

How Schools Play "Smear the Queer"

By Lisa W. Loutzenheiser

Voicing one's negative feelings about homosexuality is one of the last bastions of socially acceptable prejudice. In most public forums, it is no longer acceptable to use racial epithets or sexist slurs. Yet, when it comes to gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, there is little hesitation to demonstrate bigotry without concern for who might hear or be offended. In this era of conservative backlash, the fear of confronting the issue is, at least in part, a fear of the New Right. Schools, particularly because they serve children and are accountable to myriad interest groups, are as susceptible to these pressures as any institution.

"Smear the Queer" was a game played at my own and many other elementary schools. The rules of the game are a bit hazy but were something like: a big red rubber ball was thrown to an individual. Sometimes that person threw it away quickly, but other times someone would yell "Smear the Queer," and all the participants would pile on top of the person with the ball. Generally, this person was perceived as weaker or less popular than the others. Often the pretense of the ball was given up altogether, and "Smear the Queer" was hollered, and a, usually smaller, student was jumped on by many (generally boy) students. Having been in a pileup or two myself, I know there was nothing fun about being on the bottom, or anywhere in the pile except on the very top of that wriggling mass of children's bodies. The game is analogous to the ways in which schools treat the issues of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. The rules of the game are sanctioned by the school culture. There is a sense that it is all in fun, not a game where the name-calling or "piling on" (physical and verbal harassment) puts any student in danger. There is little or no recognition by the school or teachers that the (gay, lesbian, or bisexual) child at the bottom of the pile is in need and deserving their protection. There is no understanding that the (heterosexual) child in the middle of the pile is often part of the harassment but is also damaged. The school looks the other way, assuming that this childish game has few ramifications for any of the participants; in this game all children are the same (heterosexual) and can stand up to its rigors.

The threat or the *possibility* of religious or community disagreement is often enough to stop conversations before they begin. When approaching topics involving gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, it is as if schools reflexively react with: "Well, there may be religious disagreement, so let's not discuss it. It is too dangerous. It makes everyone nervous." When I suggest the inclusion of gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues in the classroom, teachers say: "Well, if I tried to discuss homosexuality, my house would get burned down . . ." I want to ask them how they respond to any instance of bigotry in their classroom or school. For example, do they avoid speaking about equal rights for women because there are men in town who prefer women in the kitchen? Prejudice is prejudice. What schools fail to realize, however, is that by not confronting homophobia, they are likely condoning it. In most schools, we, at least, tell students that it is not acceptable

to make sexist or racist comments, even if we do not always follow through or "walk the talk." Yet, when it comes to gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues we hold back in fear. By allowing anti-gay harassment to be voiced without reprimand, schools are sanctioning and even encouraging bigotry.

As a teacher who has taught sexuality to junior and senior high school students, a teacher educator, and someone who actively works towards the inclusion of difference and against oppression in all of its forms, students have made the importance of teaching students and their teachers about the wide spectrum of sexualities abundantly clear to me. Otherwise, we consign gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens to be forever at the "bottom of the pile." In doing so, we give all students the message that "the homosexual" is Other: to be feared, odd, fundamentally different. This act of Othering causes many gay, lesbian, and bisexual young people to feel that their sexuality makes them essentially unlike, separate, and forever outside the culture of their peers. Among other consequences, Othering causes isolation and depression, which in turn can lead to suicide (Hershberger & D'Augelli; Kourany; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher).

Some of the most disturbing and shocking statistics concern the suicide and attempted suicide rates of gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens. While schools are not the only community institutions responsible for helping these young people, the suicide rates alone must spur educators to tackle these issues, if only to save a single child sitting in your classroom. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has estimated that *thirty percent* of all youth suicides are committed by gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. They are three to five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers and are more likely to succeed when they do (Kourany). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens are not only at risk when it comes to suicide, but they are more likely to use and abuse drugs, be kicked out of their homes and end up on the street (Buce & Obolensky; Krucks; Remafedi; Uribe & Harbeck). It is vital for teachers and teacher educators to understand the kinds of stresses and difficulties that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth face. These stresses are only exacerbated if the student is of color, working class, disabled, or goes against traditional gender roles.

