

# Unequivocal Educational Experiences of LGBTQ+ Youth

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## Abstract

“I thought for a very long time that I was introverted. I realized that I just wanted to be my true and genuine self - and that’s difficult if people act like it’s weird” (Ngo, 2022), is a quote coined by one of my closest friends and fellow classmate, Thi Ngo. Like all my other peers in the Education department, Ngo is an Education Science major who, at the time of this writing, attends the University of California Irvine. Ngo is a Vietnamese American who is part of the LGBTQ+ community. And as a female-born individual, Ngo identifies as a non-binary queer who wishes to transition as a male. In hopes of providing more research into queer and gender discussions, I, along with my colleague Emily Mercado, have decided to create our very first academic podcast entitled *Uncloseted*, a one-hour conversation that delves deep into the intersectionalities, struggles, and personal challenges that our guest speaker, Thi Ngo, had experienced as an LGBTQ+ student in Northern California. Our podcast also pulls ideas from Cris Mayo’s 2014 book entitled *LGBTQ Youth and Education*. Mayo is a world-renowned author who currently serves as Director and Professor of the Interdisciplinary Studies master’s degree program in the U.S. Department of Education (uvm.com). And it is through his readings that we’ll begin to debunk previous misconceptions about the coming-out experience, look at the issues of being LGBTQ+ under an Asian American household, and explain how unfair government policies and school practices persist at removing queer and non-binary conversations inside American classrooms. This paper hopes to expose those practices and shed light on the intersectional experiences of Thi Ngo during his K-12 years. Likewise, our study hopes to find possible *action steps* or suggestions that could better the school experience for many current and uncloseted LGBTQ+ students in the country.

*Keywords:* LGBTQ+, queer, non-binary, heteronormativity, schools, gender-intersectionalities, gender identity

## Misconceptions about the “coming-out” experience

It’s difficult enough to be diagnosed with ADHD or social anxiety in middle-school. You could be the most heterosexual person out there with some minor health complications and people will still harass you; what more if they found out you were gay? Nowadays LGBTQ+ students face the challenge of “coming-out” in a heteronormative world. Despite what common

media portrays the coming-out experience to be, Ngo explains how the process of “exiting the closet” is pervasive and continuous across all contexts. When asked how his K-12 experience was different from that of his peers - and how his identity as LGBTQ+ affected those experiences, Ngo explains how his coming-out experience was never a one-time thing,

In terms of coming out, I suppose I never necessarily “came out” as a whole event. I feel like in the early 2010s, a lot of people viewed coming out as one huge thing in your life. I would say that perception comes out as this huge shocking thing. But when you’re actually LGBTQ+, you’re potentially coming-out whenever you meet someone new.  
(Ngo, 2022)

This passage speaks volumes about the “coming-out” experience and how it is portrayed in American film and media. Oftentimes when non-LGBTQ+ people hear the term “coming-out,” they always attribute it to this giant event that happens once in a person's life. But in reality, coming-out as queer, gay, lesbian, trans, or non-binary and gender nonconforming is something that occurs repetitively and continuously for many LGBTQ+ youth. When Ngo says that “you’re potentially coming-out whenever you meet someone new” he attributes it to his own K-12 experiences in middle and high school. Ngo believes that many of his peers and classmates would “hint” that they’re queer, and they would come-out at different times and with different people who fall under the same spectrum. Ngo even explains how coming-out became a recurring activity with his own mother, “I will say that, in terms of coming out in middle and high school, it’s definitely true that there is no set coming out experience. I told my Mom, and she didn’t believe me, I told her later and she didn’t believe me. I told her two years later and she didn’t believe me” (Ngo, 2022). In his book, Mayo explains how LGBTQ+ youth lack support from family members within their immediate household and school environments, “these [lack of supports] may include a lack of role models in schools, discomfort with parental involvement or, especially in the case of children with LGBTQ parents, difficult relations between school and family” (Mayo 2014). And this ties back to that idea of a continuous coming-out experience. Ngo says how his mother and father were both staunchly conservative, if not, oblivious to talks about the LGBTQ+ community. Ngo explains how she [his mother] cared more about her own daughter’s academic success in a heteronormative world, as opposed to how her daughter felt and who she identifies as. For many LGBTQ+ teens like Thi Ngo whose parents are deeply rooted in a heteronormative values, it can be difficult to comfortably exit as queer in one spontaneous go. And for students’ part of the LGBTQ+ community, coming-out can take months or even years before parents, relatives, and immediate peers could take the hint. And this is something that will be discussed in further detail.

