

# Differing Sexualities

By Kevin J. Graziano

## Young Children, a Young Adult, and the Word "Gay"

Recently while waiting for the bus in a small, quiet neighborhood in San Francisco, where I currently reside, a young woman strolled by me on her way to fetch two children from a nearby elementary school. We quickly exchanged glances as she headed down the hill whistling and enjoying the afternoon sunshine. It was one of those rare early spring days when most people call in sick, dust the mothballs off their favorite pair of shorts that have been in refuge all winter, and simply decide to take a casual walk to an unknown destination.

Minutes later and still waiting for the bus, the same young woman staggered by arm-in-arm with book bags, lunch boxes, and colorful artwork scribbled and signed by Picasso enthusiasts. The children, a young girl and boy each no more than 5 years-old, were rather entranced with their images and engaged in sharing their day at school.

As the young woman opened the sliding door to a minivan and instructed

the children to pile in, the young boy unexpectedly, yet quite clamorously, shouted to the young girl, "you're gay." The young woman, tangled in straps of book bags, stopped dead in her tracks as if she had just spotted a deer. Her one-word response was an elongated "w...h...a...t.?" The young boy, now shy and intimidated, muttered, "you're gay," as if he knew a lecture or scolding was in order. Still outside the van, the young woman, completely flabbergasted, calmly drilled him with questions. Where did you learn that word? And, what does it mean to be gay? To which, the blonde-haired boy replied with confidence, "it means you're nasty."

My bus arrived and I went on with my day thinking about the young boy's remark, you're nasty. Although it made me angry, I was not surprised at his comment. After all, even children in elementary school are not sheltered from the isms that exist in our society. I was, however, pleased to overhear that while the young woman closed the door to the minivan, she acknowledged the young boy's comment and began to share the meaning of being gay with her two, young, naive passengers.

Regardless of how diverse and multicultural a city may be, such as San Francisco, there's always a handful of teachers and administrators who unconsciously, and in some instances

consciously, choose to ignore derogatory comments that students toss around classrooms, hallways, and playgrounds. The question that the young woman above should ask herself is why aren't students, faculty, teachers, and staff appropriately addressing epithets in our schools?

There is limited research available that fully examines the unmet needs of gay and lesbian students in school coupled with educators' attitudes towards this topic. Available research is consistent with Uribe and Harbeck's (1991) conclusion that the educational system in the United States is blindfolded and mute on the subject of homosexuality. Iasenza (1989) concurs and writes that education is a socialization process that imparts the values of the dominant culture. In this respect, she believes, the lack of research on gays and lesbians in our schools reveals the influence of heterosexism and homophobia in our society.

The first half of this article reviews literature on some of the unmet needs of gay and lesbian students in our Nation's schools and highlights educators' attitudes and beliefs toward individuals with differing sexual identities. Although the majority of literature reviewed in this article does not portray educators as being supportive of gay and lesbian needs, I don't wish to dismiss those teachers, educators, administrators, Gay

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# in Singular Classrooms

Straight Alliance (GSA) groups, and allies across the country who educate others about indifference and support the needs of gays and lesbian students.

An analysis of my own school experiences, silently walking through crowded hallways as a young gay male, is provided in the second half of this article. My experiences are discussed under the theoretical underpinning of Martin Covington's self-worth theory (1984, 1985, 1987). A brief description of Covington's theory is provided. This article concludes with a description of an exclusion activity aimed at assisting educators with understanding behaviors of belonging to majority and minority groups.

My decision to write this article has been forthcoming since I entered graduate school in 1998. My intention has always been to have a simple and non-threatening piece of literature on sexuality and education that could be read and understood by the masses. The young boy's comment about gayness being nasty greatly inspired me to write this article in the first person. While I could have engaged a group of students in a collective dialogue on their school experiences, I chose to share my inner voice of growing up *different* in what appeared to be a singular, heterosexual classroom.

## Gay and Lesbians in Our Schools

Sexual identity is usually determined by adolescence, if not earlier (Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981), and there is no valid research that refutes sexual identity can be altered (Haldeman, 1994). Current estimates of the number of gays and lesbians in the United States vary considerably. The most widely quoted estimate of 10% is based on Kinsey's data (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948; 1953) on sexual behavior and psychological response. The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior (Janus & Janus, 1993), the first cross-sectional national study of sexuality since Kinsey, places the estimate between three and seven percent.