To understand the impact of heterosexism and homophobia in schools, one must not only enumerate the struggles which gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth face at school, but also demonstrate how, by not dealing with these issues, the school environment is damaging to all students, gay or heterosexually identified. Equally important to understanding the school culture vis a vis gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues are the reaction and perceptions of school personnel because students follow what teachers model. To make school environments more welcoming to students of all sexualities, educators can implement such changes as altering curriculum, changing the school environment, and training pre-service

and supervising teachers about issues facing gay, lesbian, and bisexual families, students, and faculty.

When discussing school structures, we must draw some distinction between heterosexism and homophobia. Many educators recognize (even if they do not reprimand) a blatantly homophobic remark, such as when one student calls another a "dyke." Homophobia is damaging; however, so is heterosexism, or the assumption that everyone is straight or should be straight. By failing to recognize the existence of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, schools participate in naming heterosexuality as "normal." It is within the context of compulsory heterosexuality¹ that students and educators live. The expectation of heterosexuality is a lens through which assumptions are formed and behaviors are, often unknowingly, discriminatory.

Heterosexism occurs in individuals, but is just as likely to occur unthinkingly at the structural and institutional levels. For instance, it is rarely acknowledged on school registration forms that a student might have two moms or two dads. The form generally has two specific spaces, one marked Mother, and the other, Father. This does not seem like a major issue—a gay or lesbian parent can merely cross out the Mother or Father. Yet, when it is just one of the many obstacles facing gay or lesbian parents of school age children, it says something about how welcome gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are going to feel at that school. Each and every time parents fill out that form they must out themselves to that school and wait to gauge the response. It is indicative of the invisibility of gay and lesbian families, as well as gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in general, within the schools.

Heterosexism extends past the organization into the culture (e.g., the rules of acceptable behavior, language, etc.) of the school. How often does a staff development day or curriculum course include or even mention gays, lesbians, and bisexuals? Teachers and administrators often do not see the necessity of acknowledging sexuality issues in the curriculum, or purchasing library books by or about gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. When schools accept homophobia and heterosexism, we rob heterosexually identified students of the opportunity to reach past their own prejudices and assumptions. The assumption of student, parent, and educator heterosexuality causes a complacent and complicit silencing that hurts gay and heterosexual students alike.

Piling on

Students who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, especially those who are out at school, are in jeopardy. "Piling on" takes the form of physical and verbal abuse, as well as isolation and invisibility inside and outside the classroom. Like children on the pile, the layers of each build upon the student, ultimately making the schooling experience for many gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth difficult and often dangerous. Rather than protect the gay students at the bottom of the heap, schools often contribute to students' difficulties.

Each day, in hallways and classrooms, gay youth hear negative messages of who they are and how they "perform" their sexual identities. How many middle school and high school classrooms have we been in where we have heard one student call another fag, dyke, or say "oh, that's gay" for something that is bad. While these may not seem like particu-

larly harsh epithets, to hear them day after day leaves students feeling that the school culture is threatening. This is, perhaps, most difficult for the student who is out because the s/he is much more of a target and may feel that each comment seems directed squarely at him/her. These messages can cause students to internalize the stereotyping or insults. This, in turn, contributes to gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth struggling against their identity and thinking of themselves as damaged, deviant, or bad.

In a sense, it is a no win situation for those who are closeted or questioning, as much as it is for those who are out. Closeted youth learn to hide and separate their lives very early on, knowing that they must have one life at school and another out in the gay community, or in their rooms at home. Learning to disconnect one's life early on requires that a piece is kept split apart because it is different, wrong, or bad. While the out student is more visible, the closeted student is forced to listen to the homophobic remarks, and yet, feels unable to respond. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual students have spoken to me of lying to themselves, their parents, their friends, and deceiving the boy and girlfriends of the opposite sex in order to "pass." They mask themselves in order to gain some measure of acceptance and safety but also often feel intensely angry at themselves for not being able to stand up to the comments.

