

Contagious Tolerance: Creating Safe Schools for Our Students

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Abstract

This presentation is premised on a research study that was conducted with a group of secondary teachers. The study examined how teachers grappled with issues surrounding homophobia and heterosexism in their schools. For the purpose of this presentation, some of the findings from this study have been applied to the college campus. Specifically, the author argues that creating safe and tolerant college campuses involve: dismantling contextual oppositions, engaging in reflective practices and partnering with college administration.

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I was thinking about the question ‘how can we make schools safe?’ Schools are safe. They are just big buildings with non-skid stairs. We are doing things to make a safe place unsafe. Perhaps phrasing it the way we do absolves us of the responsibility for making schools unsafe.

(Jones, 2010, p. xi).

As an educator and college professor, I am constantly attempting to address homophobia and intolerance in my classroom and campus community. As a teacher educator, I believe it is imperative to begin equipping teachers with the tools necessary to combat homophobia and intolerance in their school communities. Yet, the journey to creating safe places for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning (GLBTQ) students is quite tedious. In fact, many recent instances attest to the challenges that GLBTQ students face on their college and school campuses. For example, during 2010, a number of students committed suicide as a result of bullying and homophobia. These tragedies caused an “It Gets Better” campaign to remind GLBTQ youth of their value to our society.

Additionally, according to the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (2009), “84.6% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported being physically harassed in the past year because of their sexual orientation.” Further, the survey revealed, “the reported grade point average of students who were more frequently harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression was almost half a grade lower than for students who were less often harassed.” The National School Climate Survey reveals many more troubling findings

about school communities. Although, this data represents high school environments, it is important data to consider when addressing homophobia on the college campus because these students will enter our colleges.

Homophobia is a real and tangible problem for schools. As one teacher expressed, “it is not enough to believe that our classrooms and schools are safe places because we follow a system of rules and proscribed consequences” (Jones, 2010, p. 61). Thus, we must begin contemplating how we can create a more tolerant collegiate campus. In order to begin addressing the idea of a contagious tolerance, I will discuss one research study that I conducted with a group of secondary teachers. In the study, I examined how secondary teachers discussed and grappled with homophobia in their schools (Jones, 2010). I conducted a collaborative professional development program that included the following methods of data collection: individual and group interviews, participant reflective journals, PD sessions, and a research journal. The study involved a group of secondary teachers from a range of disciplines in upstate New York. All of the teachers were tenured with earned master’s degrees. Three of the teachers were completing their doctorates. The group included a mixture of suburban and urban teachers who varied along the lines of sex, age and race. The age range of the participants was 34 to 53. For the purpose of this presentation, I postulate that several of those findings are applicable to the collegiate environment and creating a contagious tolerance on the college campus: the role of contextual oppositions, the role of reflective practices, and the role of administration.

In my study, teachers discussed and defined homophobia through contextual oppositions. By contextual oppositions, I mean the process of placing things into oppositional relationships through the use of contextual understandings. In other words, context can change the process through which one constructs meaning about words. In doing so, context changes the traditional

meaning of a word to a meaning that is antithetical of its traditional definition. For example, for these teachers, the phrase “you’re a fag” has many different definitions, some premised on popular culture (meaning “you’re stupid”) and some premised on homophobic hate language. For the teachers in my study, they determined the meaning of homophobic language based on the context surrounding the words. In doing so, they ascribed a “new meaning” to a traditionally defined homophobic slur. Thus, to them, not all hate language was indeed homophobic (although, the phrases and words are traditionally used as homophobic slurs). Therefore, these teachers are allowing contextual oppositions to guide their definitions of homophobia.

This is problematic because hate language has power when it is used. Although, it may mean “you’re stupid” to a heterosexual student using the language, it still maintains a derogatory slur for non-heterosexual identities, which can create an unpleasant environment for a GLBTQ student who is also sitting in the classroom. Thus, the hate language perpetuates intolerance in the classroom. Furthermore, if teachers are determining levels of homophobia based on these contextual oppositions, then the problem of homophobia may be underreported. Thus, schools and classrooms may be more intolerant than we might believe.

