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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on one high school teacher's experience coming out publicly as a gay man to his students, sharing his initial experiences as a closeted gay teacher working in a public high school, and focusing on the events that led him to come out to his students. The paper highlights the effects that "teaching from fear" had on him personally, looking at how it shaped how he taught and the connections that he had with his students. Finally, the paper examines how self-identification impacted him, his teaching, his students, and his high school campus. The paper explores how a focus on self-reflection and student reflection impacts students and curriculum. Through student narrative and reflections, the paper shows how coming out united his students and his classroom in ways that fear never could. (Author/SM)

Abstract
Teaching From Truth

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association,
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Symposium on Gay, Straight, and Lesbian Educators: Allies for Social Justice

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This paper reflects on my teaching experience coming out publicly as a gay man to my students at Rancho Bernardo High School. I share my initial experience as a closeted gay teacher, working in a public high school and focus on the events that led me to come out to my students.

This paper focuses on the effects that "teaching from fear" had on me personally, how it shaped how I taught and the connections I had with my students. Finally it examines how self-identification impacted me, my teaching, my students, and my campus.

I wrote this paper to explore how a focus on self reflection and student reflection impacts students and curriculum. Through student narrative, the paper shows how "coming out" united my students and classroom in ways that fear could never do.

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Teaching From Truth

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Introduction

"Tell yourself; none of this ever had to happen, and then go make it stop, with whatever breath you have left. Grief is a sword, or it is nothing."

-Paul Monette

I often joke to friends and family that teaching for me has been like returning to the scene of the crime. It still seems ironic that I would have chosen to work in an environment that once represented isolation and pain. Yet I have come to see how becoming a teacher has been, without realizing it, a way to reclaim my past, a way to create light in a place that once felt so dark.

My high school years were marked by not being real. Each morning I would wake up and make deals with the universe. I would pray for one day to forget the truth that I knew. I would ask for one day where I didn't have to think about being gay. If I was granted this wish, I agreed to improve my grades or treat my family better. It never worked.

I never saw myself in high school. Literature in English never included me. I never knew of a teacher who was gay. I

never heard the words gay or lesbian mentioned; it was always faggot or dyke. In every aspect of high school, my story was never told, or it was told through rumors and lies. I remained silent.

In college, while my roommates thought I was at work, I was in the public library. On the third floor of the downtown library, my world began to open up. It was in the gay and lesbian literature section that I began to reclaim my life. I would spend nights alone, sitting on the floor reading coming out stories, sections of fiction, gay and lesbian history, and anything else that I could find. Those nights on the third floor, alone on the cold cement floor, were where I took my first breaths of life. It was where I discovered that I would survive. It was literature and literacy that helped save my life. It was during that time that I knew I would go into education.

I didn't think I could be a teacher. I can still remember how many days it took for me to complete the teaching credential application. As I filled out each line of the form, I remember thinking about the life I would have to hide in order to stand in front of a class. I had spent half of my life fighting to be real. I had worked too hard breaking the closet door down, to go back in, even for just part of a day. It was finally my college roommates who convinced me to mail it in.

My first year teaching was my first experience with hate. Faggot and queer were painted in large letters across my classroom windows. "DeJean is gay" was scratched into a desk. Faggot was carved into the door to my classroom. After each event, I would wonder how they knew. After each incident I withdrew. I suddenly didn't walk across the large quad at lunch for fear that someone would scream something out. I got to work earlier, so I could do most of my work alone, without students or teachers around. I became more guarded, which could be seen by how I taught, and what my lessons would reveal. Students knew there was a line in the sand, and rarely did they cross it. Since I didn't have tenure, I told only a few people what was happening to me. Simply put, I taught out of fear.

My first year of teaching, I was named First-Year Teacher of Southern California Teacher. It was while I was getting the award that I knew I would have to come out to my students. I knew eventually I would have to move out from a place of fear, and teach from a place of truth and honesty, or I would have to leave a job I loved. It was at this time that my work on campus shifted from teaching primarily high school English, to coordinating the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination Program). It is a program designed to assist students from the academic middle, who want to attend a four-year university. Students who are admitted into AVID stay with me for the four

years of high school. They work with college tutors, work on note taking skills, work on test taking methods, visit colleges, etc. It is an intense program, where students create a family environment in order to support one-in-other's success. For most AVID students, they are the first in their family to attend a university. The majority of AVID students are from low-income homes or are students of color. Being on a campus that is mostly white and upper class, most AVID students are seen as being "other." It was the class I would eventually come out to.

