

Encouraging Pre-Service Teachers to Address Issues of Sexual Orientation in Their Classrooms

Walking the Walk & Talking the Talk

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Introduction

Imagine this scenario: A high school marching band has just finished a long day of summer practice. The drum majors dismiss the students by grade level—first the seniors, then the juniors, and so on—as each class shouts a group cheer. When it is the juniors' turn, several students shout, “one-two-three-FAGGOTS!” The music teacher is out of earshot several yards away and neither the student leaders nor the parents who are standing there say anything in response. The next day when the teacher was told about the incident and spoke to the students who had initiated the cheer, they stated that they “didn’t mean it in a negative way.”

Unfortunately, scenarios such as this one are all too common in U.S. schools, making for a hostile environment for many lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) students. In a recent national school climate survey, nearly three-fourths of LGBT students aged 13-20 reported frequently or often hearing homophobic remarks such as “fag” or “dyke” at school (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Even more prevalent was the negative use of the word “gay” in expressions such as “that’s so gay.”

However, LGBT students reported that teachers and staff rarely intervened in response to biased and derogatory comments based on sexual orientation, sexism, or gender expression. This was true even in cases when the adults heard the remarks firsthand. And although non-LGBT students may believe that expressions such as “you’re so gay” and “no homo” are innocuous, over 90% of LGBT students reported that they feel bothered or distressed when they hear such comments (Kosciw et al., 2012).

The purpose of this article is to de-

scribe ways that teacher educators can encourage future teachers to address LGBT issues in their own classrooms. The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network’s (GLSEN, 2008) *ThinkB4YouSpeak Educator’s Guide* served as the framework for the activities that I have implemented in undergraduate (e.g., K-12 Multicultural Education, Issues in K-12 Education) and graduate-level (e.g., Foundations of Diversity and Equity) courses for pre-service elementary and secondary teachers. The activities described here have been used effectively with classes as small as 25, and as large as 140 students.

Multicultural Education and LGBT Issues

As a teacher educator, I am aware of the need to incorporate issues of sexual orientation and gender identity into my undergraduate and graduate-level multicultural education and cultural diversity courses. When I began teaching at the university level in 1999, scant attention and page space was devoted to LGBT issues in the textbooks available for me to use with my students.

Indeed, in a content analysis of teacher preparation textbooks, Young and Middleton (1999) reported that only two of the seven multicultural education texts included discussion of LGBT issues. Today, the coverage of these topics in textbooks has improved, but still tends to be limited.

Thus, as teacher educators, we must bridge this gap by relying on related diversity concepts to help us plan instruction. As anyone who has taught a course on multicultural education knows, teaching about issues of discrimination, racism, bigotry, power, and privilege to a mix of students from so-called majority and minority groups is challenging.

Too often, students of color are silenced in university classrooms by students from the dominant White culture; those who

do speak up often give up in the face of defensiveness and obliviousness from their White peers (Delpit, 1988).

In my experience teaching multicultural education and cultural diversity courses, I have found it to be the case that some students are silenced and others are quite vocal. While some students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, and/or socioeconomic backgrounds do speak up in class, they run the risk of “putting themselves out there” only to be dismissed, ignored, or challenged by White students with little awareness of White privilege or systemic societal inequities (McIntosh, 1988).

Indeed, White pre-service teachers may use “tools of Whiteness,” such as fear of people of color, deficit understandings of students from communities of color, and a “Whites as victims” narrative to maintain and defend their hegemonic understandings of race and power in U.S. society (Picower, 2009, p. 204). Similarly, students may have developed “tools of heterosexuality.”

Given this background knowledge, I expect students with diverse views on sexual orientation and gender identity to be similarly hesitant to share out in a large class dominated by “traditional” social norms. I have found that while many students will not share their perspectives out with the whole class, they are willing to write about them as individual reflections or discuss issues in small groups. Thus, I designed class sessions to provide a range of opportunities for students to participate in ways in which they could feel safe and also be heard.

Preparing Teachers to Be Advocates for LGBT Students

The high school band scenario highlights the importance of preparing teachers to address anti-LGBT slurs as they occur and, more importantly, preventing the occurrence of such incidents in the first place. Unfortunately, issues of lesbian, gay,

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bisexual, and gender identity are often excluded from multicultural education, or are not seen as social justice issues in K-12 school curricula or pre-service teacher education (Hyland, 2010; Mayo, 2013; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006).

In-service teachers may be aware that some of their students (a) identify as LGBT or are questioning, (b) have parents who identify as gay or lesbian, or (c) have experienced, witnessed, or perpetrated homophobic bullying at school (Puchner & Klein, 2011). However, teachers may feel ill-prepared to discuss these issues with their students and may thus avoid such discussions, thereby inadvertently silencing their students (Puchner & Klein).