It is not only verbal harassment that places gay, lesbian, and bisexual students in danger or at risk in school, there is also the physical danger. Studies show that gay, lesbian, and bisexual students are at higher risk of physical abuse at school (Gordon; Hershberger & D'Augelli; Hunter; Rotheram-Borus, Rosario & Rossem; Uribe & Harbeck). Forty percent of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students experience physical violence in schools (Hunter) and forty percent of gay and lesbian youth say school work was affected by the environment at school (Sears). In a nationwide study of two thousand gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults, ninety percent said they were subjected to verbal or physical harassment. In this same study, one in five lesbians and one in two gay men reported that they were victims of hate crimes in school (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force).

In secondary schools, where social conformity is often prized, those whose behaviors or mannerisms fall outside rigid gender roles may face more harassment. It seems likely that far fewer young women (twenty percent) versus young men (fifty percent) reported physical harassment at school because some gay male teens stand out more readily as demonstrating mannerisms that their male peers (who are most often the perpetrators) stereotype as gay.

We are all susceptible to these stereotypes and as educators rarely discuss honestly our own views of gender roles and sexuality. By assuming, and not reflecting upon, a type of normativity based on what is accepted as male and female appropriate behaviors, schools and teachers often have difficulty dealing with students who do not fit gender roles. The consequences are that a student's identity makes him/her somehow responsible for others' harassment and the school's inability to address it. Because schools are unsure how to handle the issue or the students, these homophobic attacks lead to heterosexist responses by the schools. For example, a former student of mine, Steve, is a young man with less stereotypically male attributes. Other students began to tease him, then threaten him, and challenge him to fight. When he refused, the harassment increased. The school's failure to

respond led to a situation where Steve felt he had no other choice but to protect himself and brought a stun gun to school. One of the students who had been leading the attacks on Steve reported the stun gun and, per district policy, Steve was expelled from the school district. In this case, the student was experiencing harassment because he was perceived as gay, and the school did not recognize that the attacks occurred on the basis of sexuality. While not condoning Steve's carrying the weapon to school, the lack of awareness on the school's part led to an inability to comprehend the complexity of issues surrounding the reasons for his bringing the weapon. Steve was expelled as much for the school's silence about gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues, as for the possession of the weapon. The school's response was to take care of the individual's transgression, not the main cause of the conflict.

As gay, lesbian, and bisexual students move through the hallways waiting for the next shove up against a locker, or sit in classrooms anticipating the next slur, they hear few positive reflections of themselves. School curriculum rarely mentions gay, lesbian, or bisexual people or issues. When included, it is often a dismissive comment in a health book causing snickers and groans by other students. The students rarely have role models because gay, lesbian, and bisexual teachers are afraid to come out in the classroom for fear of harassment or of losing their jobs. The end result is greater isolation for the students and more internalization of the sense of Other. The Othering and silences are often interpreted by students as a confirmation that homosexuality is shameful and bad; otherwise, it would be acceptable to bring up as part of the school's curriculum.

The silence in the classroom can also have deadly consequences. Students who are not able to be out in the classroom or in the school, often have difficulty finding someone safe to ask questions. In the case of HIV and AIDS education, gay, lesbian, and bisexual students who are sexually active may not feel that they have anyone to ask about safer sex options, without coming out and/or enduring ridicule. Further, if the school does not acknowledge that there are gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth enrolled, then information about gay sexual practices may not be covered in the curriculum. This is particularly alarming in light of the fact that

4 percent of those infected with the	
HIV virus are	13-19 years old
15 percent	10-24 years old
23 percent	25-29 years old

Considering the fact that incubation periods can be as long as ten years before AIDS symptoms appear it is likely that thirty percent of all infections occur while those infected are in high school (Centers for Disease Control). By blocking off the ability to gain information about safer sex and the practices in which gay, lesbian, and bisexual students may be engaged, educators may in effect be encouraging the increase of HIV infection among those youth.

