BRIDGING MULTIPLE WORLDS

Case Studies of Diverse Educational Communities

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experiences of race and gender. They did not use universal teaching practices. Since the race and gender of the teachers influenced the students’ perceptions of the teachers’ credibility, it was necessary to find approaches to deal with these challenges. The findings agree with the view that teaching is not a neutral activity. It is permeated with values about individuality, knowledge, and society that reflect larger issues. In the words of Brown, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey (2000), “There are no universal teachers but there are teachers whose experiences are affected by their race and gender” (p. 286).

In summary, African American females who have interest and proficiency in mathematics will need teachers who have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to not only teach them effectively, but also to encourage, support, and expose them to career opportunities in mathematics or related fields in science and technology. African American female students are likely to face barriers such as peer pressure, family influence, limited availability of role models and mentors, and various affective factors. The availability of special intervention programs, advanced placement courses, and appropriate guidance and counseling can be most valuable for talented African American females who deserve every chance to realize their potential. In view of the disproportionately small number of African American females with recognition in mathematics, we cannot afford to do otherwise.

ISSUES OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The issue of sexual orientation is undoubtedly one of the most controversial topics in American society today. The horrendous killing of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student, in 1998 brought to national attention the glaring fact that the number of hate crimes committed against gay men and lesbians is increasing in the United States (Human Rights Campaign, 2001). While virtually all Americans stand in opposition to such unconscionable acts, the degree to which they are willing to allow homosexuals the same rights and privileges granted to heterosexuals is still a hotly contested issue in the public dialogue. The public schools represent a microcosm of this debate. In fact, an argument can be made that the discrimination faced by teens who are not heterosexual is more intense than that which gay adults face.

In virtually every way, lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents are worse off than their adult counterparts. While forces in the larger adult society might hint at political correctness, acceptance, and accommodation, the high school—the center of most adolescent life and culture—stands staunchly aloof and rigidly re-
sistant to even a suggestion that any of its faculty or student body might be homosexual or that homosexuals deserve anything but derision and scorn within its walls. High schools may be the most homophobic institutions in American society, and woe be to anyone who would challenge the heterosexist premises on which they operate. (Unks, 1995, p. 5)

To understand Unks's statement and discuss the issues relating to sexual orientation in the public schools, it is useful to understand the terminology used in the discourse. Homophobia has been defined as "prejudice, discrimination, harassment, or acts of violence against sexual minorities, including lesbians, gay men, bisexual, and transgendered persons, evidenced in a deep-seated fear or hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex" (Sears, 1997, p. 16). The fears, misunderstandings, and discriminatory behavior of heterosexuals directed toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) individuals are well documented (Pharr, 1988; GLSEN, 1999). The intensity of these negative feelings and behaviors is correlated with a variety of personal, geographic, religious, and educational factors (Sears, 1997). Heterosexism is "a belief in the superiority of heterosexuals or heterosexuality evidenced in the exclusion, by omission or design, of nonheterosexual persons in policies, procedures, events, or activities" (Sears, 1997, p. 16). This is the pervading view in school and society and, despite an increased awareness of the injustice of such a view, the majority of school personnel are often inactive in changing behaviors that place GLBT students at risk daily.

**Risk Factors for GLBT Students**

The overriding risk factor for all teens is the lack of communication or support from one or more of their multiple worlds: family, school, religious institution, community, and peers. Many GLBT students experience significant stress knowing that there is little if any support in any of these circles for a nonheterosexual orientation. Sexual orientation is a term used to describe the attraction one feels toward either or both sexes, since individuals may be homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual (GLSEN, 1999). Just as is the case with heterosexuals, adults who are nonheterosexual report that they have little control over their sexual orientation (Pharr, 1988). Sexual behavior involves the sexual activities in which individuals engage. While the median age for recognizing one's sexual orientation is 13, sexual behavior may or may not accompany this awareness. Sexual identity is a broader concept than sexual orientation involving a multitude of issues related to gender. Unlike most individuals struggling with their racial identity, youth forming their sexual identity can be recognized by others as having a different sexual identity than
the one that the individual eventually determines. Others generally assume heterosexuality until a person “comes out” as gay or bisexual.

