

Facilitating Visibility of LGBTQ Issues in Public Schools

Teacher Resistance and Teachable Moments

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IN THIS CHAPTER, I DISCUSS MY COMMITMENT, as my district's international/multicultural coordinator and a teacher, to facilitating visibility of LGBTQ issues in public school, the resistance I have encountered in talking with teachers, the teachable moments I have seized, and the role of community in this work. Finally, I reflect on where my district is, where I see it going, and why.

Addressing LGBTQ Issues in Schools

It was spring 2008 and the school day had just ended. After a busy morning of doing research, making contacts, and taking care of daily business as my district's international/multicultural coordinator, followed by an afternoon teaching 2nd grade, I was preparing to leave for a local association meeting that, as president, I would be running. The meeting was scheduled to begin in less than 15 minutes so I knew I had to gather my belongings and head out the door. Just as I was grabbing my coat and bag I looked up and noticed a 6th-grade boy standing outside my multicultural office reading a poster that I had hung up earlier in the school year. "No homophobic remarks spoken here," it said. The young man popped his head into the doorway of my room. "What are homophobic remarks?" he asked of no one in particular. My eyes opened wide, certainly making me appear more alert and awake than I felt at that point in the day. I quickly

averted my gaze away from the door and toward my teaching partner. "Oh, no," I thought. "How am I going to handle this?" My mind raced in a million directions. "I don't have time for this right now," I thought and then chided myself almost immediately, knowing I must answer this child's question; to make excuses would violate everything I stood for as both a person and an educator. A simple explanation came to me. "It's like calling someone gay," I said. "Oh," he responded with a quick nod of his head and walked away.

Although I recognize that the term *gay*, in and of itself, certainly does not constitute a homophobic remark, I also know from experience that when used by students in this school setting, it is homophobic. Indeed, all words referring to homosexuality are typically used as put-downs. For this reason, my response to his question seemed sufficient and, because of its clarity, a good one.

Addressing LGBTQ issues in school is daunting. However, as educators, we are there to provide information to all our students, whether we feel completely comfortable sharing the knowledge or not. It is imperative that we either give students the information they seek or help them discover it. By responding to the 6th-grade student with an "I don't have time for this" comment or attitude, I would have not only opened the door for him to ask the question of someone who might have answered with misinformation but I would have also devalued this young man and the knowledge he sought. The simple fact that I have this poster displayed in such a prominent place implies that not only is it a message I want to share with students, parents, and staff, but it is also one that I am ready and willing to discuss.

When it comes to being straightforward and talking about matters related to LGBTQ issues with elementary-aged students, I have always been willing to discuss, intervene, and answer questions. I know that in doing this I am taking a risk. After all, there are no hard-and-fast rules or directions explaining how to do this. I do know, however, that not to say anything, whether it be in response to a question, a discussion students are having, or a homophobic remark, is the biggest injustice of all. I am certainly aware that, in having these conversations and embarking on these teachable moments, parents, colleagues, and administrators might question my judgment. This is a risk I am willing to take. Throughout the 20 years of my teaching career, questions have arisen about how and why I teach reading and writing the way I do, the absence of behavior modification in my classroom, and why I rarely assign seats to my young

students. These professional choices I make are solidly grounded in research, educational philosophies, and what I believe to be best for students. Thus, my classroom environment, teaching, and assessment strategies and other decisions I make as a teacher can be defended and explained without a problem. I do not see these incidences as threatening, but opportunities to share why I do what I do. The same goes for discussions surrounding lesbian and gay issues.

