



“Rewind and Replay:” Changing Teachers’ Heterosexist Language to Create an Inclusive Classroom Environment

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: By completing the “Rewind and Replay” activity, participants will: (1) identify heterosexist language in common classroom interactions, (2) discuss underlying heterosexist assumptions embedded in common teacher statements, (3) brainstorm inclusive terms and expressions for use in place of heterosexist language, and (4) verbally practice alternatives to common heterosexist expressions. *Target Audience:* Pre-K through high school teachers and teacher candidates.

Klein NA, Markowitz L. “Rewind and replay:” Changing teachers’ heterosexist language to create an inclusive environment. *Am J Health Educ.* 2009;40(6):329-332.

INTRODUCTION

The American Association of Health Education,¹ American School Health Association² and the National Association of School Nurses³ specifically commit to protecting students of all sexual orientations. In 2007, however, a majority of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning (LGBTQ) students between the ages of 13-18 reported feeling unsafe in school.⁴ Eighty-six percent reported being harassed verbally, 73.6% frequently heard derogatory language such as “faggot” or “dyke,” and almost half (44%) claimed they had been physically harassed. Although most of the harassment came from other students, more than one-fifth of students reported experiencing what they considered “offensive” LGBTQ language from teachers and staff.

While the school climate for LGBTQ students appears grim, most teachers do not intentionally condone homophobia in the classroom. For example, when asked, 73% of teachers reported that they believe

creating a safe environment for all students is a teacher’s obligation.⁵ Unfortunately, when teachers use heterosexist language in the classroom, they unwittingly contribute to an unsafe learning community.^{6, 7}

Heterosexism is typically defined as the process by which an individual assumes that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual.⁸ Heterosexism can occur both intentionally and unintentionally. Intentional heterosexism in schools occurs when policies or practices limit the rights of LGBTQ students. Some examples include when school personnel: (1) ignore violence against LGBTQ students; (2) prevent LGBTQ students’ groups on school campus; (3) allow only heterosexual dates for school-sponsored events; and/or (4) prohibit students from wearing clothing with non-lewd, pro-gay messages. School personnel are warned against such overt instances of heterosexism, and legal case decisions usually have been sided against the school.⁹

Unintentional heterosexism can occur

when school personnel use non-inclusive language and, therefore, promote traditional notions of heterosexuality. Most individuals do not realize that emphasizing traditional gender roles is related to heterosexism, yet when gender is defined as a strict dichotomy, the false notion of “opposite sex” is established. Although many educators intuitively realize that boys and girls do not strictly follow stereotypical roles, (i.e., females are emotional and males are rational), they may unintentionally emphasize a false dichotomy of “opposites” to children.

Although it may be tempting for teach-

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ers to ignore heterosexism in the classroom, thinking that it only affects a small minority of students, the truth is that heterosexism affects all children. Any time teachers enforce false dichotomies that exist in society, whether based on race, gender, religion and/or sexual orientation, they unwittingly create a “normative” group and an “other” group. Teachers, then, may organize classrooms around the norm (e.g., Whites, men, Christians and heterosexuals). This practice typically teaches children that the norm is valued and that the “others” are, at best, special or, at worst, harmful.

An unsafe environment is serious for LGBTQ students because it can affect those students’ educational attainment as well as their emotional and physical well-being. LGBTQ students who report more physical harassment have lower GPAs. The lower GPAs may be due to the fact that 32.8 percent of LGBTQ students reported missing one or more days of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.⁴ LGBTQ students (as compared to non-LGBTQ students) are twice as likely to “consider or plan, and four times as likely to have attempted suicide.”^{10(p942)}

The “Rewind and Replay” activity is designed as a step teachers can take to reduce unintentional heterosexism in the classroom. The activity has been used with pre-school teachers at a private daycare as well as teacher candidates and counselors at a university, all of whom were located in the Midwest, to help them become aware of their biased language and to encourage more inclusive alternatives.

OBJECTIVES

At the completion of the “Rewind and Replay” activity, participants should be able to successfully complete the following objectives (a. through d.), which are listed under three main goals.

