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Arts on the Ground: Camp fYrefly as an LGBTTTQ&A Arts-Informed, Community-Based Education Project

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Abstract: This paper investigates the arts-informed, social-learning-for-leadership model used in an annual summer camp to help LGBTTTQ&A youth and young adults develop a resilient mindset to assist them to survive and thrive.

Introduction: Camp fYrefly as a Social-Learning-for-Leadership Model

We started Camp fYrefly (www.fyrefly.ualberta.ca) as a university-community educational initiative in Edmonton, Alberta in 2004. The camp, now held annually, is a lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, two-spirited, queer, and allied (LGBTTTQ&A) arts-informed, community-based education project that we describe as arts on the ground. This means the camp employs art forms as vehicles to enact a social-learning-for-leadership model that is communal, collaborative, productive, and ambitiously transformative. Indeed, art forms drive the camp's nonformal and informal social learning that aims to help LGBTTTQ&A youth and young adults (generally 14 to 24 years old) to build their leadership potential so they can make a positive difference in their own lives and in their home/group-home environments, formal learning spaces, and communities. Our research indicates that arts-based educational strategies have significant utility in helping individuals engage in social learning (Grace & Wells, 2007, in press a). In using an arts-informed, community-based social learning model at Camp fYrefly, LGBTTTQ&A participants link artistic expression and representation to what it means to be a proactive leader who advocates for self and others in a spectral community marked by an array of sex, sexual, and gender differences. They learn that the camp is a safe and dynamic space to engage in a lived process of arts-informed, community-based education in which all are ethically bound to be responsive and responsible as they learn lessons in becoming resilient in community.

Our camp philosophy and programming emphasize a by-participant-for-participant approach in which young adults (generally 18 years and older) mentor younger camp participants who have declared their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, or who are questioning or coming to terms with their sex, sexual, and gendered positionalities. These peer mentors are assisted by adult facilitators; they have already had leadership training at previous camps or through *Out Is In*, our arts-informed, community-education project that we run throughout the year (Grace & Wells, 2007). At Camp fYrefly, we emphasize take and give: take what you need from the camp and give back to others, whenever possible, through subsequent community involvement. In the spirit of nurturing leadership, a youth advisory panel guides the development and delivery of a wide-ranging program. In addition, more than 50 individual and corporate sponsors donate their time, talents, and financial support to make the camp a viable reality.

Camp fYrefly—the fourth camp is planned for August 2007—has been filling a void for participants marginalized and disaffected due to their sex, sexual, or gender

differences. These individuals often see limited future possibilities in life, learning, and employment. Each year about 55 youth and young adults join us for four days to focus on individual and social development, the enhancement of leadership potential, and the promotion of health, wellbeing, and resilience. Youth from across Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and British Columbia attended last year's camp. Each participant had completed a camp application, as they were comfortable and able, in which they spoke about their life histories, motivations, learning needs, and talents and skills in relation to coming to camp. This provided the planning team with background information to help them plan activities to meet diverse needs in a diverse community. Participants were asked to pay a \$25.00 commitment fee; those unable to pay the fee could volunteer to provide an in-kind service at the camp such as doing setup for particular activities. We covered all other camp expenses through our ongoing fundraising efforts. To ensure that Camp fYrefly is a safe, inclusive, and respectful environment for all youth participants and adults, everyone has to abide by a few ground rules based on an ethic of mutual respect and personal security. We emphasize and accommodate the spectrum of participants who come to our camp community. Camp fYrefly is structured in such a way that we are also able to accommodate special needs (dietary, for example) and health requests.

