

## **Teach to Reach: Addressing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth Issues in the Classroom**

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*This article explores the delicate and complex issues immediate to the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. The author places the discussion within the context of learning environments and presents ways in which pre-service and in-service teachers can help create safe and equitable spaces for all learners. Presented are various classroom strategies, activities, and resources for educators to tap into and utilize.*

“I’ve been out of the closet for sometime. I only go back in when the school day begins.”

—Anonymous high school student

I teach future teachers—young, bright-eyed enthusiasts eager to make a difference in the lives of children and adolescents. To help equip them for the challenging road that lies ahead, I present them with a host of activities that encourage them to think deeply about the profession. One specific activity asks students to describe how they want their prospective classrooms to look and feel. Initially, they hesitate, but then their responses start to flow. I write as many as I can on the board: clean, colorful, bright, safe, spacious, welcoming, intellectual, nurturing, respectful, sensitive, caring, humorous, understanding, encouraging, fun, and fair. Next, I present them with several real-life situations that they may encounter in the day-to-day classroom. We examine each scenario, brainstorming various strategies for handling them. For me, it is critical to take note of the approaches they propose in

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managing a given situation, and if their recommendations are consistent with or contrary to their description of the ideal classroom.

One scenario that students frequently disagree upon, in terms of an appropriate resolution, involves a gay teen who is repeatedly teased by schoolmates. Having suffered enough ridicule, the student approaches the classroom teacher for some measure of support. I ask my students what action they would take, if any. Some suggest sending the teased student to the school counselor; some propose having a conference with those doing the teasing; others advise putting off any mediation to avoid further singling out the student. Those recommending the latter contend that openly addressing the problem poses the risk of intensifying homophobic attitudes. In as much as I understand their position, it is contradictory to *their* ideal classroom. By not addressing the situation, the gay student has essentially been abandoned in an environment in which these future teachers have described as being safe, caring, respectful, understanding, and fair, amongst other things.

There are a number of reasons why educators, school counselors, administrators, and even parents steer clear of issues surrounding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. Usually their reservations are less about bringing further attention to the LGBT student (something ironically unavoidable) and more about the negative feelings that they themselves harbor. For instance, many adults are uneasy talking about sexuality with young people. They find the subject to be uncomfortable and embarrassing (Owens, 1998). Others perceive homosexuality itself as unnatural, abnormal, pathological, and, in many respects, immoral (Armesto & Weisman, 2001; Harwood, 2004; Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002). The mere discussion of it displays an interest, giving rise to feelings of shame, guilt, and fear. Hence, the topic is not openly entertained. Then there are those who simply have no tolerance for this lifestyle. For these individuals, antihomosexual sentiments run extremely high as acceptance for other gender identities runs incredibly low (DuBeau, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1990; Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001; Unks, 1995).

While not in agreement with any of these views, I am certainly aware of their roots. We live in a society that has traditionally supported and rewarded the heterosexual model of socialization—a mental box of conformity that rigidly defines conceptions of “normal” masculinity and femininity. Anyone venturing outside of this box becomes a target of ridicule and rejection. Slurs like faggot, sissy, dyke, punk, and bitch serve to condemn those who straddle its borders or exist somewhere along its outer boundaries. Furthermore, such words function to either bring the “deviant” identity back into the box or to isolate it altogether (Gevelinger & Zimmerman, 1997; Kivel, 1999; McInnes, 2004; Szalacha, 2003).

I pose the following questions to my students: With the understanding that LGBT youth do not feel comfortable inside of the box or willingly want

to be in it, how then should we respond to them? Should we ignore their needs, issues, and concerns so as not to draw further attention to them? Do we label them as confused and rebellious and place them in the category of a troubled discipline problem? Should we turn a blind eye to their everyday abuse and harassment with the hope that it will all someday cease? Do we chalk up their lived experience as some “phase” that will pass quietly into adulthood? Tied to this query is a larger and more relevant question that must be addressed: How can schools create learning environments that genuinely recognize and embrace every student despite race, class, gender, religion, learning style, and sexual identity?

