

MEDIA REVIEW: "Our Compass" Review

Our Compass is an educational documentary film that profiles the stories of eight youth who attend Compass, a weekly drop in group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQQ) youth who have been labelled with an intellectual disability. The film is narrated by the youth and each youth discusses issues such as coming out as LGBTQQ, sexuality, gender identity, coming out as disabled, love, dating, families and how they deal with oppression and loneliness. Overall, the film is excellent and has many strengths that will appeal to a wide variety of audiences.

The youth also explain what role Compass plays in their lives. Skyler, one of the participants, talks about co-founding the group with the support of Skyler's social worker. The group became an instant success when seven people attended their first meeting and has since made a lasting impact on each youth. Rainbow, another participant, describes the group as, "coming together as a family and supporting each other with different struggles."

Like many other LGBTQQ youth, isolation and loneliness is a major concern. Skyler and Rainbow describe the validation that comes from knowing that they are not alone and that other LGBTQQ youth are "out there." Rainbow says that having others around allows group members to "get together and make a strong shield that could make other people understand we aren't different from other people."

Compass is a unique and much needed group for LGBTQQ youth with intellectual disabilities. To my knowledge, no other group of its kind exists in Canada. It's rare that the sexual and gender identities of youth with intellectual disabilities are acknowledged in a service context, let alone at large. In Toronto there are several groups for queer youth and a couple for youth with disabilities but there are none for LGBTQQ youth with intellectual disabilities other than Compass.

Our Compass presents a collection of fresh and feisty stories that are rarely heard in the public domain. Films that have positive portrayals of people with intellectual disabilities are rare. First person accounts and films created by disabled people are even rarer. "How's Your News" and "The Freedom Tour" are two examples of more recent films created and directed by people with intellectual disabilities. There's also an American festival that features the work of people with developmental disabilities called the *Sprout Film Festival*. Their goal is to reinforce accurate portrayals of people with developmental disabilities and to expose the public to important issues facing people with developmental disabilities.

Author

Jennifer Paterson

The School of
Disability Studies,
Ryerson University,
Toronto, ON

Correspondence

jpaterso@ryerson.ca

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Obviously, there’s much work needed to dismantle many of the oppressive stereotypes about people labeled with intellectual disabilities. The Compass youth do a fine job of speaking about some of the most damaging stereotypes about disabled people, including being perceived as asexual, incompetent or sexually deviant. The youth challenge these stereotypes by asserting themselves as sexual people. Several directly claim their sexual agency and, as such, force the viewer to re-think what they know about sexuality and disability through their narratives and portraits.

They also challenge predominant perceptions and definitions of disability. Their stories and portraits aren’t focused on overcoming or tragedy. In a section titled “Power,” the eight youth discuss their disability identities. Each youth has a unique relationship to disability. Ryan, for example, says that Asperger syndrome is part of him and he accepts it. Rainbow says that disability doesn’t make a difference to her, yet it makes her feel strong although she isn’t sure that she is disabled. C.J. says that she doesn’t feel that her disability is a burden.

Freedom. Love. Sexy. Pride. Power. Hope. Community. These are some of the themes that were used to inspire a portrait of each youth. Each person was supported to develop a theme to describe and celebrate their identities. Still shots of each portrait are shown as each person describes what each portrait means to them.

Romeo, one of the Compass participants, devised his portrait around the theme of power. Romeo’s portrait evokes a stereotypical image of power. In the photo, Romeo is wearing a tuxedo, standing in front of a limousine. Romeo says that power means that, “I can do anything that I put my mind to. I can be anyone I want to be in the future.”

Ryan’s portrait was constructed around the theme “sexy.” It invokes feelings of “Brokeback Mountain,” with Ryan donning a cowboy hat, lying back on a sleeping bag in a tent with a sexy smirk on his face. Ryan says that he wants to make himself look sexy so that he will have an easier time dating.