The consequences for coming out can be severe, ranging from verbal harassment and social ostracism to physical abuse (Remafedi, 1994). Being the recipient of verbal abuse is almost guaranteed, with 97 percent of youth reporting that they hear homophobic epithets in school (GLSEN, 1999). The low self-esteem and feelings of isolation and depression that GLBT youth experience are tied to any number of risky behaviors, including school absenteeism, dropping out, homelessness, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior that can lead to HIV infection, and suicide (GLSEN, 1999; Harbeck, 1997; Hunter, 1996; Remafedi, 1994).

The high rates of suicide attempts and actual suicide among GLBT teens have been highly publicized, with as many as 30 percent of the 5,000 suicides committed by adolescents and young adults (ages 15 to 24) annually attributed to distress over sexual orientation (O’Conor, 1995; Remafedi, 1994). A recent study by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health reported that 10 percent of Massachusetts high school students attempted suicide, according to a survey of about 4,000 students in 1997 (Healy, 2001). Of those, 40 percent of gay and bisexual students attempted suicide, compared to about 10 percent of their heterosexual peers. While some are concerned about the inflation of these statistics due to sampling problems (Unks, 1995), perhaps the most important message is that higher rates of attempted suicide and actual suicide among homosexual teens are not due to an inherent mental instability, but to a predictable reaction to a hostile environment.

Although most school staff are aware that GLBT youth are present in the schools, many teachers are uninformed about the population. Their views are based on a variety of societal beliefs and myths that have little empirical support.

**Characteristics of GLBT Youth**

Estimates of the number of GLBT adolescents in the United States varies from 1 to 30 percent, although a range of 5 to 10 percent is most commonly reported (Ginsberg, 1999; Harbeck, 1997). There is even a controversy over whether the actual figure is over- or underestimated (Harbeck, 1997; Sears, 1997). It is difficult to study the population due to the obvious threats involved in self-identification. On the other hand, many samples involve individuals associated with therapeutic settings. Much of the information accumulated comes retrospectively from adults (Anderson, 1995). As mentioned previously, gay teens usually report being aware of being more attracted to persons of their own sex between ages 12 and 14, although in-
dividual reports vary widely (Anderson 1995; Ginsberg 1999; Sears, 1991). Most homosexuals recall a period of intense anxiety when they realize that they belong to a stigmatized group and often go through a period of trying to change their orientation. They may begin or continue heterosexual activity despite an awareness of their orientation. Again, it is important to point out that sexual orientation is distinct from sexual behavior and that, despite the presumption of promiscuity that colors much of the public debate about homosexuality, studies have shown that GLBT students' sexual experiences are similar to those of their heterosexual peers (Ginsberg, 1999).

For many GLBT teens, coming out is an all-consuming issue that is rooted in a strong need for emotional support and often takes precedence over the many curricular and extracurricular activities that are associated with success in high school (Ginsberg, 1999). Students most frequently come out to trusted GLBT peers first, then close heterosexual peers or family members, although some may rely on a teacher, counselor, or coach (GLSEN, 1999). Coming out to a sibling or parent can be very threatening, depending on the family members' beliefs and expectations. Parental responses can range from confusion or denial to threats of disowning the child or physical violence if the child does not "change" (Ginsberg, 1999).

Some of the negative response that parents display is rooted in the belief that a child can change his or her sexual orientation. To some extent, this belief is tied to the controversy over the factors that determine sexual orientation. There continues to be debate over the biological basis for sexual orientation (Jones, 1999; Lipkin, 1996). Some studies suggest that when one identical twin is gay there is a higher likelihood that the other twin is gay than with fraternal twins, suggesting a biological link. Furthermore, the sexual orientation of adopted children is unrelated to the orientation of the parents, suggesting that the trait is not socially rooted. Nevertheless, there is no foolproof way to identify sexual orientation, despite an array of theories based on genetic makeup, hormonal levels, socialization, and environment (Pharr, 1988). However, both heterosexual and homosexual adults report having little control over their sexual orientation.