Nevertheless, it is clear that teachers, especially those in secondary settings, will encounter LGBT students and the challenges they face, and thus they have a responsibility to become educated on these issues (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010). Teacher educators can help future teachers along this journey of awareness and advocacy.

Setting the Stage

Readings

There are a number of readings that instructors can assign to students to prime them for in-class discussion and activities related to LGBT issues. For example, in a book chapter titled “Queer Lessons: Sexual and Gender Minorities in Multicultural Education,” Mayo (2013) describes the history and overlap of LGBT movements with multicultural movements, discrimination of LGBT people, and ways to improve education for students of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

Similarly, a chapter in a book by Koppelman (2011) titled “Heterosexism: Transforming Homosexuality from Deviant to Different” provides an historical overview of myths about and cultural bias against homosexuality, institutional discrimination of LGBT students in schools, and the movement for equal rights and status for all Americans. These two chapters provide a good foundation for discussion, especially in undergraduate courses.

For students enrolled in teacher preparation programs, Quinn and Meiners (2011) provide an overview of the historical backdrop of teacher education and the struggle for social justice of LGBT people. Nieto and Bode (2012) describe a case study of a high school student who identified as lesbian, and provide commentary and reflection questions that can be used to initiate a

discussion of LGBT issues with pre-service middle and high school teachers.

The Education Digest includes condensed versions of previously published articles on a variety of topics that correspond well to issues related to LGBT youth. For example, Holladay’s (2011) piece on cyberbullying provides background related to bullying in general, Reis (2009) examines the question of whether or not adults should encourage LGBT students to “come out,” and Underwood (2004) discusses the legal obligations that schools have to protect LGBT students.

Critical Thinking Related to the Readings

One of the challenges that university faculty face is how to encourage students to think deeply about the issues addressed in the course readings, and more specifically, how to encourage students to complete the readings prior to class. It is well known that many undergraduate students do not complete the assigned readings and are thus underprepared for class discussions. Although graduate students may be more likely to do the required readings, they may need assistance in focusing on key points that the instructor wishes to emphasize.

Tomasek (2009) provides an extensive list of reading and writing prompts that “promote critical out-of-class reading” and can be used effectively with the readings related to LGBT topics (p. 127). Some of the prompts help students to identify the key issue(s) of a reading, such as “What problem is the author identifying?” or “For whom is this topic important and why?” (p. 129). Other prompts require students to make personal connections or interpret the evidence provided/argument made in a reading, challenge an author’s assumptions, or make inferences about what they read.

LGBT Resources

Teaching about issues of sexual orientation and gender identity in multicultural education courses serves a dual purpose: (a) to prepare future teachers to address these issues with K-12 students; and (b) to send the message that university faculty are supportive of their own LGBT students. Thus, one of the first tasks for faculty can be to share campus and other resources with their students.

For example, the university may have an LGBT resource center or a chapter of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). Faculty can take some time at the beginning of class to review the information and materials available on resource center or club websites.

Pre-service teachers who are doing fieldwork or student teaching may find that their school sites have resources as well, including established GSAs. In addition, national organizations provide free resources to help teachers prepare for issues of LGBT and gender identity. For example, the *Teaching Tolerance* website—<http://www.tolerance.org/>—includes articles, teaching activities, and blog forums that address LGBT concerns. Some of the many resources available for educators on the GLSEN website—www.glsen.org—are back-to-school guides, links and information for upcoming events, research reports, public relations materials, and teaching materials.

Creating a “Safe Space” for Discussion

University campuses may have LGBT resources to support faculty in their own teaching and professional growth. For example, both of the universities where I teach offer workshops for faculty to prepare them to create a “safe space” for all of their students. Universities also have GSA clubs that faculty can join. Such training and active participation can help faculty to lay the foundation for acceptance in their own classrooms.

Creating a safe space for sharing ideas and perspectives and asking questions is essential for multicultural education courses, because class discussion often involves controversial, “hot button” topics. Thus, faculty can facilitate discussion of safe space ground rules the first week of class and then go back to these ideas often. Although undergraduate students are adults, they at times react with immaturity to serious problems posed by their peers. For example, students may laugh out loud in response to other students’ descriptions of situations in which they or others have been the target of demeaning racial or other slurs. Asking students to put themselves in the shoes of K-12 children serves as a reminder that they are held to a high standard of anti-bias language and behavior.