In classrooms, assemblies, or in counselor's offices, schools offer few forums for discussion about gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. The combination of harassment and invisibility leads to an isolation that feels huge and reinforces some students' beliefs that they are isolated at school. Not only do they feel physically at-risk, but they do not feel safe

to be themselves, or have anyone to speak with about their concerns. With this in mind, it is not surprising that the dropout rate for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth has been estimated as high as twenty-eight percent (Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Schools' inability to talk about or incorporate gay issues literally robs some teens of the high school experience.

Most players in the game assume that homophobia and heterosexism in schools affect only gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning students. This assumption coincides with the belief that homosexuality is an individual's problem or belongs in the individual domain. It is the "I-don't-care-what-you-do-in-your-bedroom-as-long-as-I-do-not-have-to-know-about-it" point of view. However, issues of sexuality affect all students, not only because one hopes that schools do not want to educate generations of bigoted youth but also because students should gain a better understanding of the spectrum of sexualities.

Unchallenged views of heterosexism are as bad for the bigot as the victim because they lead students to believe that gay, lesbian, and bisexuals are at the very least odd, different, outside the system, and, at the most extreme, sick, an abomination. If gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues are not discussed in the curriculum, the only representations that gay and heterosexual students alike have are the extremes that the media often chooses to portray. These extremes display all gay men as drag queens, every lesbian as looking like a man, and that gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are only white. Obviously, these stereotypical depictions do not do justice to the diversity in the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities. However, once again, gay, lesbian, and bisexual students are left feeling even more confused and like the Other because they know they are not like their classmates, but neither are they like the stereotypical gays, lesbians, and bisexuals portrayed in the media. Heterosexually identified students further internalize the stereotypic notions of what it means to be gay. This may feed and strengthen the fears of heterosexual students which may, in the future, have ramifications for themselves or their family members.

Now, who's got the ball?

In addition to the overall belief that gay issues are human rights issues and that schools should educate with a curriculum inclusive for all students, schools must also realize that some high school students are not settled in their sexual identities. The messages they receive today may affect how they see themselves in the future. Like gay, lesbian, and bisexual identified students, these youth will internalize the silences and negative messages; this can only make any later realization of being gay, lesbian, and bisexual more difficult. Also, heterosexual students may later become parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual children and, by accepting heterosexuality as the only norm, they may lack the knowledge to accept their own children.

Because internalized homophobia is so insidious, it is a sad fact that some of the most virulent homophobes in junior and senior high schools are those students who later realize their own homosexuality. Their acts of hurling epithets and physical harassment are cases of acting out their own fears and

self-hatred against others. When schools allow the harassment to continue unchecked and undiscussed, they are damaging the perpetrators who come to believe that their actions are correct or justified.

Presuming that all students are heterosexual, also often means assuming that so are all parents, uncles, aunts, sisters, and brothers. A student of mine felt it necessary to hide her father's homosexuality and battle with AIDS from her friends and classmates. When she began to speak of it in a sexuality class, she finally had the opportunity to talk about the shame and fear she felt for herself and her father. She spoke of the tremendous anger she felt about the disease and her reaction to it, as well as how there was usually no place at school to talk safely about these issues. She also told her classmates about the jokes and comments she felt compelled to endure and to which she was unable to respond. By speaking out in class, she found out that she was not the only teen dealing with AIDS and that other students had family members who were gay or were fighting AIDS. Shortly after the class period, a male student told me about his gay sibling and enduring his friends' anti-gay jokes without saying anything for fear that his friends would reject him because of his association with his brother. He was close to his brother, felt like he should stand up for him, and was angry that he didn't, but said that fear made him quiet. He also spoke of being in a situation with his friends when they were talking about "bashing some queers." He felt petrified that his friends would go through with it, that he would participate even though he would hate himself for it, because he was afraid of what would happen if he said no. Because of the pervasive silence in the curriculum and pedagogy, this young man was left feeling he had nowhere to turn for reassurance that it was okay to care about his brother or to gain support with his friends.