One group that faces even greater risk is students who are both gay and people of color. They are more vulnerable to antigay harassment and face a more complex set of issues in coming out (Sears, 1995, 1997; Uribe, 1995). Although there are individual reports that the black community is less accepting of homosexuality than the white community, there is little empirical support for this belief. Nevertheless, these youth often feel extreme isolation in trying to keep separate the three worlds in which they reside: the homosexual community, their racial community, and the society at large.
Rationale for a School and Community Response

There are a variety of strong educational, psychological, legal, and ethical reasons for supporting students who are GLBT in the schools. Obviously, these are students who are at risk, and their existence is often denied by the school culture and curriculum (Unks, 1995). The public school culture—the newspaper gossip columns, the school yearbook signings, class ring exchanges, Valentine’s celebrations, the prom—is based on a heterosexual view. Furthermore, like other diverse groups, the lives, literature, art, and music of GLBT individuals is either absent from the pages of elementary and secondary texts or not identified as such.

Many national educational, medical, and mental health organizations have written policy statements supportive of the rights of GLBT students and educators. For example, the National Association of State Boards of Education, representing the 50 state boards of education, voted that “State boards should provide leadership in eliminating the stereotypes and discrimination on the basis of sex, age, disability, race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnic background or national origin in curriculum materials, counseling methods and other education processes” (Harbeck, 1997, p. 18). Similarly, since 1974 the National Education Association has issued strong statements opposing employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

The position statement of the National Association of School Psychologists (1999) supports sexual minority youth in public and private schools by endorsing (1) education of students and staff, (2) direct counseling, (3) advocacy, (4) research, and (5) programs for HIV prevention directed toward GLBT youth.

Those who view homosexuality as abnormal or immoral can exacerbate the psychological stress that may accompany coming out. The psychological implications of reparative therapy present another issue that has caused professional organizations to respond. Reparative therapy refers to psychotherapy aimed at eliminating homosexual desires and the belief that homosexuality is a mental disorder (GLSEN, 1999). Transformational ministry is an approach used by some Christian groups to attempt to eliminate homosexual desires. The American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973; all major health professional organizations have supported this. Furthermore, 10 national education, health, and counseling organizations have supported a statement in opposition to reparative therapy and transformational ministry, saying that its promotion is likely to exacerbate the risk of harassment, harm, and fear.

Although there is considerable case law regarding homosexual students and teachers, the Nabozny case stands out. In 1995 Jamie Nabozny, a gay former student, sued the Ashland School District in Wisconsin for not protecting him against harassment (Jones, 1999). Jamie was mock-raped in a
classroom, urinated upon in a bathroom, and kicked so badly that he required surgery to stop the internal bleeding. In this landmark case, the Seventh U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the district pay Jamie Nabozny $900,000 in damages for violation of the Fourteenth Amendment Equal Protection Clause.

Although no federal law protects students simply on the basis of their sexual orientation, Title IX applies to cases of sexual discrimination in which sexual orientation issues may be present. The Office of Civil Rights has issued extensive guidance for school districts that outlines a school’s responsibilities under Title IX, including grievance procedures and prevention (Office for Civil Rights, 2001). Massachusetts was the first state to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in public schools (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993; Jennings, 1996). Similarly, case law has supported the rights of gay and lesbian teachers whose districts have attempted to terminate their employment on the basis of sexual orientation, although questions remain regarding a possible line between public and private behavior (Zirkel, 1999).

The ethical dimensions of the homosexual controversy in U.S. society are extremely complex, especially given the plurality of religious beliefs. However, there are issues on which many faith organizations can agree, especially the right of individuals not be discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation in areas such as safety and employment (Interfaith Alliance Foundation, n.d.). Furthermore, it is not true that all religious organizations are opposed to homosexual orientation and behavior. Some organizations have openly supported homosexuality as healthy and acceptable (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, 2001), whereas in other major denominations there are groups within the denomination that are openly accepting of gay and lesbian individuals regardless of official church doctrine (Crew, 1997; Nugent, 1997). Nevertheless, it is clear that many conservative Christian denominations view homosexuality as sinful. However, the debate over the biblical view of homosexuality is far from resolved in most major Protestant denominations.

