



Pride and pedagogy: The reality for LGBTQ+ teachers

Teaching students and experienced educators talk about being queer in a shifting environment

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Robin Chenoweth: In the past two years, a spate of similar bills has swept through state houses across the country. In all, watch groups have tracked 49 bills that have passed into law in the United States that affect gender-affirming care, what can be taught and said in schools, which bathrooms students can use and which books belong in the library. These bills mostly impact school environments. And that has one group of folks feeling pretty apprehensive. LGBTQ educators have been protected by federal law — Title VII of the Civil Rights Act — that according to a Supreme Court decision in 2020 outlaws discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. But now protections like those are feeling tenuous. And that has some educators — and some teaching and learning students at Ohio State’s College of Education and Human Ecology — wary about what will come next. Inspire's own Maya Stepnick, an incoming junior in the primary education program, talked to fellow students and two seasoned educators about how today’s education climate is impacting their choice to teach. Here’s Maya.

Maya Stepnick: I’m studying primary education at Ohio State University, and I also identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. These two pieces of my identity sometimes intersect in a way that makes others feel uncomfortable. This makes me a minority in the education field, and has at times dissuaded me from wanting to be a teacher. There’s such a magnifying glass already on teachers’ lives, being queer can add an extra layer of vulnerability that can feel isolating and scary. Especially right now. Naturally, I’m not alone in feeling this way.

Ashley Telfer: I don't believe in education if it's not inclusive, and obviously, with everything that's happened, that is just not a possibility, especially in Ohio. And I just, I can't stand for

that, like, especially being a queer teacher. Like, it's just something I cannot do and, and who knows how bad it's going to get?

Maya Stepnick: According to Brown University, approximately 4.8% of non-LGBTQ+ identifying people chose to become teachers, while only around 3.4% of LGBTQ+ individuals follow the same career path. This discrepancy could have negative implications for school districts struggling to find teachers, as well as for queer educators and queer students. I'm Maya Stepnick, an intern for the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast. How can we navigate a field that is not always welcoming to queer people? If people who would make great teachers are discouraged from entering the field, what does the profession lose? And how will students suffer? What are parents, communities and districts afraid of? Robin Chenoweth is the Inspire Podcast producer. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

Maya Stepnick: Like many topics that explore the intersections of how people identify, the experiences of queer educators cannot be put into one box. They can be drastically different, dependent on many factors. What state does this person live and work in? Are they also a person of color? What are the politics of the district? Is this person able to pass as cisgender or straight? How rigid is the school administration? What grade level are they teaching? What supports are in place? Not every queer teacher's story is the same. For some, being gay can be a complete non-issue. Or you could be fired for it.

Ella Lucas-Palmer: My name is Ella Lucas-Palmer. My pronouns are she, her. I'm currently in the dual licensure special education program to be certified in mild to moderate and moderate to intense K through 12.

Maya Stepnick with Ella Lucas-Palmer: Have you had any concerns about going into education in terms of your own identity as someone in the LGBTQ community? Or has that not been something on your mind?

Ella Lucas Palmer: Yeah, I would say definitely within the past year, and specifically one class that I took that really made me start to think about it more so, that it really is being a minority as an LGBTQ student now and then teacher in the future. And if I think back to my own days in high school and elementary school, on the very first day of school, you go in and the teacher has an "about me" PowerPoint and their beautiful pictures of their kids and their husband and their dogs. And it's amazing. I love that. ... I do think it really helps build connections with students, knowing that teachers are real people. ... But if you were to think about that as an LGBTQ perspective, and to then instead say, I go into my first day of school and I have this super cute PowerPoint of me and my partner, who identifies as a woman, just to see two women together, you're going to get questions from kids. You're going to get kids who tell their parents, and then you're going to get angry emails from the

parents. It might go as far as the school board. I've had teachers who have pictures of their family on their desk, which, again, is great. I don't necessarily feel like I could even freely do that without it maybe drawing questions in places and work opportunities. Now, I have kids ask, "Do you have a boyfriend?" Because kids want to be a part of your life, and they want to know that, and when those boundaries are there, I think it is completely fine to be able to share that with kids. But it's just another level of having to think about the repercussions of something as simple as being with my partner for three years and wanting to share that, introducing myself as someone who has a wife and a family at home, it really is a whole other set that you have to deal with instead of I'm a woman and I have a husband, that's great.