From Fear To Truth

"Only a teacher, in search of his freedom, can inspire a student to search for his own."

Maxine Greene

The more time I stayed as an AVID teacher, the more difficult it was becoming to hide. While students in my English class were with me for a year, AVID students were with me for their entire high school career. We would spend weekends together touring colleges, afternoons washing cars for fundraisers, and evenings together in study sessions. Students were getting to know me more than I was prepared for.

Our theme for our AVID classroom for the last two years has been the "Hero's Journey." During the years, I have invited guest speakers into our classroom to share their own hero's

stories. Students worked on projects to showcase what obstacles they were facing and how they were overcoming them. The community in my classroom was beginning to showcase who they were; yet, I still knew what the ground rules were. Students would often ask me to share parts of my own story, but I never knew how to do that knowing that the most important parts would have to be left out.

For me, being a gay teacher has been surrounded with the fear of the unknown. Would parents pull their students from my classroom if they found out? Would students who I had worked with for so many years want to leave? Would the students who did stay become distant? Fear can be a powerful silencer. Yet the years I spent editing my stories, changing pronouns, and thinking through everything I said, were beginning to take their toll. As Parker Palmer reminded me in the Courage To Teach, "What brings more security in the long run: holding this job or honoring my soul?" It was then that I realized that any consequence of being honest with my students would outweigh the pain of continuing to live a divided life.

In many ways the things going on outside of my classroom, were impacting the things going on inside of it. The first was the Knight initiative, a California proposition to ban gay marriage (didn't they already realize we couldn't marry?), which was being debated in California. The ads for the initiative

filled the airways with lies about my life. Signs stood throughout San Diego telling people to "protect marriage" by voting yes on the initiative. Students continued to talk about the ballot, as if gay men and women were not around to hear what they were saying. Weeks before the final vote was set, "Yes on Knight" signs lined both sides of the road from the exit off the freeway to the entrance to my school. Some days I did not want to go to work. The ballot passed.

The second was my plans to attend the Gay and Lesbian March on Washington with a group of friends. I decided to reclaim my life two days before I would leave for DC.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do." It was the quote I recited to myself as students entered my classroom. It was this quote that helped finally stop my hands from shaking.

When the class was settled, I asked my junior and senior AVID students to sit in a circle on the floor. I lit a candle and pulled out my power card. I have been using power cards in my AVID classroom over the years to pull the class together. Power cards are an activity where students randomly pull a power card from a basket and share how that word connects to where they are in their life at that moment. Six months prior, the card I picked was the word "mask." I never told the class how it connected to me. I simply put it in my wallet and told them

that I would get back to them.

Once on the floor, I took the card from my wallet and told them it was time that I shared with them how this word connected to me. I began by telling them that in every aspect of my life I have integrity; with my family, with my friends, with everything I do, except at work. I told them that I would not be in school on Friday and Monday because I would be attending the Gay and Lesbian March on Washington. And that, for me to maintain my integrity, I didn't want to lie to them about why I wouldn't be in school for two days.

No one moved.

I explained to them that I wanted to share with them my own hero's journey. And so I did.

When the bell rang, students remained seated in the circle. And when they finally did move, there were hugs, and tears, and well wishes. I had no idea what would happen because of this. What I did know was that I was now free.

Student Reflections

Taryne Newsome, AVID Senior

Truth. Inspiration. Real. DeJean. I am one of the privileged ones who know about this heroic human being and how everyday he strives to show us that we too are heroes. In the year 2000 I experienced something that I have never experienced before, a revealing of one's soul. And this soul belongs to Mr.

DeJean. This experience was a journey and a pathway for Mr. DeJean. And for me, it was a pathway to respect.

It seemed like a normal day until I entered room 504 during 3rd period, but there was something about that room. That atmosphere was unrecognizable to me. We all sat in a circle with our "Enlightenment" candle burning, which symbolizes our own "Hero's Journey." Mr. DeJean joined us and told us that he had something to tell us. He said that he had felt that he was wearing a mask for all of us for a long time. And at that time I had no idea what he was talking about. He continued to talk and then I saw a tear. Then I saw a tear come from my face and I knew where the discussion was headed. At that moment, I felt nervous. Not the nervous that you get when you're scared, but the nervous that you feel when you're about to reveal something sacred. I was very teary at that time because I felt an instant connection with everybody in that classroom. At the same time and we were all sharing this private moment with a teacher. But, I knew it wasn't just a teacher student relationship anymore. It was now a friend-to-friend relationship, which means much more to me. Mr. DeJean took several deep breaths and then...he said it. It was silent. At that moment I never thought that a teacher would be so real with his students and to be willing and open to share his personal life with us. I have so much respect for Mr. DeJean because I know how the world is. I

cherish the fact that I have been given the chance to really know a teacher for who he is and what he believes in. The bell rung and nobody moved. It was universal. The feeling in that room was respect. I remember hugging him, as my teacher, friend, and as somebody who is creating his own path. I will never forget this day, nor will I ever forget the friend who showed us who he really is.