To answer the above, we must first realize that, whether viewed as a phase or not, many LGBT youth are facing a personal crisis. In a culture where heterosexuality is the expectation, this “hidden minority” is often marginalized and unable to find safe spaces of acceptance (Owens, 1998; Lee, 2002; Pearson, 2003). Consequently, much of the way in which they are perceived by the larger society produces internalized feelings of low self-esteem, self-pity, and self-hatred. Their emotional distress has been extensively documented as leading to such high-risk factors as school failure, drop-out, substance abuse, homelessness, prostitution, HIV infection, and suicide (DuBeau, 1998; Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000; Schwartz, 1994; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992).

Schools—ideally meant to be the safest social institution for our youth—sadly represent one of the more aversive sites to the homosexual identity. In accordance with federal law Title IX, many school districts have implemented policies and programs to help eliminate sexual harassment and ensure safety for all students. However, despite administrative compliance, many LGBT youth are still being verbally and physically abused throughout the academic year (Elia, 1993; Gill, 1998; Peters, 2003). Owens (1998) states: “As with all students, sexual-minority teens are required by law to attend school even though, for them, it is continuously dangerous and unsafe” (p. 72).

In 2003, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) conducted a survey of the school-related experiences of LGBT youth. The study involved 887 students from 48 states and the District of Columbia. The document notes that a majority of LGBT youth experience verbal harassment in school due to their sexual orientation. Nearly a quarter of these students disclosed that it happened quite frequently. Regarding physical violence, the document reveals:

Over a third of the youth also reported some experience of physical harassment in the past year because of their sexual orientation and more than a quarter of the youth reported that they had experienced physical harassment because of their gender expression. Although incidents of physical assault were less common, nearly 20% of youth reported some incident of physical assault in the past year because of their sexual orientation and over 10% of youth reported having been assaulted because of their gender expression (Kosciw, 2004, p. xi).

The study also points out that almost half of assaulted or harassed students never report their victimization to anyone. Nearly 50% of those students surveyed stated that they felt uncomfortable talking openly about LGBT issues with teachers, school counselors, and parents, as well as a significant number being unaware of their school's policy or the enforcement of it.

Though school anti-discrimination policies represent a viable strategy for helping to alleviate some of the issues confronted by LGBT youth, policy implementation does not always bring about a change in mindsets. As researchers have noted, school staff can possess homophobic views or be unconscious as to how their personal biases negatively affect their relationships with students (Banks, 2006; Kissen, 2003; Maney & Cain, 1997; Vander Haegan, 1993). Jones (2004) asserts that, "no one should have to listen to homophobic statements, such as 'this is so gay' and 'what a faggot.'" Surprisingly, gay teens hear these offensive comments not just from other students, but from teachers and administrators as well" (p. 45). Without question, the homophobic attitudes of school personnel diminishes the effectiveness that anti-discrimination policies are meant to have.

As homophobia goes unchecked in classrooms and hallways, educators send the general message that discrimination of any person or group is acceptable. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth, like all young people, deserve our support and protection. It may be easy for some of us to regard their problems as something that they have brought upon themselves and to further render their lives as invisible (Mathison, 1998; Owens, 1998). Yet, part and parcel to good teaching is meeting the needs of *every* student, whatever their crisis. What is important to understand is that it is not the homosexual identity that leads to high risk behaviors, but rather oppressive, insensitive environments limited with resources and support (Pearson, 2003).

In my discussions with future teachers, I inform them that how well we connect with students and maximize their learning, depends, in large part, on our perceptions of them. One classroom strategy that teacher educators can use to encourage preservice teachers to get in touch with their personal biases is problem solving activities, similar to the one in the opening of this article. In the course of problem solving, students are able to critically think about situations that they may encounter as inservice teachers and develop outcomes that can genuinely assist a young person in crisis. Guided discussions around diversity issues also engage future teachers in thinking beyond textbook facts and figures, becoming more introspective and aware of their present belief systems (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). In this way, the classroom as a whole is able to reflect on their perceptions and hopefully come to realize how cultural misunderstandings can have a negative impact on teacher-student relationships.

Other classroom strategies that teacher educators can look to are the use of guest speakers and multimedia formats. Testimonials from students who have been harassed or assaulted because of their diversity may strike an empathetic chord within preservice teachers, pushing them outside their fixed mental boxes and into a place of compassion (Lipkin, 1999). In the event that guest speakers are unattainable, teacher educators can turn to multimedia formats (e.g., books, films, websites) that communicate the individual realities of LGBT youth. Becoming familiar with their narratives not only serves to acknowledge the lives behind the statistics, but also puts us more in-tune with the issues and concerns of this social group (DuBeau, 1998). A selection of multimedia resources that educators can use is listed at the end of this article.