Faculty can ask the class to brainstorm ways that teachers might encourage elementary, middle, and high school students to increase their compassion for peers in ways that require maturity and understanding. Instructors can guide students toward safe space-friendly rules, such as GLSEN’s *Sample Ground Rules*, which include “Respect Others,” “Speak from the ‘I,’” “Ask Questions,” “Respect Confidentiality,” “Share ‘Air Time’” (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2008, p. 8).

Initiating Discussion of Sexual Orientation and Identity

60-Second Pair Share and Listen

To warm students up to thinking about gender and sexual identity issues, faculty can ask students to engage in a 60-second pair share and listen (McIntosh, 2012). In this activity, adapted for this topic, students form pairs and then take turns describing in 60 seconds his or her first awareness of gender identity, how it evolved, and is currently constructed. The goal of this activity is to have students tap into their prior experiences in their own identity formation, to share their thoughts with another student, and to listen to someone else's perspective.

When one partner is talking, the other partner must listen only without providing any verbal feedback. This is more difficult than it sounds! Sixty seconds can seem like a long time to the speaker and the listener may be tempted to interrupt. After 60 seconds, the pairs reverse roles. It is important that faculty direct the students to refrain from commenting on their partner's experiences and instead describe *their own* experiences. This is not easy for students, some of whom may wish to validate or otherwise respond to their partner's ideas.

This strategy ensures that every student in class has the opportunity to speak uninterrupted and every student has the exact same amount of time—very egalitarian! It also provides students with the opportunity to hear another person's perspective in a safe space, that is, with one other peer as opposed to in front of an entire class. Instructors can repeat this process, but replace “gender identity” with “sexual identity.” This activity allows students to begin thinking about gender and sexual identity as these concepts relate to themselves and who they are.

Building Awareness of LGBT Issues

“Where Do I Stand?” GLSEN Activity

For this activity, post a sign that says “strongly agree” on one wall of the classroom and another that says “strongly disagree” on the opposite wall, thus making a continuum. Explain to your students that you will read a series of statements to them aloud. For each statement, ask them to think about “Where do you ‘stand’ in response to anti-LGBT statements?” Examples of statements included, “I often hear the phrase ‘that’s so gay,’ ‘you’re so

gay,’ ‘no homo,’ or the word ‘gay’ in general used in a negative way among my peers;” and “I have personally used terms like ‘faggot’ and ‘dyke’ with my peers” (GLSEN, 2008, p. 17).

In response to each statement, students physically stand at various points of the continuum that represent their opinion. After all of the statements have been read, students return to their seats so the class can engage in discussion. Students can first be asked to turn to a neighbor and share their thoughts about the activity. Questions to encourage discussion might include: How did you feel as you were standing in response to the statements? Do you think everyone was honest in their responses to the statements? How did the statements themselves make you feel? What were your thoughts as the statements were read aloud? After students have discussed their ideas with neighbors, several students can share out to the whole class.

“ThinkB4YouSpeak” GLSEN Television Ads

There are a series of three television ads created by the partnership between GLSEN and The Advertising Council that can be ordered for free though the website www.glsen.org. Each ad runs 30 seconds and features a scenario in which teens use the phrase “that’s so gay” when they mean that something is dumb or stupid. In each ad, a caring adult points out that the phrase is insulting.

There are also similar ads that were created in partnership with the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the GLSEN Sports Project (see e.g., <http://sports.glsen.org/game-changers/nba-glsen-and-ad-councils-official-think-b4-you-speak-ads/>). At <http://www.think-b4youspeak.com/> there is a live feed that shows the number of times the words, “fag,” “dyke,” and “so gay” are used on Twitter on a daily basis. Students can view the ads and Twitter counter and then discuss them at table groups. The GLSEN ThinkB4YouSpeak Educator’s Guide provides a list of 11 question prompts that can be used to initiate the table group discussion.

The History of Hurtful Words

The *ThinkB4YouSpeak Educator’s Guide* (GLSEN, 2008) provides definitions of the words, “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “transgender,” “questioning,” and “queer,” as well as histories for the words, “faggot,” “dyke,” and “gay.” Students can read the definitions of these terms and discuss how

people might feel when these words are used to describe their identity in a negative way.

Changing Language and Behavior

“From Bystander to Ally” GLSEN Activity

For this activity, instructors read a scenario aloud to the class that describes a hypothetical incident in which a middle or high school student heard hurtful language (i.e., “you’re such a retard”) and no one responded to stop the behavior (GLSEN, 2008, p. 27). Instructors can ask students to reflect on this scenario and think of a time when they have heard something that made them feel uncomfortable and neither they nor anyone else responded.

Students write down a brief description of the scenario on an index card and then exchange cards with another person at their table or near their seat. Pairs of students read each other’s cards and then discuss: (a) what the people in the scenario should have done instead of standing idly by; and (b) why they think no one in the scenario did or said anything to stop the behavior. After the pairs have had time to discuss, ask some of the students to share out what they talked about with the whole class.

