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Out or in...? Which is it?: The Question of Coming Out in the Heteronormative and Homophobic World of Education

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) educators and students face a frightening world inside our school buildings. LGBT educators constantly face the potential for the life-threatening consequences of coming out in the classroom or the negative emotional and physical effects of remaining closeted. LGBT students and teachers report regular assaults and abuses due to their marginalized status in school. This paper examines the tensions which circulate around the issue of coming out for the LGBT school community. Furthermore, the topic of queer theory is explored along with the opportunities provided by such theory for the deconstruction of the existing heterosexist framework in our schools. The question of how this relates to the art educator is considered in the context of the unique opportunities afforded in the art room for today’s youth to consider issues of identity, differences, and community.

Keywords: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, LGBT, LGBTQ, queer theory, identity, sexuality, heteronormative, heterosexism, homophobia, LGBT educators, art education.

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“Ms. Johnson,” B exclaimed in her southern accent as she caught a glimpse of my wedding ring, “I didn’t know you was married!” My heart began to race. Wearing that ring was for me, I had thought, my way of not betraying myself because it reminded me daily of my commitment to someone else and to myself. After a long pause I blurted out, kind of happily, “I am!” But it was not over. B continued, “How come you never talk about Mr. Johnson?” I quickly replied, “Because there is no Mr. Johnson.” Now I was thinking, “What have I said? How am I supposed to be honest yet not come out now?” I continued, “Johnson is the name I was born with... I didn’t change my name for someone else.” She seemed reassured but then asked, “Okay then, well, how come you don’t talk about your huzbin [sic]?” Wondering if this was honest curiosity or a less benign inquisition of some sort, I stuck with her interrogation and replied, “Oh, B, you don’t want to hear about my boring grown-up life” as I patted her shoulder, making friendly contact in an effort to mitigate the damage done by my lack of dialogical transparency and emotional openness. For a moment I felt relief for being able to match wits with her (and a little queasy because I had been so evasive) and then she shot back, “Oh yes I do!”

This verbal exchange occurred in front of a class of 15 high school students at the start of a sculpture class. It was one of only a few instances where a student directly interrogated me on my marital status, while there have been countless times when my identity as a lesbian has been the unasked question lurking in a classroom discussion. It is the possibilities raised by these questions that terrify me and other lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) educators on a daily basis.

The Fears of LGBT Educators

Exposing one’s sexual identity to students can have serious negative effects on one’s teaching experience and one’s personal life. Among other problems, it can result in the neutralizing of the LGBT teacher’s classroom

authority (Potter, 1998). Even worse, the cost of coming out may include being fired. Yet the stress of remaining closeted and leading a double life is associated with many health concerns such as “regularly experience[ing] anxiety, headaches, stomach disorders, high blood pressure, depression, and in some cases death caused by career-related complications” (Yared, 1997, p. 1).

The American Bar Association highlighted the case of Gerry Crane in its publication entitled *Human Rights* (Yared, 1997). In 1993 Mr. Crane was hired to save the music program at the high school in Byron Center, Michigan. For two years he received excellent reviews and was considered one of the best teachers in the school. In the summer of 1995, word of Crane’s plans for a commitment ceremony with his partner spread to school officials, parents and students.

Mr. Crane endured daily harassment at the hands of the school board for the entire school year. The following summer, Crane came to an agreement with the board; in exchange for one year’s salary and health benefits, he would quit his job and not seek further employment in that school district. Five months later, Mr. Crane collapsed and died from what the coroner stated were the effects of stress on an otherwise

minor congenital heart condition.

Clearly the decision of whether or not to disclose one’s sexuality is a complicated one for an LGBT educator. There are cases where the decision to disclose has had negative effects and cases where self-disclosure was a positive action in the life of the LGBT teacher and his or her school (Jackson, 2004). The problem is these outcomes vary widely depending upon relatively unknowable circumstances, presenting the LGBT teacher with the painful and ongoing question of disclosure.

One might argue that teachers are not compelled to include details of their religious beliefs, political affiliations, and socio-economic status in classroom discussion (Branzburg, 1983). Homosexuality differs from these because “it carries the burden of an abundance of misinformation and the onus of the most damning type of deviance acknowledged by our society” (Branzburg, 1983, p.10). Because of this, the particular perspective informed by one’s homosexuality must be exposed in order to combat the perpetuation of false or inaccurate cultural rhetoric. Disclosure of one’s sexual orientation can be entirely relevant to both pedagogical and relational concerns in the classroom. Wright (1993) cited Thomas Gordon’s five traits in a good

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teacher-student relationship as openness or transparency, caring, interdependence, separateness to allow growth, and meeting mutual needs. Certainly, failing to disclose my identity as a lesbian created an obstacle to transparency while setting my students and me up for failure in having our needs met in a mutual way in the classroom. Secrets “isolate and distance us from others, leading to inauthenticity in relationships. Both radical educators (Freire, 1989) and feminist pedagogists (Noddings, 1991; Belenky, et al., 1990) emphasize the importance of [the teacher student relationship]” (Wright, 1993, p. 27).