Deisher (1989) estimates that approximately 3 million young people between the ages of 10 and 20 are predominately or exclusively homosexual. Statistically then, if we consider the involvement of siblings of homosexual youth and parents who identify as gay or lesbian, as many as 9 students in a classroom of 30 could be affected by homosexual issues (AFSC Gay/Lesbian Youth Program, as cited in Fontaine, 1998).

## Major Stresses of Gay and Lesbian Students

Our culture often stigmatizes sexual behavior, identity, and relationships that fall outside of the norm. As a result, many gays and lesbians unwillingly become part of a despised minority group — that is, too often they experience pain as result of being different. For some, these experiences may include social isolation, rejection by family, depression, lower self-esteem, higher risk to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), alcohol and other drug abuse, utilization of psychiatric services, homelessness, and difficulties in school (Herek, 1989; Hetrick & Martin, 1988; 1989; Kruks, 1991).

In the Third Annual Report of The Safe Schools Anti-Violence Documentation Program (Reis, 1996), 77 incidences of anti-homosexual bisexual harassment and violence in Washington schools have been reported. These incidences included gang rapes, physical assaults, physical harassment and/or sexual assault short of rape, on-going verbal and other harassment incidences, and a comedic reenactment of gay bashing.

Harassment and violence directed at open gay and lesbian students on college campuses are also becoming widespread. In a study of three major universities, D'Augelli (1993) reveals that gay,

lesbian, and bisexual students are often chased or followed; have objects thrown at them; are punched, hit, kicked or beaten; are victims of vandalism or arson; are spat at; and some may be assaulted with a weapon. Gays and lesbians are victimized at a far higher rate than others on campus with rates four times higher than the rate of victimization reported for the general student population (D'Augelli).

Social isolation is another serious problem for many gay and lesbian students. Overall, visible gay and lesbian role models are virtually nonexistent; and accurate information about sexuality is often unavailable, even in the context of sexuality education programs (Hunter & Schaefer, 1987). This lack of information sends a troublesome message to gay and lesbian students, one that says "you are not welcome here."

Disclosing one's sexual identity within the family while still living at home is yet another social problem for many gays and lesbians. Unlike other minority groups, some gays and lesbians do not have the support of their families and have no chance to develop a group identity (Hetrick & Martin, 1988; 1989). In some situations, parents and siblings may actively reject a gay or lesbian family member, and may, as a method of coping, inflict threats and verbal and physical abuse onto their gay or lesbian son, daughter, niece, brother or sister. After disclosure, some find themselves cut off from both family and friends and may become homeless. Some may even experiment with prostitution (Zera, 1992).

Internalizing these negative messages about one's sexual identity is probably the major contributor to suicide attempts among gay and lesbian youth (Butler, 1994). Gibson (1989), in the Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide, reports that gay and lesbian youth account for 30% of all teen suicide attempts. Gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people, and black gay youth are 12 times more likely to attempt suicide than their white heterosexual peers.

### **Educators' Attitudes Regarding Gays and Lesbians**

Homophobia, which originally meant an irrational fear of homosexual persons (Weinberg, 1972), has been expanded to include prejudicial attitudes and negative stereotypes towards gays

and lesbians, generally seen as arising from fear, dislike, or hatred of homosexuality (Daly, 1990; Fassinger, 1991; Martin, 1982). Homophobia may also include affective or emotional feelings of anxiety, disgust, aversion, anger, and discomfort that heterosexuals experience in dealing with homosexual persons (Hudson & Rickett, 1980).

Overall, teachers' exposure to gay and lesbian issues is very limited (Bliss & Harris, 1999). Evidence suggests that teachers, counselors, and administrators exhibit high levels of homophobic attitudes and feelings and have limited knowledge on issues related to sexual identities that fall outside of the norm (Dressler, 1985; Fontaine, 1998; Price & Telljohann, 1991; Rudolph, 1988; Sears, 1992).

