

Core Values  
and the Identity-Supportive Classroom:  
Setting LGBTQ Issues  
within Wider Frameworks for Preservice Educators

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Consider your core values as an educator, the ideas that inspired you to become a teacher. With these deeply held beliefs in the background, now complete this sentence: "I believe that all students in a public school have a right to \_\_\_\_\_."

Whenever I introduce a new group of teacher education students or other preservice educators to the research about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth and schooling-related issues, I begin with this prompt. I ask students to write privately for a few minutes and then to share some of their ideas aloud while I collect them on the board. Because, in many cases, I have asked students to complete some reading about LGBTQ issues prior to the class, some of the rights that they identify are those that one might expect to hear directly after students have read this material, including "a safe learning environment," "freedom from bullying and harassment," and "acceptance and respect at school." Often, however, students are able to think beyond the content of the reading and to come up with a broad spectrum of ideals to which they believe all students are entitled and that drive their most fundamental motivations to pursue careers in education. These ideals include "opportunities to develop their own unique talents and

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skills,” “adequate resources to help them learn,” and “supportive, encouraging teachers.” Some students even offer such ideals as “proper nutrition.”

This list of rights serves (literally) as a backdrop for a presentation and discussion of current data about the school experiences of LGBTQ students and about the risks that these youth face both in and out of school. If my classroom is equipped with a projection screen, I use the screen both to conceal the list of rights that students have generated and to display slides that highlight recent key data from two sources. We begin with the most recent data from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) School Climate Survey (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008).

Although numerous articles about school-related risks affecting LGBTQ youth have appeared in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002), none of these addresses the breadth of issues that the GLSEN survey addresses, including anti-LGBTQ language; verbal harassment; physical attacks; the responses of teachers to anti-LGBTQ language and harassment; LGBTQ representation (or lack thereof) in school curricula; the relationship between victimization and school performance; and the specific experiences of lesbian and bisexual girls, transgender youth, and LGBTQ youth of color. Moreover, the consistency of GLSEN’s findings over multiple, biennial administrations of the School Climate Survey lends credibility to its data, which, although not based on random sampling, represent the perceptions of more than 6,000 students in grades 6 through 12 (mostly LGBT-identifying) from across the country.<sup>1</sup>

### Data from the GLSEN School Climate Survey

Findings from the GLSEN survey about anti-LGBTQ language and harassment that I discuss with preservice educators include at least five key statistics:

- 9 out of 10 students that GLSEN surveyed indicated that, at school, they hear the term “that’s so gay” or a variant of it either “frequently” or “often.”
- Over 70% noted that, at school, they hear other homophobic language (e.g., faggot, dyke, homo) either “frequently” or “often” at school.
- 44% stated that most of their peers use homophobic language.
- Collectively, over 80% said that they are “extremely” (25%), “pretty much” (30%), or “a little” (29%) “bothered or distressed as a result of hearing words such as ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ used in a derogatory way.”

- 68% indicated they have been verbally harassed at school either “frequently,” “often,” or “sometimes” in the past year, and 29% indicated that they have been physically harassed. (Kosciw et al., 2008)

Another central focus of our discussion involves the responses of teachers to homophobic language, harassment, and violence. Although some of GLSEN’s findings point to the positive difference that supportive teachers and other school staff make in the lives of many LGBTQ students, data from the survey also suggest that some teachers fail to provide a safe learning environment and may even contribute to the victimization of LGBTQ students.

In particular, 38.6% of the students that GLSEN surveyed indicated their teachers never intervene when they hear students use homophobic language, and another 44% indicated that teachers intervene only “sometimes.” Additionally, 5% noted that they “frequently” or “often” hear teachers and other school staff make homophobic remarks themselves, and another 18% said that they “sometimes” hear this kind of language from school adults. Further, among students who had been harassed, over 60% indicated that they never reported it to school staff, and the most frequently cited reason was that they believed that such reporting would be ineffective (Kosciw et al., 2008).

Finally, our slide-based discussion focuses on some of the risks, both academic and otherwise, that LGBTQ youth face as a result of being victimized or attending hostile school climates. I end with data from the most recent Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (MYRBS), which is based on questionnaire responses from more than 3,000 students in randomly selected high schools across the state. (Even though the teacher education program in which I am currently working is based in New York, I use MYRBS data because Massachusetts is one of only a few states that, in its Youth Risk Behavior Survey, includes questions about self-identified sexual orientation and/or same-sex sexual activity and has been disaggregating youth risk data by sexual orientation for more than a decade.)

