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Queer Path and Career Path: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

In order to facilitate the professional career tracks of future music educators the purposes of this study are (a) to describe experiences and establish common themes in the workplace experiences of gay male music educators; and (b) to identify philosophical directions for future studies in this area.

Interviews with three gay male college level music educators will be conducted over 6-8 weeks. Using domain questions (Spradley, 1979) informed by Cass’s Model of Sexual Identity (1979), data will be collected, transcribed, and coded using inductive coding procedures and processes. Each successive interview protocol will be informed by directions discerned during the data analysis process. Peer debriefing will occur with music education faculty familiar with qualitative research procedures. Member checks will take place during the final interview. Thick description of participants, contents and interview responses will be provided to ensure that the emic voice is most prominent.

To triangulate findings, I will collect such artifacts as syllabi, CV’s, letters, recommendations, and other physical examples that support, define or even contradict what is said in interviews.

Initial Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your experience coming out.
2. Please tell me where you were in your career when you came out.
3. Please tell me concerns you had about negative ramifications of your sexuality being public on your career
4. Please tell me about any benefits you considered or found in your career of your sexuality being public.
5. Based on your experiences, what suggestions would you have for other LGBT persons seeking career tracks in music education?
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PURPOSE

In order to facilitate the professional career tracks of future music educators the purposes of this study were (a) to describe experiences and establish common themes in the workplace experiences of gay male music educators; and (b) to identify philosophical directions for future studies in this area.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Because this area of inquiry, “Queer Path and Career Path” (or, the broader domain of LGBT identity and music education) only recently opened, very little has been written about it. Therefore, it was necessary to broaden the search beyond music education into psychology, music therapy, and popular music culture.

Bergonzi (2009) reminds us that adolescents work hard at building relationships that help them define themselves. “Too often, however, high schools are developmental wastelands for youth in sexual orientation minorities; that is, those who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender” (Bergonzi, 2009, p. 22). Bergonzi cites alarming statistics on LGBT youth harassment, feelings of being unsafe, absenteeism, and substance abuse – all of which are much higher than their heterosexual counterparts. He suggests that “one of the first actions we can take as educators is to identify the ways through which we provide privilege for heterosexual students based on our acceptance of the idea that although heterosexuality is certainly more common, it is not normal for some of our students” (Bergonzi, 2009, p. 22). Bergonzi gives numerous examples of how heterosexual privilege limits curriculum, causes non-heterosexual students to feel excluded, and oppresses lesbian or gay faculty. Heterosexual faculty can kiss their spouses or sweethearts goodbye before the bus leaves for the spring choir tour, and have pictures on their desks of them. LGBT faculty cannot share in these simple acknowledgements of their partners (Bergonzi, 2009, 23). In terms of curriculum, heterosexual privilege even extends to National Music Standard 9: “Understanding music in relation to history and culture.” Many details of the personal lives and trials and tribulations of such prominent gay composers such as Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, and Benjamin Britten are systematically eliminated from
what students are taught about the composers and the circumstances surrounding specific works. Begonzi cites The New Grove Dictionary article “Gay and Lesbian Music” in support of the recognized contributions of gay and lesbian composers and the uniqueness of their struggles and sensibilities (Bergonzi, 200, p. 24).

These same unique struggles and sensibilities come into play in the realm of music therapy. Chase (2004) examined current writings on the subject of therapy practices with gay and lesbian clients. Chase stated that “it is widely accepted that in order for therapists to be effective with culturally diverse clients, they must become culturally literate, developing knowledge of their client’s heritage and cultural identities” (Bernstein, 2000, as cited in Chase, 2004, p. 34). Incorporating Purnell and Paulanka’s 1998 Cultural Competence Model, she outlined its three steps: (a) Engaging in rigorous self-reflection, (b) Learning about the culture, and (c) Adapting clinical practice to fit the needs of the cultural group. Chase stated, “Similar to clients from different ethnic culture, gay and lesbian clients’ needs may not be met by approaches used with other clients. Music therapists may need to expand their musical vocabulary by using different instruments and styles of music” (Chase, 2004, p. 37). These adaptations might include using more inclusive language (ie. “family of origin” vs. “family of choice,” or “single, partnered and married”), using a wider variety of music with examples specific to lesbian and/or gay culture, and including a cultural assessment tool as part of the music therapy process to gain more precise and accurate insight into the client’s lesbian/gay culture. Chase (2003) addressed the broader topic of multicultural music therapy in a review of literature, and suggested five clinical considerations in working with clients from diverse cultures. These were adapted from two cultural-competency models (Purnell, L., & Paulanka, B., 1998 ; Waxler-Morrison, 1990, as cited in Chase, 2003, p. 87). Abbreviated versions appear below.