Therefore, it is imperative that educators and the campus community dismantle the contextual oppositions that they are using to determine whether the language used in their classroom is truly homophobic. We must begin to view all hate language as inappropriate regardless of its “new popular culture” definition. If a student says, “that’s so gay” or “you’re a fag,” he or she should be reprimanded in an appropriate manner. In doing so, teachers are destroying the hierarchy and opposition that exist in their conceptualization of hate language. By doing so, teachers send a message to students that all hate language is unacceptable in his or her classroom.

Secondly, a contagious tolerance involves creating and engaging in reflective practices. Reflective practices are imperative aspect of creating safe schools for GLBTQ students. In fact, “understanding where we are with our personal journeys toward creating safe environments for all of our students cannot be accomplished without deliberate thinking about our attitudes and beliefs toward others” (Jones, 2010, p.62). As one teacher wrote, “uncovering my own biases and examining how those attitudes were formed, forced me to confront my established classroom practices” (Jones, 2010, p. 62). Therefore, I posit that it is imperative for college professors to metacognitively examine their own thoughts about this topic. We must begin implementing these practices in our own thinking process, as well as our students.

While working with this group of teachers during in this professional development program, I attempted to illuminate to them the impacts of homophobia in their schools and issues surrounding homophobia. One teacher wrote in a reflective journal, “it was not until I was forced to face my own biases about non-heterosexual students that I was able to begin to change the way I managed my classroom in regards to hate language.” She continues, “because I am a heterosexual person, I never really thought about how a GLBT student must feel in a room full of heterosexual privilege. It is daunting once we begin to examine our own beliefs about difference. But, self-examination is necessary.” For this teacher, examining her own personal beliefs about non-heterosexuals became the catalyst that caused her to begin to recognize heterosexual privilege and how GLBT student may feel in her room. This metacognitive practice is vital if we are to begin truly creating tolerant safe places for our students.

Lastly, I believe that a contagious tolerance can only take place on a college campus with the support of the administration. I postulate that the level of tolerance on a campus is impacted

by the role of the administration. While working with the same group of teachers, the following story was shared:

In my school, administrators do not want to deal with homophobia. They knows it's a problem, but it's all about pretending it is not there or a quick note and then we move on. For example, there were a few girls who decided that they would service a young guy behind a tree. They cut the tree down. Cut the tree down. Why don't you just talk to these kids about how to respect themselves, and how to behave? They are young and naive. They want an older boy paying them some attention, and they think that this a great way. So they cut the tree down. I am like, well that will teach them, instead of really sitting kids down and talking to them. I think the same thing happens with homophobia. Let's cut the tree down and pretend that the problem has gone away. (Jones, 2010, p. 42)

This teacher acknowledges the role that administration plays in the construction of tolerant places. In order to begin creating tolerant places, we must first be able to discuss sensitive subjects, such as non-heterosexual identities. For this administrator, it was easier to remove an old oak tree rather than discuss students' sexuality. I argue that in many cases administrators do not want to discuss sexual topics. For them, it is easier to "cut the tree down" and pretend that the problem will go away. If we do not discuss homophobia, then homophobia does not exist.

During the same professional development a teacher wrote in a reflective journal, "Principals have to be involved in a positive way. They must be the leader that will help faculty address this problem" (Jones, 2010, p. 41). This teacher acknowledges the power that

administration has in creating a contagious tolerance. I argue that the same applies to college campuses. The administration of the college campus must begin addressing homophobia in a way that supports the faculty's attempts to alleviate homophobia. Administrative support is key.

College campuses across America are facing a tremendous challenge. We have seen the pain that homophobia has caused so many young lives in schools such as Rutgers. We have read the reports that suggest that homophobia is rising. This is a problem that we must begin addressing. We must begin helping teachers recognize how they construct contextual oppositions to define and even determine if something is homophobic. We can do that through reflective practices. But, we must also create reflective spaces to engage in self-examination about our own biases about GLBTQ individuals. Yet, that is not enough. We must have the college administration recognize the problem and be willing to help in eradicating this problem. Once these three aspects are in place, I believe a more tolerant school community will begin emerging. It will be a community where the tolerance is contagious; one that will spread more quickly than anyone could have imagined.

References

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