The heterosexual students in the class gained an education on a number of fronts: the realization that their peers may have gay, lesbian, and bisexual family members; that those jokes that were "just funny and weren't about anyone they knew" did hurt others; that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people were everywhere, indeed in their friends' (and perhaps their own) families. Because this school is situated in Northern California, many would assume that the students would have a greater exposure to gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues and so would be more sensitive and understanding. If there is a lack of awareness in the liberal Bay Area, with a visible gay, lesbian, and bisexual population, what must it be like in more rural or remote areas?

It is not only the students who carry heterosexist assumptions. Students also hear negative comments from their teachers. In the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth report, fifty-three percent of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students heard teachers use homophobic statements. James Sears' study of pre-service teachers found that eight of ten had negative feelings about homosexuality, and, of these, thirty-three percent were what he called high-grade homophobic. A survey completed by the teachers highlights their lack of knowledge. Sears found that: fifty-four percent believed a person chooses to be gay; forty-seven percent said the majority of lesbians and gay men were seduced by older people of the same sex; twenty-four percent believed most lesbians and gay men wanted to be members of the opposite sex. What this points to is not only teachers' discomfort with

the topic but also the fact that they lack information, even before going into the classroom.

It seems unreasonable to expect teachers to be willing to discuss openly a topic about which they have little or no education themselves. First and foremost, as with any area of cultural difference, teachers must educate themselves about diverse gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities and explore their own attitudes and feelings before attempting to teach.² Teacher education programs also have a responsibility to educate pre-service teachers and their supervisors about the issues of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. Just as we have the responsibility to teach about issues of race and gender, we have the same responsibility to prepare and enable pre-service educators to teach all students from where they are. Even if pre-service or supervising teachers have objections to homosexuality, they must acknowledge that their role is to make school a welcoming and safe place for all students and that this extends to issues of sexuality.

Schools and schools of education can do a great deal to develop a school culture that declares any type of discrimination unacceptable. However, when I discuss this issue with heterosexual teachers, I am often met with fear and apprehension. Yet, it is heterosexually identified teachers, trainers, and teacher education professors who must be among the first to eradicate homophobia and heterosexism. In part, they must address these issues to erase the notion that the only people who care to talk about heterosexism and homophobia are gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Heterosexual educators must also speak out because their very heterosexuality gives them a measure of privacy and protection that gay, lesbian, and bisexual teachers and professors do not possess.

Schools can begin with small steps. When you list categories of comments (racist, sexist) that are not acceptable in the classroom, add "homophobic" and define homophobia if students do not understand it. Each and every time a student calls another a name or remarks that something is "gay," publicly address the issue, reminding students that all such remarks are inappropriate. This will begin to ingrain in students the concept that this is an issue of equality and that everyone in the classroom has the right to an education free of harassment.

Teachers and teacher educators should no longer make assumptions about their own students' sexuality. One exercise to try is to place yourself in the chair of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual student during a typical class session. How might he or she feel invisible, or inferior? Rewrite the lesson or the lecture with this student in mind. When we make gays, lesbians, and bisexuals an everyday part of the classroom curriculum and pedagogy, the discomfort and apprehension about discussing it begins to fade into the rest of the classroom culture for both teacher and pupil.

Teachers and teacher educators can alter the curriculum so that the contributions of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are acknowledged. For example, when discussing James Baldwin's contribution to literature, also consider the fact that he was gay and how this might have influenced his writings. The same can be done with the art of Michelangelo, the music of Tchaikovsky, or the scientific method of Francis Bacon. In these ways, gay, lesbian, and bisexual students begin to see and hear positive images of themselves in the classroom, rather than something odd or bad. Similarly, pre- and in-service teachers can learn to modify classroom curriculum

and begin to delve into their own attitudes and concerns about gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.

