

Alumni Spotlight: Justin Smith (BAY '09), Literature Teacher & Grade Level Leader at Democracy Prep Endurance High School

How are you creating/supporting safe spaces for LGBT people in your school community?

Mainly, I'm trying to infuse my English classroom with literature featuring characters from all backgrounds - this year, my classes have read a couple of class novels that focus explicitly on openly queer characters, and while the discussions have not always been easy and smooth, we've grown as a class because of it. Through NYC's LGBT Writers in Schools program, one of my classes read Adam Silvera's *More Happy Than Not* and hosted a visit with him where students got to ask questions and hear his reasoning behind the novel. It was pretty incredible to hear my students, almost all of whom squirmed at the beginning of the year at any discussion of queer themes, ask thoughtful questions about what it means to be a gay man from the Bronx and how he discovered himself. Several of my students wrote alternate endings to his book (students took on the voice of a gay character in their writing!), and many of them remarked that they hadn't thought they could ever really relate to a gay man before, but speaking with him altered their perspective. Hearing students take on different perspectives, stretch themselves to try to understand another person's identity, allowing themselves to see the world differently than they did before is really what being a teacher is all about.

I also have started training teachers at my network in creating classroom environments that are supportive for LGBTQ students, primarily based on GLSEN's survey findings. Both at my own school site and for other teachers in my network, I've tried to spark conversations about where exactly our schools are at. The trainings have made me realize how much a lot of our schools are doing, and also where we're missing the mark - our dress codes aren't consistent across schools, for example, and trans-friendly bathroom policies were not the norm at every school site. I hope that by starting some conversations, teachers have been able to better advocate for their students, and hopefully have a few more tools to create safe spaces.

How has this work been influenced by your role as a TFA alum?

At my institute site in 2009, the training on LGBTQ+ issues was pretty surface-level - it primarily consisted of two testimonials of teachers who came out to their classes and were celebrated by their schools and students. This didn't jive with my own experience in school and in the world, and also didn't give me any tools to address issues when they popped up in my classroom. My amazing curriculum specialist, Melissa Oliver, could tell that we weren't satisfied with the training, so she planned an additional, opt-in training. Every corps member at my site came, and it was a foundational moment for me where I felt supported by my peers and leaders.

In what ways would you like to see TFA New York amplify its engagement of LGBT corps members and alumni?

I've seen a lot of growth over the last seven years, and the prominence of queer communities in TFA's communication with alumni has definitely increased. I can only hope that corps members are being trained in competencies relating to LGBTQ+ folks, and that they're reading, talking and thinking about what it means to have classrooms that serve all of their students.

What inspired you to join the corps?

Academics were always a safe haven for me when I was growing up. I grew up on a farm in Tennessee, and came out when I was fifteen. High school was an incredibly unsafe place for me - physically and emotionally, I never felt comfortable at my school. I remember visiting another school for a tournament and seeing safe space stickers up in all of their classroom windows, and I was totally overwhelmed. I wanted desperately to go to a school where the teachers cared enough about their LGBT students to publicly claim their support for them.

I wanted to teach because I wanted to create spaces like that for students. I'm still striving to figure out how to do that, exactly, but it's so important to me that students feel safe in their own skin in my classroom. I don't think we can address educational inequity without making sure all of our students can safely be themselves when they walk through our doors - a student who feels unsafe cannot learn in our rooms and we must prioritize not just academics, but accepting spaces.

What advice would you give to current corps members and alumni regarding being LGBT in school settings?

If you're not sure what to do, find allies that you know get and support you to talk things through with. We all teach in different schools in different communities and come from different backgrounds - there's no one way to be an LGBT educator, and there are many different "right" ways to be LGBT in schools. It's important to prioritize your own well-being and the well-being of your students.

Has any one thing or series of things revolutionized how you approach working with LGBT students/corps members or alumni?

I've worked with people who are some of the most outspoken allies to the queer community that I've met, but who have also committed pretty serious microaggressions against myself and my students - from cracking jokes about boys who like Justin Bieber to imitating the way that I walk, people who vigorously claim allyship and really want to be supportive of LGBTQ folks make missteps. I've learned that part of my role is not to ignore those things or harbor resentment, but instead to trust that others are doing their best and need dialogue in order to understand how their actions can affect others, even when they don't think there's anything homophobic or offensive in their words.

Given your experience and commitment to this work, please tell us what you know to be true?

You can't be what you can't see - you have to see and hear and read about people like you before you can really see yourself in the world. An enormous part of our role as educators is to help our students discover