After the class discussion, show the students GLSEN’s (2008) list of “10 Ways to be an Ally” on a large chart paper or the projector screen. Have volunteers read each of the ten items aloud to the whole class. Next, write two headings on the board: bystander and ally. Ask the students to brainstorm individually or with a small group, reasons for why people do not stand up for other in situations like these.

Record students’ ideas on the board under the heading, bystander. Ask the students to brainstorm ideas for what is needed for people to shift from being bystanders to allies. Record students’ ideas on the board under the heading, ally. A nice way to wrap up this class discussion is to ask small groups of students to work together to brainstorm ways that K-12 teachers can be effective allies for LGBT students. Record each groups’ ideas on the board.

The final list should include key ways that educators can support LGBT students. These include: (a) being a visible ally, such as displaying a safe space sticker or poster in your classroom; (b) supporting students who come out to you, as by listening with empathy and caring; (c) responding to anti-LGBT incidents, such as language and behaviors as they

occur; and (d) supporting GSAs, by becoming a member or founding a GSA club on your campus (GLSEN, 2011).

“Taking it to the Street”: Encouraging Teachers to Use GLSEN Materials

My GLSEN Lesson Plan

Ask students to read through the *ThinkB4YouSpeak Educator’s Guide* (GLSEN, 2008), choose one of the six activities described in the guide, and write a lesson plan based on the activity that they can use with their own Grades 6-12 students in their subject area. Students can upload their lesson plans to the course website, so that others in class can read them. Or, students can briefly present their lesson plan ideas to the whole class.

How Will I Be an Ally to LGBT Students?

Explain the importance of teachers having a plan to address anti-LGBT language and behaviors. For example, if a teacher has not thought about how he or she will handle these issues when they arise, they may not know what to do or say when the time comes. Having a plan helps reduce fear and apprehension that teachers might have in dealing with situations that arise in their classrooms or somewhere else on campus, such as the halls or lunch tables.

Ask students to work in small groups to discuss concrete ways they can be allies for LGBT students. Have groups record their ideas on chart paper and then share out with the whole group. Then, as individuals, have each student write down his or her personal plan to address LGBT issues, including incidents of bullying or students coming out or questioning their own sexuality.

Zero Indifference

GLSEN has published an educator resource that helps teachers address how to end name-calling in schools and is excerpted in the *ThinkB4YouSpeak Educator’s Guide* (GLSEN, 2008, p. 35). This section of the guide provides teachers with concrete ways to address negative language and behaviors of any kind in schools. First, the guide suggests that teachers should not avoid or excuse incidents, nor should they be paralyzed by fear in such situations.

Further, the guide provides a two-step suggestion for intervening: (a) stop the behavior immediately; and (b) educate the

students who are involved. The guide also describes the factors that help a teacher to decide whether to educate publicly (i.e., immediately) or in private (i.e., later; GLSEN, 2008). The goal is to determine what is best for the targeted student and meet his or her needs first. Faculty can initiate role-playing scenarios with future teachers to help them prepare for situations in which they must intervene to address anti-LGBT slurs.

Final Reflection

Individual Quick Write

As a final activity, instructors can ask students to respond in writing to a prompt that encourages reflection, such as: (a) What were your initial attitudes toward LGBT people and have they changed as a result of class activities? Why did your attitudes change or why didn’t they change? (b) What did you learn from these class activities? How will what you learned impact you as a K-12 teacher? (c) Will you implement some or all of the activities we participated in, in your own class? Why or why not? or (d) What challenges do you foresee in addressing LGBT issues as a teacher? How do you plan to handle these challenges?

In response to a quick write, one of my undergraduate students wrote,

Through today’s lecture, I learning the importance of thinking before speaking. I have always considered myself a strong supporter of the LGBT community and I felt that today’s discussion made me a stronger supporter of their cause. I believe it is important to make children in K-12 aware that bullying in no way solves any problems, but instead creates them. I feel that educators and those that are potential role models to the younger generation should be allies, not bystanders when it comes to bullying.

Conclusion

The ideas presented here provide a starting point for implementing rich and meaningful class discussions and engaging activities to help future elementary and secondary teachers build their own awareness of LGBT issues and prepare them to address ALL students’ needs. Through this work, teacher educators and K-12 teachers can help to minimize and hopefully eliminate anti-LGBT language and behaviors in their schools.

Who knows? Perhaps the next generation of K-12 students will make anti-LGBT slurs in hallways, classrooms, on the play-

ground, and online an “uncool” thing of the past.

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