

Transcending Rainbow Flags and Pride Parades: Preparing Special Education Preservice Educators to Work with Gay and Lesbian Youth

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Educators are often at a loss in handling lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues in the classroom. Often this is attributable to a lack of training during the preservice program at the university level. This article suggests that special education teacher preparation programs are uniquely positioned to promote sexual diversity through inclusive school practices. Activities and resources for including sexual diversity in the preservice curriculum are included.

Scenario

Michelle had just finished teaching her last English class of the day when Jeffrey popped his head back in the door and asked to speak to her. As a first year teacher, Michelle was anxious to get to know her students and help them with English assignments whenever she had the opportunity. She knew Jeffrey struggled with a learning disability and she was always appreciative when he came in for extra tutoring. Jeffrey, with a tear running down his freckled cheek, took a seat next to Michelle's desk and began to talk to her about other students taunting him with epithets such as "queer, fag, punk ass and Miss Jeff." Michele was caught off guard. She had heard these taunts in the hallways, yet had pretended to not hear them. After calming him down and escorting him to the counselor's office, Michelle sat down with the chair of the English department to get her advice on how to quell the taunts and how she could have handled the situation with Jeff. The English department

chair chalked it up to high school pranks and advised Michelle to "leave it alone."

Introduction

Educators are often at a loss in handling lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues in the classroom and may relent to "leave it alone" as noted in the aforementioned scenario. Unfortunately, this tactic can lead to devastating results as demonstrated in the recent suicide of fifth grader, Jaheem Herrera of Georgia (Boone & Leslie, 2009). Herrera hung himself after confiding in a friend that he could no longer deal with the torment of gay slurs he received at school on a daily basis. The reason for not addressing the issues faced by LGBT youth may stem from a lack of knowledge in how to handle situations of sexual diversity in the school setting. Surveys of LGBT youth conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) indicated that the challenges faced by students in the school setting include hostile school climate, absenteeism, lowered student

expectations and lowered academic achievement (2007). Furthermore, student respondents indicated hearing homophobic remarks, feeling unsafe because of their sexual orientation, missing schools because of fear of safety issues and experiences of harassment and assault. Wolfe (2006) opined that as educators working with LGBT youth we must look at our current practices and policies and noted “as we embrace the notion of no child left behind, for the promise that it holds, let us not be afraid to include LGBT students and the children of LGBT parents in that promise”(p. 203).

“Although preservice programs have begun to teach teachers how to create classrooms free of racism, sexism and classism, little has been done to integrate sexual diversity into the teacher education curriculum” (Kissen & Phillips, 2002, p.169). This paper suggests that special education teacher preparation programs are uniquely positioned to promote sexual diversity through inclusive school practices. Activities and resources for including sexual diversity in the preservice curriculum are included.

Why Do I Need to Know This?

Gay and lesbian issues can be particularly controversial and are often marginalized and silenced in educational contexts (Robison & Ferfoija, 2001). Schools operate from a heterosexist prospective meaning that everyone is assumed to be heterosexual (Campos, 2005). Individuals expect to see heterosexual couples holding hands in the hallways and fulfilling the stereotypically gender roles such as twirler and football jock. The very mention of the term “gay” or “lesbian” often incites deprecating remarks and heinous stereotypes. Unfortunately, the term “gay” and “lesbian” often have become synonymous with specific sexual acts leading to a discussion of immorality and sin rather than discussions revolving around the need for a comprehensive school policy aimed directly at addressing anti-LGBT bullying and harassment.

“As homophobia goes unchecked in classrooms and hallways, educators send the general message that discrimination of any person or group is acceptable” (Hall, 2006, p. 152).

Whatever an individual’s belief is regarding homosexuality, he or she is morally and legally obligated to provide a safe school environment for all students (Underwood, 2004). This requires preservice teachers to explore and examine their own attitudes and perceptions toward LGBT people. Several studies have been conducted revealing the attitudes and knowledge of preservice teachers toward LGBT individuals (Gentry, 1986; Herek, 1988; Koch, 2000; Maddux, 1998; Morgan, 2003). Herek found that preservice teachers that have limited contact with gay and lesbians had more negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Mathison, 1998). Additionally, Maddux (1998) indicated high levels of homophobia among the 90 preservice teachers he surveyed for his research administered at the University of Cincinnati. In a 1992 study, Sears examined the personal feelings and professional attitudes of teachers and counselors toward homosexual students and discovered that 80% of the respondents had negative attitudes and feelings toward homosexuality. Koch (2000) conducted a large study of 813 preservice teachers in the state of Illinois which examined the differences between preservice special education and other preservice teachers’ knowledge and attitudes toward gay males and lesbians. His findings noted no significant difference between the two groups. Additional research in this area indicated that receiving instruction in LGBT issues may not aid in changing attitudes, however fifty seven percent of respondents in one study felt they needed more training to effectively address the needs of gay and lesbian youth (Ben Ari, 1998; Butler, 1995). While minimal studies have been conducted in preparing preservice teachers to work with LGBT youth, it is easy to conclude that one way to meet this challenge is by addressing the issues of LGBT within the context of the teacher education program.