If a student were to ask me if I can cook, I would like to say, “I don’t have to; my partner is a chef.” In any other social context, this would be my answer. In the classroom my response would most likely be, “A little.” Clearly much is lost for both the questioner and the respondent with this abbreviated response. Parts of my identity that have nothing to do with my sexual behavior become off-limits because the richer context for knowing me is lost to my students. In such an exchange, students may then perceive me as somewhat closed to personal interaction, while I am left feeling invisible and unworthy of knowing. These feel-

ings of invisibility and unworthiness among closeted LGBT educators are documented in several studies.

An LGBT person does not come out of the closet just once in his or her lifetime. Every day of our lives we are faced with multiple opportunities to confront our own internalized heterosexist and homophobic thinking. According to Lampela (2003), “For many teachers, wondering whether or not it is safe to come out is a daily dilemma” (p. 87). In simple social interactions, LGBT individuals are required to make on-the-spot decisions regarding self-disclosure which could greatly impact everything from how they are treated socially to their personal safety. Personal disclosures have become easier to maneuver as our society has had greater exposure to LGBT characters and personalities on television and in film (Lampela, 2001). Nonetheless individuals find that, “handling this is a constant exercise in personal and social negotiation. It’s easy to get wrong” (Stanley, 2007, p. 6).

Now that our nation’s military establishment ended the policy of *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell*, the final frontier for LGBT equality may be our education system. As recently as the 2010 midterm election campaign season, Tea Party-backed Senator Jim DeMint [R-SC] restated

his belief that openly gay people and sexually-active unmarried women should not be allowed to teach children in schools (Erbenraut, 2010). Erbenraut (2010) stated that the education system is viewed by many advocates as one of the most conservative fields in the country. It is easy to see his point when we consider DeMint's comments and other current events. Recently, a young student teacher, Seth Stambaugh, was removed from his elementary teaching placement in Oregon because when a student asked if he was married, he alluded to being gay and not being allowed to legally marry (Kathryn B., 2010). In 2010 in Washington, D.C., a parent filed a complaint alleging that Margaret Hemenway stole her child's innocence because Hemenway, the child's first-grade teacher, told her class that she was getting married to another woman (Erbenraut, 2010).

Cosier and Sanders (2007) referred to the current challenges facing LGBT educators (and other LGBT people) as a culture war. Lesbian artist and art educator, Hammond (2003), labeled the educational environment as the front line of this current culture war. Hammond blended the notion of culture war with the nonviolent martial art of aikido, thus transmuting the notion of war into a more

spiritual format. It is, nonetheless, important to note the place in which this issue exists in our society, a place of deep and historically violent conflict. The knowledge of this pervades the existence of LGBT educators (and non-educators) because of threats directed at us by those who do not approve of our existence. In our socially constructed heteronormative culture, "heterosexuality is the uninterrogated norm" (Valocchi, 2005, p. 752).

Everyone is assumed to be straight unless proven lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

School administrators rely on this construction of assumption in their efforts to minimize the possibility of an LGBT teacher (or student) upsetting someone, somewhere, in the educational system. LGBT educators often choose to remain closeted, not revealing their sexual orientation to their administrators and colleagues. If they do choose to reveal their true identity to a principal, for example, they are often met with a plea to remain closeted to their students. Khayatt (1992) asserted that teachers are hired in conformity with an assumed standard. They are expected to reflect the state's sanctioned model

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of behavior while embodying the dominant values of the society (and specifically the school board and administrator) that employ them.

I did not have to accept the job of temporary art teacher at my alma mater; I did it to help the school. After 25 years of being openly lesbian, I felt I could not put myself into a position to be closeted, even for a few months, but I thought it would be great fun to go back to my high school to teach art. With the supply and demand model working to my advantage (they needed an art teacher and I could supply them with one), I felt a reasonable amount of control in the situation. So in my interview with the principal, we talked openly about my being a lesbian and a Buddhist.