Maya Stepnick: This idea that queer educators have to pick and choose what is "appropriate" or "allowed" within their classrooms is something that came up during just about all of my conversations. Here is incoming senior Ashley Telfer sharing her concerns about the potential of getting pushback for being open with students.

Maya Stepnick with Ashley Telfer: One of my concerns and fears is, like, having to pick and choose districts based on what their policies are in terms of, like, teachers and how we show up. I've heard lots of stories of other people in education having to hide their identity or their gender identity, and it definitely, like, scared me away at first in terms of, is this something I'm going to have to combat? Like, I know so many people who are so accepted by the places they work at...

Ashley Telfer: Yeah.

Maya Stepnick Ashley Telfer: And it's not a problem at all. But I also know the opposite. So, I guess my question to you is, I'm curious. I've heard both things from multiple different people. ... Is that something you're worried about, or is that not really something that you feel will affect your teaching?

Ashley Telfer: It's definitely something that I've thought about. I think I have a certain level of privilege as a typically straight presenting person. I think that that's like something that a lot of queer educators don't have the privilege of because they present more queer, or they present more as, you know, not as the gender that they were born as, or whatnot. And so, it's easier for them to get targeted in a situation like that than it would be for me. So not that necessarily I ever think that I would put myself in a situation where I intentionally am not sharing my identity because I am fearful that I'll be kind of singled out or to be used against me. But you know, if I'm in a situation where I'm in a school and I don't realize. ... You know how they operate at the beginning of the school year, I could survive for the rest of the school year and ... kind of shield myself a little bit, if that's necessary. So, it's something that scares me, because I don't, like ... why would a school ever be like that? That's what

kind of frustrates me is, I can't imagine there ever being a school where I feel scared to, like, share who I am. But I know that that happens, and so think that's what worries me the most about it. ... I mean, especially right now, it's something that you have to be aware of, because who knows what people are going to think that they can get away with at the current time.

Maya Stepnick with Ashley Telfer: Absolutely.

Maya Stepnick: Joey Fadley, an incoming junior in the college, is especially worried about new policies going into place in Ohio that will affect all educators, not just queer ones.

Maya Stepnick with Joey Fadley: How are you feeling right now about your major, about your career path? It seems right now that you feel pretty good about it. ... Do you have any concerns, or anything like that?

Joey Fadley: Not with, like, the job.

Maya Stepnick with Joey Fadley: Okay.

Joey Fadley: But like, politically, yes, if that makes sense. ... Especially now...

Maya Stepnick with Joey Fadley: Yeah.

Joey Fadley: I feel like I was going into this, and then the election happened, and then I feel like everything is crashing and burning, but I still want to power through it. ... I do think things are going to be a little weird. I do think things are going to change dramatically from how I was taught in school. ... Even though things are going to be bad, I feel like I can still teach, be a good teacher and, like, help these students, for what they deserve and what they need.

Maya Stepnick: Fadley plans to be as open about his personal life as his straight counterparts are. He wants to be treated with the same respect as any other authentic, hardworking, dedicated teacher. When asked about bringing up future partners in front of students here was his response:

Joey Fadley: I would implement it as much as straight people do.

Maya Stepnick with Joey Fadley: Yeah.

Joey Fadley: I mean, you know when in elementary school, people would say, like, my husband, or my hubby, or whatever. I would definitely say, you know, my husband. I would have pictures of him and my kids.

Maya Stepnick with Joey Fadley: Yeah.

Maya Stepnick: Fadley doesn't believe that doing this is dangerous or harmful to students. In fact, representation serves the opposite purpose. Here is Bexley City Schools Principal David Schottner speaking about representation. Schottner completed the college's principal licensure program in 2019.