## Intersectional experiences of a Vietnamese American Youth

Aside from coming-out moments that occur at home or at school, it's even more difficult for LGBTQ+ youth to understand their own intersectional identities, especially for those who live in a highly collectivistic and multiracial family household. In his book, Mayo explains how multiracial LGBTQ+ students report having "higher levels of harassment and assault based on sexual orientation than do [cisgender] male and female students" (Mayo, 2014). Lately we've been hearing reports about [violence against transgender people](#). And the majority of [sexual harassment cases and acts of violence against AAPI women](#) has reached an all-time high in 2022. The idea of being both queer and Asian has bothered Ngo for a majority of his K-12 years. That, and along with the pressures to succeed in an Asian-American family household, is something that left him questioning his own intersectionality and gender identity. As Ngo remarks, "as a teen growing up in this society, being LGBTQ and being Asian - you could *not* be both at the same time. That was what I was raised to believe in" (Ngo, 2022). Ngo describes how he grew up in the bay-area of San Jose, California. Despite being raised in the highly progressive and queer-accepting borders of San Francisco and Silicon Valley, Ngo was reared in a local charter school that was situated on church grounds. When asked about Mayo's input on multiracialism, and how "White, Latinx, and multiracial LGBTQ+ students felt more unsafe at school compared to Black and Asian students" (Mayo, 2014), Ngo said that he could not speak for the Black or Latinx experience simply because he lacks personal insight. And that he rarely experienced harassment in school despite coming from both an Asian and queer background. However, Ngo did say that he was under immense pressure to succeed academically within an Asian-American household. When referring to his mother, Ngo comments,

She believed that being successful in school, to some degree, also meant becoming cisgender and heterosexual. She believes that being LGBTQ would be 'distracting.' [...] The implication was that, if you liked someone who was the same gender as you, then that is even more as a distraction. Because not only are you liking another person who derails you from school, you're being 'abnormal.' (Ngo, 2022)

Many Asian parents, most especially those who rear their children to be academically successful, tend to label "dating" and "romantic relationships" in school as distractions that could prevent their child from studying effectively. In today's media, we see how "Tiger Parents" are portrayed in Asian-American [film](#) and [television](#), mothers and fathers who demand nothing from their children aside from good grades, a guaranteed pathway to a top-notch university, and a one-way ticket to a high-paying career. But the idea of having Tiger Parents bodes even worse for Asian-American children who fall under LGBTQ+ spectrum. It's bad enough that you're attracted to someone at school, it's worse if the person you're attracted to is of the same sex. And that makes you weird and abnormal. In our podcast, Ngo described his parents as the typical "mainstream cisgender and heteronormative parents" (Ngo, 2022). Schools must begin having the "talk" with

parents about heteronormativity and how society advocates for heterosexual norms; this “push” for heteronormative and cisgender values can give people the wrong idea about what’s considered normal and accepted in contemporary society. It pushes queer individuals into an isolated corner of our world. Until schools provide support groups that educate parents about such issues, LGBTQ+ students must navigate their way through a heteronormative, and possibly homophobic, school environment.

