their students' hands.

Special thanks to Eric Whitacre, whose tweets and posts generated 2/3 of our responses in just two days.

Thanks to the American Choral Directors Association for helping us break the silence.

And for invaluable advice and assistance: Carol White, Dr. Cynthia Taggart, Justin Fyala, Lauren Cooper, and Naveen Khetarpal.

Toward Safe Space What Choral Teachers Can Do

- **Post a rule or policy regarding hate speech, bullying, or harassment in a prominent place. Specifically include sexual orientation and gender expression in a list of protected groups of people.**

57% of survey respondents stated that their junior high/middle schools had no rules or policies relating to hate speech. 51% made the same statement about their high schools. Furthermore, an open-ended question revealed that many schools or choral programs had rules or policies, but that they were vague, lacking specificity about what people were being protected. The singers' impression was that the schools were, in this case, continuing to avoid the issue of LGBTQ protection.

"It seemed as though a "no bullying" policy was implied but never broken down as to what constituted bullying, harassment, and discrimination."

"Everything that was taboo was swept under the rug and not discussed. 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."

Here is an example of a policy demonstrating specificity, from Tim Estberg of New Trier High School.

This is a Safe Zone. Learning is an adventure. It involves not only mastery of information, but the ability to risk and experiment with what is being learned. We all come to this class as unique individuals. Behavior based on courtesy, respect, and an appreciation of our differences and similarities will create an environment in which each of us can grow and learn. 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.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) has a more robust document detailing issues of policy and policy language here:

<http://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/GLSEN%20model%20district%20policy.pdf>

- **Come out to your students...as LGBTQ or as an ally.**

Many survey respondents who experienced support with regard to LGBTQ issues in their secondary school choral programs stated that their safety was facilitated simply by the fact that their teacher said things that conveyed an attitude of support and/or empathy.

"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."

- **Post “Safe Space” stickers or signs outside all entrances to your classroom.**

Numerous survey respondents revealed that “safe space” stickers contributed to their sense of support, even when LGBTQ issues were not discussed in the context of their choral programs.

“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.”

You can download safe space stickers from the GLSEN website here, printable on Avery sticker 5163: <http://glsen.org/download/file/MzE3MQ>

- **Mention when composers are LGBTQ. This can be as routine as mentioning when composers are women, Afro-American, Asian, Irish, etc.**

This was a recurring theme in our survey. One respondent was particularly eloquent:

“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.”

A long list of LGBTQ composers is available on Wikipedia. Some composers whose music is commonly performed by choruses are Samuel Barber, Benjamin Britten, David Brunner, Paul Caldwell (of Caldwell and Ivory), Aaron Copland, and Stephen Sondheim.

- **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.**

itgetsbetter.org is a library of user-created videos offering support to LGBTQ youth. The project was started in response to the startling number of LGBTQ teen suicides in the fall of 2010. The site currently hosts over 50,000 videos posted by celebrities, organizations, activists, politicians, parents, teachers, and media personalities.

Making a video can be as simple as recording a statement of support (including your classroom’s policy on harassment, even) on your phone or computer. Post the video to YouTube, then submit the URL to itgetsbetter.org.

Paul Caldwell has created an It Gets Better video, which he considers required viewing for anyone performing his music. It features a performance of *Hope for Resolution* sung by his chorus, with the kids speaking candidly about LGBTQ issues. Do a Google search for It Gets Better Paul Caldwell.

- **Say things that encourage an atmosphere of inclusivity.**

Our gender non-conforming and trans* respondents raised the issue of addressing groups of singers with language which is based on a notion of gender identity as a binary distinction.

But another respondent told a story that we wish reflected the experience of every adolescent singer:

“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.”

- **Examine requirements mandating gender-specific concert attire**

If a trans* tenor now identifies as female, recognize that her journey has been arduous in many ways. Forcing her into “male” attire is a public devaluing of her identity. Similarly, forcing all sopranos and altos into long dresses communicates unilateral indifference to the spectrum of gender expression embraced by many singers who are lesbian, non-conforming, gender-questioning, or trans*.