

LGBT Oppression

Sandy Watson & Ted Miller

My Back Pages

Yes, my guard stood hard
when abstract threats
Too noble to neglect
Deceived me into thinking
I had something to protect
Good and bad, I define these terms
Quite clear, no doubt, somehow.
Ah, but I was so much older then,
I'm younger than that now.
(Bob Dylan, 1964)

*I kept myself to myself so I got the grief of
being bullied. I twice nearly killed myself
because of the bullying...I still get the
usual, "Hey puffer...what u doing still
alive?" And crap like that. (Gary, n.d.)*

*When I started to realize in 5th grade that
being gay wasn't accepted, and that most
people believed it wasn't real, I started my
hiding. (Cody, n.d.)*

*I want to come out of the closet but I'm too
scared. My whole school is filled with people
that just take the piss out of gays and I
wouldn't be able to stand it. (Dani, n.d.)*

There is no question that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) students are routinely verbally, emotionally, and physically bullied by their classmates

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in school contexts as the aforementioned statements from a gay student internet message board demonstrate (Meyer, 2008; Nansel et al., 2001; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 2001; Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002; U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, 2006).

Just how often LGBT students suffer abuse at the hands of their peers in schools varies across studies cited in the literature since the issue was first explored in the early 1990s. Human Rights Watch (2001) concluded that as many as two million U.S. students have been harassed by peers at school due to their sexual orientation, while the Gay Lesbian Straight Educational Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey (NSCS, 2005) results indicated that approximately 75% of students reported hearing anti-gay slurs used by their peers (such as "dyke" and "faggot") regularly in the school setting. In fact, the results indicated that approximately 90% of students frequently heard their peers utter the expressions "that's so gay" or "you're so gay" during the course of every school day.

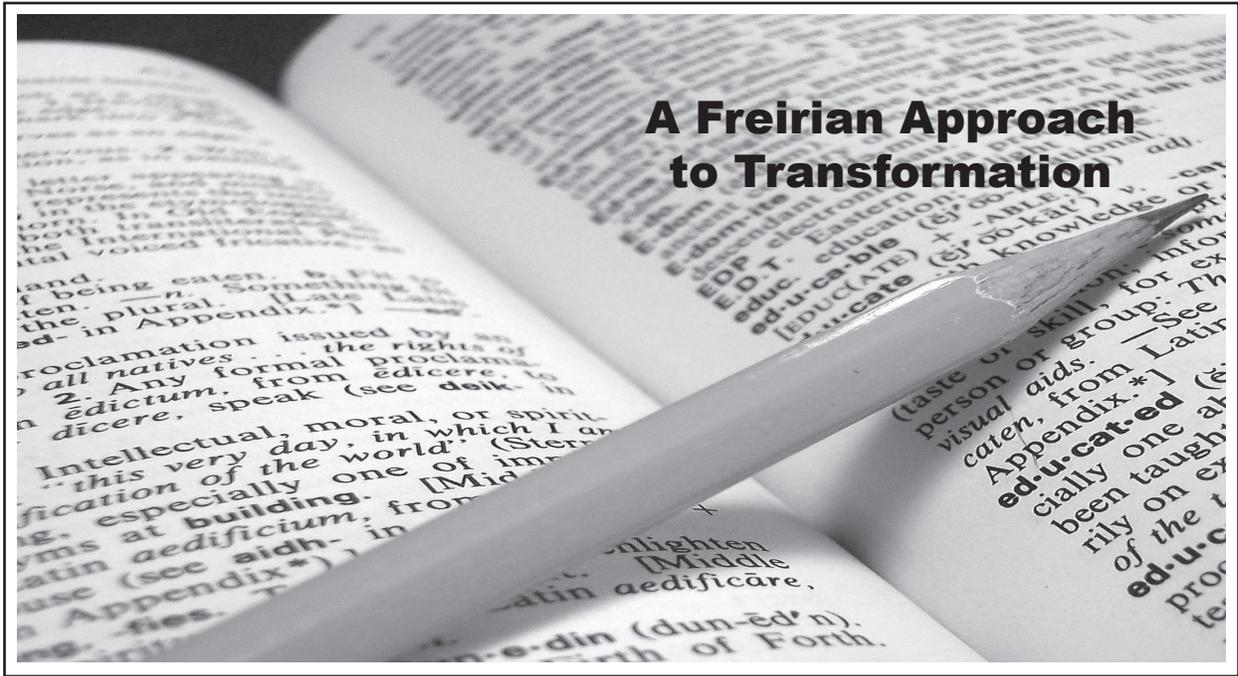
Further, over one-third of students reported that they had personally experienced verbal or gestural harassment at the hands of their school peers based on their sexual orientation and over 25% indicated experiencing physical abuse (as examples, getting spit on, being chased by other students in their cars in the school parking lot, being touched or grabbed in-

appropriately) by their classmates. More alarming, approximately 38% of students reported experiencing incidents of physical assault at school simply because of their sexual orientation (GLSEN NSCS, 2005). Physical assaults reported run the gamut from getting shoved into lockers, pushed down stairs, beat up, and even shot.

One of the prevailing reasons why LGBT students perceive their schools to be unsafe is that many of their teachers do not intervene when they (the teachers) witness peer-on-peer LGBT bullying and harassment, effectively allowing the berating and or violent behaviors to continue. One alarming report indicated, "...teachers fail to intervene in 97% of incidents involving anti-gay slurs at school" (Carter, 1997).

Recently, Kosciw and Diaz (2006) stated that 83% of LGBT students report that their teachers rarely, if ever, intervened when students made homophobic remarks. Teachers who turn a deaf ear to anti-LGBT harassment directed toward one student by another, who don't take corrective action when LGBT students report peers' acts of violence inflicted upon them, and who don't intervene when they witness acts of violence against LGBT students are complicit in their silence.