Inclusion

Preservice programs are in a unique position to incorporate sexual diversity among discussions regarding inclusive practices. If inclusion means all students, then sexual diversity is assumed to be a component of an inclusive classroom. Moran (2007) defined inclusion as “the entitlement of all children and young people to quality education, irrespective of their differences or dispositions.... it is about embracing educational values of equity, diversity and social justice” (p. 119).

Special education preservice programs instruct future teachers in inclusive models which bring students with disabilities closer to their mainstream peers through the use of accommodations and modifications, differentiated instruction and IEP development. Ostensibly, the discourse on inclusion embraces a broader human rights perspective concerning social justice and putting measures in place to meet the needs of students based on equity, entitlement, and diversity. Because special education teacher preparation programs play a role in shaping preservice teacher beliefs about teaching and learning, it seems a natural fit for these programs to discuss sexual diversity issues.

Faculty within preservice programs should deal with all aspects of diversity and difference by examining existing barriers fully and openly, so that approaches to learning and teaching, which are more inclusive, can be developed and sustained. Unfortunately, university faculty themselves are likely to have been trained in graduate programs with little or no mention of LGBT issues therefore faculty of teacher education programs need to recognize and respond to their own heterosexist attitudes and behaviors (Young & Middleton, 2002). Moreover, assumptions are often made about the teacher educator’s sexuality and their reasons for broaching such subjects causing them to ignore the discussion of LGBT issue within their course curriculum (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001). In order

to establish a friendly LGBT community, three strategies can be implemented at the university level. First, teacher education faculty should not condone any form of homophobia. The incident should be addressed immediately and the victim and offender counseled separately. Second, faculty should not make any assumptions regarding the heterosexuality of preservice teachers and should take steps to ensure gender neutral scenarios in instructional activities. Finally, faculty must address any and all incidents of homophobia and not hesitate based on fear of reprisal in that students may think they are gay (Michaelson, 2008).

Preparing Preservice Teachers

Once barriers have been fully examined, discussed and addressed, faculty is ready to provide training to preservice educators in sexual diversity. How can special education preservice programs effectively address sexual diversity within the framework of inclusion? Kluth and Colleary (2002) argue that there are many intersections between teaching about inclusive education and teaching about sexual diversity. The authors note, “inclusive education has motivated countless elementary, secondary and postsecondary educators to consider and appreciate the individuality that each student brings to the classroom” and that “perhaps, most important, the inclusive school movement is prompting teachers and administrators to attend to differences broadly and positively” (p. 106).

There are many ways that preservice programs can move future educators to understand and explore issues of sexual diversity within the framework of a progressive ideology. Instructing students in the tenets of inclusive education which include recognizing differences, interrogating labels, persevering student dignity, designing relevant and sensitive curricula and encouraging advocacy (Kluth & Colleary, 2002) can also be used to teach preservice teachers about sexual diversity. Two ways to successfully

use these tenets is to make teacher education classrooms safe and comfortable for LGBT students and to integrate the issues of sexual diversity in the teacher education program. A second way to use the tenets of an inclusive school is to specifically teach them to preservice educators. Strategies and activities based on the five tenets developed by Kluth and Colleary are described in the remainder of the article and are summarized in Table 1.