David Schottner: I currently serve as the principal of Cassingham Elementary in Bexley City Schools. It is the elementary school that serves central Bexley. ... I feel like everybody deserves the right to be who they are and not have to hide anything. If you've never experienced hiding who you are, it is a miserable, depressing, lonely place that I lived for 24 years. And I don't wish it on anybody. Part of the reason I became an educator is to be that role model for that child who felt lonely and needed a connection. Representation in every way is so important. ... Everybody deserves to feel like they are important, they are valued, they are heard. And I think that starts in the elementary grade levels, where kids can feel lonely and isolated. So as teachers, we need to be diverse so that the kids feel seen and represented. So, I think that is why it's important to have gay educators, educators of color, educators of different religions, educators of all backgrounds, so that all different perspectives are brought to the table. I think that's so crucially important. ... We are a part of that village that help parents raise students and raise children to become the amazing adults that they can be. So, I think that's why it's really important that we are able to be out in ourselves, to show kids kind of, kind of take it down a dark path here, but the number of suicides for LGBTQ teens is horrifying. So, if, if it just takes one connection and one adult to get involved in a youth's life and say, "You matter; you are worth it. You need to stick around because you're amazing." One person can save someone else's life. So that's why we have to have queer educators to show our queer youth that you matter. It does get better, and we're here for you.

Maya Stepnick: Joey Fadley also hopes to be this welcoming, safe person for all of his future students.

Joey Fadley: If I'm teaching, like, younger grades, especially, I might be ... their first door open into queer world. They might think like, whoa, men can marry men? Women can marry women?

Maya Stepnick with Joey Fadley: Yeah. ... If a student came to you with questions or anything like that ... you would have conversations with them...

Joey Fadley: I would, yeah. It would definitely be like a student-led conversation. Like, I would definitely answer the questions truthfully, in an appropriate manner.

Maya Stepnick with Joey Fadley: Yeah, because there's an age-appropriate way to do everything.

Joey Fadley: Exactly.

Maya Stepnick: I asked Ashley Telfer what she thinks would happen if she were in a situation where she wasn't allowed to be out at work.

Ashley Telfer: I definitely think that if I was required to, like, hide my identity as a teacher in the school that I was in, it would very much put me on edge every single day being in the classroom. And I would not be able to be the best educator that I could be, because I would be kind of in constant duress that I was going to be found out or that I would be thought of a certain way. Because at the end of the day, my identity is my identity, but when I'm at school, I'm a teacher, and that's all that matters. You know what I'm saying?

Maya Stepnick with Ashley Telfer: Absolutely.

Ashley Telfer: And so, I don't, I feel like it would cause an unnecessary level of stress that would, in turn, impact my students, because I wouldn't be giving them 100%. You know, I would be giving them a portion of that, because the other portion would be going to kind of this anxiety that I have about my situation and everything that's going on around me. So, I think that that's one very major thing, and I also know how that feels, because I spent so much of my life, you know, feeling like I had to hide, and having that constant anxiety. And so, I know how it impacts me, and I know that it would be a big problem for my teaching.

John Eckenrode: I'm John Eckenrode. I use he, him pronouns, and my current title is sixth through eighth grade English language arts elective teacher in Reynoldsburg City Schools. Being a queer kid in rural Ohio, northwest Ohio, like you would understand, it was hard and it was anxiety-inducing.

Maya Stepnick with John Eckenrode: Yeah.

John Eckenrode: And so, I think that was something that really pushed me away from going in education right away.

Maya Stepnick with John Eckenrode: Oh, yeah.

John Eckenrode: And then I decided I wanted to be that person that can help other students feel good about themselves and just be there for kids, that I didn't have. I didn't have a representation. I didn't feel important to any of my teachers. ... When you get in as a teaching role, one of the questions people ask, is like, "What teacher made you want to become a teacher?" Or like, "What teacher made that lasting impact on you?" -And my response is, like, none of them.

Maya Stepnick: Having queer representation or acceptance growing up means a lot. Ella Lucas-Palmer.