1. Know yourself. Explore your own cultural values, attitudes, and biases. These aspects of yourself greatly affect the therapy you provide your clients.

2. Engage in new cultural experiences. Meeting with people from minority cultures may not give you a full understanding of cultural issues, but will certainly expose you to experiences that may be helpful in your work with diverse clients.

3. Treat each person as an individual. Make sure to explore client’s personal history before making assumptions based on their ethnic background or cultural identity.

4. Be musically flexible. Learn to play new and familiar songs in a variety of musical styles, keys, and modes. (emphasis added)
5. Ask for help if you need it. Providing multicultural music therapy is a difficult task. Network with other therapists working with culturally diverse clients through conferences, email chat rooms, peer supervision, and state/regional meetings (Chase, 2004, p. 88). The lesbian and gay subcultures have our own music, our own popular stars who speak to us. Furthermore we have our own cultural and linguistic norms that are different from the dominant heterosexual culture. As Bergonzi (2009) pointed out in his article, these need to be included in the music education classroom as an acknowledgement not only of the presence of LGBT students, but also of the cultural contributions of LGBT artists.

To that end, Roberta Lamb undertook an unusual performance project. She began her undergraduate career as a music education student, but soon switched to performance. The explanation of why became part of a multimedia performance art piece that she presented at a conference. In the abstract to the paper portion of the project, she stated: “‘Music Trouble’ is an experimental paper, a linear re-presentation of the multi-media performance (which included costume, poetry, photographs, and musical scores, in addition to the paper) designed for the Ottawa Border Crossings Conference” (Lamb, 1997, p. 85). In the course of the performance piece, Lamb explains her own journey in the words of another character.

She was telling me about a lost dream, how much she had wanted to teach music and why she had switched her undergraduate degree concentration from music education. She was compelled to perform and she liked children teaching kids to play music in a band seemed the perfect vocation. But by the end of the first year of university classes, she knew it would be impossible... She had dreams of making music teaching better, but she knew she couldn’t survive the teacher education project. One time a music education professor suggested she should at least wear make-up, if not a skirt, when she went to the schools - and that was not the worst of it - whatever she said or did was wrong, or at least so totally awkward and uncomfortable that the action became a scene, even if the music was right. She was out of place. The school culture couldn't acknowledge her and wouldn't recognize who she was (Lamb, 1997, p. 87).

This issue resonated in the experience of “Raymond,” one of the participants in this study, however with greater psychological trauma. He felt unsafe, threatened by the high school students in his student teaching placement. “My student teaching experience in my undergraduate school was in [a southern state] and it was a very... let’s just say a very rough, working class, even to some extent agrarian class, and was very Bible-belt oriented, so I, uh, I, you know, I got a lot – it was a – it was a very unhappy experience, a very bad placement for me. I stuck it out...” Unfortunately, this is often the experience of LGBT student teachers in their placements.
Lamb is not an anomaly in terms of LGBT music artists. In reviewing journal articles for this paper, scores of articles appeared in popular music journals and magazines – Billboard, Rolling Stone, the Village Voice, International Musician, Popular Music and Society, Fanfare, American Record Guide – about both popular and classical LGBT performers and composers. Indeed, “Gay and Lesbian Music” is a lengthy article in the New Grove Dictionary of Music. The article’s editors are two of the three responsible for an entire text on the subject: Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology (Brett and Wood, 1995). Clearly, the gay and lesbian subculture has established such a significant presence in our culture that we must take into account LGBT students in our classrooms, rehearsal halls and studios. An article from the Journal of Singing – The Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing – addressed this, titled “The Private Studio: Repertoire Selection for the Ten Percent.”