The rest of the film addresses the complexities around oppression and identity. The youth

talk a great deal about systemic oppression and barriers, sharing some difficult aspects about coming out as LGBTQQ and disabled, homophobia, transphobia and ableism. Their stories clearly articulate how many of the barriers disabled LGBTQQ youth encounter are socially created barriers and don’t necessarily have to do with their impairment or LGBTQQ identity. For example, Romeo talks about feeling lonely, isolated and unloved, contributing to his feelings of depression.

Although the youth discuss some of the challenges they have encountered, they have clearly come together to support each other through their struggles. There is an overarching message of hope in the film without being overly sentimental, like some other films that take up disability. Several youth describe how the group has significantly shaped their sense of hope. As Skyler puts it, “Sometimes it’s really sad but, at the same time, you know you are around friends, so it makes a big queer family that you can always be with.”

The coming out stories that the youth tell about themselves are complex and complicated; they aren’t clean and tidy coming out stories. Many coming out stories portray people as having fully formed and accepted their sexual identities. Some Compass youth don’t follow that trend, talking instead about their identities as “works in progress.” Conventional accounts sensationalize the more difficult aspects of coming out such as suicide or self-harm. Indeed, suicide is a concern for LGBTQQ youth. The Griffin Centre website indicates that LGBTQQ youth are 14 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth. And the Compass youth don’t brush over this fact, sharing personal details that are more difficult to hear. However, just as youth courageously talk about their struggles and their joys, they recount difficult aspects of their lives in a thoughtful and humorous manner. Josh, for example, shares part of his coming out story involving his mother who discovered him unclothed and having sex with another man. He laughs as he describes running out into the hallway outside of his bedroom, chasing after her. Although the story is funny, it’s impossible for the viewer not to empathize with how difficult such a situation would be. Sometimes, coming out isn’t a laughing matter.

Another strength of this film is the way that gender and sexuality are addressed. The youth talk about their gender and sexual identities in rich and complex yet accessible manner. Rainbow and Skyler's stories challenge the viewer to re-think sexual and gender identity, not as static, but as an evolving fluid identity. Rainbow identifies as a gay man but is considering identifying as a transgender woman. Skyler explains how their gender and sexual identity is fluid, ranging from bisexual one day to transgender woman another day. Skyler is attracted to people of various genders, but not all at the same time. As Skyler puts it, "gender and sexual orientation can take a long time to learn, but I know what I am."

Our Compass is an important film with many strengths. No other film speaks to the experiences of transgender people with intellectual disabilities. The ethno-diversity of the participants is also impressive. Many of the *Compass* youth in this film are racialized youth.

The film is directed and produced by Tess Vo, co-facilitator of the group and co-written by the eight featured youth. The film is produced in association with Griffin Centre's ReachOUT program. It seems to be a truly collaborative project as the youth were involved in the creative development both behind the scenes and on camera. Their combined creative efforts have produced a thoughtful, visually pleasing educational tool for anyone who enjoys documentary film and for anyone who is touched by disability and/or LGBTQQ people. *Our Compass* will be publicly released in the spring of 2010.

Additional Notes

Our Compass is co-written by:

Ryan	Josh Palmer
Firestone	Romeo Pierre
C.J. Fung	Ruby Rowan
Rainbow	Skyler Siao
Hunt	Tyson Purdy
Wayne	Smith
Koltchigin	Tess Vo

Compass is held at Griffin Centre on Thursdays from 4:30 p.m.-7:00 p.m. Griffin Centre is a non-profit charitable mental health agency providing flexible and accessible services to youth, adults and their families. Our mission is to promote positive change for vulnerable youth and adults with mental health challenges and/or developmental disabilities and their families. We are dedicated to delivering innovative services and developing creative partnerships that enhance lives and communities. For more information about Griffin Centre please visit www.griffin-centre.org.

Compass is part of Griffin Centre's ReachOUT program. ReachOUT is a creative, inclusive and accessible program for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer youth and adults in the Greater Toronto Area. Activities include drop-in groups, community outreach, counselling, consultation, art and skills exchange. We offer a safe spaces that reflect the diversity of our queer and trans communities. For more information about ReachOUT please visit www.griffin-centre.org/reachout

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