DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 158 SO 028 216

AUTHOR Friend, Richard A.
TITLE From Surviving to Thriving: Lessons from Lesbian and Gay Youth.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Empowerment; *Homophobia; *Homosexuality; Individual Power; Lesbianism; Personal Autonomy; Social Bias
IDENTIFIERS Bisexuality

ABSTRACT

This paper examines narratives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth who have not been silenced or disenfranchised and who have not felt powerless in the face of society's resentment and understanding of their lifestyle. Elements in school, at home, with the extended family networks, among peers, and particular interpersonal dynamics of the individual are scrutinized to uncover factors that contribute to their capacity to thrive. Based on this select group of youth, recommendations are offered for undoing homophobia and heterosexism in schools in order to make them inclusive settings where all people thrive. (EH)

# FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING: LESSONS FROM LESBIAN AND GAY YOUTH

**Richard A. Friend, Ph.D.**
**University of Pennsylvania**

**American Educational Research Association**
**Annual Meeting**
**Tuesday March 25, 1997**
**Chicago, IL**



For more information, contact the author at: 5510 N. Sheridan Rd. #16-A, Chicago, IL 60640; phone/fax (773) 275-1294

## INTRODUCTION

For more than fifteen years, I have had the pleasure and honor of working with, and studying the lives of well over a hundred lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth. The story of their lives is often a narrative of loss and pain (Friend, 1992; 1993; 1994; 1996; Gibson, 1989). The account is textured with violence and suicide, harassment and dropping out, invisibility and silencing. I have always found, however, that there is a cadre of youth who are not silenced, disenfranchised or feeling powerless. These youth have moved beyond merely surviving to thriving - acting with agency and resilience to reconstruct their worlds. These youth not only fail to succumb to the pressures that often lead to low self esteem, depression and suicide, but manage to find inner and outer sources of strength and support. They organize themselves and others to transform the oppressive circumstances of their lives. They have emerged with inner strength and a sustaining set of insights. These intrapersonal resources combine with sufficient interpersonal as well as political competencies to effect change.

I interviewed this select group of youth to uncover factors that contribute to their capacity to thrive. The resulting narratives examine elements in school, at home, with their extended family networks, among their peers and particular intrapersonal dynamics that contribute to their stories of success. Based on this select group of youth, recommendations are offered for undoing homophobia and heterosexism in schools in order to make them inclusive settings were all people thrive.

## THRIVING YOUTH

Who are these youth? Here is a sampling:

Derik Cowan was thrown out of his home in Connecticut two years ago after his fundamentalist parents found out he was gay (Woog, 1996). The 21 year old founded *Oasis* - the "queer youth Web'zine" that attracts more than 10,000 people a month.

Today 20 year old Timothy Ryan is coordinator of Youth Pride's HIV education program in Providence, Rhode Island (Woog, 1996). After coming out at age 15, Timothy spent four years working for the successful passage of a state gay rights bill. Currently he's organizing a support group for HIV-positive youth; two years ago he tested positive.

Adam Sofen is 17 years old and was a catalyst behind the creation of Gay and Lesbian History Month. After Adam wrote a letter to *Newsweek* complaining about the lack of gay role models, Rodney Wilson, a Missouri teacher, and the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Teachers Network (GLSTN) came up with the history month idea. Adam speaks regularly at staff training and teachers' meetings, as well as runs cross-country and track. He hopes

to be "the first Jewish, openly gay somewhat socialist president of the United States" (Woog, 1996, p.52).

Kelli Peterson would get beaten up in her freshman gym class and then go home and tell her parents she'd been hurt playing field hockey. On February 6, 1996, a week after Utah lawmakers secretly met to strategize about stopping the newly formed gay-straight alliance at Salt Lake City's East High school, Kelli stepped up to the microphone inside the rotunda of Utah's state capital and said "I would like the legislators of Utah to know that I did not start this group to advocate homosexuality. I started this group to end the misery and isolation of being gay in high school." (Snow, 1997)

17 year old Miguel Ayala founded the first Gay Straight Alliance in a Chicago public school. Miguel recently became the first openly gay person to serve on Chicago's Board of Education (as a Student Representative). Not satisfied with organizing at a local level, Miguel founded Pride USA, a national organization whose mission is to assist students who want to start Gay Straight Alliances in their school and serve as the national organization of all such clubs. He secured 501(c)(3) status and has established a Web site for the group (personal communication, 24 October, 1996).