Choosing new songs for students involves many factors. First and foremost, the teacher must decide if the song suits the musical needs of the student at this point in his or her development... Another consideration in choosing music is the emotional needs of the student. When we choose a love song for a student who has never experienced a mature love relationship, we have to help that student to imagine what that love would be like... The complexities of romantic relationships are easily lost on young people due to their relative inexperience with love. Teachers have been addressing this problem for as long as there have been students to sing the songs. But what happens when that same student happens to be gay? Now he or she has the added problem of trying to imagine being in love with someone of the opposite gender, a feeling that he or she has not had. And to make matters worse, the feelings that he or she has experienced have not, until very recently, been modeled in television, films, or books. Indeed, as straight students learn more about themselves and their romantic involvements, they apply this knowledge to their understanding of songs. But as gay people learn more about themselves and their romantic involvements, they may find themselves more and more isolated from many songs that teachers would choose for them (Swanson, 2009, pp. 601-602).

I had this happen as a graduate student taking voice lessons. I had to make that extra imaginative leap because the literature did not address the kind of love I had known. It was my desire to explore the isolation LGBT students and music educators often feel that motivated me to undertake this study.

**METHODOLOGY**

Interviews took place with three gay male college level music educators over 6-8 weeks. Using domain questions (Spradley, 1979) informed by Cass’s Model of Sexual Identity (1979), data were collected, transcribed, and coded using inductive coding procedures and processes. Each successive
The interview protocol was informed by directions discerned during the data analysis process. Peer debriefing occurred with music education faculty and with a clinical psychology colleague familiar with qualitative research procedures. Member checks took place during the final interview. Thick description of participants, contents and interview responses are provided to ensure that the emic voice is most prominent.

**Initial Interview Questions**

1. Please tell me about your experience coming out.
2. Please tell me where you were in your career when you came out.
3. Please tell me concerns you had about negative ramifications of your sexuality being public on your career.
4. Please tell me about any benefits you considered or found in your career of your sexuality being public.
5. Based on your experiences, what suggestions would you have for other LGBT persons seeking career tracks in music education?

The three participants selected were gay male doctorate-awarded music educators between the ages of 30 and 55. Two were Caucasian, one was multi-racial. All three teach at the college Level, in conservatory-style music departments of major universities in the northeast. Coincidentally, all three are choral music specialists, although this was not one of the selection criteria.

I conducted three rounds of interviews. Questions for the first round pertained to the trajectories of their music education careers and their personal journeys coming out as gay men. Questions were informed by Cass’ Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation, a six-step model. Level 1, “Identity Confusion,” centers on personalization of information regarding homosexuality, but finds it unacceptable. Level 2, “Identity Comparison,” the individual accepts the possibility that s/he may be lesbian or gay, accepting the identity but rejecting the behaviors or vice-versa. Next with “Identity Tolerance,” the individual accepts the probability of the homosexual identity, and recognizes the ensuing sexual, social and emotional needs. Level 4, “Identity Acceptance,” centers on acceptance (versus tolerance) of the homosexual self-image and includes increased contact with the gay/lesbian subculture. Also important at this level is an increased anger toward the heterosexual community,
which could also be stated as resentment of heterosexual privilege. Next at Level 5, “Identity Pride,” the individual divides the world into gay/not gay, immerses him- or herself in the subculture, and limits interactions with heterosexuals. It is at this level of the developmental model that individuals often come out to family and close friends. Finally, at Level 6, “Identity Synthesis,” the individual integrates the gay/lesbian identity with other aspects of the personality, making sexual identity an important but not primary factor in relationships. In this study, levels 4-6 were most salient. Participants were asked to recall the period of self-acceptance of their gay identities, recount their experiences of coming out to families, and demonstrated Identity Synthesis in their “settled” identities as gay college music educators. The last in particular had a significant impact on classroom demeanor and creating “safe space” for LGBTQI youth.