Many participants come to camp feeling stigmatized and ashamed due to the heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia that remain pervasive in education, culture, and society. Many of these youth are inclined to act out of a sense of frustration, often exhibiting a range of socially disruptive behaviors that can include social withdrawal, drug-and-alcohol abuse, suicide ideation or attempts, and physical and/or verbal aggression (Grace & Wells, in press b). Camp fYrefly works to counter this social exclusion and fallout. As a multi-faceted social-learning encounter, the camp can be a powerful and unique experience for participants. Our goal is to have each participant return home with an empowered sense of self, and with a network of supportive friendships. During the camp, we create a safe space for LGBTTTQ&A participants to dialogue and engage in self and communal expression and representation. Since LGBTTTQ&A youth and young adults are a minority often underserved in many traditional educational programs and services (Grace & Wells, in press b), our social-learning-for-leadership model fills a void in their individual and social learning. Youth tell us that, for them, the camp is about being, becoming, belonging, safety, connection, and finding role models. Here are a few of their responses to the camp evaluation item “I couldn’t believe it when ...:”

- *People said “gay” or “queer” without glancing around to see who would hear them. This was my first time in a queer-safe space.*
- *People talked so openly about being gay, without passing any judgments.*
- *I gained so much support and positive feedback when I had my artwork displayed for the talent show.*
- *The Imperial Court of the Wild Rose [–Edmonton’s drag king/queen organization–] visited us. That rocked!*
- *There were so many youth who took on leadership roles and did really well.*
- *Fantastic, amazing, and inspirational experience. Great youth and the adult leaders were down right awesome!*

Role modeling is important to camp participants. Seeing accomplished LGBTTTQ&A adult facilitators offers them the hope and possibility that they can be

achievers, too. We consider interactions with adult mentors who want to give today's Generation Q (queer) something they never had to be a vital component of the camp. These dedicated adults who volunteer their time and talents have included educators, counselors, police officers, doctors, clergy, artists, musicians, dramatists, dancers, writers, and queer cultural workers. Working with the young adults who function as peer youth workers, this collective provides a dynamic experience that is jam-packed with drama, music, writing, visual art, empowerment and reflection exercises, anti-oppression work, personal growth opportunities, healthy socialization, and in-depth learning activities about specific youth topics and social issues. There are day and evening workshops, with designated time set aside to engage in personal reflection, community building, and social activities. Workshop topics have included: leadership skill-building; confronting bias and dealing with diversity; combating preconceived notions and confronting stereotypes; coming out and coming-to-terms with sex, sexual, and gender differences; negotiating relationships with peers, parents, guardians, and care givers; healthy dating and relationship skills; bullying and discrimination; learning LGBTTQ history; challenging oppression through art; health and safety; participatory drama; networking; self-esteem and resilience building; and nurturing ourselves and our knowledge. As a collaborative and strategic engagement in program planning and delivery, the collective focuses on social learning that emphasizes self-development, healthy socialization, empowerment, critical reflection, consciousness-raising, and anti-oppression work. In sum, as LGBTTQ&A camp participants tell us, Camp fYrefly is about *fostering, Youth, resiliency, energy, fun, leadership, yeah!*

LGBTTQ&A Youth and Young Adults and the Trend toward Resilience

In our work with sexual-minority youth and young adults, we have gained first-hand experience regarding how challenging being, becoming, and belonging can be for them. Thus, working within a politics of hope and possibility, we focus the Camp fYrefly experience on empowering camp participants so they can work to build a healthy and happy future free from ignorance, fear, and the symbolic (like shaming, harassment, name-calling, and rightist politico-religious denunciation) and physical violence (like assault and battery, rape, and murder) that they usually engender. By helping camp participants to develop leadership strategies and a network of knowing friends, trusted adults, and community-resource contacts, we provide them with a foundation to amass resilience tools that will help them survive and thrive. This goal is in keeping with the emphasis in the third stage of Savin-Williams' (2005) typology that depicts researchers' understandings of the changing sociopolitical and cultural locatedness of LGBTTQ youth and young adults. In his third stage, which covers the late 1990s and the early 21st century, Savin-Williams relates that there has been a focus on education for social change in order to counter the social, cultural, and political marginalization of sexual minorities. Educational interventions have stressed the creation of safe spaces, LGBTTQ-inclusive curriculum, and anti-harassment policy development. They have highly contested first-stage (1970s and 1980s) emphases on deviance, pathology, and the need for specialized medical intervention, and the second-stage (1980s and early 1990s) emphasis on LGBTTQ individuals as "at-risk" for social problems including increased drug-and-alcohol abuse, homelessness, violence, and suicide (Savin-Williams, 2005). However, any third-stage gains have been largely assimilationist in nature, and the

