The Impacts of Inclusivity within Elementary Music Education on Students within the LGBTQ+ Community

by Kelly Ruggieri

Elementary music classes are an introduction to creating, performing, and connecting to music for many students. It can be where their love of music begins and provide a space of safety, support, and validation. Conversely, it can be where students withdraw from music because of feeling nervous, uncomfortable, or invalidated. For students within the LGBTQ+ community, how supported they feel in elementary music can have lasting impressions. I conducted a qualitative study interviewing five adults within the LGBTQ+ community to deepen our understanding of the perceived short and long term impacts of inclusivity within elementary music.

Why discuss the LGBTQ+ community in elementary school?

While there are adults who fear elementary school is too early to discuss the LGBTQ+ community, the topic I am discussing is not sex education; I am referring to gender identity and sexual orientation. Many people within the LGBTQ+ community already know or start to question their identity during elementary school. If elementary students are receiving other types of representation, why are we not including the LGBTQ+ community? LGBTQ+ students are part of every school population, so it is a worthwhile endeavor to understand the importance of this inclusion and to find tools to help achieve this in our schools.

Research and Findings

My research included interviewing five adults who identify within the LGBTQ+ community to discuss their experiences with and perceived impacts from inclusion within elementary music. By using in vivo coding, the three main themes found within the interview transcripts were invalidation, validation, and negotiation. Please note: all names in this article are pseudonyms.

Invalidation

One participant, Nicole, who identifies as a lesbian, had the highest number of references to feeling invalidation through her interview. In 4th grade, she was the only person who was not accepted into the musical. She believed it was because she did not dress like a stereotypical girl at the time. This experience caused her to become extremely aware of how she dressed, and she decided to dress more stereotypically feminine from then on. Two years later, she was accepted into a choir by this same teacher without an audition. She perceived this as confirmation that she was not accepted into the musical because of how she dressed. She mentioned, “It made it seem like [music] was an elite group that I wasn’t going to be in...Music was just always something that other people did.” She decided to never audition for anything again, and she stopped participating in musical activities altogether. She even mentioned how performing is something she dreams to do, but she still holds fear and shame surrounding music.

This connects to a study conducted by Kosciw, at al. (2013). They studied the importance of in school support for LGBTQ+ students and its impact on their academic achievement. They found that one of the strongest positive influences was supportive adults at school: “a greater number of educators was related to a decreased incidence of victimization, greater self-esteem, higher Gpas and fewer missed days of school.” Just one supportive adult in school could have changed Nicole’s musical future and comfortability in who she was.

Validation

Another participant who identifies as bisexual, Jenni, had the highest number of references to feeling validation. In elementary school, she joined an extracurricular auditioned girlchoir. The conductors of this choir embraced
each member of the choir and accepted their diversities. Jenni discussed how it was an environment that empowered each member to find and use their voice. During this time, Jenni was not clear of her sexual orientation yet, but this choir created a safe space for her:

It’s only helpful to be in a supportive community... And then to know that it was an inclusive and open-minded environment... you just get to blossom at your own pace and nobody cares because what are we all there to do? Make music... And how beautiful it is that we build such great relationships along the way.

This connects to research conducted by Palkki and Caldwell (2018). They found that acknowledging and actively choosing to include LGBTQ+ students makes a large impact. They found:

Choir provided safety and encouragement that aided the disclosure (‘coming out’) process: “Choir was that safe space that helped give me the courage to come out to people...I wouldn’t have been able to be comfortable with who I was without the comforting atmosphere of my choir teacher and classes.” (p. 36)

**Negotiation**

One participant who identifies as a trans man, Michael, discussed how he knew he did not feel like a girl when he was just six years old. However, he did not come out until almost 15 years later because his mom asked him to wait. Living a life that did not feel true to himself, he described wanting to be “invisible.” However, his elementary band teacher supported his musical abilities and pushed him towards greatness. This affirmation gifted Michael the joy of “[feeling] seen for a reason that I wanted to be seen.” He mentioned:

I felt very much like I had a home in music. I felt so outcast everywhere else in school. And then like in band... I was an asset. I was essential... My teachers never made me feel like an alien like I felt everywhere else... which was so wonderful and so important to my growth as a musician and as a person.

While he was repressing his want for gender exploration, he was able to lean into the safety and his love of music. He negotiated his negative feelings about his gender identity for the comforting identity of being a musician.