I conducted Interviews for Rounds 1 and 2 in person, digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, then read and re-read the transcriptions. I color-coded transcriptions for specific topics, and derived conceptual frameworks as loose flow charts based on themes that arose. Peer debriefing took place with my advisor Director of Graduate Music Education, University of Hartford, and with a colleague who was a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology also undertaking qualitative research, specifically phenomenological studies. Round 2 questions followed up on Round 1 and sought greater depth into the areas of development of classroom demeanor and role modeling as gay music educators. The same transcription, coding and conceptual framework procedures occurred as for Round 1. Due to time and distance constraints, Round 3 consisted of e-mail review of conceptual frameworks derived from the two prior interviews, and subsequent phone conversations. Participants received documents of conceptual frameworks for both rounds to participants for review, correction, clarification, or adjustment and incorporated feedback, updating the frameworks as needed. I then collected CVs as supporting artifacts.

**FINDINGS**

Questions for Round 1 were as follows:

1. Please tell me about your experience coming out.
2. Please tell me where you were in your career when you came out.

1 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Intersexed (physically both pre- and post-operational transgendered).
3. Please tell me concerns you had about negative ramifications of your sexuality being public on your career.

4. Please tell me about any benefits you considered or found in your career of your sexuality being public.

5. Based on your experiences, what suggestions would you have for other LGBT persons seeking career tracks in music education?

Participants all shared profoundly moving stories of their lives in response to these questions.

“Raymond” was raised Roman Catholic, and attended parochial and then private Catholic schools. In response to question 1, he stated:

I think because... I was considered effeminate by other boys and I was taunted and beat up and made fun of, consequently [I] had a lot of hang ups and fears about that. So even before I felt any kind of what I understood as same-sex attraction, before it was developmentally even possible, I knew that I was different.

In talking about coming out to his parents, “Raymond” had this to say:

With regards to my family, there had always been suspicions which, because of their extreme, well, for lack of a better word, ‘conservativism,’ with regards to suspecting I was gay that it would be very heartbreaking for them, and so I did my best to dispel those suspicions. So I never officially came out to my parents – and actually was sort of brought out – until I was age 35, and then, there it was, open, you know.

“Thomas” was a student in an arts magnet school when he began the coming-out process. However his home was in a southern state, deep within the Bible-belt, which both “Raymond” and “Thomas” acknowledged as an openly hostile environment for LGBTQI youth.

I suddenly was around kids who were open about this [being gay], and I knew ‘something was wrong.’ I had a really hard year in my ninth grade year, and so when I got there in my tenth grade year it became clear what the issue was and so I started dating somebody [of the same sex]... and then I couldn’t deal with it. I talked to a friend who talked to her mother who told my parents who called the minister and it became awful.

Unlike the other two participants, “Girard” had a very positive initial coming out experience.

I was fortunate that I went to a [college] where there was a very large gay population, and so it made it very easy for me to just not worry about the sexuality part, but worry about, ‘who am I? who am I as a person?’ And I think that is a big distinction between me and a lot of other people who might not have that type of environment, where sexuality isn’t so much the issue and they can then grow into being the person that they are, and seeing the spectrum of who they are, the most beautiful aspects of their personality, of their nature, and the most hideous, the most dark [sic] of their nature... For me, having that freedom of being able to just not worry about the sexuality, but just to be me, and to find out who I am so that I could grow and mature to be fully actualized...
From attitudes of fear and the need to be closeted to concerns for full self-actualization – these attitudes are almost polar in their opposition. Is not the goal of any educational environment for all young people, especially in the public sector, to provide an atmosphere of safety and nurturing that encourages self-actualization instead of self-loathing and terror of bullying?

“Girard” and his initial crush were at an all-state event, and he heard the other boy talking about his birthday. It turned out that they shared the same birthday, which became an introductory point of conversation. However, it wasn’t until years later, at age 22, that he came out to his family, and things were not quite so simple.