For example, during a discussion with a (noneducator) friend about addressing homosexuality in the classroom, she expressed shock and concern. "Why would you ever consider teaching about sex to 7- and 8-year-olds?" she asked. My head swirled with disappointment. "I'm not talking about sex," I told her. "I'm talking about relationships." I went on to say that heterosexuality is taught in schools on a regular basis. I explained that mainstream children's literature features heterosexual relationships, emergency forms typically ask for the mother and father's names (thankfully, in my district, that is no longer the case), and female teachers often have photos of their husbands or boyfriends on their desks. Heterosexuality, as the norm, is implicitly and explicitly taught in our classrooms and schools. How does this reality affect the child who has two moms or two dads? What does it do to the student struggling with his or her own sexual identity? What about the lesbian teacher who wants to display framed pictures of her partner on her desk? One of the most important roles of our schools is to create safe spaces for students. Not only are many schools not safe for LGBTQ students and students whose parents are LGBTQ, I will go so far as to say that teachers and administrators who do not teach about or discuss issues related to homosexuality create unsafe environments for these students.

Pink TIGers

Powerful incidents, such as the one described above, and ones I describe later in this chapter, led me to the Pink TIGers. I was eager to have professional discussions with others who were combating homophobia and heterosexism in school settings. I was interested to find out how these educators, in various surrounding school districts and university settings, dealt with resistance, embraced teachable moments as they occurred, and included lessons and literature related to sexuality in their teaching practices. Were there LGBT-themed units that they knew about

that I could introduce to my district? Was anybody aware of districts that had included LGBTQ issues and literature in the elementary school curricula? Although the answers to these questions are still at large, the monthly meetings with the group have been very helpful. I have been introduced to many resources. Books have been purchased for the high school library. Recommended DVDs and books were purchased for the multicultural resource room.

Realities of Including LGBTQ Issues in the Classroom

Years ago, as a participant in a multicultural seminar in my district, I was given a priceless opportunity to watch and then discuss *It's Elementary* (Cohen & Chasnoff, 1997). The film documents curriculum-driven lessons and units focused on, and inclusive of, sexuality in elementary and middle school classrooms. The video displays educators facilitating and reflecting on lesbian and gay-themed lessons. Students are shown brainstorming, discussing, questioning, and commenting on topics rarely talked about in classroom settings (see entry in the Annotated Bibliography of this book). At the time, the segment that focused on a 3rd-grade homosexuality unit had the greatest impact on me as a teacher of 8- and 9-year-olds. In a whole-class setting, the teacher began the unit by encouraging students to brainstorm all they knew or had heard about the topic. Without judgment, the teacher asked for clarification when needed but all thoughts shared were included on the growing web at the front of the classroom. This lesson gave me possibilities for my own classroom. Could I actually teach a similar unit in my school district? I wasn't so sure. If, in fact, I were to plan such a unit, would I have to get administrative permission to teach it? Those questions have crept in and out of my mind for many years now.

As my district's international/multicultural coordinator, I implement the school district's international/multicultural education program through one-on-one work with teachers (lesson/unit planning, teaching resources, professional development plans), teaching a four-part seminar series (for college credit) to educators in the district, disseminating articles/readings on culturally relevant teaching practices and current events related to diversity, leading the district's international/multicultural literature discussion for staff (4 times a year), and collaborating with the curriculum director to infuse culturally relevant teaching throughout the district's curriculum (K-12). In this position, which I've

been in since 2006, I have had the opportunity to show *It's Elementary* to some of my colleagues. During the summer of 2008, after one such viewing, a teacher asked, "Could I teach a unit like one seen here in my classroom?" I responded with a "No, it's doubtful." I went on to explain that this is a question I have been struggling with for years, the desire to teach explicit lessons related to homosexuality as part of a classroom unit. I know I would first have to seek permission, and I am fairly certain it would be denied.

The freedom to teach such a unit, grounded in state standards and district curricula, does not even seem to be the reality in a district such as mine, where emergency forms have been purged of heteronormativity; sexual orientation language was included in the recently adopted district antibullying policy; and a committee of educators, parents, and students was created (in the late 1990s) to view LGBTQ literature and resources to be included in school library collections. In a district whose multicultural professional development program was established in 1990 and, from the start, has included sexuality under its "multicultural umbrella," I am confused and saddened that more headway has not been made with regard to teaching formally about LGBTQ issues. If not here, where? If not now, when? If not here and now, why?