Jamie Nabozny suffered years of anti-gay abuse in middle school and high school. From the seventh through the eleventh grade he was repeatedly attacked by his fellow students. These attacks included being kicked and beaten, once so severely that he needed exploratory surgery; being pushed into a urinal and urinated on; and victimized in a simulated rape in a classroom. Jamies' pleas for help were brushed off by school officials with comments such as "Boys will be boys" and "If you're going to be gay, you have to learn to expect such abuse." On November 19, 1996, a jury in a federal district court found that two school principals and an assistant principal were liable for not protecting Jamie from abuse by other students. The school officials agreed to pay nearly $1 million to settle the lawsuit. Today Jamie speaks through out the country about homophobia and its costs, and is active as a youth leader nationally.

## FACTORS FOR THRIVING

While these youth are exceptional, they need not be exceptions. There are common elements that identify "what is going *right* in these youths' lives." I have identified four broad and interrelated factors. The first factor is a group of intrapersonal characteristics that I call "**temperament**." These youth are incredibly likeable, outgoing and engaging. They seem to have a capacity to enlist others on their behalf. They recruit care givers. They develop an optimistic future orientation and feel in control of their fate. Fiercely independent, they have clear boundaries that help protect them from homophobia's tendency to "blame the victim." This charismatic temperament serves also serves as a foundation for the second factor - insight.

Theses youth are keenly **insightful**. This includes a capacity for a particular understanding of the world and their personal circumstances. They tend to observe, analyze, frame and reframe events positively - not taking things at face value. While inheriting homophobic messages, for example, rather than internalizing them, they deconstruct the meanings and reconstruct a positive and self affirming message. They recognize that when faced with prejudice and hatred "the problem isn't me." They read cues accurately, find allies and while they are risk takers, they calculate their risks carefully.

Thirdly, they all have a web of supportive and affirming **relationships**. This network of relationships is often describe as "my family." While blood relations *may* be included in this system, this need not be the case. Supportive, caring relationships include extended family, teachers, mentors and coaches, as wells as other lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth. Their temperament also functions to actively recruit supportive others and/or helps in the process of endearing themselves to care givers.

The final factor I have labeled "**moral strength**." These youth seem to have a strong set of values that they use to evaluate situations and people. They judge what they believe to be "right" or "wrong" in a way that helps them navigate oppressive and dangerous situations with the tools for making decisions with which they can live. For example, they identify homophobia and bigotry as wrong rather than homosexuality. They value honesty and truth in ways which drive them not only to be open about their lives but to combat misinformation and ignorance when it is encountered. They also are engaged in both political activism and acts of "service." Helping others or "giving back" through educating others, organizing support groups, volunteering and/or working for social service agencies is a common thread in the stories of these youth. Helping others seems to help. It is a pathway to competence and self confidence. Not only does this teach the skills of planning, decision making, cooperation and negotiation, it is grounded on a value of community responsibility. They have joined the individual self with the selfhood of humanity.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCES

In the process of analyzing the interviews, I came across a body of research with which I had not been familiar. Over the last few years there is an emergent body of literature on "psychological resilience." While located mostly in the recovery movement and abuse literature, "resilience" refers to "bouncing back after adversity" or "recovering your previous shape after you have been stretched" (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). I realized that the youth I am referring to as "thriving" demonstrate many of the traits and dynamics of resiliency (Butler, 1997). This was very helpful because I was also struggling with my goal of "studying what's going right in these kids lives as a pathway for helping others to thrive." How do you teach kids to be "charming and charismatic?" Not only were there models

from "resiliency theory" that seemed to work, but I felt reaffirmed that my work on transforming the context of schooling was supported by the literature that suggests resiliency results from a combination of both inner strengths and outer support (Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

I will share with you excerpts from some of my most recent interviews which illustrate the co-factors for thriving I have outlined above and then offer some recommendations for transforming the culture of schooling in ways which provide the outer support that promotes resiliency.

## INTERVIEW DATA

### *Jose*

Jose is nineteen years old and lives in North Philadelphia. He dropped out of school during the eighth grade after the teasing and harassment he faced from students and teachers in school became intolerable . His mother and father were addicted to drugs and as a child he lived in a "shooting gallery." Today, his mother is in recovery, his father died from AIDS a month prior to our interview, and his 16 year old brother sells drugs. Jose survived childhood by dancing and writing poetry. Today he works full time as a community educator conducting HIV prevention and anti-homophobia education on the streets, in classrooms and for social service agencies. He recently completed his GED and was recognized with a Lambda award by Philadelphia's lesbian, gay and bisexual communities for his community service.

Jose is spirited, funny and extemely energetic. His story, while set in a context of poverty, sexual and emotional abuse, also contains consistent internal and external sources of support. From early on, Jose was able to engage caring and supportive adults and peers who encouraged and built his self esteem. This web of relationships included his aunt, certain teachers, and mentors in the gay community who helped to shape his politics and focus his anger. Jose's sense of moral outrage is strong. He fights many battles and believes he has a right, and a need to build a better world even if there is a price to pay in the process.