Ella Lucas-Palmer: I think that whenever I had a teacher who even had an LGBTQ flag in the room, it made me feel more seen. So, I think I do kind of have that drive and that thought in the back of my mind that I would like to be able to be proudly a part of that LGBTQ community, so that kids at the back of the class, you know, who are struggling with their own identity feel seen and feel like they are represented as someone who is an adult and you know, in whatever profession, even if they don't want to be a teacher. Just taking up that space really does make all the difference. And seeing that space being taken up by people who are like you, look like you, act like you, whatever it may be. So, I think that is a big driving factor for me anyways.

Maya Stepnick: I spoke with Fadley about how kids, especially the younger ones, are typically curious, but also welcoming and accepting. They appreciate vulnerability and trust.

Joey Fadley: The most I get is, "Are you a girl or a boy?"

Maya Stepnick with Joey Fadley: Yes.

Joey Fadley: That's what I get a lot.

Maya Stepnick with Joey Fadley: Yeah. I've been getting that, too. ... And I say, "What do you think?"

Joey Fadley: "What are your thoughts? What am I today?"

Maya Stepnick: What scares us most are the reactions of parents, coworkers and administrators. Not the students. Ashley Telfer.

Ashley Telfer: People are so scared that gay people are indoctrinating children.

Maya Stepnick with Ashley Telfer: Making them gay.

Ashley Telfer: It's very strange. It's very strange because...

Maya Stepnick with Ashley Telfer: It's an obsession.

Ashley Telfer: It is, and I don't understand why people are so obsessed with children's gender identity or their sexual orientation, because kids don't really care.

Maya Stepnick with Ashley Telfer: No.

Ashley Telfer: And I don't care, as a queer teacher...if my student is gay or if I think that they're gay. I just kind of let them be whoever they want to be, because that has been proven to be the most beneficial to their development. You know, just because my kid who

looks like a boy, decides he wants to wear a dress, doesn't mean he's trans or gay, you know?

Maya Stepnick with Ashley Telfer: Yeah.

Ashley Telfer: It's just a very strange, it's a very strange obsession that they have with it.

Maya Stepnick: As I talked more with each person, it became clear to me that queer people in education are in such a unique place in terms of balancing the expectations of being teachers with the scrutiny from others about how we approach our privacy and personal lives while at work. It is really tough when others call into question your qualifications in working with students because you are gay or trans. Someone close to Lucas-Palmer had recently posted their harmful views on social media. And this feels threatening to her.

Ella Lucas-Palmer: Some of the things that he'd post are just horrible, horrible messages that are being hidden behind this message of spreading religion. And ... again, respect to whatever religion. But if your religion is interfering with someone else's existence...

Maya Stepnick with Ella Lucas-Palmer: No respect to hate.

Ella Lucas-Palmer: Yeah. No respect to hate, absolutely.

Maya Stepnick: We also talked about a class discussion from a course we were both in our freshman year, School and Society.

Maya Stepnick with Ella Lucas-Palmer: And, I mean, that's a conversation that we had in that class, that we had together...

Ella Lucas-Palmer: Yeah.

Maya Stepnick with Ella Lucas-Palmer: Of, there was the parallel drawn that people brought up, like, I'm trying to remember exactly what...

Ella Lucas-Palmer: Oh, my gosh.

Maya Stepnick with Ella Lucas-Palmer: You know what I'm talking about?

Ella Lucas-Palmer: With the shirt?

Maya Stepnick with Ella Lucas-Palmer: Yes.

Ella Lucas-Palmer: Yes.

Maya Stepnick with Ella Lucas-Palmer: I think we should share that.

Ella Lucas Palmer: Well, I said, if I wear a shirt that says holy matrimony is between one man and one woman, that is inherently harmful, to a wide group of students. And then

someone said, “Well, if you wear a ‘love is love’ shirt, then that could also be harming a group of students.

Maya Stepnick with Ella Lucas-Palmer: And you're like, is it?

Ella Lucas Palmer: It's not.