As the multicultural coordinator, what power do I have to make districtwide changes? Although I try to make districtwide change through all components of my job, I most consistently do so in the seminar series by showing films such as *It's Elementary* (Cohen & Chasnoff, 1997) and *20 Straws* (Gjestvang, 2006)—a documentary featuring teenagers to 20-something-year-olds talking honestly about their experiences as LGBTQ young people in local area schools (see entries in the Annotated Bibliography of this book). Sadly, though, the number of educators affected by these films is very small because taking part in the international/multicultural professional development seminars is completely voluntary.

In an attempt to include sexuality as part of a diversity and equity discussion with colleagues, the international/multicultural district committee shared an article, "20 (Self-) Critical Things I Will Do to Be a More Equitable Educator" (Gorski, 2003), with my teaching staff. Several months earlier I had run across this piece (edchange.org) while doing research. I was so moved by it that I shared it with the committee. The committee decided that this article should be shared with staff members in all five buildings in the district. My building principal was quite supportive and immediately scheduled a teaching colleague of mine (also a

longtime member of the international/multicultural district committee) to run an upcoming monthly after-school staff meeting centered around the Gorski article.

Because the staff was known to be vocal, I felt certain that conversation would be open, honest, and productive. The discussion on topics such as centering classroom discussions around students and their interests, reflecting on how a teacher's identity affects the way he or she experiences others, and understanding the relationship between intent and impact was, for the most part, strained and awkward. I was shocked. An under-the-breath, but loud-enough-to-be-heard, comment was made by a colleague saying that diversity education should be a responsibility of parents, not schools. At one point a staff member brought up the topic of homosexuality being discussed in the classroom. Many teachers kept quiet. One or two posed their opposition to just such a lesson, be it planned or a teachable moment. Two or three of us were quite vocal in stating the importance of just such dialogue in the school setting. The bottom line, I said to my colleagues, is that this has nothing to do with religion or politics but the safety and knowledge acquisition of all students. But it seems that many educators cannot separate the religious piece from the classroom. Many don't seem to realize or understand the importance of infusing sexuality in one's teaching. Including race, religion, and culture is becoming more mainstream in curriculum development and classroom teaching, but the inclusion of LGBTQ issues, sadly, is still considered off limits to many.

Teachable Moments

Constructed curricula inclusive of LGBTQ issues do not exist in many (if any) public school districts in the Central Ohio area. However, that should not preclude the opportunity to take advantage of teachable moments. Excellent educators know that these diversions from original lesson plans often provide the most powerful and meaningful learning of all. But what if these paths take us down roads some see as "bad," "evil," or irrelevant? When the words *gay* or *lesbian* are used in the elementary school setting, how is it handled? Do teachers choose to ignore homophobic remarks? Do they make up excuses for not answering questions or discussing comments about LGBTQ people generated by students? I had such an experience. What it taught me was that even though these situations seem complex

and difficult, they really are not. As an educator I must be responsive to the questions and concerns students are bringing to the classroom. To do anything else is to do them a disservice. To do anything else is to cheat these young people of valuable and pertinent information. To do anything less is to look your students in the eyes and lie.

It was late October 2004 and my 3rd-grade students were involved in creatively and artistically expressing themselves in response to an assignment related to our current unit of study. As is often the case in my classroom, noncurricular-related conversations ensued. Functioning as a student at this point, I was working on my own unique project using the artist's tools of paper, pencil, crayons, and watercolors. Sitting with several boys, at a far table, back toward the window, facing the classroom door, I was both a part of and apart from the surrounding conversations. I focused as much on my tablemates as I did on the other students in their self-selected groupings, scattered throughout my classroom.

"He's raising the gas prices." "He wants to make America safer." "He's bad..." "He's good..." "I'm voting for..." began to bombard me from all parts of the room like baseballs being hurled from an automatic pitching machine. I decided I had better attempt to make contact with this barrage of verbalized thoughts, rather than allow them to fly off in all directions, leaving misinformation and half truths soaring through the air.