Even as a small child, Jose was able to reframe abusive and painful situations as "unjust" and to feel angry when others tried to "blame the victim." According to Jose, "I stopped telling people I was getting teased at school because it was always, 'Well why do you act so feminine?' It was always turned back on me. I'm like, 'Hey, I'm the victim here!' ... It's amazing that I stayed in school as long as I did. I dropped out in the eighth grade, but the last grade I finished was in seventh. I basically did all my learning out of school."

Using his life experience as a Puerto Rican living in the urban U.S. helped Jose deconstruct homophobic myths and stereotypes and reconstruct a more accurate affirming sense of self. Having both understanding and support about racist and ethnocentric oppression growing up in a Puerto Rican neighborhood, he used what is sometimes called "target transference" to facilitate his reframing. This educational process of deconstruction and reconstruction also fuels Jose's service as a community educator.

According to Jose, when he first encountered myths and stereotypes about gay people, "I knew (the myths) weren't me. And I knew they weren't my friends. I knew there were myths about Puerto Ricans. And I knew they weren't right... And then I was like, 'Uuhh! These are myths too. HELLO!' Now I'm constantly educating people. It's like I need to be paid 24 hours a day. That's what I hate about being gay. It's like a job. It comes with a political part about it, an educational part. And it's sometimes it's really tiring. We ride the bus and me and my friends get into conversations. By the end of our bus ride, the whole bus is in our conversation. We go from myths about minorities, to myths about gays to myths about contracting HIV... Now someone comes up and says 'so and so said HIV and AIDS are the same thing.' And I'll go 'Did she?' Then I go and I knock on their door and I'll go 'Let me tell you Miss Thing. Blah Blah Blah..."

Jose's moral strength has helped him in making different life choices as some of his peers and family members and he talks about both the payoffs and the costs. While he knows there is homophobia in his neighborhood, he believes that his being gay may not be the primary wedge between him and some of his community. "My friend Albert is gay. He dropped out of school and does drugs and sells drugs. The people in the neighborhood feel more connected to him. I think they separate themselves from me because I went on and got my GED, because I have a legal job and I just don't believe in sitting down and taking what America gives me. When I was a street thug and I used to hang around the corner with all the girls like a 'coochee,' then everyone said 'Hi' to me. But when I started working and I started telling them, 'why do you put up with that? You don't always have to be on welfare and blah, blah, blah.' I'm going against what they've been taught their whole life. At first I was jealous. Why doesn't anyone connect with me? I'm the right one here. I'm the one who's trying to change America."

It's Jose's moral conviction and activism that strengthen his resolve when he feels the double bind of the disconnect in his Puerto Rican community and faces racism in the gay community. "I go to clubs and people say 'You speak really good English.' Like I'm supposed to say 'Thank you.' I mean, that's a compliment!? I can't sit down and quit, the world will never change. I want to respect myself... It has its good side and it has its bad side. 'cause sometimes it's like 'This bitch is always complaining.' So I have to pick and choose my issues, which is hard because everyone of them is important to me. Like fighting for youth and then fighting for gay youth which are two different things. Sometimes I wear different hats. When I'm in the Latino community fighting for Latino rights, I still

wind up giving homophobia workshops because I AM IN THE LATINO COMMUNITY TOO-- HELLO! You can't be Puerto Rican and gay - I hate that. I'm out there fighting for welfare rights and AIDS. I'm always in Harrisburg. I need to stay away from Harrisburg. You know what I mean? It's like I have to pick and choose my issues. 'Cause my mother was on welfare. My mother was a crack addict. So I have to fight all these battles, because I just can't sit there and take it. Activism is an outlet."

Faith and spirituality also ground Jose's moral character. He says, "I thought being gay was a sin. Naturally, who doesn't in the beginning. I thought I was gonna go to hell. So that's why I joined the Mormon Church. And then I dropped out because I found out all their prophets are white and live in Utah. And I refused to believe that God only talks to white old men who live in Utah. Am I wrong here?! I REFUSED to believe that... I've learned that I can be gay and God still loves me. I was raised Catholic, and then Pentecostal and then Mormon. No wonder I'm freaked out... I'm just as normal as anybody else. So I finally became comfortable with me being gay and my spiritual side. They both go together hand in hand. That's an important lesson."

Jose's web of supportive and affirmative relationships include David, the gay activist/mentor who helped to shape his politics and poetry as well as pushed him to get his GED. Others were teachers all along the way who were islands of support and encouragement. Jose remembers them clearly and by name. Nora Gutierrez was his teacher who helped to keep him from dropping out of GED school when he faced the painful sting of homophobia from peers he had trusted.