Recognizing Differences

Multicultural courses in preservice programs have been aimed at exploring cultural diversity, yet sexual diversity often has not been appropriately included in the multicultural curriculum. Preservice programs can remedy this situation by including sexual diversity as part of the curriculum. By exploring and recognizing the differences inherent in sexual diversity, preservice teachers begin to recognize stereotypes portrayed in film, television, books and the media. "The fact is we need to do what we can so that all differences among youth are tolerated and accepted, regardless of their academic and social prowess, their ethnic or economic background, their gender and sexual orientation and so forth" (Campos, 2005, p. 6). Although a faculty member may not know any openly LGBT individuals, they are on campus often socialized to conceal their sexual orientation. Recognizing differences may be seen as an opportunity to push an agenda or certain belief system. Nothing could be further from the truth. Recognizing differences is an effort to transform a possibly harmful environment into an inclusive, tolerant one. All students are deserving of a learning community free of intimidation, fear, discrimination, harassment and bullying. To aid preservice educators in recognizing differences, LGBT guest speakers could be invited to speak. Additionally, students could visit a local PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) meeting and discuss their impressions of the meeting. Exploring LGBT themed magazines and

comparing and contrasting them to mainstream magazines is another activity that may be used to explore differences.

Interrogating Labels

One way to heighten the awareness and sensitivity of preservice teachers is through exploring the labels used to perpetuate the oppression and mistreatment of LGBT youth. In her article discussing her journey in teaching gay and lesbian students, Wolfe (2006) noted that through classroom discussions and activities, preservice faculty members must develop teachers "who embrace and embody values of courage, respect, integrity and fairness" (p. 203). Labels have the tendency to be limiting and constricting stripping an individual of his/her uniqueness, talents and gifts. Proponents of the inclusive school movement recognize the need to avoid labels and to use Person First Language due to the checkered past of special education programming. Person First Language also can be used when discussing LGBT persons. Just as individuals with disabilities are more than their disability, LGBT students are more than their sexual orientation. They are students with unique interests, religious backgrounds, race, ethnicities and genders. Moving away from the socially constructed labels placed on LGBT youth allows educators to view the individual's uniqueness rather than focusing on the label used to classify the child.

Taking a look at sexual diversity in film, books and personal interactions is one way that preservice programs can explore the devalued roles and affirming values assigned to LGBT persons. Wolfsenberger (1972) wrote that society often devalues individuals by placing them into specific roles which may include object of burden, object of fear, object of ridicule, object of pity, childlike, sick or deviant. While Wolfsenberger's devalued roles were originally used to describe the stereotypes assigned to individuals with disabilities, the devalued roles can also be applied to LGBT people. Through

this exercise, preservice educators are introduced to the theory of social role valorization which is based on the premise that society tends to view individuals who differ in any way from the societal expectations as less desirable. By viewing movies, reading books and recounting personal interactions with LGBT individuals, preservice educators can identify the devalued roles often assigned to LGBT by society.

In addition to identifying devalued roles, preservice teachers can also use books, movies and personal interactions to identify the six affirming values and positive images which include inherent strengths, great expectations, relationships, positive contributions, full citizenship and choices identified by Turnbull, Turnbull, and Wehmeyer (2007) In examining affirming values, preservice educator are given the opportunity to identify the gifts, capacities and unique potential of LGBT students.

Preserving Student Dignity

Inclusive schooling teaches us much about preserving student dignity. Self determination and advocacy are central themes within this movement (Kluth & Colleary, 2002). How can a teacher preserve student dignity? It is through actions such as promoting an ethic of care (Noddings, 1992), facilitating relationships with students, encouraging and empowering, helping students to live in community with one another and by creating a culture of acceptance and support within the walls of the classroom. To this end, teachers do not allow bullying, name calling, oppression or stigmatization. This is accomplished by supporting and respecting all students and by standing up for against any forms of oppression and mistreatment any all forms. In an inclusive classroom that values student dignity, teachers make it a priority to allow students time to talk and to be listened to and provide a comfortable setting which encourages the student to be himself. Human Rights Watch (2001) reported that in each case where LGBT youth

reported a positive school experience, teachers were credited has being supportive in discussing diversity in the classroom setting.

Designing Sensitive and Relevant Curricula

Teachers in inclusive classrooms are concerned with providing a curriculum that reaches and motivates all learners. This is accomplished through content enhancements, physical arrangements, grouping strategies, multimedia, and instructional accommodations. Teachers who embrace diversity design and implement a curriculum that supports and encourages the experiences and perspectives of a wide range of individuals. In order to meet the needs of students with disabilities, teachers of inclusive classrooms celebrate the accomplishments of individuals with disabilities such as Beethoven when discussing classical music. This can also be accomplished when discussing sexual diversity. For example, when discussing the endeavors of Greek philosophers, a history teacher could point out the impact that sexual orientation may have played in the decision. Recently, several curriculum materials have been developed which may be used in classrooms to discuss sexual diversity.