Fontaine (1998) reports that "although counselors did not appear to support the idea that students chose a gay or lesbian lifestyle due to a lack of heterosexual options or the influence of a gay or lesbian adult . . . they did believe that a homosexual lifestyle was chosen by the person" (p. 12). Some school counselors even believe that gays were sexually abused as children and claim that counseling a gay or lesbian student about gay or lesbian issues would not be professionally gratifying (Price & Telljohann, 1991).

Further, prospective teachers seem to accept many myths and stereotypes about gays and lesbians. In 1993, prospective teachers enrolled in a *Human Diversity in Education* course at Kent (Ohio) State University responded incorrectly to true/false survey statements regarding gays and lesbians based on information documented in current literature (Butler, 1994). Common incorrect responses included statements about sex roles in same sex relationships; statements about gays and lesbians seducing their students or sexually exploiting them; the media's influence on swaying youth into becoming gay or lesbian as a way of life; and that gays and lesbians are usually identifiable by their appearance. Harboring such beliefs without critically reflecting and collectively discussing their origin is an indication of prejudicial behavior and can be potentially devastating in the classroom.

In Sears' (1992) study on gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues in education, educators acknowledged that they had gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth in their classroom. They also knew that

their national unions, professional licensing requirements, and even some school districts mandated that they serve the needs of this population. When asked if they served these students' needs, the majority of the teachers and counselors said, "No" (Harbeck, 1997).

The first reason was that their professional training programs did not include gay and lesbian issues. They had no prior knowledge on how to deal with gay and lesbian students. The second reason that educators did not feel they served the needs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students was that they had feelings of homophobia so they did not know how to handle the issue(s). The third and most common reason was fear that their colleagues would think that they were gay or lesbian, which might compromise their reputation and employment (Harbeck, 1997).

Perceptions of educators' negative and or lack of gay and lesbian knowledge were also measured by gay and lesbian students themselves. In a study examining how gay and lesbian students perceive educators, Sears (1991) found that some gay and lesbian students not only perceive educators to have limited knowledge on gay and lesbian issues but are unconcerned about the issue also. Detached from students' personal concerns and social issues, reluctant to discuss the issue, and responding to racial slurs but not to homophobic slurs were identified as being characteristics of educators holding negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian students.

Most educators claim to obtain knowledge about differing sexualities through professional journals, mass media, workshops/professional conferences, and textbooks (Price & Telljohann, 1991). However, as Fontaine (1998) argues, over the past eleven years there have been few professional education journals that include research on gay and lesbian issues. This limited research on gays and lesbians has influenced the American Psychological Foundation (APF) to develop a research award, the Wayne F. Placek Award, which offers up to \$30,000 to "encourage scientific research to increase the general public's understanding of homosexuality" (APA Monitor, 1997, p.40).

Gay and lesbian issues are often never mentioned in classrooms or collectively discussed in the curriculum (Anderson, 1994; Fontaine, 1997; Uribe & Harbeck, 1991). Teachers either avoid the topic in their classrooms, or when discussed, present it in a negative

manner (Fontaine, 1998). Textbooks typically either ignore gays and lesbians or present misleading images of them, and teachers may not be prepared to counteract or supplement this information (Anderson, Kielwasser & Wolf, Malinsky, and Telljohann & Price, as cited in Bliss & Harris, 1989) leaving gay and lesbian students and students questioning their sexual identity left to wonder "to whom can I divulge such personal information?"

### **Educators' Professional Demeanor**

Sears (1992) argues that as professionals, educators often assert that personal beliefs and community values do not interfere with the delivery of professional services to students. Many educators believe that they exhibit a nonjudgmental demeanor, but their biased feelings and attitudes are communicated in subtle ways (Fontaine, 1998).

There is a significant gap between attitudes regarding appropriate professional responses to gay and lesbian-related issues in the school and actual professional behavior (Sears, 1992). As the following examples exemplify, many educators may express a willingness to take a nonjudgmental position and a desire to gain an understanding of issues related to sexual identity, but are less apt to initiate open discussions or to create safe environments for gay and lesbian students and parents (Sears, 1991).