I had purposefully avoided the topic of the upcoming presidential election, knowing I was far too passionate about it to lead an objective conversation with my 8- and 9-year-old public school students.

"Okay," I boomed, causing all chitchat to cease, all artistic expression to stop, and all eyes to focus on me. "We need to talk about the upcoming election." The teachable moment had arrived; I could either go with it or sidestep it. I faced it head on. I walked into the hall, quickly returning with a large sheet of paper. I pinned it to the front board and wrote: "What we think we know about George W. Bush and John Kerry," making a two-columned chart, purposefully writing the president's name first, in an attempt to conceal my prejudices.

Students returned to working on their projects, raising their hands if and when they had something to contribute to the chart. As secretary, I wrote the words just as they were spoken, much like the teacher in *It's Elementary* (Cohen & Chasnoff, 1997). When all ideas had been generated, I began to discuss each in turn.

"President Bush doesn't want gay people to get married," I read to the class. This was Mark's comment. Good for Mark. I noticed a few students

shifting in their seats; others peered around the room uncomfortably, some looked at the floor, and others continued with their work. "How's she going to handle this one?" I imagined several students asking.

To explain both Bush's and Kerry's positions on gay marriage, I needed to be certain my students knew what it meant to be gay. Amid some nervous 3rd-grade giggles and surprised expressions, I dove in like a pelican plunging into ocean water for a tasty fish. "To be gay means that if you're a man you love another man or if you're a woman you love another woman in the same way some of your moms and dads love each other." Expressionful "Oohs" seeped out of the quietness like toothpaste oozing out of an almost empty tube of toothpaste.

"That's gross!" "That's sick!"

"Why?" I asked.

Nobody seemed to have an answer.

I continued in what seemed a different direction, to ease the tension and confusion some of my students were exhibiting. "How many of you know 3rd graders who are excellent readers? They knew how to read before they started kindergarten and can now read really hard stuff. It's as if they were born ready to read." Many hands shot up. "How many of you know talented soccer players who can play the game more expertly than others at their same age?" Several kids nodded; others raised their hands. "How many of you recognize gifted artists, kids who just have this amazing ability to draw?"

"Like Olivia and Aaron," somebody said.

"Do you agree that people are born with certain traits?" I questioned. Again, there was agreement either through expressions or words. "If you're a talented singer, artist, athlete, or writer, is it by choice or were you born to be this way?" I inquired. There were mutterings, but the consensus was that, yes, indeed, one was born with certain gifts or qualities.

"Gay people are born gay," I proclaimed. "It's not a choice. They don't necessarily know it when they're young, but at some point they realize it. Some of you seem to think it's weird or gross. I have to tell you that I have many good friends, both men and women, who are gay." Surprised looks. "Think about this—what if, at some point, you discover that a friend or family member is gay? Do you say, 'Ooh, sick!' and abandon them? Or do you say, 'It doesn't matter 'cause they're still the same person I've always known and loved?'" Silence filled the space around us.

I looked around the room, realizing it was probably time to step down off my soapbox. Curiously, however, I noticed one little boy who was

sitting in a different spot from where he had been when I started my "sermon." Yes, he was still in the same blue chair. However, instead of being directly in front of my desk, about 12 feet away from where I was standing, his chair was directly to my right, approximately 3 feet away.

Why had this "speech" attracted this young man to me like metal to a magnet? How did it happen that he slowly narrowed the gap between us without notice? Had I sent him the message, "I'm an ally," "I am safe," "I understand that everyone is not the same, and I value the differences?" Was his physical relocation a silent "Thank you?"

Although I described that being gay is not a choice, it truly isn't as simple as that. Taking into consideration that I was working with 8- and 9-year-olds and knowing that homosexuality is often portrayed as a choice (and nothing else), I wanted my students to realize that there is more to it than that.

