

REPARATIVE JUSTICE, RACIAL RESTORATION, & EDUCATION SERIES

Black, Lesbian, Gay, & Gender Non-Conforming Youth Do Not Have Safe Spaces in K-12 Schools

By Jvania M. Webb

Being Black is powerful, and it has created internal and external hatred. Looking in the mirror can be a ritual or an avoidance of the truth behind one's eyes when acknowledging the truth becomes too painful or accepted. Lorde's book, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, (1982), takes us as the readers on a journey through her childhood. I believe that she at one point was too afraid to look into her eyes but as she got older and settled into herself, looking in the mirror became a ritual. For Black Lesbian, Gay, and Gender Nonconforming Youth (BLGGNCY), these rituals and painful truths become a part of the journey that makes and develops strong warriors who are fighting an invisible war.

The war is within themselves and the environments that they are placed in either by choice or force. BLGGNCY tend to not have a safe space to express themselves or to just be themselves. K-12 schools are not safe spaces for BLGGNCY and this is evidenced by harassment and bullying, not having representation, and school teachers and administration ignoring parents' requests for protection of BLGGNCY. Black Feminists have been fighting for BLGGNC rights for years. [Kelly, 2002](#), describes three Black women in 1977 who were a part of a collective of other feminists, and they were fed up with society's patriarchal ways and fragile masculinity while fighting to help empower women. There were times that Black women had to fight harder because of the color of their skin, gender, sexism, and sexual orientation.

Women who identify within the BLGGNC community are normally more accepted than the men who are a part of this community. There are various intersections and oppressions that Black women got accustomed to fighting, because "they understood the racial and sexual dimensions of domination" (Kelly, 149), but it seems along the way Black women never started to fight for Black LGGNC youth rights. Safe spaces are important for everyone so that they can feel comfortable being themselves and not have to put on a front or be accused of acting out of character. Safe spaces are even more important for those in the BLGGNC community because harm could be a determining factor on how unsafe some places are. BLGGNC people are constantly working to fit into heteronormative situations and spaces because they want to be thought of and seen as 'normal,' but that is not how BLGGNC people are seen, they are seen as abnormal and deviant ([Ahmad, 2006](#)).

In "Queer Phenomenology," Ahmad explains how spaces were not created or designed with BLGGNC people in mind; and based on the definition of Queer Phenomenology, K-12 school's classrooms fit this description as well. BLGGNC people are expected to mold themselves to fit into a box when interacting with heterosexual ideologies and events. They are essentially an oval trying to fit into a square and that causes trauma and damage to them emotionally, mentally, physically, and sometimes financially. When one encounters someone who is different than them, regardless of their sexual orientation, one must think about how certain orientations affect the person and how one identifies on the spectrum of LGGNC.

At times there may not be an easy explanation; it could be very complex for some, and it is not just a scale of black or white. There are people who lead with being LGGNC and there are folks who do not; there is no wrong way to define yourself. Ahmad also talks about how to look at Queerness differently based on how you identify objects and others. There are critical ways on how to respond to one's difference in relation to orientation and the space that they walk in and live in as well. These "objects, people, places, or things" are meant to help us see that when spaces are 'built' they need to be built with everyone in mind, regardless of

if they are LGGNC, homeless, and or handicap. Historically, spaces were built for middle and rich class White men who had power. White women were included as long as they were connected with middle or rich White men. Black and even poor White people do not fit in normalized society because those spaces were not made for them, so therefore LGGNC people do not fit unless they are White.

A lot of youth are coming to terms in relation to their sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation earlier than they used to, 67% of transgender youth and 55% of cisgender youth have been made to feel wrong about their identity and attractions ([HRC, 2019](#)). In 2010, the “It Gets Better” Movement was introduced to children and teenagers in the United States ([Shelter, 2010](#)). This video movement went viral because the organization reached out to celebrities to help record videos expressing to young people that their life may be hard now because of their sexuality or sexual orientation, but, eventually, life, family, schools, friends, and overall support, which is the ‘it’ will get better for them personally.

In addition to some youth being ostracized and/or alone, those feelings that they are experiencing might take some time to subside; however, holding tight to others that they can trust while being on this journey might be the support that holds them over until they can finally say that life for them got better. A question that teachers, staff, and administration should be asking themselves in order to foster safe spaces in their schools is, ‘how do we work on preventing our students from getting to the point where they are contemplating suicide or using drugs/alcohol to escape the emotions and the isolation that they experience while at school?’ When students positively see themselves in the classroom curriculum and assignments, it is easier for students to start to have a sense of pride about what they are learning.