In addition to the classroom strategies proposed above, teacher educators can also have students review research concerned with the lives of LGBT youth. This includes students submitting an annotated bibliography of multimedia resources and, as Maney and Cain (1997) suggest, “develop lesson plans that address the special needs of children of alternative families” (p. 240). With respect to exploring resources, GLSEN provides a “do-it-yourself” training program called the *GLSEN Lunchbox*. The program is designed to provide educators, administrators, parents, and youth workers with the knowledge and skills necessary to build unbiased and safe learning environments. Included in the “lunchbox” are forty-five activities to assist school participants in understanding LGBT issues and concretely addressing them in schools and communities.

If we as educators are operating under the precept that classrooms at every level of education are meant to be safe spaces for healthy growth and development, then we must strive to meet the needs of all students. This requires us to persistently reflect upon our responsibilities to a culturally diverse student body, including the presence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students—their needs must also be met. Our failure to recognize their existence and afford them the same rights as others precludes us from creating equitable learning environments that genuinely support student diversity. When we as teachers become more sensitive to the issues surrounding LGBT youth, we not only advance the prospect of minimizing their discrimination, but we also place ourselves in a better position of contributing to the overall well-being of every school participant.

A student trusting a teacher enough to take on the formidable task of disclosing his/her sexual self-concept deserves more than to be told that “it’s just a phase.” Quite the contrary, this young, fragile life warrants acknowledgment, understanding, respect, love, acceptance, intervention, and access to honest information. In one sense, this kind of advocacy involves transcending those social taboos that prevent us from discussing LGBT issues in the classroom. We must teach students that not everyone shares the same sexual orientation or lifestyle, just as they obviously do not

share the same race, class, gender, or religion. As we inform young people of the multiple realities, identities, and ways of being that make up our world, we deconstruct walls of ignorance and replace them with building blocks of sensitivity and awareness.

In another sense, advocacy entails providing and participating in school programs that serve to educate youth and adults on LGBT issues. Student programs like the Gay/Straight Alliance focus on pluralism, diversity, fostering positive human relations, and nurturing healthy self-concepts and self-esteem (Lee, 2002). School faculty and staff can attend training workshops where they can receive “basic information on and about homosexuality and the needs of gay students, crisis intervention and violence prevention strategies, and appropriate responses to expressions of homophobia” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 3). The National Education Association (NEA) also offers professional in-services for assisting colleagues in becoming more aware of the “invisible” identity of LGBT youth—their needs, issues, and concerns (Schwartz, 1994).

In its simplest form, advocacy is about providing an open ear for any student expressing fear and self-doubt. By being there to listen to their thoughts and problems, we demonstrate human compassion, and we show young people that they are not alone in whatever predicament they face. If our goal is to develop safe schools and classrooms, then we must construct spaces where everyone has the freedom to express their true selves and reveal their identities without fear of being admonished, ridiculed or rejected.

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## APPENDIX A

### MULTIMEDIA RESOURCES

#### Books

- Baker, J. M. (2002). *How homophobia hurts children: Nurturing diversity at home, at school, and in the community*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Best, A. L. (2000). *Prom night: Youth, schools and popular culture*. New York: Routledge.
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#### Films

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#### Websites & Programs

- [www.commercialcloset.org](http://www.commercialcloset.org)—Commercial Closet is a non-profit education and journalism organization that examines worldwide media representations of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and the transgendered.
- [www.gsannetwork.org](http://www.gsannetwork.org)—the Gay/Straight Alliance network is a youth-led organization that builds alliances between gay-straight school programs, and presents schools with education initiatives that focus on peer support and professional development.

*www.glsen.org*—the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network works with schools and communities to make sure that every individual is respected despite gender identity or sexual orientation.

*www.nea.org*—a national association with a membership of 2.7 million educators and professionals. The NEA provides programs and services that promote excellence in teaching, community support, and professional development.

*www.tolerance.org*—a non-profit organization that offers programs that focuses on teaching tolerance by building community and diversity, while minimizing hate and bigotry.



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