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Queer Isn't a Choice! Queer Is My Family!

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Article abstract

This article reflects on the way that young people with LGBTQ2S+ parents engaged in the writing of an original song as a form of gender and sexual diversity education during an applied theatre research project. The creative work was self-revelatory, deeply personal, and created a powerful space for both self-exploration and youth-led advocacy. Participants believed that queer is to be celebrated, embraced, and owned. Not as a marginal identity that needs to be questioned and explained, but as an embodied site of emergence and becoming. The song that was written during this workshop celebrates unique family formations while also suggesting that everyone is different in their own way. In doing so, songwriting as affective practice engaged participants in a subversive and empowering reordering of their world. The emergence of new possibilities materialized by centring the stories of, by, and for youth participants as we navigated the tensions between authorship, aesthetics, and pedagogy.

Queer Isn't a Choice! Queer Is My Family!

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Dans cet article, Pamela Baer examine comment des jeunes ayant des parents LGBTQ2S+ se sont engagés dans l'écriture d'une chanson inédite lors d'une formation à la diversité des genres et des sexes offerte dans le cadre d'un projet de recherche en théâtre appliqué. Le processus s'est avéré révélateur et très personnel et a permis de créer un espace puissant pour l'exploration de soi et l'élaboration d'un effort de sensibilisation mené par les jeunes. Les participants à la formation étaient d'avis qu'il faut célébrer, accepter et assumer l'identité queer. Qu'il ne s'agit pas d'une identité marginale que l'on doit remettre en question et expliquer, mais plutôt d'un lieu incarné d'où l'on peut émerger et devenir. La chanson composée dans le cadre de l'atelier célèbre les situations familiales uniques tout en laissant entendre que chaque personne est différente à sa manière. Ainsi, l'écriture de chansons comme pratique affective a amené les participants à réorganiser leur monde de manière subversive et autonomisante. L'émergence de possibilités nouvelles s'est matérialisée en plaçant au cœur du processus les histoires des jeunes participants qu'ils avaient eux-mêmes écrites et qui étaient destinés à leurs semblables, et ce, tout en naviguant les tensions liées à la paternité de l'œuvre, l'esthétique et la pédagogie.

Mots clés : théâtre appliqué, composition de chansons, éducation anti-oppression, affect, LGBTQ+, genre, diversité sexuelle

This article reflects on the way that young people with LGBTQ2S+ parents engaged in the writing of an original song as a form of gender and sexual diversity education during an applied theatre research project. The creative work was self-revelatory, deeply personal, and created a powerful space for both self-exploration and youth-led advocacy. Participants believed that queer is to be celebrated, embraced, and owned. Not as a marginal identity that needs to be questioned and explained, but as an embodied site of emergence and becoming. The song that was written during this workshop celebrates unique family formations while also suggesting that everyone is different in their own way. In doing so, songwriting as affective practice engaged participants in a subversive and empowering reordering of their world. The emergence of new possibilities materialized by centring the stories of, by, and for youth participants as we navigated the tensions between authorship, aesthetics, and pedagogy.

Keywords: applied theatre, songwriting, anti-oppression education, affect, LGBTQ+, gender sexual diversity



In spring 2018, I explored the possibilities of using applied theatre to facilitate gender and sexual diversity education with young people who have at least one LGBTQ2S+¹ parent. Participants

were drawn from around Toronto and met for three days during March Break as myself and my co-facilitator Sadie led everyone in applied theatre activities. Youth were active agents in the research process, guiding the path of inquiry as they shared their stories, wrote songs, choreographed movement, played with puppets, and made books. Applied theatre as an aesthetic and participatory art form materialized in the space between creation, story, and research, building an affective performance that encompassed the stories we live as depicted through intra-actions, movements, and art.

I worked with young people whose families, identities, and experiences are under-represented on stage, in research, and in popular culture, providing an opportunity for them to learn more about themselves through creative processes and sharing their stories (Epstein-Fine and Zook; Goldstein). The applied theatre work was self-revelatory, deeply personal, and created a powerful space for both self-exploration and youth-led advocacy. As a queer-identified woman and parent, this research focus emerged from a desire to advocate for LGBTQ2S+ family formations such as mine and to bring that dialogue to the wider educational community through collaborative performance work. Together artists and young people discovered the possibilities of applied theatre to support youth from LGBTQ2S+ families in challenging heteronormative and cis-normative ideas and discourses.