As the students present for this conversation grow older, will some reflect on my message, remembering that early in their school career there was a teacher who was "safe"? That there was a teacher who respected those seen as different? That there was an adult in their past who knew that to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender is virtually the same as being born with artistic, linguistic, or athletic gifts? The follow-up documentary to *It's Elementary, It's Still Elementary* (Chasnoff & Chen, 2007), suggests they will (see entry in the Annotated Bibliography of this book).

Was there backlash from this teachable moment? No. Had there been, I was comfortable and confident holding my own ground explaining what I said, why I said it, and how the teachable moment presented itself. I have had these explanatory discussions with colleagues many times over the years. There is not always agreement, but there is a willingness to listen.

Simple choices send the message of safety in quiet, understated ways that are clear and recognizable to students. Posters displaying messages of inclusion, posted quotations of people from many cultural groups, artwork that captures images of respect and tolerance, literature written or illustrated by and for a variety of groups, and symbols on visible stickers and buttons need to be purposefully and prominently displayed in our school, classrooms, and offices. If nothing else, this alone lets others know who you are *and* what you stand for.

Although many might argue that elementary-age children are far too young to know their sexual identity and to be exposed to information about LGBTQ people and issues, and are not even interested, I beg to differ. Children are much more sophisticated in their thinking than some

might assume. They seek out truth, are open and willing to learn about various perspectives, and are often aware of what is in the media. Creating safe spaces for all students must be a priority for teachers, schools, and districts.

Community

In spring 2007, Kristen, one of the high school's guidance counselors, contacted me, interested in information about LGBTQ people that was housed in the district multicultural resource center, as well as information about high school gay-straight alliances (GSAs). She said that a student had come to her wanting to start a GSA and asked her to be the advisor. In addition, this student had recently come out as being gay himself. Kristen was hoping to have young adult literature and resources to share with this young man but, as a new counselor to the district, found the LGBTQ resources in her office limited to a few old pamphlets. Several meetings occurred during the spring, setting the foundation for the GSA that officially began in fall 2007. I was included in these planning stages, as was a local youth center leader who heads up a facility that helps to create safe environments for LGBTQ teenagers. Additionally, I invited Kristen to a Pink TIGers meeting. She has been a part of the group ever since. With the expertise and experience of Pink TIGer GSA advisors, the GSA has created a mission statement and received valuable advice about dealing with obstacles faced by other local GSAs. The monthly discussions not only have led Kristen to important decisions with regard to advising the high school student group, but also have provided her with ways that students can get involved outside the district. Information about teen book discussions, and copies of the necessary books, have been provided to those teens seeking to get involved. Community-wide activities for LGBTQ youth have been shared with Kristen through Pink TIGers meetings as well.

Conclusion

Does the existence of a GSA open doors for LGBTQ-themed lessons and discussions to become realities in classrooms? At this point, there is no way of knowing. Given the support of several central office administrators, the existence of a district multicultural education program, and the

eagerness of a handful of high school students, the door could be opening just a crack. In such a small district (about 2,000 students) it stands to reason that, as the GSA raises awareness through education and activities with high school staff and students, information will filter down to the middle and elementary schools. I assume, however, that this process will be slow. Given the discussions that transpired during an elementary school staff meeting (mentioned earlier in this chapter) and conversations I have had with the district curriculum director, I cannot predict if and when explicit teaching about LGBTQ issues will become a reality in my district's schools. Although the curriculum director has been supportive of including sexual orientation as a "category" under the multicultural umbrella since the inception of the district's international/multicultural education program and has been instrumental in creating a proactive group of educators, parents, and students to review LGBTQ-themed literature for our school libraries (to prevent parents from attempting to ban as "the last holdout." She went on to explain that although it is seen as "politically incorrect" to speak of another's race or religion in derogatory terms, many still find it acceptable to speak in such terms with regard to sexual orientation. This "reality" (if it is that) frustrates us both.

My work to move my district to one where LGBTQ issues and literature, at all levels, can be explicitly introduced by teachers has a long way to go. If I am to succeed in doing so, I am certain that the Pink TIGers will be a big part of that success.

References

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