Kissen (1996), in her book, *The Last Closet: The Real Lives of Lesbian and Gay Teachers*, claimed that homophobia among students originates among the adults in power (teachers, parents, and principals) (Potter, 1996). In this case, and oftentimes, a more tolerant principal readily abdicates power to the parent population in order to spare him or herself the stress of a possible conflict, leaving the LGBT educator to navigate a lower, more personal and constant level of conflict alone (Sanlo, 1999).

In my conversation with the

principal, I was forewarned and any problems I might have would be of my own making, and most likely, in need of my own solutions. The decision was mine to make, and I made it with all the zeal and enthusiasm of any naturally born agitator who every now and again enjoys challenging the status quo. How could I not take this opportunity to challenge a status quo where our laws “facilitate and nurture an educational system where schools are able to use tax money [or in this case government voucher money] to speak about respect while modeling bigotry” (Yared, 1997, p. 4)?

*Truthfully,
there was a lot
at stake for me – and on a
very personal level.*

Here was an opportunity to gain the acceptance by one of my earliest social groups in an important and formative historical place. I had long ago left behind a lot of people and places of my assumed straight youth for fear of rejection. The heterosexual framework of high school left little safety for this lesbian adult to return to as a means for connection. Formal education is permeated by a “rhetorical compulsoriness of heterosexuality” (McKenzie-Bassant, 2007, p. 55) that perpetuates

an insidious heterosexist paradigm, which serves to alienate those who do not fall within its boundaries. Finally, I felt confident enough to take my place in my own history in spite of decades of feeling alienated.

Challenging the Status Quo

Over the past century, our society has perpetuated an intensely hostile environment for gays and lesbians and, in particular, for gay and lesbian educators. LGBT people have been demonized and characterized as predatory toward the young by the predominantly heterosexist society (Potter, 1998). These false allegations continue today despite the abundance of evidence pointing out that the majority of sex offenders of children are heterosexual males (Khayatt, 1992). Homophobic elements of society continue to insist that LGBT people are unfit to be around children. This is not a new strategy. In fact, there is historical precedence for the creation of such damning lies. For centuries, dominant groups have used the “they’re after your kids” (Jennings, 1994, p. 13) myth to gain power over and marginalize a subordinate social group. In nineteenth-century Russia, the fictional claim was Jews were out to use the blood of Christian children in the Passover Seder; in early twentieth-century America

the justification for lynching 1200 black men over a 40-year span was to protect the purity of young white girls (Jennings, 1994). In addition to the contrived fear campaign that warns that LGBT teachers will molest our young people, a more frightening possibility for homophobes is that the LGBT educator may provide a positive role model for our students, thus legitimizing homosexuality as an option for young people (Khayatt, 1992).

But heterosexual teachers do not tell their students about their sex lives. Heterosexual teachers inform their students of *their* sex lives whenever they mention the existence of their spouses, their boyfriends or girlfriends, or any children they might have, when they wear their wedding rings, when they display photos of spouses on their desks or anywhere in their classroom, or when they bring their spouses or dates to school functions (Pobo, 1999). These images and symbols “suggest that sexuality in America is everybody’s business [and] that institutionalized heterosexuality constantly makes an issue of sexuality” (Pobo, 1999, p. 2).

LGBT educators are not seeking to discuss intimate sexual activity with our students (Wright, 1993). We just want the same opportunities as our heterosexual col-

leagues for expressing the fullness of our human experience with our students, and that experience includes relationships and identities. "Coming out is not a discussion of intimate sexual details, it is a discussion of identity" (Wright, 1993, p. 27), and identity is constructed by numerous beliefs about oneself. Branzburg spoke to this when she asserted, "I know that every part of my existence, the way I live my life and see my possibilities, the way I think of and treat others, and the way they think of and treat me, are informed by my lesbianism" (Branzburg, 1983, p. 10).

Recent work in queer theory has illuminated the notion of a heteronormative society by deconstructing the false sexual binaries of masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual. Queer theory points out that these binaries are indeed ideological constructs rather than naturally occurring phenomena (Valocchi, 2005).

Transforming the Dialogue: Art Educators Can Help

Are teachers who claim that sexual orientation identity has nothing to do with art education perpetuating a system

that leads youth to escapism, withdrawal, and suicide?

(Keifer-Boyd, 2003, p. 15)

It is critical that all educators, and particularly art educators, embrace the notion of solving the crises created by heterosexism and homophobia. Gude (2003) stated that good teachers and good curricula encourage students to "investigate questions relating visual and social phenomena. Good art projects will encourage the reconsideration of our notions of 'natural' or 'normal'" (p. 75). Because "art makes the strange familiar and the familiar strange" (Hammond, 2003, p. 109), art educators are uniquely positioned to move students out of established and outdated modes of thinking, most often handed down from their parents, and into new ways of considering the world.

