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## Educational Equity is a Human Right

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# Educational Equity is a Human Right



By Susan Carson, GVSU Faculty, Photography By Susan Carson

**T**o what extent does the integration of character and moral education into teacher education have a long-term effect on the way teachers present themselves in their future classrooms, the type of environments they are able to maintain over time, and the degree to which their students make positive gains academically, socially, emotionally, and morally as a result of their teachers' actions and persona?" (Schwartz, 2008, p. 596)

"NCATE believed that the time had come for teacher

educators to pay attention not merely to knowledge and skill development and teaching and learning but also to the moral and ethical development of teachers." (Wise, 2006, p. 5)

As these quotes suggest, the interpretation of moral behavior and its application in the classroom has become a hot issue in the formation of teachers. Next let us accept educational equity is a human right. If so, then morally Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) individuals are part of our human family.

What ideas and practices will lead to a transformation in educational equity for LGBTQQ educators, students, and families?

Certain guiding questions can spark conversations and reflections. As educators, do we welcome unique families, honoring their needs and contributions? How can we bring this reality into our classrooms and into education so the uniqueness of each individual is honored and fear is

## **95% of school counseling services had few or no gay, lesbian, or bisexual resources.**

removed from our discussions? Are LGBTQQ educators empowered to act as role models for their students? Are today's education students—tomorrow's classroom teachers—actively supported as they learn how to teach social responsibility for all? How can we promote these practices? How can we create awareness regarding the fact that all social justice issues are related?

### **Shared Narratives**

As a mother of five, educator, and passionate advocate for social justice and harmony, these are some of the haunting questions I stumble over in my teaching and personal life. With arguments about same-sex marriage and civil rights for gay/lesbian partnerships heating up, it is truly time to freely acknowledge the importance of these questions in education.

Two personal experiences have supplied direction in my research about this topic. A unique set of circumstances guided the practice of inclusion in a middle school in a large district in Alaska. A cognitively impaired male student posed a safety concern for numerous students, particularly girls with long blonde hair. He was attracted to these individuals and, if given opportunity, would wrap his fingers around their hair and scream.

After numerous meetings, the parents of one student decided to request an individual education for their daughter "Dottie," who was becoming a frequent target for "Brad." Unable to make other accommodations to satisfy the safety concerns of her family and fearing lawsuits, the district decided to grant the request. Dottie was given individual

instruction throughout her entire school day; she did not attend classes with her peers.

The situation was compounded by the fact that Dottie's parents were a lesbian couple. Brad's family simply saw this as the "comeuppance" that was deserved due to Dottie's family lifestyle, therefore freeing Brad and themselves of any responsibility.

Have we created room in our educational system to address, accept, and welcome unique family compositions? It appears that a battlefield has been drawn politically and socially. Sexual orientation is the last remaining socially acceptable form of discrimination.

Fine Valley High School (a pseudonym that can represent any number of schools across America) was the home of Thomas and 2,549 other students. Although Thomas had a lot of friends, he chose to keep mostly to himself. But he participated in school events, often going to school dances alone. When Thomas came out to his friends at Fine Valley, he received support that buoyed him for his next challenge, his parents.

Thomas' parents classified themselves as belonging to the religious left. Thomas loved his parents and they loved him. Thomas also had a brother, a Marine serving in Iraq. When Thomas told his parents that he was gay, he was stunned to be met with anger, bitterness, and moral condemnation, which did not reflect who he thought his parents were. Shortly after his heart-rending sharing with his parents, they admitted Thomas to a psychiatric hospital, where he was put on antidepressant medication.

Tragically, Thomas overdosed on the very pills that were prescribed, at the bus stop in front of the high school, alone, and at night. A policeman found Thomas and rushed him to the hospital, where he was pronounced brain dead. His parents turned off his life support after 12 hours.

### **By the Numbers**

Several authors have documented that 10% of the U.S. population identifies as LGBT (Bagley & Tremblay, 1997;

Gibson, 1989; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948), and Lambda Legal's data show that 5-6% of students in the U.S. are LGBT (i.e., approximately 2.25-2.7 million students) (2001). The precise statistics do not matter in this instance. It is a given that numerous individuals in our population are LGBTQQ. If the estimated national average does hold up, and one in 10 individuals is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning, then Fine Valley High School has approximately 250 individuals that are LGBTQQ.

At the turn of the century, the U.S. census showed that same-sex couples lived in 93% of all counties in the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The 2010 census reported that same-sex couples headed 600,000 households, and 111,033 of these households had children under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau Summary Files, 2010). Whether nontraditional family structures are legally recognized or not, LGBTQQ students and families are in our classrooms.

The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey (Kosciw & Diaz, 2005) indicated that nine states and the District of Columbia had a passing grade of "C" or better in supporting and protecting LGBTQQ students and their allies. In 2009, the GLSEN National School Climate Survey reported that 28 states have some form of anti-bullying laws in place, with 15 states and the District of Columbia prohibiting harassment on the basis of sexual orientation (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2009).