Steven Zamora, AVID Senior

Mr. DeJean has introduced me to the idea of being true to myself. Integrity, honesty, commitment, caring, and passionate, are words I would use to describe Mr. DeJean. Truly Mr. DeJean has been an inspiration to almost all of his AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) students. It takes a man like Mr. DeJean to express his innermost feelings and thoughts about life to the class. For this reason, I honor and respect him. Telling the AVID class that he is gay, I believe was the most decent and respectful thing he could have done. He took part in this action, to demonstrate his ability to express what kind of person he truly is. This act of honesty caused the class to unite as a family. Now we are trustful and comfortable with who we are and what we believe. As an individual that has provided inspiration and leadership to his students, he had yet to become self-centered. Mr. DeJean contains admirable characteristics, and this is why I believe that Mr. DeJean is more than a man, he

is a living legend.

Sara Vallee, Freshman, San Diego State University.

Most teachers come in and out of your life quickly, only having a small but lasting impression. Maybe once in a while you decide to keep in touch with that teacher, or you promise yourself you will remember the lessons they have taught you. And then there is a special teacher who becomes constant in your life. Mr. Willie DeJean has become constant in my life. He is the rare teacher who enters your life and by your and his choice, he has remained constant.

I remember the first year I was in his class. I was a freshman in high school. When first meeting him, you knew there was something unique and special about him. And no matter how weird you thought he was, you could not help but love him. Through the five years I have spent a lot of time with him, and he has become like a member of my family.

Willie DeJean has not only affected me in this way, he has affected every child he has come in contact with. So when a teacher and mentor lets you in on his personal life, after you have continuously let him in on yours, it brings you even closer to him. This was a very important thing that Mr. DeJean did. The moment that he told us that he is gay, I felt a wall break down between us. I could tell that that was the exact thing that was holding him back from letting us experience the real

and true him. I am very glad he felt that he could trust us enough to let us know such a personal thing about him. And I would not have change anything about him telling us. Now I can tell he feels that he is more able to be open with us as friends.

Michael Zepeda, AVID Senior

My name is Michael Zepeda, and I am a senior at Rancho Bernardo High School. I come from two different ethnic backgrounds: Mexican and Filipino. I am the first-born generation in the United States. I also moved from a lower income housing area, to a predominately white, high economic neighborhood. I will be the first in my family to attend a private university, and receive a bachelor's degree. I am also a very active community member, receiving awards for the hard work I have put into my community. Know that I have shared a little about myself, but I would like to share a story about a man that is like no other you will ever meet. And what I tell you about him might shock you, but I think it's because you'll never meet a man like him.

It all started about during a day of sharing in our AVID class. All of the students, along with Mr. DeJean were gathered around on the floor in a circle. Over the course of the period, as people shared, Mr. DeJean shared something with the class that was very personal. At least that is what society's

standards make it seem like.

Mr. DeJean announced to the class that he was gay. To me, when I heard this, I was so happy for him, because he was no longer afraid of what people would think about him if they knew he was gay. Mr. DeJean is like no other person I have ever met before. He takes teaching to the fullest everyday. Now knowing that Mr. DeJean openly told the class that he is gay, only meant that he was finally and completely ready to be open with us, his students. Having Mr. DeJean as a gay teacher means nothing more than he dates males. This does not bother me in any way.

I have personally known Mr. DeJean for four years now. Over this period of time, I have seen him cry, laugh, and even get mad, just as he has seen me do the same. When I think about all the time I have know Mr. DeJean, the word father comes to my mind. I honestly feel that when my dad is not around, I know that I always have another one right their watching out for me everyday. Maybe he doesn't know this, and this might be the first time he hears this from me. But I want him to know that I love him. I love him so much that I would put my life on the line for him. Mr. DeJean has taught me a lot about finding the real me, and all the good I have to offer. He has really helped me become a better person.

