

Underestimating our students

by BROCK WEIR

Do you ever look back on your childhood and wonder how you survived it all?

I bet most of us do, even if our respective benchmarks of what had to be endured might be a little bit different.

If you're of a certain age, you might have fond memories of running out your front door barefoot after dinner to play with friends, not for a moment thinking to lock the door behind you.

All my parents needed know was their own parents wanted them home before the streetlights went on. The world was essentially your oyster. Not so much today.

For my generation, let's say people born between 1980 and 1990, we had other things to worry about? Dangers like ? Red Rover?

I'm old enough to have fond memories of my own ?calling so-and-so over? in a spirited round of the recess-time game with nary an injury sustained by any party; yet somewhere along the line it was a game deemed too hot to handle and summarily banned.

Yet, we lived to tell the tale.

Were we built hardier than the generations that have come since then? I don't think so.

What might have set our generation, and even that of our parents, apart is we were by and large encouraged to develop and foster our critical thinking skills.

Us kids from largely White communities were, of course, spoon-fed a bucolic version of our own country's history that rarely touched upon the realities of our nationhood, but we were largely encouraged to examine, study, and read up on issues that were truly affecting our world.

That, sadly, seems to be on the wane in some parts.

Last week, for instance, Police were called to the headquarters of the York Catholic District School Board after delegates ? mostly parents ? spoke with anger and frustration over the fact that some teachers had deigned to designate their classrooms as ?safe spaces? for all students.

The general thrust of the argument that a simple sticker, simply by nature of it featuring a graphic of the Pride flag, was somehow an attempt to ?indoctrinate? students in? respect for one another, regardless of sexuality or gender identity?

Nope.

?Brainwashing? was one term thrown out for the overall argument, and at its heart was, ?to believe that being gay is okay.? Heaven forbid.

?Inclusive education means that all students are supported and included in all aspects of their education, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity,? said one parent, apparently without a healthy sense of irony. ?It's imperative that we all view students as equals and ensure they are comfortable and welcome in all aspects of their educational experience.?

?Creating a safe space for one group,? the delegate continued, ?can also lead to exclusion of another. This is especially true if one?is

given preferential treatment over another, which appears to be the message of these stickers.?

This, in my opinion, is hardly the case.

While the sticker in question might include the Pride Flag, an obvious symbol of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, its message really is that it's a 'safe space' for all students to be themselves, without judgement, and the symbol's inclusion is merely a testament to the fact that this once- (and, sadly, still-) marginalized group has a place within their community - perhaps a place that is being denied to them in the home, their particular faith community or, depending on their age, even the workplace.

'There is absolutely no need to have such an aggressive campaign all around schools exposing younger children like my nine-year-old to sexual ideologies and indoctrinations that she's far too young to understand,' the delegation continued.

Words like 'aggressive,' 'sexual ideology' and 'indoctrination' are buzzwords designed to rile rather than reflect reality. After all, at the heart of a debate is a humble sticker that teachers have been using for well over a decade. Although designs have varied over the years, they have almost invariably included some sort of symbol that 'safe spaces' are indeed accessible to younger members of our society who identify as 2SLGBTQIA+.

And those buzzwords, particularly in the last few months, have been thrown about with wild abandon on both sides of our border. One only has to look as far as the recent legislation passed in Tennessee banning drag shows with other similar bills working their way through their respective corridors of power with alarming speed, all in the name of a fantastical 'danger.'

But, why? After all, although terms have changed over the centuries, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals have always been integral parts of our communities. Drag too is almost as old as civilization itself. The better question might be, 'Why now?'

Take a moment to respectfully listen to a parent about why they might take their son or daughter to a Drag Queen story hour and the level of joy that all parties experience might prove enlightening.

My generation, again using the 1980-1990 birth bracket, survived seeing Robin Williams dressed in drag in Mrs. Doubtfire without any ill-effects and have probably even shared the laughter with their own kids. We also withstood 'indoctrination' when exposed to reruns of Tom Hanks and Peter Scolari Buffy-and-Hildegard'ing it up on Bosom Buddies - but, again, those Red Rover wranglings may have set us up to have iron-rich constitutions.

Kids of the 70s had a learning moment when they sat down with their families to watch All in the Family's Edith Bunker (Jean Stapleton) show much-needed kindness to her dear friend Beverly LaSalle and mourned along with her when LaSalle was murdered simply for being a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

Kids of the 50s and 60s regularly saw Milton Berle sashaying across their TV screens in ballgowns and other forms of drag, apparently without any ill effects, saw Mary Martin take wing as Peter Pan without palpitations, and survived more than one occasion of Lucy and Ethel donning suits and mustaches to pull one over on the boys.

Heck, keep climbing our family tree, and those of our ancestors lucky enough to score a seat to the Globe Theatre in its prime saw dudes don the duds of Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, Desdemona, and Juliet without the roof caving in.

And on and on it goes.

Learning about gender roles on the stage in Grade 10, as far as I'm aware, did not encourage any of my peers to ponder careers in drag any more than learning about the Archimedes principle prompted us to seek out careers as arithmetic professors in nudist camps - but both gave us a good foundation in history and mathematics.

We could handle it, and so can they - if given half a chance. And, thankfully, schools appear to be withstanding the barrage to do

just that.