### **Being invisible in a Heteronormative World**

“Being queer in school was almost like an S-tier level of networking. ‘Are you gay? I can’t say that though. Do you like Steven Universe? Is that a pink pin?’ If you grew up in a community that refuses to acknowledge that you exist, then you’re gonna feel like shit” (Ngo, 2022). As mentioned earlier, Ngo spent a majority of his middle and high-school life within the progressivist areas of Silicon Valley. Unfortunately, Ngo didn’t have the privilege of enjoying those queer-accepting communities. Being brought up in a charter school that was built upon church grounds, life in San Jose as an LGBTQ+ youth was very different from that of his peers who attend schools outside the conservative bubble. According to Mayo, LGBTQ+ students have problems living in a vastly heterosexist society and believe that heterosexism reinforces acts of homophobia. Mayo remarks,

Schools, like the rest of the social world, are structured by heterosexism - the assumption that everyone is and should be heterosexual [...] Heterosexism is also reinforced by homophobia, overt expressions of dislike, harassment, and even assault of sexual minority people, a practice that members of the school community often ignore or dismiss as typical behavior based on the heterosexist assumption that either there are no LGBTQ people present in school communities, or, if there are, those LGBTQ people ought to learn to expect a hostile environment. (Mayo, 2014)

Mayo’s thoughts about “living in a heterosexual society” is no different than what Ngo experienced in the early 2010s. It’s this paradox of living as an LGBTQ+ person in a highly liberal state and progressivist city, but at the same time, caged within the walls of a charter school that’s planted on church grounds. With a heteronormative society comes advocacies towards heterosexist ideas; and as heterosexism pervades inside classrooms, we can expect an environment where homophobia can thrive. There’s also the misconception that homophobia works at recognizing the LGBTQ+ community. In his book, Mayo describes homophobia as, “over expressions of dislike, harassment, and even assault of sexual minority people” (Mayo, 2014). And many people believe that such harassments and derogatory slangs work to benefit the LGBTQ+ community, which is entirely false. What we actually see is the opposite; by perpetuating homophobic dialogue, people are led to believe that being gay or queer is nothing

short of a joke - a phase that students simply undergo during puberty. Therefore, it conditions cisgender individuals to believe that LGBTQ+ people are not real, and that LGBTQ+ students should just endure the continuous barrages of jokes, slangs, and derogatory comments that stems from a heteronormative classroom.

Students that shuffle between a gender nonconforming identity often lack the proper support within their communities. If school administrators and teachers continue to stay neutral, they are essentially blinding themselves from conversations that acknowledge gender nonconforming youth. It doesn't matter if you know that queer students exist; what matters is what you can do for them. Describing his experiences with staff and administrators within his San Jose charter school, Ngo remarks, "And you could tell, the teachers knew, the administrators knew, everyone knew that they have students under the spectrum. On the other hand, you go to school and realize that none of your teachers talk about gay people" (Ngo, 2022). Being invisible in a heteronormative school environment can have detrimental consequences on the social and mental health of many queer adolescents. While conservative parents continue to dictate what is deemed "age-appropriate" for their child, schools will continue to erase the LGBTQ+ experience from textbooks, curriculums, and culturally relevant pedagogies. Mayo explains, "Ignoring the issue of sexuality means neglecting to provide LGBTQ students with representations of themselves that enable them to understand themselves" (Mayo, 2022). According to the 7th Edition of Ormrod and McDevitt's *Child Development and Education* textbook, late adolescence marks the stage of forming an *identity*, or how "older adolescents (ages 14-18) make progress toward establishing a self-constructed definition of who they are, what they find important, what they believe, and what they plan to become" (Ormrod and McDevitt, 2020). Identity development is crucial in the life of a teenager. And it is because of these identities that gender intersectionalities matter the most. If schools continue to silence talks about LGBTQ+ individuals, many of its students who just started forming their own gender identities won't be able to figure that out. Gleaning on his own personal experiences at his local charter school, Ngo recalls how students would attempt to form progressive alliances that not only recognizes LGBTQ+ people, but also provides a safe space where queer students can thrive,

I remember vividly, high school students in my little charter school wanted to create a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). So, they went to school and very promptly got shut down because of whatever rules were for teachers and administrators back then. The rule was, because we have a charter school on church grounds, the church would not let us have the GSA. Therefore, us as a school or community cannot have a GSA. Therefore, we cannot acknowledge the LGBTQ+ community. (Ngo, 2022)