1. Critical thinking about heterosexist language through:
 - a. identifying heterosexist language in common classroom interactions
 - b. discussing underlying heterosexist as-

sumptions embedded in common teacher statements

2. Creating alternatives to heterosexist language by:

- c. brainstorming inclusive terms and expressions for use in place of heterosexist language

3. Communicative demonstration of inclusive language through:

- d. practicing verbal alternatives to common heterosexist expressions

MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

The following materials are needed for the activity:

1. *At Risk and Ignored: The Reality for LGBTQ Youth in Schools*—a three-page fact sheet from the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S. found at http://siecus.org/_data/global/images/LGBTQ_FS.pdf (copies for all participants).

2. *Dealing with Legal Matters Surrounding Students’ Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*—a 21-page publication found at <http://www.nea.org/teachers/images/glb-guide.pdf> (copy for presenter for background information).

3. “Rewind and Replay” activity quotes to serve as key for facilitator (see Figure 1).

4. Copies of “Rewind and Replay” activity quotes with only heterosexist statements, cut into strips and folded with one statement on each slip of paper (one sheet per every 16 participants).

5. Fishbowl or other container for folded “Rewind and Replay” activity quotes.

6. For assessment, copies of “Rewind and Replay” activity quotes with all three subheadings, but with only the heterosexist statements column visible (one sheet per participant). Optional background information for educators about LGBTQ issues in schools can be found at the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) at <http://www.glsen.org>.

TARGET AUDIENCE

This activity is designed for P-12 teachers and teacher candidates, and it can be

completed in a group setting, such as an in-service or teacher preparation classroom.

PROCEDURE

The following four directives are focused to the person who will be implementing this teaching strategy.

Part 1: Establish the Current Climate and the Need for Safe Schools

Distribute copies of *At Risk and Ignored: The Reality for LGBTQ Youth in Schools*. Ask teacher/teacher candidates (i.e., participants) to define in their own words “sexual orientation” and “LGBTQ.” Then, for comparison of definitions, the instructor should direct the participants to the last page of *At Risk and Ignored*. Participants should be given a few minutes to read the remainder of *At Risk and Ignored* to later discuss the current climate for LGBTQ students.

Part 2: Introduce the Concept of “Heterosexism”

Ask participants to define “heterosexism.” Read aloud the definition from Youthsafe.net: “the institutionalized assumption that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is inherently superior to and preferable to homosexuality or bisexuality.”^{8(p16)} Discuss examples of heterosexism in schools using the publication *Dealing with Legal Matters Surrounding Students’ Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity* (if the budget allows, provide copies to all participants as a resource). Ask participants for other examples of heterosexist policies they have experienced as teachers and/or as students. Emphasize that these examples are cases of *intentional* heterosexism.

Part 3: Introduce the “Rewind and Replay” Activity

Define unintentional heterosexism as non-inclusive language that creates a norm/other dichotomy. Introduce the “Rewind and Replay” activity with the following statement: “Unintentional heterosexism is more pervasive and more difficult to identify than the examples we’ve discussed. The next activity is designed to help identify unintentional heterosexism in everyday interactions with students.”