A final rationale for addressing sexual difference in schools is that all students benefit from gaining factual information. Homophobia hinders all students by confining people in rigid gender roles and inhibiting close personal relationships with members of the same sex (Blumenfeld, 1992). All students, whether gay or straight, are vulnerable to homophobic slurs, regardless of their sexual orientation (Sattel, Keyes, & Tupper, 1997). Although the issue is constantly appearing in the media in ways that may or may not be helpful or accurate, many community groups avoid the topic due to its controversial dimensions. Unless public schools respond to the void of information available, students will continue to rely on hearsay.
Staff Training and Resources

Although most teachers and support staff are aware that there are GLBT youth in their classrooms, they admit that they do not meet these students needs due to their lack of professional training, their own homophobic feelings, or their fear that colleagues will think that they were gay or lesbian, thus potentially compromising their reputation or employment (Sears, 1992). These responses indicate that, like their students, teachers and other school staff are in need of information about GLBT youth, as well as strategies for working with these students.

It is not reasonable to expect gay and lesbian teachers to become the standard bearers for change. The Employment Non-Discrimination Act, prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, was introduced and strongly supported during the Clinton administration, but it has not been passed (Harbeck, 1997). Therefore, it is up to state law whether sexual orientation is a protected category. Although case law has supported gay teachers, as stated previously, there are still fuzzy areas of the law. Many gay and lesbian teachers have come out in the last decade and made significant contributions (Anderson, 1996; Jennings, 1996; Prince, 1996). However, both gay and straight staff must be involved in the process to enact change.

It is important that both preservice and in-service teachers receive relevant information. In 1994 Massachusetts became the first state to establish an Advisory Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth that must ensure that all teacher certification programs include information about serving GLBT youth (Harbeck, 1997). Workshops that address homophobia will certainly help many in-service educators to feel more comfortable about addressing these issues with students. In addition, many resources, such as speakers, brochures and books, policy statements, and videos, are available through organizations such as Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG, n.d.) and Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (Jennings, 1996; GLSEN, 2001) (see Table 10.2). At minimum, staff must understand the federal and state laws that govern their behavior toward students and follow accompanying procedures established by the school district. Although guidance counselors, social workers, health teachers, and coaches may have a higher likelihood of coping with students who are victims of harassment, school staff can encounter antihomosexual epithets from students and peers and must deal with them appropriately.

Curriculum Issues

While school staff are generally aware of the need to enforce antidiscrimination policies in the public schools, the process of including information about homosexuality and the histories, literature, art, and music of GLBT individuals in the curriculum continues to be a source of controversy across the coun-
try. However, individual teachers and school districts have implemented curriculum change in a number of ways. For example, the Minnesota State Board of Education requires every school to submit a plan for including multicultural, gender-fair, disability-sensitive material and resources throughout the curriculum. Some districts include sexual orientation as part of the gender fairness concept (Sattel, Keyes, & Tupper, 1997). Districts include this content within courses or units on justice, equity, and prejudice reduction; health; and the history or psychology of sport. Sexual orientation can be appropriately discussed in social studies and English classrooms as well (Lipkin, 2000; Roy, 1997). Most recently, educators are exploring the need for addressing these issues on the elementary level (Boyd, 1999; Letts & Sears, 1999). An increasing body of information is available for districts seeking to make their curriculum more inclusive and is available through many of the organizations mentioned above (Lipkin, 2000; Schniedewind & Davidson, 1997).

School and Community Support Groups and Programs

Today there are over 700 support groups for GLBT youth (GLSEN, 2001). Known by a variety of names (e.g., Gay–Straight Alliance, BIGAYLA, Allies), many of these groups have grown out of GLSEN because the organization emphasizes education, action, and the inclusion of people of all sexual orientations (Jennings, 1996). Each group or chapter sets its policies and procedures; however, a universal policy is that youth are not required to declare
their sexual orientation. Often groups meet on campus after school, but other groups are sponsored by a variety of service organizations and may meet in community buildings.

Another organization that is helpful to youth and their families is PFLAG. Its mission is to support the needs of parents and friends of lesbians and gay men, to educate them and others, and to advocate equality for their gay and lesbian children (Durgin-Cinchar, 1997). In addition to sponsoring 450 affiliates, PFLAG provides newsletters, help lines, programs, brochures, and advocacy activities (PFLAG, 2001).