Maya Stepnick with Ella Lucas-Palmer: Because “love is love” doesn't say anything about love is only love if it's gay love. Like, that's not what that means at all.

Ella Lucas Palmer: I mean, we looked at each other in that moment and just we were like, jaws on the floor. I think that that scares me a little bit.

Maya Stepnick with Ella Lucas Palmer: It was a little scary. ... It's just such a bizarre parallel to draw.

Ella Lucas-Palmer: It is.

Maya Stepnick: Like any other discrimination or workplace harassment, even the fear of this “could” happen to me because it has happened to others is strong enough to discourage people, including myself at times, from wanting to become a teacher. No one wants to feel unappreciated at their place of work, and no one wants their integrity as a professional to be questioned simply because of their gender or sexual orientation. Here are some stories about the good and bad sides of being an open, out, queer educator. I asked John Eckenrode about some of the ways his experience as a teacher are unique because of his identity as a gay man.

Maya Stepnick with John Eckenrode: One thing I'm curious about, because you're in middle school, have you had a lot of students ... come out to you, or like, ask you for advice or disclose things to you? ... Is that something that has happened?

John Eckenrode: Yeah. I probably have had probably about 20 to 25 kids in my eight years come out to me personally. And then I've had some just generalized come up to me and be like, “Hey, this is now my pronouns and my name.” And it's really nice to have that moment with students. And that's what's really nice, to also be openly queer and happy. If there are students in here that are queer, there is someone here who is not scared, or that is like them, yeah, and openly like them.

Maya Stepnick: Earlier that day, Eckenrode had just come out to one of his classes for the first time. That can be a double-edged sword, he said.

John Eckenrode: Actually, today was the first time I came out to one of my classes, and they just kept asking, like, if I had a wife.

Maya Stepnick with John Eckenrode: Yeah?

John Eckenrode: And I said no. Then one kid, kind of like, made a snide like, “Ask if he has a husband?” And I was like, “No, I’m not married.” And then they asked me if I had a girlfriend. I was like, “No, I don’t have a girlfriend.” Then the kid said, kind of snide again, “Ask if he has boyfriend.” I was like, this isn't important to what we're learning about. And I so I told them, and then, like, a bunch of the boys started laughing and giggling about it. And I'm like, see, this is not safe, still... Like, it's still not safe. And obviously I don't really care what those kids think in that sense, because they're children and they're sixth grade boys, it's not a big deal to me as an adult.

Maya Stepnick with John Eckenrode: But it doesn't feel great.

Maya Stepnick: It is common for queer people to get remarks like these from students. Oftentimes they are rooted in misunderstanding or curiosity, not hate. The same week that I had this conversation with John, a fourth-grade boy at my placement asked me repeatedly if I had a boyfriend and if I wanted a husband and kids. He wouldn’t drop it. Eventually, I did tell this kid that I do want to get married, but I want a wife not a husband. This was a student who I know pretty well and trusted enough to share this with. Unfortunately, he responded with “Ew, that’s nasty!” When things like this happen, it can be hard to just push forward, redirect the conversation and not take things personally. There is always this fear in the back of my mind that kid could go tell other people and something could happen to me. John shared a similar sentiment.

John Eckenrode: Straight people get to be comfortable talking about their partners nonstop, right? They can have pictures of their partners everywhere. They could talk about what they did with the weekend. Like, it's their background and their screensavers at work.

Maya Stepnick with John Eckenrode: Yeah.

John Eckenrode: They get to be so open and comfortable with it,

Maya Stepnick with John Eckenrode: Yeah.

John Eckenrode: And I can't be without a fear of being made fun of, or fear of like, now I'm actually nervous. Like, is a parent going to say something? Or, because we know the place that we're in right now, and we're seeing stuff happening with families and parents coming in and complaining about teachers, and school boards are siding with them. And school boards need to do better.

Maya Stepnick: Support, like the support that Eckenrode receives in his current district, makes a huge, positive difference. Queer people tend to band together within education,

as we do in many places, so finding support within your district or in any capacity can also be very beneficial.