Teachers in mainstream educational environments may or may not be able to enact curricula based solely on acceptance of gays and lesbians. However, curricula that embrace LGBT acceptance is fundamental to loosening the grip of heteronormativity and homophobia on our society and decreasing incidents of bullying and other symptoms of homophobia. The art room holds some of the most promising opportunities for creating this change.

For several years I have taught a project based on Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*. Over the course of several weeks, high school students participated in many activities based on *tikkun olam* (the translation from Hebrew is roughly "to repair the world"), the Jewish concept behind much of Chicago's work. We began by talking about discrimination, and students then wrote essays on their personal experiences on the receiving side of prejudice. We explored our own biases by listing groups we knew to be marginalized in some way, and candidly considered our own comfort levels with these groups, thus recognizing some of the irrational aspects of bigotry. The project culminated in a school-wide installation exhibit of ceramic plates and canvas runners created by students to honor individuals who are or were part of marginalized groups and work(ed) to improve the social standing of their groups. The effects of this work were not limited to the students in the class, but a learning opportunity was also created for members of the greater school community.

Recently I led an art workshop for teenagers called "Me and the World" in which a group of teens explored the issue of identity and how, through increased self-awareness, they may find their place in

creating a healthier, happier world. What ensued was a week of deep learning for both the students and me. On the first day, half of the students shared with the group that they either identify as gay or lesbian or have significant LGBT family members, including a pair of twins with two moms. Other students shared how they are beginning to question the anti-gay dogma of their religious upbringing. All of the students expressed a need to explore the issue of sexuality as it relates to identity. While the curriculum structure was already set, the experiences of these students guided the content that followed throughout the rest of the weeklong workshop.

The program began with a presentation entitled "Are You Different?" based on Andy Warhol's silkscreen image "Are You Different?" of 1985-86. A discussion about difference, identity and self-acceptance followed the presentation. Students then created "freak flags" in celebration of their individuality. Next, students viewed artworks that utilize words by artists such as Barbara Kruger, Glenn Ligon, and Shirin Neshat and created self-portraits using words as the central meaning-making structure.

Once students had a meaningful grounding in their own identity, they were each assigned the task of mak-

ing a self-portrait/superhero trading card in which they developed their personal strengths into world-changing attributes and considered their perceived weaknesses similar to Superman's kryptonite problem.

The culmination of the week took place when students came together in groups to create large artworks with either the intention to illustrate the world as a better place or to create imagery that would persuade viewers to join their cause for the creation of a better world.

Conclusion

Teens can be sophisticated in terms of awareness of symbols and their meanings.

Guiding teens to combine symbols, language and observational imagery in artwork that explores and expresses their individuality is exactly what many of them craved: an opportunity to speak and be heard in a world that otherwise ignores them.

An art curriculum designed to encourage acceptance of LGBT people includes opportunities for students to discuss their feelings in talking circles in a safe and authentic manner. The teacher must make certain that he or she is well-grounded in both the LGBT

educational literature as well as in his or her own personal reflections and beliefs on this issue. Each teacher should always understand that he or she has at least one lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) student in the classroom. Making sure that our words and actions as educators are not damaging to that student is essential in creating a safe art room.

These are the types of activities art educators can use to present our students with opportunities to explore the complex world around them. "Art offers us a way to look at life experience, difference and similarity, and cultural communities. Most importantly, art creates a space where silence does not have to be tolerated any longer" (Bradshaw, 2003, p. 58). Our students will, as adults, shape their world. Our work as art educators provides us with the opportunity to help them learn ways in which they can develop a critical consciousness that will in turn help them become better citizens of that world (Bradshaw, 2003).

It is time that policy makers face the underlying homophobic causes of bullying. Once this is acknowledged, the next step must be for the public school system to go beyond their own version

of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* and begin to celebrate both LGBT faculty and students for the unique perspectives and experiences we can provide the greater school community. Not until LGBT people are embraced as part of what makes up a new, more expansive definition of normal, will our schools truly be safe for every student and every teacher. It is time to stop the terrors within our schools by developing the courage to use our voices – gay and straight, male and female, and everyone in between and beyond – to create a compassionate and productive environment encouraging a life of integrity for everyone.

Author's Note: Even with all this promise, I left my teaching position in the traditional K-12 system because I could not reconcile my sexual orientation identity with the insistence of administrators that I remain closeted. I left because I wanted to teach art in an environment of complete authenticity or not teach at all. In my effort to create a learning environment based on acceptance of all people, I founded a small non-profit art education center whose mission links social justice with intelligent art education.

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