Student-led organizations like the [Gay-Straight Alliance Club](#) seek to "build community and organize around issues impacting them in their schools and communities" (gsanetwork.org). [Forming a student-led club or organization](#) usually begins with identifying the club's interests,

what its goals and objectives are, who is willing to get involved, and most importantly, getting the help of a faculty member to sponsor the organization (ivywise.com). The problem resides in the “faculty-member” aspect. If schools and teachers alike don’t want to sponsor GSA clubs, how can LGBTQ+ students, such as those in Ngo’s charter school, make a progressive change for the betterment of their community? In Ngo’s school, the freedom to express one’s gender identity was limited to the conservative views of pastors and school administrators in the area, and the idea of forming progressive clubs or student-led organizations felt more like a pipe dream for students who are still closeted - and still afraid.

### **Don’t Say “Gay”**

Who decides what is age-appropriate and what is not age appropriate? Whenever schools try to implement a new curriculum on sex-education, or talks about racial discrimination, or a material that pertains to contemporary social and political justice issues, parents are often first in line to slam those ideas. In today’s society, [parent’s and parent unions want to know more about what their children learn in school](#). Politically conservative parents are usually the ones who criticize and question new policies that bring about sensitive topics, and they assess what class materials are considered safe and unsafe for their kids to learn. According to Ngo,

A lot of the times when people label things to be age-appropriate or age-inappropriate, it’s not because of their genuine concern for their child. It’s because of their belief that, ‘I don’t want my kids to learn about things that I personally do not understand, or things that I do not wish to understand.’” (Ngo, 2022)

[Sex-education has been around since the early 1900s](#) when WWI soldiers succumbed to STDs. As a result, the federal government passed the Chamberlain-Kahn Act to educate soldiers about syphilis and gonorrhea (newsweek.com). And In a [2017 study](#) by Leslie Kantor and Nicole Levits, “more than 93 percent of parents place high importance on sex education in both middle and high school” (Kantor and Levits, 2017). If sex-education has long been accepted by parents and administrators, what’s stopping schools from including the LGBTQ+ dialogue in the class curriculum? Perhaps the idea of sex-education only caters to cisgender and heterosexual audiences. It’s okay for discourses regarding male and female genitalia to pervade class discussions, or for students to snide and chuckle whenever pictures of condoms appear on the projector screen; but it’s not okay if a student wishes to understand why his male classmate is wearing a skirt in class, or why his female peer cut her hair short, or why he feels attracted to the boy sitting next to him at lunch. If this is the case, what is deemed appropriate or inappropriate to talk about in school is subject to political debate, rather than a fundamental right for all. Many parents consider heteronormative ideals and values to be socially accepted. So, they try to justify school actions that seek to disenfranchise, or even erase, LGBTQ+ topics from school curricula. It's just as Ngo said, it’s not that they don’t understand, but rather, they “do not wish to

understand.” This is where *Don’t Say Gay* policies come into place, which are government bills that seek to “protect” LGBTQ+ students by not talking about them in classrooms. Despite its best intentions, many of the bill’s staunch critics come from the LGBTQ+ community itself.