Maya Stepnick with John Eckenrode: Have you been able to find other queer educators in your school and your district?

John Eckenrode: Yes, actually. This is really cool. So I play in Stonewall Sports.

Maya Stepnick with John Eckenrode: Yeah, I've heard of that.

John Eckenrode: So I play kickball right now, and there's a couple queer educators on our team. ... And right now, we're actually kind of organizing a queer happy hour meetup monthly. And so that's kind of getting started now. To kind of build a culture of queer educators and having a support system for each other because of how stressful it is. And I think that I'm really excited to see that. ... My last boss, who also you interviewed, David Schottner ... it was awesome to have him there and have that support system as your admin there, because he's on your side. He's going to support you. He's going to understand what you're going through and so making sure you do find that queer space.

Maya Stepnick: Having been in the field for over 23 years, David Schottner's reassurance and lived experiences were helpful to hear as a young person. He has had past experiences where he was not supported as an out, gay educator. Thankfully, he is now in a district where he is well supported. I asked him to speak a bit about these two experiences and how the support that he had affected how he was able to show up as a teacher.

David Schnottner: So, I think one factor here is geography, and one factor here is time. When I started teaching, it was 2001, which was, you know, being gay was much different, then. I'm actually listening to a re-watch podcast for *Will and Grace*, and it's taking me back 25 years, which is so fun. But they have so many good discussions about the world was such a different place. We had gay bars and gay clubs because it's the only place we could go to feel accepted. ... So, it was a completely different world. We were much more isolated. We had to find our people and kind of stick with our people. So, my first three years, when I taught in Cincinnati, I was still in the closet, which was difficult. I feel like some people knew, but it ... it was something we didn't talk about. When I was able to move up to Columbus in 2005, that's when I was able to come out, be myself. So, when I got my job in Reynoldsburg, it was a fresh, new start. I came in as the new gay teacher. Everyone knew it. And during my teaching years, it ... you know, there was still some hate, some negative comments. But when you work with younger students — I taught third grade— they don't care. They love everybody. Kids are great. If I had any issues, it was from parents. As I moved up the ranks and became the teachers' union president, we opened up a new school, a STEM school, which I loved. And that's when I kind of had my first taste of

in-your-face discrimination. The year was 2011, so we still didn't have any equality in Ohio. We had no protection in our teachers' contract in Reynoldsburg. You know, the language today says everyone's treated equally based on race, creed, religion, sexual orientation, the whole thing, but sexual orientation was not included, definitely back in 2011. So when we went to open the STEM school ...

Maya Stepnick: The school put out its first newsletter to parents. It was submitted to the district for approval.

David Schnottner: Everyone just gave their background, their family, blah, blah, blah. And they came back to me and said, "Well, you referenced your husband." "Yes, I did." "Well, we don't know if you can do that." "Well, my female colleagues also referenced their husbands." And they said, "We understand, but if parents object, we're not sure we could help you." ... So, the insinuation was, if a parent complains, "What are you going to do? Are you going to fire me for being gay?" Well, that's actually a thing. And that was a thing in the early 2000s. As I learned through my teacher union colleagues, there were people in central Ohio who were fired from being teachers simply for being out and gay, which is a terribly scary thought to think of, but it existed even in the early 2000s.

Maya Stepnick: There were two times when parents requested that principals remove their children from Schottner's class.

David Schottner: I said, "Can you tell me more about that?" Because I already knew, but I'm like, "You need to tell me." They're like, "Well, they didn't really want ..." They always try to mask it as, "They didn't really want a male influence." ... "But there's another straight male teacher right across the hall, so let's just call this what it is." They're like, "Okay, they don't want to be with a gay teacher." And I said, "Why did you do that?" And both of them said, "It was to protect you." At the time, I didn't understand and I didn't agree. Now being in the principal's chair, I get it, and I appreciate it.

Maya Stepnick: It's clear there are still challenges that queer educators face... it is also evident, though, that there is hope — hope in community. Ashley Telfer.