Consistently, students are shocked by the MYRBS statistics showing that almost 30% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth state that they have attempted suicide, a rate more than four times greater than that of their heterosexual peers (29.1% vs. 6.4%). The students also are surprised by data showing that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students (the survey does not include any items to determine transgender identity) are more than three times as likely as their heterosexual peers (13.3% vs. 4.2%) to skip school because they feel unsafe as well as more than four times as likely (18.7% vs. 4.5%) to have been threatened with or injured by a weapon at school (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2008).<sup>2</sup>

At this point in the session, we turn off the slides, raise the screen, and reveal again the list that we generated at the beginning of the class. (I admit here that the somewhat dramatic effect of this transition is a deliberate attention-getting strategy.) As one might predict, students are immediately struck by the mismatch between the rights that they identified as belonging to all students, based on what they consider their core values as educators, and the experiences of LGBTQ youth in U.S. schools, as depicted in the GLSEN survey results and the MYRBS data.

Our discussion then continues with my asking the students, “Which of the rights that we articulated as belonging to all students are violated or compromised for LGBTQ students, assuming that the GLSEN and MYRBS data accurately reflect their experiences?” Here, the connections (or, perhaps more accurately, disconnections) that students identify between their list and the data usually begin with such rights as to feel safe at school and to attend school free from harassment and bullying. Probing more deeply, however, students are often able to point to ways in which a broader spectrum of generally agreed-upon student rights are violated on a regular basis based on what the GLSEN and/or MYRBS data show. These insights vary from class to class, but in recent sessions, participants have focused on the rights of students in at least four areas.

The first area is the right to *develop their own unique skills as learners*, a right that is compromised if LGBTQ students skip classes or school because they feel unsafe or silenced in classes in which the central aspects of their identities are not represented. The second is the right to *be supported and encouraged by teachers*, some of whom, the data show, fail to address the needs of LGBTQ youth adequately and, in some cases, may even harbor and act upon homophobic attitudes themselves.

The third area is the right to *participate in extracurricular activities that expand their horizons*, as some LGBTQ students may believe that they would not be welcome in certain school athletic or extracurricular activities and because many schools still do not have gay-straight alliances. The fourth area, which was noted above, is the right to *adequate nutrition*, which some of my students have convincingly argued could be jeopardized if LGBTQ students feel unsafe in the school cafeteria, which, along with hallways, are among the most common locations for anti-LGBTQ harassment to occur (Bochenek & Brown, 2001).

### The Two Graduate School Contexts

Notably, the contexts in which I have taught preservice educators about LGBTQ issues have been factors affecting the extent to which they have been receptive to the idea of these issues being addressed openly in

K-12 schools. My first experiences in teaching this material took place at the Harvard Graduate School of Education between 2003 and 2006.<sup>3</sup> Both in the school's Teacher Education Program (made up of graduate students seeking master's degrees and state certification to teach at the middle and high school levels) and in the School Leadership Program (for preservice administrators and other school leaders), I taught stand-alone sessions for several years, the first half of which followed a format similar to the one that I described above, with the second half focused on case studies in which students worked in small groups to problem-solve a situation related to homophobia in a school context. These case studies, some of which were drawn from the work of educator Michael Kozuch, involve such issues as opposition to efforts to start a gay-straight alliance, a teacher being targeted with homophobic language, and homophobia in a school sports context. With the slide presentation in the background, students were called upon to discuss how they would address the case as educators and how they might use arguments about core values to defend their solution to potential opponents.

Because these groups at Harvard were relatively large (some included as many as 100 students), when I first started conducting the workshops, I expected to encounter at least a few participants in each session who might express objections to addressing LGBTQ issues openly in a K-12 context. Yet, in all these sessions, which involved upwards of 400 students over several years, no student ever raised such objections. Of course, there are several possible reasons why this might have been the case. If students with these sorts of objections were, in fact, in any of the sessions, they were most likely in the minority at Harvard's Graduate School of Education and may, therefore, have felt unsafe (somewhat ironically, given what the GLSEN and MYRBS data show about LGBTQ youths' feeling unsafe at school) voicing these opinions to their peers. I would also like to think, however, that the framing of the issue around core values and widely agreed-upon student rights led at least some students to rethink their stance when the disturbing data on issues affecting LGBTQ youth were presented in this way.

Since 2005, I have been a core faculty member in the Master of Arts in Teaching Program at Bard College (another secondary teacher education program that likely attracts a disproportionately liberal student body). At Bard, I use my lesson juxtaposing core values and universal student rights, on the one hand, with the GLSEN and MYRBS data, on the other, in the context of a ten-week course titled "Identity, Culture, and the Classroom." This course has afforded me an even broader framework within which to discuss the rights of all students and the responsibilities of teachers with regard to LGBTQ youth.