"I'd hang with these two girls. And there was another gay guy in our class, named Louis. We were at this restaurant and Louis was over there and the two girls were talking like, 'See, Louis is not a faggot.' And at first I thought, 'These two girls were my friends and they're talking like this.' Finally I said, 'What's a faggot?' And they're like, 'A faggot? You know what a faggot is.' I'm like, 'No I do not know what a faggot is. Tell me what a faggot is.' She's like, 'You. Gay.' So I think, before I knock this bitch out, maybe she really doesn't know, so I'm gonna tell her. 'Faggot is a derogatory statement for a gay, like Spick is to a Puerto Rican and bitch is to a woman.' She's like, 'No, it's not.' and calls the waitress over and asks, 'What does faggot mean?' Doesn't faggot mean gay?' The waitress was, 'Yeah.' But in a way like, 'Yeeaah.' with attitude. You know what I mean? Like it was really nasty. And I said to her, 'What would you call an uneducated bitch?' She was like, 'what?" and I said "A waitress." I know it was totally uncalled for, but I was so angry. I wanted to show her that people look at waitresses that way, but is that the way it is? No. And they stood there and challenged me like I was supposed to walk away and go 'Thank you for showing me the way. I'm a faggot. All this time I thought I was gay...' I was totally hurt. Nora Gutierrez was shocked when I told her what happened. I mean that's why I dropped out of school in the first place. I said to her, 'Why am I gonna go back to the same thing, shit ain't changed yet.' So she talked to them and they called me and apologized but, the damage was already done and the pain still there. I was so close to

dropping out. I wouldn't have stayed if it wasn't for Nora. If it wasn't for her, I would have dropped out of GED school. I think that teachers have had the most effect on my life. Like Miss Wilson, Miss Douglas or Big Lou the NTA who told Albert and I 'if you're gay, always walk with your head high.'"

*Sharon, Lynne and Aaron*

The combinations of temperament, insight and supportive relationships are consistently woven throughout the narrative of nineteen year old Sharon's story. Sharon is white and comes from a working class background. She came out at the early age of eleven. Even then not only did she have the insight to correctly identify her feelings, but to selectively identify who was "safe" to share this information with and who was not. According to Sharon, "I started my coming out process in the end of fifth grade, so that would have made me eleven. I told my best friend at the beginning of sixth grade... and from then on, I just told a few of my closest friends first... I knew my family couldn't find out... Finally, the summer after ninth grade ... after my mom had been asking me like for a year and a half I told her. I had been lying about it until then... Finally I just thought 'I can't lie about it anymore'... This is the only way I can explain what hapened - she had never been physically abusive towards me before. Ever. She beat me pretty badly. And her boyfriend had to drive me home. And I was bleeding. She really didn't take it well, I guess you could say. And I didn't talk to her for a couple of years after that."

In response to Sharon, seventeen year old Aaron (who is Jewish and lives in the Main Line section of Philadelphia) chimed in with "sometimes you have to just let go and be willing to take the risk of letting someone else's reaction be their own... People in general don't react as badly as you think they will. Though there are gonna be the few people who react badly. And you really have to find out who you're gonna choose to listen to and who you're not." Agreeing, Sharon says, "You learn who your friends really are. And the people who are your friends, you learn that they respect you so much more for being honest."

This theme of valuing honesty and the temperament of independence through establishing healthy boundaries was also echoed by seventeen year old Lynne's description of her relationship with her mother. "She would constantly yell and say hurtful things. So I stayed away from her. Which was a hard thing to do. But I did that to give her, her own time to think..." Lynne comes from a middle class background in suburban Philadelphia.

For Lynne, her brother's interracial relationship also helped her with the insight and understanding it took to deconstruct the messages she received from her parents. She says, "My family is very intolerant of anything. Blacks. Asians. Jews. Gays. Anything. You know, anything other than White and Italian is just not good at all. When I was in elementary school, my mom told me that my gym teacher was a dyke. So, I did get...the

myths and the stereotypical side of it. I unlearned them and I started to see how people really were. I tried really hard not to take what my parents thought to heart. My brother had a Black girlfriend for about three years. And I loved her just as much as he did. And I knew that their relationship was right because they were two people for each other, not because they were both White, 'cause they weren't. ... So, I knew my mom was wrong and I knew that my dad was wrong, for saying stuff like, 'They shouldn't be together. They shouldn't have kids.' So when they said stuff about gays and Jews and Asians, I kind of tried to dismiss it. It would make perfect sense for me to, to grow up just like my mom and dad. But, for some reason, I didn't. There was something that helped me to know that they were wrong. And I just wanted to get information about what was real and what was right. I grew up with my own morals and, you know, my own judgments and they just were a lot more liberal than theirs. I think maybe it had to do with everyone around me. Other than family. Because, for the most part, they were the role models, too. My classmates and friends. Anyone outside of the family."