Michael’s experience relates to research completed by Espelage, et al. (2008). They surveyed more than 13,000 high school students aiming to further the understanding of mental health outcomes when lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning youth have familial and school support. This study found, “Although many sexual minority students indicate high rates of [depression, suicidal feelings, and alcohol-marijuana use,] students receiving support from parents and schools reported significantly less depression-suicidal feelings or less alcohol-marijuana use” (p. 13). Although Michael was struggling, his band teacher was the support that guided him.

**10 Ideas About How To Implement LGBTQ+ Inclusion in Elementary Music**

Every teacher has the ability to support their LGBTQ+ students. Teachers who embrace students’ identities can have lasting and meaningful impacts. Whether this inclusion is explicit or discreet, here are some tips for you to incorporate in your elementary music classes.

Implementing LGBTQ+ inclusivity explicitly:

1. Include LGBTQ+ musicians in your curriculum.

2. Listen to music created by LGBTQ+ musicians and discuss how their perspective or environment may have impacted how the music was written.

3. Hanging a safe-space symbol (Safe Space Kit, 2019, p. 4).

4. Start a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in your school (Starting Your GSA, n.d.)
Implementing LGBTQ+ inclusivity discreetly:

5. Use inclusive language. Address students or audiences with gender neutral terms like “students, sopranos, scholars, musicians, 3rd graders, everyone” etc.

6. Utilize gender neutral dress codes for concerts. Rather than specifying what boys and girls wear, write a list of appropriate clothes. For example, students may wear a nice shirt with either pants or a skirt. Dresses are also appropriate.

7. Understand the laws within your state. Seven states in the United States have signed legislation to include representation of the LGBTQ+ committees within “curricular standards for social sciences, humanities, the arts, or science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)” (Inclusive Curricular Standards, 2022, p. 1).

8. Create a safe environment where students feel comfortable to ask questions or add their perspective.

9. Persistently and clearly support your students. Whether you can safely have these conversations in your school or not, students know which teachers have their back.

10. Continually analyze your classroom environment, teaching style, and curriculum to see if there are ways you can be more inclusive.

By implementing these tips into your teaching, I hope you are able to create a more well-rounded and inclusive environment where all of your students feel free to be who they are while making music. As Jenni mentioned at the end of her interview, “You are fighting the good fight.”

Works Cited


Biography

Kelly Ruggieri is an elementary music teacher in New Jersey and proudly teaches at her alma mater within the Scotch Plains-Fanwood school district. In this position, she teaches general music and 4th grade chorus. She earned her Bachelors in Music Education at Westminster Choir College of Rider University. While a student, she performed with Westminster Williamson Voices where she was a member of the residency choir within
the Oxford Choral Conducting Institute and helped record two albums: Ola Gjeilo: Sunrise Mass and Aurora. She was also a member of the Westminster Symphonic Choir where she performed with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Princeton Symphony, and the Juilliard Orchestra. She is a current graduate student at University of Wisconsin Stevens Point and finishing her thesis regarding the impacts of LGBTQ+ inclusion within the elementary music classroom.

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**Biographical Information for Poster Presenters**

**Creative Sparks: Sixth Grade General Music Students’ Self-Perception of Understanding Music Lesson Involving Creativity**

by Austin Vonderloh

Austin Vonderloh is a senior Music Education student with a Choral, Instrumental, and General Music certification. He has been heavily involved in the UWSP music department throughout his time there, including being the current President of ACDA and Horn Club and being on the State Solo and Ensemble student planning committee. After graduation, he will be in the UWSP Master of Music Education program. He aspires to be a conductor while working with higher education students and sharing his passion for music.

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**Very Young Composers: A Framework for Innovative Elementary Music Education**

by Myles Boothroyd

Myles Boothroyd is a performing saxophonist, teacher, and music scholar. He serves as Assistant Professor of Saxophone and Music Theory at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, where he oversees a thriving studio of saxophone soloists, quartets, and the student-led ensemble SaxPoint. He is the soprano/alto saxophonist for Generation Quartet, a Wisconsin-based chamber ensemble that presents recitals and clinics throughout the Midwest. Dr. Boothroyd is the chair of the 2024 NASA Biennial Conference Programming Committee and has earned top national prizes in the MTNA Solo and Chamber Music Competitions, NASA Collegiate Solo Competition, and Chamber Music Yellow Springs Competition. He is Editor of The Saxophone Symposium, the premier publication of saxophone literature, performance, and pedagogy in the US. His articles have been published in Nota Bene and in The Eastman Case Studies. Dr. Boothroyd holds a BME from Central Michigan University and MM, MA, and DMA degrees from the Eastman School of Music.