The course begins with foundational theories about identity development in adolescence, particularly those of Erik Erikson who, despite what some might characterize as homophobia in some of his writing, was undeniably a pioneer in the field of child and adolescent psychology. Working from Erikson's theories about adolescence representing a particular time of "crisis" (or turning point) for the development of identity, we discuss how adolescents grapple, primarily unconsciously, with questions of self-definition and their place in the world. In his classic text *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Erikson (1968) calls identity formation "a process 'located' in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture" (p. 22, italics in original). In this light, we consider the crucial role that "cultures" within schools play in adolescents' development of a healthy or unhealthy sense of self, and how teachers play a central role in establishing the culture of their classrooms and of the school culture as a whole. We discuss the responsibility of teachers to serve not only as deliverers of course content but also as what Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) have called "applied developmentalists," adults entrusted with ensuring that young people follow positive developmental trajectories that allow them to learn and achieve to their fullest potential.

This groundwork-setting conversation about identity theory provides an additional backdrop for the discussion of LGBTQ issues, which takes place several weeks later in the context of discussions about other identity-related issues such as those associated with race, gender, ethnicity, social class, ability/disability, and language. Many of the readings about these issues come from my edited book, *Adolescents at School: Perspectives on Youth, Identity, and Education* (2008a), as well as the work of authors such as Ferguson (2000), Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Gilligan (1996), Tatum (1997), and others. The exploration of LGBTQ issues in classrooms and schools thus takes place amid a larger conversation about how schools provide or fail to provide opportunities for students from various historically marginalized groups to develop positive identities as learners.

### Students' Responses to Studying LGBTQ Issues

As a final project for "Identity, Culture, and the Classroom," students are called upon to draft either a "plan of practice" or a statement of their "principles of practice," articulating how they envision themselves working to creating learning environments, both within their classrooms and in the larger school communities in which they will work, that support the positive development of students both as learners and as people. (These final projects have been in the form of papers for the past five years, but in 2010, I have also begun offering a presentation option.)



Students are required to draw on at least three bodies of literature for these final projects (e.g., research and/or theory about ethnicity, gender, and race), focusing on how these inform the ways that they conceive of their responsibilities as teachers.

Over the past five years, many students have chosen to cite the GLSEN and/or MYRBS data in their final projects and to argue for the rights of all students to a supportive learning environment. Other class participants have drawn on broader theories of identity to illustrate why focused work around LGBTQ issues will be an essential aspect of their practice as professional educators.<sup>4</sup> In the following excerpts, two students, one being certified to teach history and the other preparing to teach mathematics, discuss their plans to incorporate LGBTQ issues into their course curricula based on these principles:

Along with Black history and women's history, I feel it is especially important (due to the highly common neglect of this subject) to include the history of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people into my curriculum . . . Students of varying sexual orientations are often completely neglected from history courses, which may make them feel even more marginalized and outside the school community than they already feel. I plan on studying the Stonewall riots in my classroom and possibly using excerpts from a book titled *Gay New York* by George Chauncey (1994) to demonstrate the impact that gay culture and movements have had on our society. There is also a lot of gay history that dates back to ancient Greek and Roman times, which is often neglected as well. I want all of my students, regardless of race, sexual orientation, and gender, to understand that the group(s) they identify with did have a place in history, and they shouldn't ever feel like they are alone or unimportant.

From the [GLSEN] School Climate Survey, we see a marked difference between schools with and without inclusive curricula. In schools with no inclusive curriculum, 63.1% of respondents reported feeling unsafe because of their sexual orientation, as opposed to 44.8% of respondents from schools with an inclusive curriculum. Considering my subject area is math, how can I incorporate LGBTQ themes into the classroom? If we talk about Turing machines in computer science, we will undoubtedly discuss British mathematician Alan Turing, a gay man whose code breaking helped the British immeasurably in WWII. Also, in story problems, rather than using the nuclear definition of family, I can refer to the many different kinds of families there are in reality. This is an example of how I can make class relevant for students who are not part of a nuclear family.