When making assignments, develop examples that include gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. For example, when creating math word problems, talk about "Geneen and her girlfriend," or "John and his mothers," just as you would speak of Geneen and her boyfriend. When assigning research topics, include issues of interest and importance to gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. For instance, in a biology class, challenge students to explore the myths surrounding the transmissions of AIDS or to explore the genetic theories about homosexuality. Mixing these examples in with other topics demonstrates that gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues are not to be brought up only during particular (and often uncomfortable) classes; rather they are everyday issues and should be discussed alongside any other. Teacher educators need to introduce pre-service teachers to issues of importance to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students and teachers by modeling inclusionary language and course content.

To gain a better understanding and sensitivity, curriculum leaders, administrators, and faculty of secondary schools can encourage in-service activities by local gay, lesbian, and bisexual organizations, especially by those who serve youth. It is especially important to invite organizations involved with communities of color, people with disabilities, and people who serve gay, lesbian, and bisexual clientele. To better prepare pre-service teachers, their supervisors can bring community members, program alumni, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual graduate students into seminars to speak about their experiences. This may give pre-service educators an opportunity to ask questions and educate themselves.

Lastly, schools must find teachers who *want* to teach health and sexuality classes where all types of sexuality are discussed openly and frankly. The courses need to be taught by trained health educators who are able to build a safe environment for real discussion. The curriculum must come from the students' experiences, which are rarely found in a textbook. Having co-taught one such course with a community-based AIDS educator,³ I can attest to students' hunger for such classes. The class covered important information about birth control, sex, anatomy, and safer sex practices; yet, we were also able to move beyond the more superficial "covering of material," to the heart of what the students thought and why they made particular choices. Part of what made the class special and particularly effective was the instructors not only directing the class, but also participating alongside the students in all classroom activities and speaking openly about sensitive issues.

In order to prepare our students for panels of gay and lesbian community members, we spent a number of days discussing stereotypes about gay and lesbian people, in addition to separating myths about gay people from reality. Students had the opportunity to explore their own feelings and misconceptions. As previously mentioned, even as open as many believe the San Francisco Bay Area to be, some students had never before discussed the issue. Some believed they knew no gay, lesbian, or bisexual people until, that is, members of the class came out to them. This was vitally important because it allowed the gay and lesbian class members to gain acceptance and support from their classmates and allowed the heterosexual students to confront some of their misconceptions head on.

For classes such as this to be beneficial, the teachers must build a connection and trust with the students. Often the first step is allowing students to see when things are uncomfortable or difficult. If students are going to be willing to take risks, they have to see their instructors do the same. This is not to advocate losing control of the classroom or encouraging unsafe activities, but teachers must show students that they are not afraid to talk about sex and sexuality and that they can be honest and non-judgmental.

Until schools are willing to acknowledge structural heterosexism and change the culture of the school to include the concerns and cultures of many students, gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth will continue to struggle against invisibility and isolation with all its consequences, and heterosexual students will continue to forego an inclusive education. Schools will continue, both figuratively and literally, to play "Smear the Queer." Ultimately, we all lose because we continue to educate generations of school children to be ignorant about others and to relegate others to the bottom of the pile.

Notes

1. This concept was developed by Adrienne Rich and is explained more fully in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."
2. There are many excellent resources available, among them Kurt Chandler, *Passages of Pride: Lesbian and Gay Youth Come of Age* (New York: Times, 1995); Linea Due, *Joining the Tribe: Growing Up Gay and Lesbian* (New York: Anchor, 1995); Ann Heron, *Two Teenagers in Twenty* (Boston: Alyson, 1994); Dan Woog, *School's Out: The Impact of Gay and Lesbian Issues on America's School* (Boston: Alyson, 1995). (This has an excellent resource list in the back.)
3. I want to thank Teresa Ashby of the Marin AIDS Project for her support, and dedication to teaching sexuality in public schools. No educator could ask for a better teacher.

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