Encouraging Advocacy

In its simplest form, advocacy can be defined as “providing an open ear for any student expressing fear and self-doubt” (Hall, 2006, p. 154) While children often are exposed to advocacy of religious beliefs, gender identity and cultural/ethnicity, rarely are they observers of individuals espousing advocacy for LGBT issues. Historically, teachers have taken stands on economic, cultural, political and social issues of the day. Special education teachers are experts in advocating for the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in general education classrooms and this advocacy is taught as part of the preservice curriculum. Preservice teachers are taught to advocate that students with disabilities

are entitled to respect from peers and teachers and that they should be free from harm. This type of advocacy is also appropriate for sexual diversity. Campos (2005) eloquently states that teachers have the responsibility to be supportive and proactive rather than judgmental by noting, “you are not forced to adapt your convictions and become an advocate, making signs and wearing buttons, freedom rings or rainbow jewelry. Simply put, schools, parents, and communities must teach youth and one another to approach sexual orientation with a mature and considerate attitude” (p. 13). This can be accomplished by providing a safe environment whereby students have the opportunity to express ideas, thoughts, challenges and criticisms.

Conclusion

With the ever-changing demands being placed on teacher’s, university programs are often seeking ways to implement appropriate programming to meet unique needs of educators. Often in this shuffle of course requirements, field experiences and key assessments, preservice programs inadvertently omit courses dealing with diversity. This author suggests that universities can no longer ignore the need to address sexual diversity within the preservice educator program. Future teachers need to understand that inclusion not only addresses individuals with disabilities but also expands to inclusivity of students from sexual diverse backgrounds. To create a truly inclusive community, it is incumbent upon preservice teacher programs to address LGBT issues directly.

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Author's Note

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Tables

Table 1
Activities and Resources

| Activities | Sample Resources |
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| Have students watch a TV show or movie featuring a gay or lesbian character. Identify the strengths and weaknesses portrayed by the gay and lesbian character. Based on the work of Wolfensberger, identify the devalued roles that were presented? | Movies/TV Shows: <i>Boys Don't Cry</i> , <i>Philadelphia</i> , <i>And the Band Played On</i> , <i>The Matthew Sheppard Story</i> , <i>The Birdcage</i> , <i>As Good As It Gets</i> , <i>Will and Grace</i> , <i>The L Word</i> , <i>Six Feet Under</i> |
| Read a book detailing the challenges faced by GLBT adolescents. Identify the challenges/triumphs described in the book. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harris, M. (Ed.). (1998). <i>School experiences of gay and lesbian youth: The invisible minority</i>. New York: Harrington Park Press. • Reed, R. (1997). <i>Growing up gay: The sorrows and joys of gay and lesbian adolescence</i>. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. |
| Bring magazines to class that are written for the GLBT community. Have students read an article in the magazine and identify differences between the GLBT magazine and mainstream magazines. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Advocate</i> (www.advocate.com) • <i>Curve</i> (www.curvemag.com) • <i>GENRE</i> (www.genremagazine.com) • <i>Metrosource</i> (www.metrosource.com) |
| Have students visit a local PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians) meeting or invite a speaker from the local PFLAG chapter. | www.pflag.org |
| Identify historical GLBT figures and their contributions. | Examples: Alexander the Great, Susan B. Anthony, Julius Caesar, Oscar Wilde, Tennessee Williams, Jane Addams, Truman Capote, and Willa Cather. |
| Visit websites which promote equality of GLBT persons. Ask students to describe three things they learned from the websites. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • www.teachingtolerance.org • www.glsen.org |
| Have students keep a tally of the number of homophobic remarks or slurs they hear for a total of one week. In class, discuss what was heard and how did they feel when hearing the remarks? | Have students keep a notebook to tally slurs or remarks. |
| Make a list of organizations nearest your community that offer services to support gay and lesbian youth and their families. | Find local organizations by looking in your local phone book or doing a web search. |
| Check out a book that is written for children that focuses on GLBT issues. Write a paper outlining your argument for/against reading this book in your classroom. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newman, L. (2000). <i>Heather has Two Mommies</i>. Los Angeles: Alyson Publications. • Skutch, R. (1998). <i>Who's in a Family?</i> Berkley, CA: Tricycle Press. • Valentine, J. (2004). <i>One dad, two dads, brown dad, blue dad</i>. Los Angeles: Alyson Publications |
| Develop a webquest which allows preservice teachers to explore diversity websites. | Example: www.glsen.org |