Ashley Telfer: I know obviously, though, in every school there's at least one or two queer people, and so I think that those people kind of band together and support each other. And so I hope that ... if I am in a situation like that, that I can find those few people that I can kind of lean on, and they can, we can lean on each other.

Maya Stepnick: And hope in perseverance. Ella Lucas Palmer.

Ella Lucas Palmer: I won't name her, but my favorite thing that my instructor says is that if these human rights are getting taken away, if I am not allowed at the end of the day to say,

these people exist... Point blank, period. They exist. If I'm not allowed to say that, then we're going to go underground. But we're still going to say it.

Maya Stepnick with Ella Lucas Palmer: Yeah.

Ella Lucas Palmer: We're still going to be here. We're still going to be teaching. I don't know about the rest of the world, but at some point we have to put our jobs on the line to protect kids, to protect this generation that we are teaching. I don't want to be a factory cog. I did not get into teaching to be a factory cog. ... At the end of the day, we're still going to be here. We're still going to be talking. We're still going to be teaching.

Maya Stepnick: David Schottner and Joey Fadley agree.

David Schottner: If you are an education major listening out there, my advice to you is just pay attention. Listen to what's going on at the state level and the federal level and the local level about laws, because they do affect your job in the classroom. They do affect things you can say and do to students.

Joey Fadley: If you're queer, be yourself in a classroom, don't hide who you are.

Ella Lucas Palmer: At the end of the day my message is, take up space.

Maya Stepnick: Ella Lucas Palmer.

Ella Lucas Palmer: Being there, taking up space in your race, taking up space in your identity, because you exist and you deserve to exist. Whatever you believe in, whether it be religion, spirituality, you are here. And that is a gift to me. It is a gift to the people around you. You're here and you deserve to take up space.

Maya Stepnick: And for any current educators who might be listening, whether or not you identify as queer here is some advice. Joey Fadley.

Joey Fadley: If you're straight, keep an open mind about your queer students and your queer coworkers. That's the best way to be a straight ally.

Maya Stepnick: John Eckenrode.

John Eckenrode: Straight coworkers, admin, they need to do better with being proactive and doing the work on their own and using queer people as supports and including them, but not the center all. I should not be being the only one that focuses on making sure our curriculum has a queer literature in it.

Maya Stepnick with John Eckenrode: Yeah, that's exhausting. And that's not your job.

John Eckenrode: It's not my job, right.

Maya Stepnick with John Eckenrode: You can't be the only one.

John Eckenrode: I can't be because I'm also one person. I am a gay, white male. I have a certain amount of viewpoints and experiences that I can come from.

Maya Stepnick with John Eckenrode: Yeah.

John Eckenrode: So, we need these other people working as well.

Maya Stepnick: Ashley Telfer.

Ashley Telfer: I think if I would have had a teacher that not even they were that identity, but they were openly supportive of that identity, that would have made a huge, huge difference in just my perception of all of it. ... Growing up, it was always kind of something that was not ideal and so, and it wasn't something that was talked about. ... And I do think that if I had me when I was younger, even just someone who's not afraid to just like say, like, oh, be who you want to be. ... It would have made a world of difference.

Ella Lucas Palmer: At the end of the day, respect.

Maya Stepnick: Ella Lucas Palmer.

Ella Lucas Palmer: If I were an intervention specialist in a classroom with another teacher, if that teacher is not understanding, not respectful, of my identity, of what I choose to have up in the classroom, of what I choose to show in my about-me PowerPoint, I think kids are so intuitive and in tune and empathetic that they will pick up on. They will see that there's tension. Kids are nosy. They will figure it out, and I think that makes a huge impact in a classroom environment.

Ella Lucas Palmer: I feel everything boils down to is, just respect, and giving people space to exist as they are, because the moment that we don't is when we start to snuff out people.

Maya Stepnick: Respect. What a simple, beautiful notion. Right now, things are scary. New bills are being passed, and teachers are losing support. When things are scary and unknown, community, support, trust and respect— from parents, from coworkers, from allies — can carry us through.

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