Dance, Dance, Revolution:
A Closer Look at LGBTQ+ Inclusivity

I do not identify as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or any other letter in the ever-growing sexual identity acronym. However, my identity does include that of a future school counselor who cares deeply about issues surrounding school climate and mental health. Now more than ever in school settings, tolerance and inclusion are emphasized across all realms of diversity. Risk factors are disproportionately present amongst youth who identify as LGBTQ. Fortunately, a great deal has been done to support these young people in schools and in communities at large. The counseling field has become incredibly more sensitive to their needs. These supports, backed by a growing body of legislation and non-discrimination policies, positively affect LGBTQ persons, their peers, parents, teachers, and community members. It appears that the future is full of promise.

Despite the progresses of recent years and the growing support system the LGBTQ community boasts, tension often accompanies efforts to transform these supports into concrete inclusive practices. Creating inclusive community spaces, particularly in schools, is sometimes seen as "overstepping." This perception is motivated by the forces that underlie the problem: unfamiliarity, misunderstanding, and fear. There are drawbacks to promoting equity in settings where inequity has been historically preferred.

How can we get around this barrier to inclusion? All evidence points towards contact. Creating shared spaces and experiences, memories, bonds, and gaining undeniable evidence of one another's shared human identity; these are key to combating the misunderstandings and fears that underlie discrimination. In addition to emphasizing LGBTQ friendly *spaces* (support groups and clubs), perhaps more energy should be spent establishing LGBTQ inclusive *norms*. The goal is to create inclusive environments, so that one day, people no longer use the word 'inclusive' to describe environments. A good point to remember is "separate but equal" is not equal. While I am emphasizing LGBTQ groups specifically here, this is necessary for the liberation of all oppressed groups.

Norms are the manifestation of a community's ideals. There are times, however, when outdated ideals are maintained in enduring norms. High school prom dances serve as an example. The antiquated expectation is that young people dress like young ladies and gentlemen and bring dates of a different gender. Many students do not adhere to this norm in their everyday lives, so why should they set aside their true selves to adopt this outdated notion for one night?

As a little girl, my younger sister repeatedly told me that she wished she were a boy. She felt more like a boy than a girl all her life but accepted herself tentatively in her tween years because her friends did. When she turned 14, she informed her family and friends that she is a pansexual girl. This insight into her gender and sexual identities, paired with the coming-out process, liberated her from confusion about who she was. The night of her senior prom, I helped her put on a dress she did not feel comfortable in and did her hair in a way she never did it. I remember feeling that it was not right, but was not exactly sure what was wrong. This was what every other girl in her class was doing. It was what I did. Learning how to be a counselor who values

tolerance and inclusion forced me to face the fact that I had been discriminating against her masculine gender expression.

The societal expectations surrounding prom blinded me to her agony, and I was telling her that she could be herself, just not on certain days. Recently, I asked her how she felt about her experience. She believes she would have looked and felt better in a suit, accompanied by her crush, a young man, who would have also been wearing a suit. She felt that the expectations surrounding prom and her desire for it to be one of the best nights of her life convinced her to go to it as somebody else.

We are capable of outgrowing outdated rules, but practiced inclusivity requires effort. Student leaders and their faculty advisors must collaborate with their administrators and counselors to establish a series of communications that promote inclusion. Again, this goes for all oppressed groups.

Many barriers to advocacy exist in schools. Busy faculty and staff lack the time, energy, and know-how to become inclusion allies. Many are afraid of push-back or politics. The most pernicious barrier, however, is in our mindsets.

We must remember for whom we work for. As counselors, we have our purposes and agendas for our students and clients. While well-meant and sometimes necessary, these agendas often interfere with our ability to hear people loud and clear. I am overwhelmingly grateful for the counseling training I am undergoing. Without it, I might not have ever understood my sister, what LGBTQ youth could be going through, or realized how important it is to humble and quiet the self in order to truly serve.

> *"If you come here to help me, you're wasting your time. If you come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, let us work together."*
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> - Lilla Watson, Activist, Academic, Artist

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