For Sharon, "family" took on a very particular meaning as she talks about the teacher who was her greatest source of support. "I didn't have the thick skin that I have now and I got teased a lot at school. I actually confided about my sexuality to one of the teachers who talked to me and supported me through everything...not only things with my sexuality, but everything. And, she was just awesome. She had been a gym teacher and she was a psychology teacher. And she was my family. She was all of my family. I was fourteen. And she single-handedly got me through my adolescence and especially my issues with my sexuality. She took me into her office and, in her life. She talked to me about everything. She never held me back. And she would never let me hold myself back, either. She's the reason why I'm here today."

Building on these bases of support, Sharon, Lynne and Aaron have been instrumental in organizing Gay Straight Alliances in their respective schools as a way to gain more support and give back to others. They are active in their local speakers' bureaus going to other schools and community events talking about their lives as lesbian and gay teens. Sharon reflects on the process, "every single day I got ridiculed going through the hallways. I got spit on going to work, going to school. I got pushed around by guys. Never actually got beat up, but they would try and intimidate me. I think it was supposed to scare me, back into the closet, or scare me straight or something. And all it did was make me want to just educate them more. And I helped start the Gay/Straight Alliance. A lot of this is what made me want to start the support group and do all the activist stuff that I did... I was a student counselor in high school, and I was the only *out* gay person. And so all the gay kids decided to come to me because they had no one else to talk to and they knew that I would hold their confidentiality. And these kids talked about wanting to kill themselves. And being depressed, and being tortured at home... They weren't getting support anywhere. I couldn't give enough of myself for all the students who were coming to me. Like I couldn't give...support to everybody. And I felt the need for a support group. I approached the School Board with it and ... I said, 'I'm an *out* lesbian in the high

school, and we need a support group.' Their jaws like hit the table. And they went, 'Well, it's not academic. We can't start a group that's not academic.' But the bereavement group wasn't academic. Children of Alcoholics wasn't academic. It was a bunch of B.S. And when there was an article written in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* about our support group, the School Board President said something to the effect of, 'it was a real issue that got brought up by a concerned student and we stood by her 100%.' They told us not to even start the support group. It was a lie."

Nineteen year old Keesha is African American and lives in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. Like the others her compelling temperament, keen insight and independence have served her well in meeting life's challenges and forging a better path. She says, "I know being lesbian is only a part of me, but it has made me a stronger person and has made me be able to deal with life situations a little bit easier than someone not gay or lesbian. I ended up leaving my home at fifteen. Paying bills, working and trying to go to school. I'm a much stronger person than I would have been because of my experiences. Because I was a lesbian I was like 'Fuck this. I'm not gonna stay in a situation where I'm uncomfortable. I'm gonna leave and try to do it on my own."

Keesha knew that some of her teachers were lesbian and gay, but also knew they did not feel comfortable or safe being "out." Ironically, Keesha was the catalyst in her school who opened the closet door for many of her peers and teachers. "One of my teachers, for example, wasn't out - I knew and she knew I knew. I would smile at her and it made her nervous. After about a year she finally came out and told me. After that it was cool and a couple of other teachers would come up and talk with me. It made me feel good. I'm 15 or 16 and I came out, and these are teachers in their 30's who aren't out yet. The administration, though was weird, like they would pity me. The principal who never talked to me ever before I came out, would come up to me and say 'Hi Keesha. How are you doing?' Like he thought my life is horrible and I have all these problems now. I would say, 'No, this is great. I'm out now, so it's cool.' At the time it was really easy for me to come out. My being out made it easier for the teachers and others. I started a group too. The Gay Straight Alliance, and that was really cool because a lot of kids started coming out. It was great for me too because all these girls would come up to me on the side. That was the best thing about being the token dyke. They had nothing else to compare me with so I was just the coolest thing. I even took a girl to my prom."

When Keesha changed schools, her independence and strong sense of self served her well in having voice to combat renewed oppression. At her new school, she says, "It was 'dyke this and dyke that.' And all these girls thought that I wanted them. I had my girlfriend there once and I was like, 'I don't want you. Look at her. Why would I choose any of you over her?' Just because I am this way does not mean that I want, all of them. There's enough lesbians that are gorgeous, that are talented, that are beautiful, why would I want them. If a girl is lesbian and she tries to talk to someone who's straight, they get so offended. But guys come up to me all the time and they never respect the fact that I'm

lesbian. They're like 'Oh, so what. I could turn you, blah, blah, blah, blah.' And I say, 'But I'm still a lesbian and I'm in a relationship.' And then they're like 'Well, can't you be with me on the side?' 'No, a relationship is a relationship. Whether I'm bi- or lesbian, I'm still in a rela--...' You know, it's like guys can't respect the fact that I'm a lesbian. .. Like, if I were to hit on a straight girl, which I wouldn't do, they would take it as this horrible thing. But if I get hit on by men that's okay. And they totally can't respect the fact that I am lesbian. Guys never respect that."

## INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

The lessons embedded in the lives of these resilient youth also contain seeds for creating change in the culture of schooling. What follows next are recommendations for creating school cultures that are inclusive and foster the type of resiliency demonstrated by the youth here.

Inclusive schools are not only safe schools were all children can learn, but are school cultures where hate, violence, harassment and suicide will not be tolerated. Inclusive schools provide *more* information about the world, not less. Inclusive schools are grounded on the philosophy that critical thinking skills to understand complex pedagogy in an engaged manner is better than limited information and passive thinking. Inclusive schools subscribe to the belief that in order to prepare the next generation of citizens and workers, schools have an obligation to teach the skills necessary to manage differences as a value added opportunity.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Jose's recommendations for schools center around creating inclusive curricula, critical thinking, fair practices, emotional support and accessible adults. He says:

"they don't have Latino history in school, it's either Black history or White history. And I don't like that in schools. And everything is heterosexist. They need to make it more diverse. Make it more...true. Recognize all cultures and not just selective cultures, ... gay sort of needs to be in schools with gay books and gay writers. And open gay teachers. Gay clubs. And teachers have to call on students that tease anyone over anything. Why would they suspend a kid who calls someone a big fat whale or a Spick, and not suspend someone who calls them a faggot? They have to enforce that everyone is equal and no one is to be put down in any way, shape or form. And counselors shouldn't assume anything. Don't answer questions that you ask. 'You feel bad, don't you?' Plus students should learn to think before they speak. People just speak off the top of their heads and say, homophobic or heterosexist or racist remarks without hearing that they're saying it. All youth need to be taught how to do that, and how to communicate. That isn't taught in

schools, though. Also administrators should not to be so stuck up. No one likes the principal. Why? I guess it's a role that they have to portray. We went to the public schools, for example, to deliver fliers for the alternative prom and we were escorted out. 'Because we don't do that here.' We know that you don't have an alternative prom, that's why we're here, because *we're* doing it. We're passing out flyers...' They need to be more open and willing to learn. I think they're scared to learn. The principals need to be more accessible for everyone, for youth who are on drugs, who are homeless. School is the place for youth, but a lot of times you can't turn and say, 'I'm gay. I'm being teased. I'm homeless, what am I to do?' A lot of things are just taught with one rhythm... We teach them about America, but we don't sit there and teach them how diverse it is and how rich in culture it is with gay, straight, whatever it may be. There need to be multiple rhythms. They think they're doing it with ESOL and all of that, but no! You have to get much deeper than that... A lot of youth fall through the cracks."

Jose has summarized eloquently the key recommendations for helping youth thrive by increasing inclusiveness in schools. For the vision of inclusiveness to become part of the foundation of school culture, formal and informal policies and practices have to be aligned with the vision described above.

*Inclusive curricula and pedagogy*

Inclusive curricula and pedagogy not only incorporate lesbian and gay issues throughout the curriculum, but do so with a willingness to accord the work of those considered "marginal" "the same respect and consideration given other work" (hooks, 1994, p. 39). Many educators worry however, that teaching inclusively opens the flood gates to tremendous controversy and chaos. I believe, however, that a risk free environment is a learning free environment. Intellectual risk taking, trying out new ideas, and challenging the status quo are part of the process of critical thinking and are not mutually exclusive with safety.

The "banking system" of education where educators pass on information to passive students like currency (Freire, 1996) is central to a control and manage pedagogy. "Decentering" this control makes many educators feel unsafe. However, in a seemingly "safe and controlled" educational setting, there are many students, like those described above, who feel unsafe and unrecognized. According to hooks (1994), "Many students, especially students of color, may not feel at all 'safe' in what appears to be a neutral setting. It is the absence of a feeling of safety that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement" (p. 39).

When studying the lives and works of James Baldwin, Viginia Wolf, Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Bessie Smith or Bayard Rustin, for example, referencing how living as gay or lesbian people may have influenced their work opens the door for all

students to learn about the important roles lesbian, gay and bisexual people have played in our culture. It also allows for analyzing how homophobia impacts the lives of people in history as well as today.

When the artifacts in school culture, such as books on the shelves, posters on the walls and pamphlets in the racks include mention and images of lesbian, gay and bisexual people, then inclusiveness is promoted. When heterosexist language is avoided through the inclusion of story problems in math class that use gender neutral pronouns or in discussions of situations that refer to partner choice and family, for example, a "decentering" of heterosexism occurs. The message, while subtle and powerful, helps to build an inclusiveness learning community that recognizes multiple voices.