Figure 1. Rewind and Replay Activity Quotes

Heterosexist Statement	Explanation of Heterosexist Assumption	Inclusive Alternative
1. "For the holiday gift exchange, you boys buy boy-books and you girls buy girl-books."	Assumes all boys like the same kind of books and all girls like the same kind of books.	"For the holiday gift exchange, bring a book you think anyone in our class would enjoy."
2. "Okay, we're going to have a contest! Boys on this side, girls on that side."	Teaches children that the groups are inherently different (norm/other dichotomy). Teachers know not to separate children of different races and the same applies to gender.	"Okay, we're going to have a contest! I need 10 children on my left and 10 children on my right."
3. "Stop flirting with her and listen." (to a boy)	Sexualizes interactions between boys and girls and is intended to humiliate.	"I need you to listen to me."
4. "When you get married, you can get your own place."	Assumes child will be heterosexual and choose to marry.	"When you are older, you can get your own place."
5. "I need a strong young man to help me carry some things to the office."	This assumes that girls are not capable of physical strength. Encourages traditional gender dualism.	"I need someone strong to help me carry some things to the office."
6. "When you boys and girls get home, give this sheet to your Mom and Dad."	Encourages gender dualism by using "boys and girls" and assumes all kids have one Mom and one Dad.	"When you children get home, give this sheet to the adult in your house."
7. "All the girls are in love with Chris Brown."	Pressures girls to have romantic feelings for males and assumes heterosexuality.	"Chris Brown is very popular with some of the kids."
8. "When you boys and girls go home tonight, ask your Mom to volunteer for the class Halloween party."	Encourages gender dualism by using "boys and girls" and assumes traditional gender roles (females are caretakers).	"We need volunteers for the Halloween party. Can you kids ask at home tonight?"
9. "When you meet that special guy, you'll just know." (to a girl)	Assumes child will be heterosexual.	"When you meet that special person, you'll just know."
10. "Who's your girlfriend?" (to a boy)	Sexualizes friendships.	"Who's your friend?"
11. "Is he your boyfriend?" (to a girl)	Sexualizes friendships.	"Is he your friend?"
12. "He's only bothering you because he likes you." (to a girl)	Trivializes conflict and sexualizes interactions.	"Is he bothering you?"
13. "Would you girls like me to get out the jump ropes for recess?"	Assumes all girls like the same activities and teaches children that groups are inherently different.	"Does anyone want the jump ropes out today?"
14. "Would you boys like me to get out the basketballs balls for recess?"	Assumes all boys like the same activities and teaches children that groups are inherently different.	"Does anyone want the basketballs out today?"
15. "Which one of you boys wants to be captain of the team?"	This assumes that girls are not capable of physical strength. Encourages traditional gender dualism.	"Who was captain last time? Who hasn't had a chance yet?"
16. "Are you playing house? Who's the Mom? Who's the Dad?"	Assumes all families need to have a mother and a father.	"Are you playing house? Who are you?"



Part 4: Complete Activity

Instruct participants to walk around the room and shake hands with each other. After about 15-30 seconds, the instructor will announce for the participants to “freeze” and tell them that the person with whom they are presently paired will be their partner for the “Rewind and Replay” activity. Ask each pair to find a place to sit together. Next, the teacher will walk around the room with a fishbowl, or similar container, and ask each person to pick a slip of paper which contains a heterosexist statement (see “Materials and Resources,” # 4).

When each dyad of participants has two pieces of paper, ask one of them to read the “fishbowl picked” activity quote aloud to the other and discuss: (1) how the statement embodies heterosexist language and (2) how the statement could be changed to an alternative, inclusive statement. For example, if the statement reads, “He has so many girlfriends. He’s such a flirt,” have the participants discuss what makes this statement heterosexist and what alternative statements could be made in this situation. Have the participants repeat the exercise with the other partner’s statement.

After sufficient time for discussion, the facilitator should bring the full group together to discuss their dyad statements. Each participant should have a chance to read his/her original statement aloud, discuss what about it is heterosexist (“rewind”), and verbalize his/her alternative statement (“replay”). The facilitator should end by encouraging the participants to become more aware of heterosexist language and practice inclusive alternatives.

ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUE

Successful completion of the activity

will be assessed at two points. First, during the full group discussion, the facilitator will assess “communicative demonstration.” As each individual verbally presents her/his critical analysis of the heterosexist statement and the alternative she/he created (see “Procedure”), the facilitator will grade each participant on her or his success. Second, after the completion of the group activity, each participant will be given a copy of Figure 1 (modified with blanks in the second and third columns) and asked to complete the form independently. Then, the facilitator will assess written “critical analysis” and “creating alternatives” by comparing each individual’s answers for the second and third column using the original Figure 1 as a key. Facilitators can assign a point system for successful completion (e.g., 0-3 scale).

Completion of objectives “a-d” found in the “Objectives” section will support the three goals of critical analysis, creative alternatives and communicative demonstration. Teachers/teacher candidates will use critical analysis to identify the heterosexist assumptions in all of the statements given. Creative alternatives require that each participant develop at least one inclusive statement. Finally, communicative demonstration provides participants the opportunity to verbally practice their new inclusive language. By achieving these three goals, teacher/teacher candidates will be provided tools for creating an inclusive classroom.

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