GLSEN's 2009 National School Climate Survey consisted of 7,261 students age 13-21 representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia and 2,783 distinctive school districts. Of the 13.4% of the students that had an inclusive curriculum portraying LGBT people, their history, or events in any of their classes, 5.4% indicated that there were very positive portrayals, 6.3% indicated somewhat positive, 1.3% somewhat negative, and .4% very negative portrayals. Students who said that they had positive portrayals of LGBT people, history, or events in their classes were more likely to feel they belonged in the school than those who did not (42.1% vs. 63.6%). Less than one-fifth (17.7%) of students with an inclusive LGBT

curriculum missed school in the reported month compared to 31.6% of all other students (Kosciw et al., 2009).

GLSEN'S 2011 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2011) found similar results stating that schools with inclusive curriculums boost the overall sense of belonging and increase positive school climate.

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) National Schools Assessment (Thompson, 2005) specifically evaluated the education system's response to the presence and needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. PFLAG measured the existence and implementation of inclusive anti-harassment policies and resources to support the LGBT population. Most of the respondents were educators. While the assessment indicated a growing awareness of LGBT safe schools issues, results also showed critical deficiencies in support for LGBT youth. According to Thompson (2005), some important findings included the following:

- 95% of school counseling services had few or no gay, lesbian, or bisexual resources.
- 99% of school counseling services had few or no transgender resources.
- 70% had no training for educators/staff on how to stop LGBT bullying.
- 92% had no training for students on how to stop LGBT bullying.
- 84% had few or no resources for parents about LGBT issues.
- 59% did not include gay, lesbian, or bisexual students in their harassment/non-discrimination policies.
- 75% did not include gender identity/expression in their harassment/non-discrimination policies.

## Our Responsibilities

Wisconsin Education Association Council President Stan Johnson emphasizes the importance and availability of educational role models in students' lives (Hetzner, 2003). The Executive Director of Clark County Education Association in Nevada, John Jasonsek, believes that children

need to be able to connect and relate with their teachers and that the education profession needs to address the creation of role models (Bach, 2004). Wang, Brinkworth, and Eccles (2013) have discussed the importance of affirming student-teacher relationships as security for positive psychological and behavioral development. Both gay and straight students benefit from having role models such as openly gay teachers, coaches, and administrators. Straight students are offered an alternative to stereotypes and given opportunities to highlight their gifts and talents—for example young men who are artistic and young women who take leadership roles (DiversityRoleModels, 2013).

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in the curriculum (McFarland, 2001; Varjas et al., 2007; Woodiel, Angermeier-Howard, & Hobson, 2003) and staff development related to LGBTQQ issues and ethical responsibilities (Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993; Jeltova & Fish, 2005).

Academically, there still exists an unease in openly acknowledging our sexual orientation. Perhaps it is in the common use of the language putting academic and lesbian in the same context (Talburtt, 2000). Often our children are at the heart of this disequilibrium—as evidenced by issues of identity, self-confidence, and expression—straddling their positions as mandatory participants in education and members of families with different compositions.

There are several curricula available that address and support equity. *Take it Back: A Manual for Fighting Slurs on Campus* is one such publication by the Gay-Straight Alliance Network (2003). Other resources are a click away, with their own lists of national organizations and thorough citing of classroom support materials. (See sidebar.)

The implications for policy are clear; all students need role models. Education needs to become inclusive of LGBTQQ educators, students, and families. In a time

when the nation is struggling with acceptance of gay- and lesbian-led families, education needs to lead the way. Educational policy needs to embrace acceptance and put it into practice.

So where does the thread unravel? Where do we begin to address the issues? The work is to create partnerships with the education community, which includes teachers, students, and families. Multiple perspectives around LGBTQQ issues in education need to be heard respectfully while also addressing values, moral educational development, equity, inclusion, and leadership concerns. These are human rights issues. When we address equity concerns in one area, we are opening the conversation to include all those who are minimized or marginalized. All social justice issues are related.

I teach about diversity and social and cultural foundations. When we address LGBTQQ concerns in my classroom, I hope that my students

feel supported as they struggle to come to grips with the social justice issues that will be part of their professional obligations. To me, working with pre-service teachers is an honor and privilege as well as a serious responsibility and civic obligation. Education is an ongoing process in the lives of our teachers and their students, not confined by the walls of our classrooms and buildings. The sexual preferences of individuals cross racial, religious, gender, economic, language, school, and community composition barriers. Our pre-service teachers are asked to experience educational illumination and shoulder leadership for change and growth within themselves first, and then with their students. I want my students to truly fight for equal educational opportunities for all students, to examine their preconceived notions and prejudices, to teach to the heart of every child, to include all families, to understand diversity as a lived reality, and to understand that “teaching is one of the noblest professions in the world” (Dalai Lama, 1999).

### Classroom Resources

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