To family, I came out to my mother, but never officially came out to my father. He always suspected but because I was so very much unlike him in pretty much every way... he didn’t understand how to relate... both my parents, they never said anything ‘kind’ about gay people. They themselves are very kind people, but [my mother] always believed that someone makes you gay, and that you learned to be gay from someone else. Very archaic mindset... because I was in classical music, the people who I worked with, she said, she just assumed that being around them somehow that lifestyle appealed to me, and attracted me and lured me.

For “Raymond,” who had been active as a Roman Catholic church musician from a very young age, his religious upbringing added another level of fear and complication in the coming-out process.

I guess that it’s almost been a life-long process and in many ways now I still have to [choose whether to come out] because not only being a music educator but as a church musician in a Catholic church I’ve had to be very careful about opening up or revealing anything about myself.

This statement segued into the second question, which was about coming out professionally. Both “Raymond” and “Thomas” were raised in Southern states, and had their initial student teaching experiences near home. “Raymond” shared:

Being that my student teaching experience in my undergraduate school was in [a southern state] and it was a very, let’s just say a very rough working class, even to some extent agrarian class that was very Bible-belt oriented, I got a lot – it was a – it was a very unhappy experience, a very bad placement for me. I stuck out, you know. There’s a thing that happens in the gay world, or I mean, in the world to gay people which is especially when the larger society just presumes that homosexuality is inherently evil, that homosexuals are inherently disordered. They wouldn’t use that language, but, you know, they’re bad, they’re sinful – they’re below human beings, so that gives them license to abuse, to make fun of. And I experienced that in my own high school that I went to. And then going back teaching in
high school, that brought all of that back. In fact, at that point in time, I sort of decided, ‘I can’t put up with this kind of taunting.’

At this point I asked “Raymond” to clarify where he went to high school. He attended a private Roman Catholic military academy. What an extraordinarily hostile environment for a young gay man who self-identifies as somewhat effeminate and passionate about music. These sorts of “cures” are the type of boot-camp treatments that LGBT youth are often subjected to by well-meaning parents or guardians with the intent of “toughening them up” or even changing their sexual orientation. Eventually society must realize that sexual orientation is an organic aspect of the human being and is not a matter of intellectual or emotional choice. “Thomas” talked about being closeted for the earlier part of his career in a southern state, but also about finding allies along the way.

If you understand [this southern state] you know that there’s the city and then there’s the suburbs... it’s very conservative. I never lied but I had to really play it safe, and I would talk to no one about it... The high school choir director knew and he was also gay and he knew from the time I was hired but that was it, nobody else knew, or about him.

Although he eventually also told the drama teacher, a “wonderful woman” who became a close friend, he was very closeted, choosing to live “a good hour away so I wasn’t in the grocery stores where parents or kids were so I never had a fear as such.” However he was often questioned about his single marital status. “I always had ‘why aren’t you married?’ ‘Well, you know,’ I’d say, ‘when?’ My schedule was so crazy that they’d look at me and say, ‘well, that’s true, you know, when would you be married?” Single LGBT professionals often bury themselves in their careers because meeting others of the same sexual orientation for socializing or dating is still very difficult, even more so because of the stigma attached to our orientations. Furthermore, career focus is a convenient way to avoid confronting the loneliness and isolation that many of us feel. “Girard” had a different experience coming out professionally.

As I said, I never officially “came out” because I was always either singing with national opera companies, or I was working in early music societies so I was with the intelligentsia. In those environments, I always felt very, very safe. Especially among the intelligentsia... they helped me settle in that people are the most important thing. Sexuality is just like your hair color. Yes, you have brown hair, you have blond hair and you have curly hair. You know, that’s how they viewed life... what mattered is was I a good person [emphasis added] and did I always show the same face to the people who saw me, was I pleasant to be around.