When creating original performance work with young people there are a number of ethical tensions that emerge between authorship, aesthetic choices, and pedagogical goals. Prentki and Preston talk about the transactions of applied theatre, noting that participation in such projects is a spectrum of practice, and, depending on the goals of the project, theatre can be created with, by, or for community members. It is my belief that in order to engage ethical applied theatre practice, facilitators should strive for performance work that is with, by, *and* for a community. Most applied theatre scholars agree that participation is an ethical priority, yet enacting a form of participation that is co-intentional and useful in the lives of participants can be challenging in practice (Etherton; Preston).

In building stories from the bodies of participants—*with* and *by* participants—facilitators can create a dialogic and affective performance that works towards new materializations, both in emergent *forms* of theatre and in our understanding of the world (Sloan). Applied theatre as an aesthetic and participatory art form materialized in the space between creation and storytelling, building an affective performance that was not limited to the stories the youth told, but rather encompassed the stories they live as depicted through intra-actions, movements, and art. Through my research, the writing of an original song became a collective effort to live differently, creating movement towards a not-yet-known difference in hopes for a disruption to the status quo and a new way of being (Kumashiro; Sloan; Zembylas). This was done by producing narratives of celebration rather than hardship about LGBTQ2S+ families. Through this process youth participants made it clear that they wanted to disrupt assumptions about their lives. This can be seen in particular within the lyrics of the song written by youth participants:

Who's that?
 Why do they look like that?
 Why do they look like a boy?
 And I'm thinking in my head
 Well I have to do *this* again

I have to tell my story again.
So listen up.

Chorus

Don't judge how our families love
Cause you can't choose who you love
Don't judge how our families connect
We all deserve a little respect
Cuz difference is a good thing
Yes my family's different
I said, difference is a great thing
And we're all different in our own way

When someone says,
I don't like LGBTQ people
My first response is to ask a question back.
Why? Tell me why?
What are you afraid of?

Chorus

How was your baby brother born?
Is your mom a boy or what?
Which mom would trade for a dad?
Don't you want to meet your sperm donor?
Are you gay too?
So she's not your real mom?
What do you do on Father's Day and Mother's Day?
How do your parents "do it"?

Chorus

We refuse to conform to your ridiculous standards!
We don't have to love certain people,
Love certain things,
And follow gender stereotypes
Queer isn't a choice!
Queer is my family!

Chorus

The chorus that materialized speaks to a shift in anti-oppressive narrative with lines about our families being different. My co-facilitator Sadie revealed that when she was growing up the narrative was, "We are the same. Our family is just like yours." She was a generation of

queerspawns that sought acceptance through assimilation into cis- and heteronormative culture: her family worked to prove that they were no different from other families (Epstein-Fine and Zook). Ten years later, many of the experiences young people with two mothers face are similar, but there is also a need to declare difference. Participants wanted to say, “My family is different, get over it.” They needed their family’s difference to be a celebration (Kandil and Te Bokkel): their families are not something that should be hidden and assimilated, but instead are something to be recognized.

Participants believed that queer is to be celebrated, embraced, and owned—not as a marginal identity that needs to be questioned and explained, but as an embodied site of emergence and becoming. The song that was written during this workshop celebrates unique family formations while also suggesting that everyone is different in their own way. In doing so, songwriting as affective practice engaged participants in a subversive and empowering reordering of their world. This emergence of new possibilities materialized by centring the stories of, by, and for youth participants as we navigated the tensions between authorship, aesthetics, and pedagogy.

As a form of queer pedagogy, writing an original song together allowed the youth to experience community in marginalization. The aloneness participants expressed feeling when sharing their families’ stories may not carry forward from here. Next time they are questioned about their family, participants might have the laughter and the love from our song ringing in their ears. The songwriting process created a shared energy that took negative experiences and made them about love, power, and community. As an affective queer practice, it was not made powerful through aesthetic choices, but rather it was powerful because these young people were writing about and performing *their own stories* (Baer). As seen in the creation of an original song, reordering affective intensities queers the status quo by putting the body, along with desire, touch, emotion, and feeling at the centre of pedagogy and inquiry (Goldstein et al.).

Note

- 1 I use the acronym LGBTQ2S+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and two-spirit) with the intention of including people who identify as transgender, transsexual, two-spirit, questioning, intersex, asexual, ally, pansexual, agender, gender queer, gender variant, and/or pangender. I recognize that the names people use to describe their gender and sexual identities are fluid, evolving, and in a constant state of becoming, use this initialism recognizing its limits and with deep respect for all names and identities that people choose to describe the ways they are living gender and sexual diversity.

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Contributor

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