Other students have discussed the need for teachers not only to create inclusive curricula but also to ensure that LGBTQ students are represented and supported in the larger school community:

As an educator, our responsibilities extend beyond simply teaching our discipline. In all areas, it is crucial that we are open to developing caring, trusting relationships with our students. As evidenced earlier in discussing the lack of staff support for LGBT students, it is abundantly clear that these relationships are missing . . . [I]t will be one of my top priorities that I am available to establish these relationships with my students. If the school does not already have a gay-straight student alliance (GSA), it would be my first priority to speak to the principal about beginning one. Students have identified that these organizations provide them a place where they can be themselves and develop supportive relationships (GLSEN, 2008).

It is not only in my role in a GSA or as an ally to the students that I will work on breaking down these harmful barriers. It is also my role as an educator that can reinforce positive experiences. History is a great discipline to work with in this context because there truly is great deal of flexibility. In some aspects, history is seen as the ability to recite names and dates, but in reality it is the repetition of themes and ideas that is what we strive to teach. We teach about the Holocaust with attention to the discrimination against Jews. We teach about slavery and the lasting legacy of racism. We teach about feminism and sexism across the board. It is my belief that the LGBT community should have an equal place within this narrative. When teaching about the Progressive Era, for example, I would include a parallel between the struggle for rights of African Americans, women, and Native Americans and the struggle the gay community faces today. In a civics class, the rights of the state as compared to federal powers could very easily be related to the gay marriage debate in the United States today.

Students in my classes who are LGBTQ themselves have sometimes focused on the role that they might play as role models and mentors, drawing both on research on the lack of representation of openly LGBTQ people in schools (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Sadowski, 2008b) and the value of mentoring for students in supporting positive development and orientation toward the future (Rhodes, Davis, Prescott, & Spencer, 2007). Additionally, because attempts to address LGBTQ issues in middle and high schools can often be met with opposition from administrators, school boards, and community members on religious and/or political grounds, I add a component to the “plan of practice/principles of practice” assignment, asking students to consider the potential obstacles that they might encounter when putting their ideas into practice in a real-world school context and when articulating how they might argue for them in the face of such opposition. As one student recently explained in her “plan of practice”:

Some parents or other groups may resist including LGBTQ issues in the curriculum. But if educators ignore certain students and certain issues



because celebrating their interests, needs, or backgrounds is too controversial or too difficult, then school would never become a place for social reform. Teachers can never help make their students well-rounded, caring people if they don't do everything in their power to demonstrate that they themselves are caring and compassionate enough to embrace the backgrounds of all their students, even if it is challenged by others.

### Some Caveats

I believe that the “plans of practice” and “principles of practice” that students articulate in their final papers for “Identity, Culture, and the Classroom” represent their sincere intentions to create inclusive classrooms, curricula, and school communities. I recognize, however, that the extent to which these intentions are realized once students are working in the real world of K-12 schooling, with its competing political agendas and where school boards and administrators often discourage teachers from raising controversial issues, quite likely varies from graduate to graduate. Based on admittedly anecdotal evidence, I can state that at least some teachers who completed the teacher education programs at Harvard and at Bard are indeed applying the principles that they articulated as graduate students. Since I have begun teaching about LGBTQ issues, I have heard from numerous students, sometimes years later, who were seeking additional advice on starting a gay-straight alliance or incorporating LGBTQ issues into their curricula.

In my future work, I intend to investigate the extent to which the framing of LGBTQ issues within the context of larger concepts such as core values, student rights, and identity development influences how inservice teachers implement and/or argue for positive change. Many schools today are driven by mission statements, which can often be seen prominently displayed in a hallway or enshrined in a glass case in the school lobby. These statements often refer to core values, student rights, and overarching goals (e.g., the school's mission to provide a safe and challenging learning environment, the right of all students to a high-quality education, the school's objective to develop the unique skills and talents of every learner). Educators empowered with strong arguments about the needs of LGBTQ students, framed within these larger ideals, are best prepared to articulate to their colleagues why the inclusion of LGBTQ issues, despite any possible controversy, is within their fundamental obligation as educators and is in keeping with the broader mission of any school community.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Data for the 2009 GLSEN School Climate Survey had not yet been released when this article was written.

<sup>2</sup> In this context, the author also makes sure to emphasize that many LGBTQ youth are resilient and thriving and that 70% of those surveyed for the MYRBS did not report a suicide attempt.

<sup>3</sup> For three years, the author also taught a six-week course at the Harvard Graduate School of Education titled “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in K-12 Education.” The author did not include the work of this course in this article because the students were a self-selected population made up not only of preservice teachers but also of various other students enrolled at Harvard.

<sup>4</sup> Quotations from student papers written for “Identity, Culture, and the Classroom” are cited with permission of the authors. Because students wrote these papers without the intent to publish, the author has omitted their names here.

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