When Sears (1992) asked prospective teachers how they would respond as teachers to situations relating to homosexuality in classroom interaction, counseling, student harassment, fellow teachers, and human rights, a majority of them responded positively. In fact, eighty-six percent (N=258) expected to take appropriate action in situations involving the harassment of students due to their actual or perceived gay or lesbian identity. Further, nearly three fourths of the prospective teachers did not believe they would have difficulty treating an openly gay or lesbian student fairly (p.62).

The same group of prospective teachers was asked to respond to a case study where a male student shouts during a class discussion on AIDS "those fags get what they deserve..." (Sears, 1992, p. 63). Seven percent of them agreed with the student's comment. Two thirds of them chose to address the student's statement about AIDS with a

logical and factual approach and tried to correct misconceptions about AIDS. A handful (6%) chose to personalize the situation or to ridicule the student by asking him "how would you feel if...?" Eight percent asked the student for tolerance and compassion (p.64).

Sears concludes that "these prospective teachers' responses reflect an understanding of AIDS, a cognitive orientation to dealing with the classroom issue, and a desire to ignore the inherent homo-negativism of the dialogues. Given the multiple levels on which a teacher could have responded, almost all the teachers focused on the anti-AIDS comment and chose to ignore its homophobic content or to discuss homosexuality in class" (pp. 64, 65). Educators' beliefs towards diversity affect both the classroom climate and instructional practices (Grant & Secada, 1990; Richardson, 1996) and can affect student attitudes as well (Good, Biddle, & Brophy, 1975).

The Salt Lake City school system is another example of educators being less apt to initiate open discussions or to create safe environments for gay and lesbian students. Rather than create a safe school environment for gay and lesbian students, educators in Salt Lake City decided to ban all extracurricular student programs than allow students to form a GSA group at school. Mathison (1998) explains that the Salt Lake City Board of Education made this decision despite a 1984 Federal Equal Access Act that requires public schools to give equal access to non-curricular student clubs, regardless of the subject matter they discuss.

Having reviewed literature on the unmet needs of gay and lesbian students in our Nation's schools and educators' attitudes and beliefs towards individuals with differing sexual identities, let's now take a closer look at the effect(s) these attitudes and beliefs may have on students.

### **Martin Covington's Self-Worth Theory**

The experiences highlighted below are based on my own personal development and internal struggle to accept an identity that was, so I believed, unacceptable to *bring* to school. These experiences are discussed in relation to Martin Covington's self-worth theory (1984, 1985, 1987). My voice should not be generalized to all gay and lesbian

students. In fact, some individuals accept their sexual identity without barriers or internal struggles.

Covington's (1992) self-worth theory assumes that the search for self-acceptance is the highest human priority, and that in schools self-acceptance comes to depend on one's ability to achieve competitively. Perceptions of ability are critical to this self-protective process, since for many students the mere possession of high ability signifies worthiness and success. Simply put, Covington's self-worth theory stresses that individuals are thought to be only as worthy as their achievements.

Many individuals equate their personal worth with their accomplishments and ability becomes critical to one's self-definition (Covington, 1992). Individuals may score high on both measures of approaching success and avoiding failure. Such individuals are referred to by Covington as overstrivers. For overstrivers, fear of failure leads them to strive very hard to succeed academically. Essentially, these students avoid failure by succeeding. They work extra hard and have good study skills.

In middle elementary years, Covington (1992) argues that effort begins to prevail as the most salient cause of success. Academically speaking, youngsters begin to assume one on one correspondence between effort and outcome — the harder one tries the better one's performance is likely to be.

Students who lack effort are broadly characterized by Covington as failure accepters. Such individuals are not particularly attracted to success, but neither are they concerned about failure. Failure accepters have a history of failing, have a low self-worth and are not very confident of their ability to succeed academically. They do not try very hard and are not really interested in academics. Covington argues that failure accepters may give up entirely on the academic enterprise.

### **One Man's Voice: Years Later**

For me as an adolescent in a public, racially diverse, overcrowded, junior high school, I acquired characteristics of Covington's failure accepter. As a youngster, my effort of success was not work hard and receive good grades nor was it centered around being successful at a valued activity, rather my effort was spent plotting how to get safely to and from school and avoid crowded situations such as the cafeteria and



hallways where I expected to hear slurs and be shoved.