Concerns for integrity, character, and emotional stability far outweigh the importance of sexual orientation and preference. This should be the norm, not the negative case study.
Continuing along this line of questioning, question 3 dealt with negative and/or positive ramifications for the participant’s career of having their sexuality become public knowledge. “Raymond” talked about the possibility of being falsely accused of inappropriate relations with a student. Beyond that, it was very much a “don’t ask – don’t tell” type of situation. However, he also said this: “There were people that did talk and so on and so forth, but that despite their conservativism accepted me because they accepted me, the person that they knew. They accepted this individual that they see is a good person... and they see my musical skills and my love of teaching and [socializing], and so it was I guess a teachable learning moment for a lot of people.” In response to this same question, “Thomas” shared two troubling incidents. In one case, two boys in his men’s choir were involved in a situation where one abused the other sexually. When word got out, “Thomas” and his friend the drama teacher had to deal with the situation. However they were admonished by their principal that “there are no gay people in this building. I don’t know what happened with this kid but... if any teacher says the word ‘gay’ to him or to my other student, they’ll be fired. We cannot say ‘gay’ and we cannot talk about what happened.” In the second incident, a lesbian colleague who taught art and coached gymnastics was falsely accused of inappropriate relations with a student.

Somebody accused her and it got really ugly, and she didn’t lose her job and she was able to cover it up and get rid of it because it was stupid – whatever they had accused her of was stupid... but it was clear that we couldn’t ‘be’ that. Now, today I understand in that school the kids are very open, that it’s had a big change, but that was NOT the case when I was there, and so, you know, I really feared for my job. And one of the reasons I left public school teaching and wanted to do the doctorate was because I wanted to continue in education but I didn’t necessarily want to be in a classroom where I had to worry about who I was.

“Girard,” on the other hand, found that it did not matter so much in the professional environment where he found himself. “In the music world, there is no fear. So many of the people I worked with were gay and were extraordinarily successful, internationally speaking.” Nevertheless, he made a very telling comment about education. “In the education world, I just thought that there was always too much ‘Jesus’ – I thought there was always too much religion, that people are so hung up on the things that absolutely don’t matter [like sexuality] that they allow that to cloud how they see the world.” Most importantly after the age of 25, he just didn’t care. “If someone asked me, I would tell them. But... in my first teaching job, no one ever asked, so I assumed they already knew or didn’t care. And I thought, ‘If I don’t make a big deal about it’ – oh I guess that was my experience: if I don’t make a point about it,
no one else really seems to either.” To me, this is the ideal situation that we should be striving to create in all educational contexts in this country.

The other part to this question concerned benefits participants found in having their sexuality be public knowledge. “Raymond” taught in a college-level conservatory setting for ten years. He found in that rarefied setting that “there’s almost a celebratory status about being gay... it has somewhat of a benefit because there’s a sort of ‘coolness’ to it among certain students and other people.” “Thomas” initially felt bad because he was not able to be “out” around his students earlier in his career, and wondered if he had missed the opportunity to be a role model, especially to LGBT students. However, years later gay former students contacted him and said,

‘we understood [that you weren’t able to be open] and what was important for us we knew you were gay but we were too and we watched that there was a role model who was doing well, and it made us think that we could do well too. And you did more for us than anything [you could have] if we had talked about it...’ I think we should get to a place where we can talk about it and I think the fine arts area – that we have never addressed it, I think is criminal because WE ARE THE PLACE where they can, where gay people go.

“Girard” found no positive difference in his sexuality being public, as one would expect given the accepting professional community surrounding him.

The final question for Round 1 interviews asked for suggestions for other LGBT persons seeking career tracks in music education. “Raymond” advised,

When you see wrongs, especially now, it’s, you know – hopefully we’ll never have another Matthew Shepard [tragedy] – that we have to feel compelled to speak up, lovingly and gently and understandingly not just, you know, placards and screaming in people’s faces, which doesn’t win friends... it will entrench people that say we’re all going to hell and God hates us and so forth and so on. But we can say the message of ‘we feel love,’ those of us who believe God loves us and made us this way.

“Thomas’” advice is to maintain professionalism in the face of a changing world, being clear about what educators can – and cannot – say to students in the public schools.

Now, this new generation [today], I think is gonna play by their own rules. And that’s ok. I mean the times change and worlds change and people change, and I think the day is coming where being is not gonna be an issue. It’s just gonna be like, you know, oh well, you’re Hispanic. I think we’re coming to that place.
“Girard” offered counsel that reminded me of the attitudes Joseph Campbell advised to those making the spiritual journey of self-discovery to self-actualization:

> Fear creates obstacles between you and other people, between you and your career, you and your success, and if you first and most importantly don’t know, fully, who you are, beyond just the sexuality, but just know who you are, and until you are happy in that knowledge, you can’t be successful. You can’t be free. And I think that’s the most important thing.