(hetero)normalizing structures of mainstream education remain largely in tact. Still, what is most reassuring about the third stage is that research on LGBTTTQ youth and young adults is now focused on a resilience or developmental assets-based approach. Here the goal is to identify the enabling and protective factors that make it possible for LGBTTTQ youth to overcome discrimination and thrive as advocates and change agents in their everyday lives (Grace & Wells, in press b; Savin-Williams, 2005).

Why study resilience? Youth come of age today in a more fragile and fragmented environment where globalization, neoliberalism, privatization, ecological turmoil, and terrorism have been normalized. Mediating the personal is all the more difficult in this unstable world where social turmoil and the nemeses of sexism, homophobia, and White supremacy, to mention a few of the key assaults on human integrity, still run rampant. Culture and society continue to lag behind inclusive legislation and law (where they exist) that recognizes and accommodates minority rights. Perhaps more than ever today, youth and young adults need to be resilient to survive and succeed. LGBTTTQ youth and young adults are probably in particular danger because their differences in sexual orientation and/or gender identity place them at the cusp of the moral and the political where conservative Christians, fundamentalist extremists, and others who fall among the myopic righteous variously defile them. Arbitrating these challenges and adversities requires building what Goldstein and Brooks (2005a) call a “resilient mindset” (pp.3-4).

What is this mindset? What are the attributes of resilient people? Thompson (2006) offers this list: a sense of self-esteem; independent thoughts and actions; the ability to compromise in interactions with others, and a well-established network of friends; a high level of discipline and a sense of responsibility; acknowledgment of one’s own special gifts and talents; open-mindedness and willingness to explore new ideas; a willingness to dream; a broad range of interests; a sharp sense of humor; insight into one’s own feelings and those of others, and the ability to communicate these effectively; a high endurance for distress; and, a commitment to life and hope for the future, even at the most despairing time of life. These are attributes that youth and young adults need to acquire as they grow, develop, and learn to be resilient on their journey to adulthood. Camp fYrefly emphasizes the development of these attributes in, for example, nonformal learning (like workshops) and informal learning (such as conversations and sharing with adult mentors). Camp participants build a resilient mindset when they learn to think for themselves; manage conflict; deal with their feelings and emotions; build self-esteem; be joyful; foster rapport, and interact with peers and adult role models; take personal responsibility and control; understand oppression; persevere; nurture personal health and wellbeing; and develop friendships based on mutual respect. They employ this resilient mindset individually and/or collectively when they participate in skits and role-plays, songwriting, discussion groups and talking circles, painting and collage work, and in writing poetry and stories as narrative inquiry. Thompson (2006) maintains that “[educational] institutions and community groups can foster these qualities by helping young people establish relationships with caring adult role models and by providing environments that recognize achievements, provide healthy expectations, nurture self-esteem, and encourage problem-solving and critical thinking skills” (p. 71). At Camp fYrefly, participants have an opportunity in an open and safe space to gain knowledge and insights so they can successfully manage their lives and positively influence their environment. Since resilient people often have a strong desire to help others, they also

use their social-learning experience as an opportunity to learn leadership skills that focus on connection, collaboration, and relationships with others. This social learning nurtures interdependence and a sense of strength found through cooperating with others in community.