My ability to succeed academically was secondary to my efforts to become invisible so that I would not be verbally and physically attacked as a result of my questioning identity. At the end of the day, I was often exhausted and had little energy left to learn. My self-worth and academic motivation were shattered not based on my performance in the classroom but on the learning environment that was imposed on me.

Consistent with attributes of Covington's failure accepters, I too had a history of failing. I didn't fail Algebra, English, or one of the more mainstream courses; rather I failed gym. Gym, a class that requires a student to show up for attendance, participate, and pass. For two years, I was either absent from gym class or offered minimized participation. My rationale for failing gym was that my absence kept me from succeeding, rather than having a low ability to perform. Rationalizing this belief became an exhausting effort to protect an already fragile self-worth.

Minimized participation in gym class carried over to other classes as well. I mastered avoiding eye contact with teachers and was grateful when he/she did not call on me, for even if I knew the correct answer I had to open my mouth and speak. This meant that the class focus would uninvitingly shift onto me. Remaining scrunched down in my seat was a tactic I employed to remain silent or at least uncommitted, rather than speak and be ridiculed by my peers.

At the same time, bargaining became an everyday ritual for me. While most adolescents bargain for a few extra hours of television in an effort to delay homework or reduce their number of chores, I bargained with God for forgiveness and a second chance at redefining my identity. "I promise to do well in school and behave," I recall whispering with every prayer before bed, "but please don't 'make' me gay."

Drawing on conclusions of research on self-worth and racial minorities and applying them to gay and lesbian students, minority youth tend to view ability differently. In the contemporary black community, ability is typically measured in a broader, more practical, everyday context than in narrow academic sense in which being bright means getting good grades (Covington, 1992). Covington argues that being able means mastering the rules and facts of survival. Looking back, my junior high school days

were indeed a ritual of survival full of despair and anger. I was angry that no one at school pulled me aside, recognized my potential, and inquired about my lack of effort.

At the age of 13 and enrolled in a Catholic high school with homophobic words such as *kill all fags* written on its bathroom walls, I had to jump routinely over hurdles to simply get by. I did not see myself in the curriculum, in school-sponsored events or organizations. I did not hear a single teacher or counselor in four years step up to the plate and say, "That word offends me. Please stop using it." Or, more importantly, "let's examine the origin of the word 'gay' and have a dialogue on its rich history."

Further, no one at school ever inquired why my participation in gym class was still minimal. Rather, the irrational fears of my high school colleagues, students, and teachers kept me in silence and prevented me from nurturing my true identity, authenticity, and inner voice — a voice that was only heard on the pages of my diary and on the blank slate of my mind.

Alone and without a voice in high school, I conjured thoughts of self-mutilating my body in hopes that same sex desires would disappear. Catholicism pounded into my mind that being gay was taboo. It was that simple and there was no debating the issue. My line of reasoning at the time was that if I could somehow remove my hand then thoughts of same sex relations would also be removed. Although I never attempted to remove my limbs or mutilate other parts of my body, the constant thought outweighed my effort to succeed in school academically and interfered with my sense of worthiness and perception of ability.

By senior year of high school, my fear of past academic failures in junior high school led to persistence and a commitment to success. I immersed myself in hobbies and schoolwork to the point of perfection. I became, as Lipkin (1999) coins it, the best little boy participating in sports, running for class officer and student club positions. I was soon crowned Covington's title of an academic overstriver.

While overstriving provided distraction and refuge from my sexuality and in my mind compensated for failure in junior high school, it also contributed to a stronger sense of self-worth and self-definition. Although the subject content was not personally engaging, I acquired good study skills and my effort in school

led to success both inside and outside of the classroom.

Again, drawing on conclusions of research on self-worth and racial minorities and applying them to gay and lesbian students, it is fair to say that the feelings of well being among minorities have little to do with performing well in school. Rather, minorities find strength and recognition in peer acceptance, affiliation, nurturance, and cooperation (Hare, 1985; Delpit, 1995). For me, my recognition and peer acceptance slowly began to bud in high school but did not fully blossom until years later while in college.

At the age of 26, while pursuing my Master's degree in Connecticut, I began to acknowledge and closely identify my inner voice and I realized that I was not alone in my quest for worthiness and respect. Having studied human development, I discovered that I had something to say and had a professor who listened to me and encouraged me to sit under a tree and think about how I might help others with similar experiences.