If our goal as music educators is to participate fully in the process of our students’ self-actualization, then it only stands to reason that we must create safe space for all our students.

The key question for Round 2 asked participants to describe ways in which their upbringing shaped their classroom demeanor and how they interact with students. “Raymond” who had experienced bullying and marginalization as a young man first took a very staunch content-based approach to the classroom that was rooted in anger and the desire to do what had been done to him. As his teaching style evolved, he moved toward “a much more affirming and radically different style” than he had experienced in his own education. In particular, he had early private teachers who were not involved with him as a student, who served as negative role models. His style now “is to really try to discern what the learning style is of the student and to get involved with what is going to motivate them.” His approach is no longer content-centered but student-centered and is based in empathy.

“Thomas” also talked about being marginalized as a young man. “I think it’s living in the margins that gives us the ability to reflect upon what’s happening and gain some wisdom of watching and learning from what people are doing... I try to treat [all my students] fairly, but I favor those that are struggling for one reason or another... I think I’m more empathetic than a lot of teachers.” This plays itself out in his classroom and rehearsal spaces in the form of extra time spent with students with special needs or as individual-izing his instruction to accommodate different learning styles. In particular, he makes a point to be at his door when they arrive every day to greet them and check in with them about the progress of their day. “Girard” had only one experience early on (age 12) of being bullied, but watched others who were “different” like himself and who were taunted mercilessly. In his classroom, he has zero tolerance for the use of the word “faggot” or the use of “gay” in a pejorative manner. Mostly he focuses on making everyone comfortable and at ease in his presence. “I like to be comfortable around people.” If he senses tension or anxiety, he immediately tries to dispel it because “I begin to focus too much on what they’re feeling or their anxiety and I can’t speak freely or help them to overcome
whatever issue they have, academic or what have you... I’m really happy to be gay, to have gone through all the experiences because I think I have a really good sense of who I am. And I think people subconsciously pick up on that, and that’s why they’re at ease.” These expressions of empathy from all three participants have different “colors” for each individual, but ultimately translate as forms of compassion for the struggles of their students, and a desire to help the young people in their classes and ensembles steady themselves and become fully the actualized individuals they were meant to be.

The participants in my study are all tremendously talented, compassionate, brave men. It was a privilege and an honor to interview them, to hear their stories, to see the trajectory of their personal lives as it interwove with their professional careers. Many parallels can be drawn to the struggles that other minorities – African-Americans, Jews, women – have endured in this world to gain acceptance and recognition of their positive, creative contributions to culture, and merely to be accepted as full-class, fully-participatory citizens in our society and that of the world at large. All three acknowledged that we still have a long way to go in this regard, but all expressed hope at progress in recent years, in addition to a deep-seated will and determination to make a difference, to better their corners of the world, one student, one classroom, one rehearsal, one concert at a time.

Several directions for further study emerge. This study only dealt with gay men; the first dimension for moving forward is to conduct similar studies with “L, B and T” persons – lesbian, bisexual and transgender. No doubt their stories will reveal similar unique struggles and subsequent perspectives. A limitation of this study was the lack of field observations. Observing the participants interacting with their students would either corroborate or refute their expressions of empathetic attention to said student. Another rich area for research would be to interview LGBT professional music performers and educators across several generations to see how their school music experiences shaped them as professionals. Lastly, the participants in this study were all choral specialists; it would be significant to ask similar questions of band and orchestra specialists as well.

In my lifetime, I never thought three things would happen: I never thought the Soviet Communists would fall; I never thought the Berlin Wall would tumble; and I never thought same-sex couples in high school would be able to walk the halls holding hands or attend the prom together. I am
happy to report that the first two have unequivocally occurred, and that the third is taking root in more progressive areas of our country. It is my sincere hope that this study furthers this progress.
Bibliography


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