When students do not see themselves (or always see negative things), thoughts run through their minds about why they are not seeing other LGGNCY who would be more relatable to certain students. This is why [Johnson, 2017](#) challenged a high school writing club located in Alabama to be expressive and create what they wanted to see in themselves. This writing club also helped to expand the thinking and visuals of who the youth was and how they identified. By creating your own space, you disrupt various systems of oppression. When Black youth are able to express themselves, they are happier and have more to look forward to as a whole. When they are stifled it seems that they could potentially become depressed. This is found across the board in youth, but when you add being queer that adds a different dynamic. That person starts to recluse and isolate themselves before others do so to them, and they feel as if they do not have many people that they can talk to.

No matter where you are and the color of your skin, LGGNCY might try to hide themselves if they do not feel safe to disclose who they are. Straight youth do not have this problem; they do not have to hide or act as if they do not like the opposite sex the way LGGNCY have to because of the fear related to being ostracized. When LGGNCY look in the mirror, they are already questioning everything because in high school, students start to see the world as different while also working to find their place in society.

When LGGNCY notice that the messaging surrounding their sexual orientation states they are not as important as straight youth, it is hard to really accept oneself. Writing can be an outlet for youth, and this does not differ regardless of one’s identity or attractions. Johnson, 2017 noticed that for LGGNCY writing would help tremendously. Being able to express yourself outwardly is important for human needs as even adults have the need to express themselves. Why would it be different for youth who identify as queer?

In their study of a Canadian high school, [Dalley & Campbell, 2006](#) conclude that “any move by an individual student or teacher to introduce a queer perspective into classroom discussions was systematically negated, [and] met with rejection (exclusion) or negative inclusion by teachers and students alike” (p. 15). Students in the study who identified as gay chose to hide their sexual identities in school out of fear of negative repercussions. Silencing processes results in queer students creating heteronormative and heterosexual personas to remain hidden and protected while in school spaces.

Society helps K-12 school systems put LGGNCY into boxes. They try to define them thinking that this will allow the opportunity for the help of teachers, staff, and administration, but boxes do not help the students in question, instead it helps adults feel better about themselves. Having a teacher who allows students to express themselves in writing is needed because the student would be able to see themselves in a different light. They can write how they intend to see themselves in the future. It is clear that LGGNCY have to create a different visual before it comes true.

When teachers, staff, and administration decide to work with youth, all demographics, socioeconomic statuses, ethnicity/races, sexualities, and genders should be included. When signing up to teach students, teachers should be teaching *all* students without letting personal biases dictate how students are being treated and how teachers act toward LGGNCY. Not all teachers let their personal biases affect how they respond to LGGNCY, however, there is a decent percentage of teachers that do.

According to [Blackburn, 2005](#), educators who work with queer youth must “[understand] gender and sexual identities in complicated ways in order to meet the needs of queer students as well as all students who are confined by dichotomous, heterosexist, and homophobic understandings of gender” and ways of being. For teachers of BLGGNCY, specifically, there needs to be normalization of non-heteronormative practices that allow Black queer students to achieve academic and social success.

In the same breath, a part of this demographic are asexual youth, who are almost always excluded out of the conversation because people do not know how to respond to someone not wanting to be sexual at all. It is already deviant to want to engage in atypical sexual behaviors, and someone not having any sexual behaviors or desires is seen as even worse. The majority of K-12 teachers are not trained on how to be culturally relevant in their classrooms, and they are certainly not trained on how to protect Black children or BLGGNCY. Black students in the K-12 school system are constantly being gazed upon to see and/or determine if they are good enough to be measured up against other students. [Callier & Hill, 2019](#), write about how educators can learn to shift their gaze, and, specifically, how to ensure that regardless of the gender or color of a child, they are met with a positive gaze, not a deficit gaze.

One way that a teacher, school administrator, or staff personnel can assist students by having a positive gaze is by looking at themselves in order to break down disparities that they have been faced with in their own lives. Essentially the teacher, school administrator, or staff personnel are a mirror for students that they are helping. Unfortunately, teachers, school administrators, or staff personnel are not trying to gaze positively, it is normally built or done from a deficit.

Although the common denominator was supposed to be supporting BLGGNCY, staff ended up surveilling them, and at times the staff themselves were surveilled. White women are overwhelmingly in charge of K-12 classrooms and buildings ([Lynn & Dixon, 2013](#)). When representation in K-12 adults is so limited, more harm is done on all students, but especially LGGNC youth. Stereotypes around masculinity as a Black man are very complex without the stigma of being someone that identifies as LGGNC.