## A Call for Action

Some may argue that the aforementioned experiences of my childhood are nothing more than a typical adolescent trying to come to grips with his gay identity. In doing so, we have learned nothing new or profound.

Rather, a nicely packaged description of one's struggles maneuvering through stages of well-researched sexual identity development models (Coleman, 1982; Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1989; D'Augelli 1994) has been presented. And, I would agree.

However, until epithets such as fag, dyke, and gay are eradicated as derogatory terms in which students use them to gain superiority over minority students, I will continuously argue for more illuminating voices in academic and non-academic literature. Only then can schools begin to understand possible factors of academic failure among gay and lesbian students.

As highlighted in this article, the problem has already been defined. We as educators now more than ever must collectively unite to defeat the problem rather than redefine it every time a student is victimized or harassed. In doing so, educators must accept, rather than tolerate, individual differences. Tolerance is temporary. With acceptance one strives for permanency.

For instance, on a cold winter evening, one tolerates the weather by

putting on a sweater. As soon as the weather changes, the sweater is removed and placed in storage until the temperature drops again. Acceptance of gays and lesbians should not be based on the environment or on here and there situations. It needs to be permanent, consistent, and supported by all of us — educators, non-educators, parents, and family and friends.

Schools should be a safe haven for students to explore, dream, develop, meet new friends, reconnect with old ones, identify a mentor or two, and acquire a liberating voice. Accepting and understanding gays and lesbians in this paradigm begins with dialogue. Simply stating words like 'gay' and 'lesbian' at a board meeting or at a school staff retreat is a novice approach at acknowledging gays and lesbians in our classrooms, in our hallways, and on school buses in school districts across our Nation. It is presumptuous to assume that youth today are reaching out to family members or peers to cope with the onslaught of feelings and emotions that accompany same sex attractions.

As seen in the countless number of GSA groups, and the like, on school campuses across our country, school has the potential to foster positive self-worth for gay and lesbian students. Such groups provide accurate information and portrayals of gays and lesbians inside and outside the classroom and encourage acceptance of all individuals.

I challenge educators in elementary school and high school as well as professors of higher education to attend a GSA meeting or a gay-sponsored event, sponsor or attend a sensitivity training, read literature by a gay or lesbian author, include the topic in course syllabi, reflect critically and discuss issues of race, culture, and homophobia with students (these discussions should include an ongoing dialogue on the distribution of power in our schools and in our society, such as the power of publishers of textbook publishers or curriculum developers who often exclude gay and lesbian issues or portray them in a demeaning manner that conforms to rather than challenges social stereotypes), or simply show support by displaying gay-friendly paraphernalia at school. I challenge educators to listen with their ears, eyes, and mouth and confront all slurs, degrading jokes, and comments about individuals who fall outside of the norm.

In *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, Lisa Delpit

(1995) contends that listening requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. She writes:

To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment — and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start a dialogue. (pp. 46,47)

Again, I'd like to reemphasize that I don't wish to dismiss teachers, educators, administrators, GSA groups, and allies across the country who believe that social justice has a place in the classroom. However, most schools in our country are set up to reward academic achievement as their highest value, and occasionally, through interaction with a warm and positive teacher, principal or counselor, a student may learn about his or her worth as a person in addition to his or her value as an academic achiever (Hardin, 1999). Unfortunately, the latter does not always prevail.

We as a nation are consumed with standardization and academic testing and have, in most cases, turned a blind eye to basic life skills, such as respect, acceptance, and reasoning — skills that many students cannot proudly claim they mastered while in school.

It is inexcusable, not a process or stage of development, for a gay or lesbian student to reflect back on his or her childhood school days with memories of failing gym, thoughts of self-mutilation, suicide attempts, or feelings of isolation in the hallways. Nor, should it take a national disaster such as September 11 or the brutal killings of Mathew Sheppard and James Byrd Jr. to implement multicultural discussions into school curricula where all students are provided an opportunity to voice freely their authentic thoughts and concerns. Such actions should be embedded from the onset of a child's education.