What gets me about Mr. DeJean and the gay community is that they are viewed as being different. It seems as if they are not

equal to you or me. The truth is that they are. In life, you will learn as I have learned, that there are both good people and there are bad people, out in the world. The one thing that people do not seem to grasp is that those bad people do not have any category. They can be of any race, religion, and sexual orientation.

I am asked here before you, to write about what I feel about having a gay teacher. For all of those who fear, wonder, or question gay people, I ask you to do the same for straight people. People are people and that is the bottom line. When you ask someone if they are gay, why don't you just ask the real question: are you a good human being? That should be what people base other people on.

The role of a teacher is to develop the minds of the future. Nowhere does the code of a teacher require anything more than the passion for teaching others. Mr. DeJean does just that, and because of this man, along with many others, I will be able to complete a dream I have had for the last seven years. I am going to Pepperdine University because of the energy and time Mr. DeJean has put into me.

Gabe Tollen, AVID Senior

When I first found out that my teacher was gay, I wasn't ashamed, disappointed, or shocked. There had always been rumors about teachers on our high school being gay, but I merely

ignored them. The feeling I got towards my AVID teacher, when he openly acknowledged he was gay, was a feeling of courage and bravery. I felt that what he did took a lot of strength and was a step towards a better tomorrow. Yet another feeling started to immerge. I felt angry. Was it my business to know about the personal life of my teacher? Was it anyone else's business? Why should he have to explain his own personal circumstance? Why should he fear being persecuted while trying to improve and educate student lives? Every student has the right to feel safe at his or her high school campus. So why should the rules differ for teachers or any other person? There were so many questions and yet so little answers. I knew only a small amount of sure things. One thing I knew to be true was that the same standard of appropriate behavior towards teacher-student relationships applies regardless of sexual orientation. I also knew that if the standards were respected, sexual orientation was a private and personal matter. So why are there still hate crimes towards gay men and lesbians? This was the question that had hung over my head for so long. I still don't have an explanation, yet I feel I know one possible reason. I believe fear drives hate crimes in certain scenarios. The fear of change; the fear of being different. But with so much fear and hate in the world, how can we fight against it? Small steps. I felt that the strength and courage my teacher portrayed was a

step in the right direction. A step towards a brighter and safer future for everyone. So once my teacher's sexual orientation was confirmed, did it change my feeling and attitude towards him? No, I still and always will consider him my mentor, my friend, my role model, and my third parent.

Cathy Lay, Freshman, San Diego State University

Finding out that someone you admire is gay or lesbian might make a person find a new mentor. In the case of Mr. DeJean, he was my mentor and along with finding out his sexual orientation, came a newfound respect.

I always looked up to Mr. DeJean and admired him for his enthusiasm and dedication to his students. He taught me the importance of hard work, and gave me the confidence to do anything. When he announced that he was gay, my feelings towards Mr. DeJean did not turn negative, but I respected him for having the courage to reveal a sacred part of him.

This experience made me open my eyes to what is out in the world. I realized it is not a significant factor on how I choose my friends. Mr. DeJean's desire to teach and to help his students is what makes him inspiring.

Mr. DeJean being able to open up to his students helped me to understand who he really is. Being an openly gay teacher is only a small part of who he is. He is my mentor, friend, and counselor. I'm proud and support Mr. DeJean. I will always see

Mr. DeJean as a great teacher; he motivates and inspires all the people who are around him.

Conclusions

"Movements start when individuals who feel very isolated in the midst of an alien culture come in touch with something life-giving in the midst of a death-dealing situations. They make one of the most basic decisions a human being can make, which I have come to call the decision to live 'divided no more,' the decision to no longer behave differently on the outside than one knows one's truth to be on the inside."

Parker Palmer

I teach from a different place today. On the surface nothing has changed, yet somehow everything is different. I get to school whenever I choose. I now walk across the large quad any time of the day. I have stopped editing what I say. I am sure the lessons I teach are different. It is amazing what you can accomplish when you are not distracted by pounds of heavy armor.

More and more students know who I really am. I have had students come out to me. Parents who are gay now have someone to contact. Students have told me about family members and friends who are gay and lesbian. Students often tell me that my classroom feels safe. I tell them it feels safe for me as well.

A few months ago a school bus filled with students was

driving slowly past my car near the school's parking lot. A student who I could not see yelled from the bus "DeJean is gay." I quickly looked up at the bus and yelled back "yes he is."

Yes I am!

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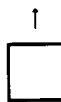
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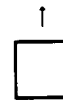
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