[Rogers & Way \(2016\)](#) spoke about gay male stereotypes in the article “‘I Have Goals to Prove All Those People Wrong and Not Fit into Any One of Those Boxes.’ Paths of Resistance to Stereotypes Among Black Adolescent Males.” Black adolescent males are constantly under scrutiny because of who they are intrinsically, and even more when it comes to being fluid in your gender. Black males are always trying to prove that they are not “bad boys” or “gay” because of certain stereotypes that are being formed around them. The expectation is that Black men are not allowed to identify as gay or bisexual, and, if they do, they are normally trapped in a box of keeping ‘their business to themselves’ and are also not allowed to be allies for those who identify as LGGNC. When thinking or hearing about programs that are geared for Black youth no matter their sexual identity, it is natural for one to look for Black women or men that are leading the program or are at least a part of it.

That being said, it is difficult for there to be exclusive programs for Black girls or boys in certain school districts because it then excludes others ([Price-Dennis & et al., 2017](#)). In trying to have a program that is centered and created for Black students, Black teachers face policies that prevent these programs, and consequently, Black youth are not supported around their needs. It is not being suggested that White women or men cannot help Black students; however, their reliability and level of comfortability lacks because they will not relate to or understand what it is like being Black.

Reports have been done about teen BLGGNCY suicide rates in the past ten years, however, recently there has been a spike in reports surrounding BLGGNCY suicide rates. According to [a 2017 report](#), Black suicide rates are increasing faster than any other racial group in America. For youth ages 10-19, suicide is the second leading cause of death, with Black teens suicide increasing to 4.82 per 100,000 in 2017. BLGGNCY are more likely to report suicidal thoughts than White heterosexual peers. This is due to BLGGNC having to deal with multiple identities in their lives, and this often leads to higher mental health and stress problems.

Recently in Alabama, Nigel, a 15-year-old boy, committed suicide because he was getting bullied at school because he was gay ([Mahr, 2019](#); [Parshall, 2019](#)). Teachers, staff, and administration did nothing to protect him. They are in part responsible for his death. BLGGNCY must be normalized as there is nothing abnormal about them. Youth already have a hard time trying to fit in and the last thing that they need is to have to work through self-esteem issues because of their sexuality.

The goal is for safe space conversations to become the norm inside homes and schools. Black youth are important. No matter their gender and sexual orientation, these students' lives matter just as much as the others. K-12 schools can learn from LGGNCY based community non-profit organizations in their cities or ones that have become known publicly. K-12 schools should also be partnering with these organizations to bring in knowledgeable people who work with this subset of demographics on a consistent basis.

Is a space that was created for LGGNCY still considered safe if BLGGNCY does not feel safe at the meetings? Times have changed but the systems that were put in place to harm LGGNCY have not. LGGNCY should be provided safe spaces in and out of K-12 spaces, in the community, and in their family homes. Unconditional love should be the norm for all students. Some LGGNCY feel comfortable being themselves as "out" and some do not. Society has also made it clear that some people would rather ignore controversial topics like LGGNC people in order to keep the problems from arising.

BLGGNCY that participate in programs like Gay-Straight Alliances or Gay-Straight Spectrum still have problems with feeling as if they belong because of racial differences, as well as adults' biases towards them. When looking at the curriculum that is taught in K-12 schools, there has always been an erasure of students who identify as LGGNC in some states. K-12 curriculum is, has been, and will continue to be heteronormative until laws are changed. This does not give future students the ability to learn how to deal with students who have different identities and specifically identify under the queer spectrum. Harming BLGGNCY is no longer just a racism or homophobia issue, but an ethical and moral issue; these students deserve and need more from those in charge of helping to mold them into productive citizens.

Questions that we as a society must ask ourselves in response to BLGGNCY using unhealthy coping management skills are:

- 1) Who is really responsible when a teenager commits suicide because of being ostracized, bullied, and/or consistently getting into fights about their sexual orientation? Is it the staff, teachers, administration, society, their peers, or parents/family members' fault?
- 2) Is it the person in question who is being ostracized, bullied, and/or consistently getting into fights fault?
- 3) How can we help these students understand themselves and be the best version of themselves they can be?
- 4) How can we create awareness and representation around these identities?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jvania M. Webb is a fourth-year Ph.D. College of Education student in the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies at the University of Missouri - St. Louis. Her research interests are Black Queerness, Social Justice, Women Studies, and Youth Empowerment. One of her aspirations is to change the conversation for Black Queer People, especially youth. She is also the founder of You Are Worthy, Incorporated, an organization committed to providing mentoring and leadership opportunities for Black Queer Youth.