In his book, Mayo tries to unravel the controversy surrounding the Annoka Hennepin district of Suburban Minneapolis, one of the major cities in the state of Minnesota. In 2011, the district declared its first ‘[gay neutrality policy](#).’ A public statement made by the Annoka Hennepin administration states, “Anoka-Hennepin staff, in the course of their professional duties, shall remain neutral on matters regarding sexual orientation including but not limited to student led discussions” (Horner, 2011). This sparked a wave of criticisms from parents and students of the Annoka Hennepin school district. The policy prevented teachers from discussing anything that pertains to sex, gender identity, and gender orientation, but instead, left it to students to express those conversations freely. In response to the school districts actions, Annoka High-school teacher, Mary Jo Merrick-Locket remarks, “ If you can't talk about it in any context, which is how teachers interpret district policies, kids internalize that to mean that being gay must be so shameful and wrong [...] And that has created a climate of fear and repression and harassment” (Mayo, 2014). By making teachers neutral, the school abolishes the rights of LGBTQ+ students to be heard inside classrooms. Since teacher’s can’t talk about queer experiences, they also can’t provide counsel to LGBTQ+ students that suffer instances of bullying, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination. Lacking the protection of adults and faculty, queer students will be more susceptible to instances of homophobia and violence. And children will start to believe that being queer and LGBTQ+ is unacceptable behavior inside the classroom. When asked about the [“Don’t Say Gay Bill” that was recently passed in Florida](#), Ngo remarks, “Again, I think the double-standard just boils down to society not realizing that LGBTQ people are real people” (Ngo, 2022). To acknowledge LGBTQ+ individuals as “real people” has been subject to years of political debate among politicians, churches, and people who’ve gotten used to a heteronormative mindset. Never mind the school-sponsored programs or student-led organizations. Until school institutions, districts, and administrators realize that LGBTQ+ students exist, these community-based programs won’t matter at all.

### **Action Steps toward change**

When asked about the controversial ‘gay neutrality policy’ that occurred in the Annoka Hennepin school district, Ngo remarks, “I’m a firm believer that refusing to acknowledge certain communities is the first step to creating policies against those communities” (Ngo, 2022). And Ngo’s statement can never be truer. In order for certain school-sponsored or student-led LGBTQ+ programs to work, we must first address the issue of neutrality, and how teachers and school administrators could address their own personal biases. It’s impractical, or rather, simplistic for schools to leave queer and gender identity conversations to its students, all the while censoring the adults who are supposed to be role models for these kids. And it is true that

disenfranchising the LGBTQ+ community paves the way for school policies that are designed to oppress it. Referring to Mayo's reading, "Youth are capable of asserting themselves and finding community with others, but without the institutional support of schools and the interventions of respectful adults, the struggles they may have to face are all the more daunting" (Mayo, 2014). The key is *institutional support*; parents, teachers, and school faculty must learn to recognize their own biases and abolish heteronormative mindsets. They must become open-minded, if not for themselves, but for their students - and the millions of American youth who struggle with gender identity on a daily basis. Nowadays, schools are limiting instruction on queer and transgender youth, [banning textbooks that talk about LGBTQ+ issues, and even barring trans-youth from competing school sports](#). Now is the time for parents and school faculty to unite. They can work to repeal government policies that erases queer figures from class textbooks, and likewise, promote a safe learning space that is both inclusive and welcoming to the LGBTQ+ experience.

So, what can we do? Mayo believes that true change starts with the school faculty. LGBTQ+ students are more than capable of creating events, clubs, and student-led organizations. But without the proper guidance and support from their teachers, all their efforts will ultimately succumb to "Don't Say Gay" bills, gripes and interventions from heteronormative parents, and Republican-led state mandates. "I feel like programs are good but what schools really need is the sincerity to back it up" (Ngo, 2022). You can't just have teachers stand at a podium, clicker in hand, lecture for twenty-minutes about Title IX, and then walk away like nothing happened. With the number of state-sponsored policies that seek to undermine and disenfranchise the LGBTQ+ community, it seems that schools have lost their moral and ethical credibility when it comes to these issues. In order for true change to happen, schools need to (1) acknowledge LGBTQ+ students as real people, (2) address the personal biases within teachers and parents through school-sponsored programs, and lastly (3) incorporate talks of gender identity, gender intersectionality, and queer representation in school pedagogy and curricula. Addressing those key factors might not guarantee a sudden change in society, but it's a start to institutional reform. As teachers, parents, and school administrators begin to acknowledge people from multiracial, multicultural, and gender nonconforming backgrounds, they can create a better, and more inclusive, learning experience for students under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. When asked how his Vietnamese and queer identity influenced his decision to become a teacher, Ngo says, "that's one of the reasons why I wanted to go into education actually. Because I want to go inside a classroom and stand there and be openly queer and openly Asian. So some poor teen out there doesn't have to grow up thinking - I cannot be both. I cannot be out there" (Ngo, 2022).



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