*Inclusive policies and practices*

The policies and practices of schooling also need to support the values of safety and respect. Clear non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies which include sexual orientation as a protected status must be developed and actively publicized and enforced throughout the school community (Anderson, 1994; Treadway & Yoakam, 1994; Walling, 1996). In July 1991 The National Education Association passed a resolution supporting nondiscriminatory personnel policies inclusive of sexual orientation and a resolution deploring incidents of harassment and hate-motivated violence based on real or perceived sexual orientation. Policies such as these provide direction and authority for educators to act proactively and reactively in support of inclusiveness. When anti-gay and/or anti-lesbian harassment occurs, not only do educators have the moral and legal authority to intervene, but have the opportunity to use these incidents as "teachable moments."

Non-discrimination policies and inclusive benefits also contribute to a school culture where lesbian and gay adults are likely to feel the freedom to be open about their lives in the same ways as their heterosexual colleagues. Not only does this provide access to information and role models for all members of the school culture, but it increases the talent pool from which to recruit future school personnel.

*Support structures and safe space*

There also need to be multiple practices and structures that support students coming together around issues of sexual orientation. There are four types of models commonly used for this purpose. These support models used collectively help to promote inclusion.

One model involves peer support groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA's or SAGA's) which are open to any student interested in understanding issues of homophobia and sexual identity. These forums provide education, awareness and focused space of

inclusion. In December 1993, Massachusetts became the first and only state to outlaw discrimination in public schools on the basis of sexual orientation. The number of public schools with GSA's in Massachusetts rose from two in 1992 to twenty in 1993 (Dorning, 1993). This fact demonstrates the way in which policies and practices weave together to form a net of support.

Another form of support is grounded on a psychotherapeutic model. Trained counselors who can provide individual and group counseling play an important role in supporting youth in conflict. Not all youth need this type of support, however, and to have this be the only type of support group available may send a message of pathology rather than inclusion.

A third model is to infuse issues of lesbian and gay inclusion into the mission of other school sponsored organizations (such as Amnesty International). It is important to help students understand the connection of individual social issues to a larger whole. A stand alone GSA is probably necessary, however, if not all groups are able to act inclusively in interrupting homophobia (and most are not).

A final model that is used is the creation of safe spaces or harassment free zones. These clearly identified locations (be a classroom, a counseling room or an administrator's office) are visibly marked (often with a pink triangles) as places students can go if there is a problem. The goal of inclusiveness, however, is for all space to be safe and free from harassment.

*Role models and allies*

The practice of having visible lesbian, gay and bisexual role models as well as "straight allies" (Washington & Evans, 1991) is important for interrupting homophobia and building inclusion. Knowing someone personally who is lesbian or gay is critical in reducing stereotypes. If there are no out role models available within the school, this says something about the current school climate. Inviting presenters and speakers in from local youth groups and/or organizations can be used as an intermediary step.

*Training*

Another key resource is training. Staff need to have comfort, understanding and effective skills for promoting and maintaining an inclusive culture (Friend, 1996; 1992). Lipkin (1996) argues that staff must work out their own feelings and clarify their own values on the issues and then be trained to handle the discomfort and questions of students. Emotional content to be addressed include feelings about the inevitable "are you one of them?" question. Like any educational process, there is a learning curve for educators.

With the right training resources and an encouraging environment, they eventually can learn to deal with this issue as they have learned to handle other controversial issues in the classroom.

*Inclusive events*

School sponsored social functions such as proms, dances, film and theater presentations should also be inclusive in theme. Invitations to these events should be worded using inclusive language that clearly welcomes all people and all couples.

*A clear strategic approach*

In order to increase inclusiveness within school culture, a clear strategic approach is necessary. The plan should include anticipating opposition and building a broad base of support around the vision of inclusion. Anticipating the opposition is not the same as fearing the opposition.

Fear of opposition is strong. Teachers fear administrators, administrators fear parents, parents bring in the fear of god and so on. Approaching the issue from a position of fear, however, means the opposition never has to do anything overt in order to stop the process. Without even materializing, the fear of opposition alone often preempts the conversation. Instilling fear is a potent tool of disempowering the courageous and facilitating divide and conquer among well meaning individuals who are simply not clear about the vision of anti-homophobia education and inclusive schools.

Kevin Jennings (1996) recommends framing the issues by using community values such as those articulated earlier (respect, fairness, and safety). He also recommends putting a human face on the argument. This interrupts the opposition's tool of framing gay and lesbian people as dreadful and dangerous "others." Finally, he recommends organizing across existing divisions. Building a broad base of community support is important fuel.

Enlist active community support from teachers, unions, parents, alumni and religious organizations that represent a broad range of races, social classes and ethnic backgrounds. Groups like GLSTN, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), associations such as the AFT, the NEA and local PTA's as well as religious organizations which support lesbian, gay and bisexual people are all key allies to be leveraged. This alliance building is key even in the absence of an organized opposition. It models the type of inclusive coalition building implied in the vision.