The Future of Research on Building a Resilient Mindset

Developing a resilient mindset, which Goldstein and Brooks (2005a) argue is a capability of any young and determined person, can enable individuals to deal more effectively with stress and pressure; cope with everyday challenges; bounce back from disappointments, adversity, and trauma; develop clear and realistic goals; solve problems; relate comfortably with others; and treat oneself with respect. From a research perspective then, researchers in education and across the social sciences ought to explore the variables that can help in predicting and prompting youth resilience in the face of adversity. Researchers need to determine what conditions enable some youth to overcome tremendous obstacles and still thrive. Current resilience research and program development for youth focuses on the “need for school and community programs to build on individual, family, or community strengths rather than focusing on individual, family, or community deficits or risk factors” (Thompson, 2006, p. 54). Glicken (2006) identifies these strengths or protective factors as “the supports and opportunities that buffer the effect of adversity and enable development to proceed” (p. 11). Protective factors are also commonly understood as “assets,” “resources,” and “buffers” whose presence or absence can have a significant impact on a developing individual’s ability to overcome or positively address risk factors and/or stressful life events. For example, the Public Health Agency of Canada (2006) identifies several key protective factors that can help to reduce the possibility that youth will experience violence: “a nonabusive home; strong, early childhood attachment to caregiver(s) and good parental supervision; positive adult role models; and completion of high school and post-secondary school” (at paragraph 28).

Resilience is still an emerging concept in the research literature (Glicken, 2006). O’Dougherty, Wright, and Masten (2005) relate that, to date, there have been three waves of resilience research: (1) a focus on individual resilience, which amounts to a traditional concentration on individual traits or characteristics of resilient people; (2) a focus on processes leading to resilience in development, which places emphasis on the role of relationships and systems that extend beyond the immediate family; and (3) a focus on interventions to foster resilience, which emphasizes the development of resilience frameworks or models and experimental studies to test resilience theory. Indeed, most contemporary resilience research has undertaken a conceptual shift away from simply identifying the individual attributes of resilient youth (a checklist style approach) to a more complex understanding that emphasizes the processes of resilience (Glicken, 2006). While these waves of research have not culminated in a common definition of resilience, most contemporary researchers agree it is a “biopsychosocial process;” it represents one’s dual ability to overcome adversity and develop the skills necessary to adapt, mature, increase competence, and thrive in challenging or high risk environments (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005a, p. 4). Some researchers also consider resilience to be an integral part of an individual’s genetic makeup. For example, Masten (2001) postulates that resilience should be considered the norm, rather than exception for the human species. To support her claim, Masten asserts that resilience is not an extraordinary quality; rather, it is

inherent and therefore can be developed and nurtured. This perspective reflects a newer trend in resilience research that examines and fosters the development of protective factors that are necessary to help build resilience (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005a). In this regard, Goldstein and Brooks (2005b) maintain that research on resilience models should now focus on assets and abilities. They identify three focal points for future resilience research: (1) the development of ecologically-based models that take into account the interaction of young persons with their environment; (2) clarification of the important role of positive relationships with healthy adults; and (3) delineation of the present competencies (rather than deficiencies) of developing individuals. Collectively, building knowledge of this triad of resilience factors can help influence the development of evidenced-based models incorporating protective factors that reduce risk, foster relationships, and enhance self-esteem (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005b). However, regardless of the approach taken in studying resilience, a caution is warranted. Gabarino (2005) warns, "We must remember that resilience is not absolute. Virtually every youth has a breaking point" (p. xi). While youth may appear resilient in social terms, they can be severely wounded in inner or emotional ways. Under duress, boys tend to act out in explicit anti-social ways whereas girls tend to internalize stressors, which often do not manifest themselves in outward or physically noticeable behaviors.

Concluding Perspective: A Message for Adult Educators

Mainstream adult education, in the spirit of remembering its vibrant history as social education, ought to study the social-learning practices of sexual minorities to gauge what constitutes a truly public, ethical, and inclusive engagement in our field of study and practice. Our research on Camp fYrefly indicates how social learning for sexual minorities can be holistic and driven, abetting individual and social development as well as leadership advocating inclusion. This LGBTTQ&A research provides yet another opportunity for adult education to investigate its own social-learning boundaries, and the extent to which they may be exclusionary and oppressive. This is important because LGBTTQ&A struggles continue in our field, even though there have been moves forward in recent years (Grace & Hill, 2004).

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