I believe educational practices are not effective without social justice. Therefore, all schools must include gay and lesbian issues in their definition of multiculturalism and must encourage and nurture the self-worth of gay and lesbian students. Mathison (1998) writes, if teacher educators value the belief that all students are precious, and that all students deserve care, they

[teacher educators] must help future teachers reach to their gay and lesbian students without hesitation and without apology. In doing so, all children are seen and more importantly all children are heard.

Gay and lesbian students must feel welcome at school and free from victimization and harassment. They must see themselves in the curricula, textbooks, school-sponsored events, and in the hallways. Their voices must be heard and represented in student clubs, organizations, and classrooms. Only then will they be able to praise their own value, strive to maintain a sense of self-worth, and develop ability, motivation, and success.

## Exclusion: An Activity for Educators

As discussed in Sears' (1992) study, one of the reasons that teachers and counselors did not believe they served their gay, lesbian, and bisexual students' needs was that their professional training programs did not include gay and lesbian issues. The following activity has been adapted from Sivasailam Thiagarajan's (1995) workbook, *Games by Thiagi: Diversity Simulation Games*, in an effort to understand behaviors of belonging to majority and minority groups.

### The Activity

Randomly assign students a number from one to six. Have a student select a number from one to six (depending on the size of the group) and inform all students with that number that for the activity they are considered outsiders or individuals assigned a gay or lesbian identity. The remaining students are the insiders or individuals assigned a heterosexual identity.

The insiders break into small groups according to their assigned numbers. One outsider is assigned to each group. The outsiders are asked to imagine walking down a crowded hallway in an airport or school and to imagine doors slightly open on both sides of the hallway. Inside the room are the insiders. The outsiders are asked to think of a topic for the insiders to discuss and share the topic with members of their assigned inside group. They exit the room and in five minutes or so walk by the room.

With the outsiders out of the room, the insiders are given more specific



directions. A code is assigned and necessary for the outsiders to be included in the inside group. The person who wants to join the conversation has to touch the left shoulder of any member of the group with his or her right hand. (Any code can be applied for this activity.) If these requirements are missed, for example, if the outsider uses his or her left hand or touches a right shoulder, it is unacceptable and the outsider is forbidden to be included in the group discussion.

Unless the outsider, individuals assigned a gay or lesbian identity, masters the code, members of the inside group, individuals assigned a heterosexual identity, are to ignore him or her. They are instructed to avoid eye contact with the outsider and continue with the conversation, laughing and talking about the topic as if the outsider does not exist. From time to time the insiders are instructed to leave their original group and join another group using the correct ritual to join the new conversation. The only instructions the outsiders receive is that they have to figure out why they are being excluded from the group and to figure out how they can become members of the inside group with all the authority and power.

I have used this activity in several secondary and higher education classes as well as teacher in-service trainings. Most participants concur that the activity is powerful and non-threatening and that it stirs up emotions and challenges them to think critically about their own behaviors and beliefs. Participants enjoy the hands on component of the activity, the group involvement, the minimized role of the facilitator, and the group discussion at the end of the activity.

This activity can be used with any excluded or oppressed population. Regardless of the population, the end product, a dialogue with participants, is essential. Participants should reflect on how it feels to be on the outside looking in and how individuals on the inside feel about excluding others who fall outside the norm. Participants should identify other oppressed groups who are often excluded from society and be prepared to discuss approaches to construct inclusive school environments — environments where all students are comfortable participating in every class, including gym, and are able walk through crowded hallways and feel safe, proud, and valued to be the person they are.

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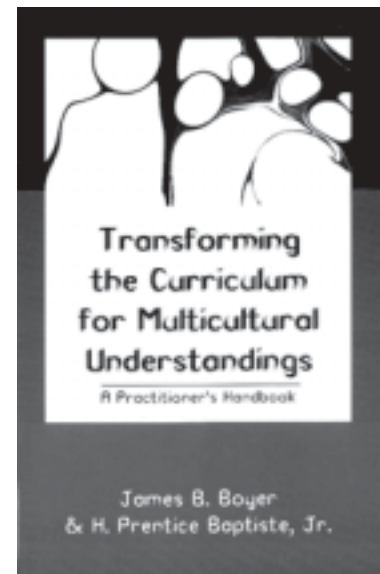
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