While more easily said than done, these recommendations for building inclusiveness have been useful guides for the organizations and schools I have partnered with in addressing

and interrupting homophobia. Complex systemic change requires the patience, perseverance, resources and commitment to continuously work at achieving the vision of inclusiveness.

## Conclusions

The better part of my adult life has been spent involved in facilitating individual and organizational change in order to improve the quality and outcome of schooling and work. I started this journey as an enthused and hopeful pioneer, ready to build a partnership around the vision of creating school cultures which promote equity in outcome as well as access. While still hopeful, I am sobered by the paradoxes which reveal how challenging it is to make this vision a reality. As an optimist, I continue to hold to the vision that public schools can and should be a place of possibility and growth for children and adults alike. Today, it is the generation of resilient lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth, as well as courageous educators and change agents who fuel my optimism and inspire me to move ahead. It is my hope that anyone involved in schooling finds a role which ensures that this next generation flourishes and cuts a path towards a better future for all of us.

## REFERENCE LIST


Anderson, J.D. (1994). School climate for gay and lesbian students and staff members. Phi Delta Kappan, 151-154.

Butler, K. (1997, March/April). The anatomy of resilience. The Family Therapy Networker, 21, 2, 22-31.

Dorning, M. (1993). Schools' support groups helping gay teens to cope. Chicago Tribune, November 30.

Freire, P. (1996). Pedagogy of the Oppressed: New Revised 20th Anniversary Edition, New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.

Friend, R. (1992). Listening to silenced voices: Strategies for undoing homophobia in schools. Independent School, 51, 3, 33-37.

Friend, R. (1993). Choices, not closets: Heterosexism and homophobia in schools. In L. Weis & M, Fine (Eds.). Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race, and Gender in United States Schools. New York: SUNY Press, 209-235.

Friend, R. (1994). Homophobia. In V.L. Bullough & B. Bullough, (Eds.). Human Sexuality: An Encyclopedia. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 275-277.

Friend, R. (1996, March 8). Being Paid to Induce Dangerous Thoughts: The Paradoxes of Being an Anti-homophobia Educator. Paper presented at the Second Annual Midwest GLSTN Conference, Chicago, IL.

Gibson, P. (1989) Gay male and lesbian youth suicide. Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 3-110 to 3-142.

hooks, b. (1994). Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. New York: Routledge.

Jennings, K. (1996). Together for a change: Lessons from organizing the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Teachers Network (GLSTN). In D.R. Walling, (Ed.). Open Lives, Safe Schools: Addressing Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education. Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 251-260.

Lipkin, A. (1996). The case for a gay and lesbian curriculum. In D.R. Walling, (Ed.). Open Lives, Safe Schools: Addressing Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education. Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 47-69.

Snow, K. (1997, January 27). Rebels with a cause: Youthful gay leaders take the fight for civil rights into the nation's high schools. The Advocate, 724/725, 57-59.

Treadway L. & Yoakam, J. (1992). Creating a safer school environment for lesbian and gay students. Journal of School Health, 62, (7).

Walling, D.R.(1996). Introduction. In D.R. Walling, (Ed.). Open Lives, Safe Schools: Addressing Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education. Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1-6.

Washington, J. & Evans, N.J. (1991). Becoming an ally. In N.J. Evans & V.A. Wall (Eds.). Beyond Tolerance: Gay, Lesbian and Bisexuals on Campus. Alexandria, VA: American College Personnel Association.

Wolin, S.J. & Wolin, S. (1993). The Resilient Self. New York: Villard Books.

Woog, D. (1996, September). Under 21. Genre, 41, 50-55.

TM026616

AREA 1997

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

# REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

## I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

| | |
|---|---|
| Title: From Surviving to Thriving: Lessons from Lesbian and Gay Youth | |
| Author(s): Richard A. Friend, Ph.D. | |
| Corporate Source: | Publication Date: |

## II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic/optical media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) or other ERIC vendors. Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following options and sign the release below.

**Check here**
Permitting microfiche (4"x 6" film), paper copy, electronic, and optical media reproduction

Sample sticker to be affixed to document

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

**Level 1**

Sample sticker to be affixed to document

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

**Level 2**

**or here**
Permitting reproduction in other than paper copy.

## Sign Here, Please

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but neither box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

"I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic/optical media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries."

| | |
|---|---|
| Signature: | Position: Faculty, Human Sexuality Education Program |
| Printed Name: Richard A. Friend, Ph.D. | Organization: University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education |
| Address: 5510 N. Sheridan Rd #16-A Chicago IL 60640 | Telephone Number: (773) 275-1294 |
| | Date: 3/31/97 |

OVER