There are two organizations that work to provide education and support. Two fairly comprehensive district programs that have been created to address the needs of GLBT teens are Project 10 at Fairfax High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District and the Harvey Milk School in New York City.

Project 10 began in 1984 to address the needs of GLBT youth by focusing on “education, reduction of verbal and physical abuse, suicide prevention, and dissemination of accurate AIDS information” (Uribe, 1995). The centerpiece of the model is a weekly support group averaging 10 to 12 students for students who are suffering the effects of stigmatization and discrimination based on sexual orientation. The adult cofacilitators (usually a male and a female) are trained through workshops and must be nonjudgmental with regard to sexual orientation. When appropriate, students are referred to community agencies for additional services. Project 10 also includes a district resource center, a paid coordinator, ongoing workshops for school staff, school support teams, lists of books for school librarians, enforcement of nondiscrimination policies, and advocacy for gay and lesbian student rights through the school system and community. This program has been successful partially due to its collaboration with social service agencies in Los Angeles that offer discussion groups, a youth hotline, emergency shelter for homeless gay youth, and group homes and foster placements for teens rejected by their families (Gover, 1996).

The Harvey Milk School, opened in 1985, grew out of the same concerns for gay and lesbian youth that spawned Project 10 (Gover, 1996; Hunter, 1996). It is a small alternative school in Manhattan that, in addition to a traditional curriculum, offers substantial social services, including a family counseling program. Serving students primarily between the ages of 15 and 17, Harvey Milk is a transitional school that encourages students to return to traditional schools when ready.

Conclusion

Many other issues relating to gender and education could be discussed in this chapter: stereotyping of gender roles, sexism, sexual harassment, the representation of women and men in the curriculum, and the implications of Title IX. While the following cases do not directly address all these issues, we be-
lieve that grappling with both cases will help you to consider many of the impor-
tant issues related to gender that caring and responsive educators must be
prepared to address.

THE CASE OF CASSIE BROWN

As she left the office of her mathematics teacher, Mr. Tempe, tears ran down
Cassie’s cheeks. In fact, she began to cry before Mr. Tempe had finished his
advice to her. She had gone to him the second time for help with a difficult
calculus problem, using logarithmic functions: \( 1.7(2.1)^3x = 2(4.5)^x \) after
working on it for days.

Mr. Tempe reminded her, “Cassie, you told me earlier that you wanted
to major in mathematics in college.” Cassie turned to face him and he con-
tinued. “Are you really sure that you want to continue to study mathemat-
ics?” he queried. “There are not many minorities in this field and you are also
female and African American. Are you sure that you don’t want to reconsider
your goal?”

Cassie responded firmly, “No, I’m going to study mathematics” and qui-
etly left his office. Although she was shocked by his words and had wanted
to say so, as a very shy person who had been reared to respect all adults, es-
pecially teachers, she simply took his advice as an honest opinion of her abil-
ity to succeed. Mathematics had been Cassie’s favorite subject since she was
in middle school.

Yet it was true that despite her usual persistence, which almost always
paid off, she simply could not solve the problem and had become very frus-
trated. As she rode the bus home from school, she began to talk to herself
silently, wondering what she should do now. She loved mathematics and
computers more than anything and always thought of mathematics as her
strongest subject. She did not want to give up. However, she just could not
get it, even after Mr. Tempe explained the process twice.

As the older bus bumped along, she cried quietly as she thought, “Here
I am in October of my senior year in high school, a student who has an av-
erage of 85, a member of the National Honor Society, and with 1,300 on my
SATs. I’ve received good grades in all my mathematics classes until now in
precalculus, and Mr. Tempe is suggesting that I give up.”

When she arrived home, Cassie was comforted by her parents, who en-
couraged her to stick to her plan to become a mathematics teacher. After all,
they knew that Cassie had always loved school and wanted to be a teacher. Now,
inspired mainly by her mathematics teachers in the middle school, she had cho-
sen to study it after high school. Furthermore, since neither parent had been
blessed with opportunities to go to college, they wanted all their children to ac-
complish that goal. But, perhaps she could not pass the class with Mr. Tempe!