These actions from authority sanction the harassers dehumanizing treatment of LGBT peers and convey that the behaviors are not only acceptable, but welcome (Buston & Hart, 2001; Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1997; Kosciw & Cullen, 2001). Shor and Freire (1987) stated:



A Freirian Approach to Transformation

The ideology of the ‘neutral’ teacher fits in, then, with support for the status quo, because society itself is not benign. Consciousness is not a blank page; school and society are not neutral fields of social equals. Not acknowledging or not challenging inequality in society is to cooperate in hiding reality, hiding conditions that would weaken dominate ideology. The teacher who pretends that reality is not problematic thus reduces the students’ own power to perceive and to act on social issues. An opaque reality diempowers people, by holding a screen in front of what they need to see to begin transformation. ‘Neutral’ teaching is another name for an opaque curriculum, and an opaque curriculum is another name for a domesticating education. (p. 174)

According to Meyer (2008) many studies (Buston & Hart, 2001; California Safe Schools Coalition, 2004; Chambers, van Loon, & Tincknell, 2004; GLSEN and Harris Interactive 2005; Kosciw & Cullen, 2001; Peters, 2003; Renold, 2000; Wilson, Griffin & Wren, 2005), have shown that homophobic harassment has become “...accepted parts of school culture where faculty and staff rarely or never intervene” (p. 555). This has happened despite the fact that in 2003 a federal appeals court ruled that schools can be held liable when they do not intervene in the harassment of LGBT students (*Flores v Morgan Hill Unified School District*, 2003).

When peer-on-peer verbal and gestural anti-LGBT harassment is allowed to continue because teachers and administrators choose not to intervene, the chances of such abuse escalating into physical harass-

ment and assault increases dramatically (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Paulo Freire stated, “Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.”

Understanding the (Mis)Behavior

To understand why LGBT harassment and abuse is so prevalent one must explore the way one thinks about sexuality and how the societal norms regarding sexuality came about. Gender scholars such as queer theorists posit “...it is the hegemony of heteronormative patriarchy that constructs dominant notions of sex, gender, and sexual orientation in very oppressive ways” (Meyer, 2008, p. 556). What light to cast an examination of the phenomenon in? Foucault (1978) stated that when one way of being is cast as “normal,” it becomes privileged and legitimized, and all other ways of being default to “deviance” and “deviance” is often perceived as taboo, other, abnormal, unacceptable, and/or pathological.

Queer theory proclaims that heterosexuality is socially constructed as the prevalent, natural sexual orientation and thus does not call attention to itself, allowing it to become invisible and unquestionable (Robinson & Ferjola, 2008). Heteronormativity is an institution that maintains the status quo and “...keeps people in their places” (Blackburn & Smith, 2010). Atkinson and DePalma (2008) describe it as a “...tautology that explains

things must be this way because that’s the way they are” (p. 27). Rich (1980) casts the heteronormative institution as oppressive, and likens it to classism and racism.

When one way of existence is accepted as natural and normal (in this case heteronormativity), then, unless evidence exists or statements are made to indicate otherwise, all people are generally thought to exist within those constructs of heteronormativity. Thus, in keeping with queer theory, and Foucault’s thoughts on deviance in the school setting, students who are perceived as existing within the “normalcy” of heterosexuality are invisible; they are not harassed, abused, or assaulted by teachers or peers for being heterosexual. Openly LGBT students however, (and those perceived to be so, correctly or not) because they are not sheltered within the invisible safety net of heteronormativity, are subject to identification as deviants, resulting in an increased potential for harassment, abuse, and or assault by their peers and teachers (Rich, 1980).

It is really no surprise, therefore, why so many teachers fail to intervene when LGBT students suffer harassment and abuse at the hands of their peers and why many teachers even participate in such harassment because the very institutions who employ teachers serve to “...enforce the institution of heteronormativity” (Blackburn & Smith, 2010). From as early as the pre-kindergarten years, students are subject to a variety of routines, procedures, curricula, and pedagogy that enforce heteronormativity to include gender segre-

gation, gender role enforcement, exposure to literature in which heterosexuality is centrally positioned, and the heteronormative performances of school faculty, administration and staff displayed as models to be emulated (Blackburn & Smith, 2010).

Further evidence of the heteronormativity of schools was revealed by Bower and Klecka (2009), who conducted a study (from a queer theory perspective) in which they explored the social norms possessed by teachers in the context of sexuality. Two of their key findings were that teachers generally “...operate within heteronormative frameworks” and the most dominant teacher norm was “...that educators do not contradict personal, moral, or religious beliefs of families” (p. 367). These results are not surprising since most schools operate in a heteronormative system within a heteronormative society (Browne, Browne, & Lim, 2007).

Thus, educators have quite a task set before them: the dismantling of heteronormative frames via the utilization of anti-oppressive practices and pedagogies (Goldstein, Russell, & Daley, 2007; Grace & Wells, 2007; Kumashiro, 2002) so that oppression due to sexual orientation can no longer take place.

A Freirean Approach toward Reformatory Dialogue

Clearly, our schools are in the midst of a crisis of dehumanization when anti-LGBT harassment and abuse occurs with such frequency and at such degree that the victims become “... so oppressed by dehumanizing social structures and conditions that they succumb to a sense of fatalism” (McInerney, 2009, p. 26). Paulo Freire’s passion for social justice and his philosophies regarding oppression are sources of hope for many who witness or experience dehumanization. And although Freire was addressing oppression in a mostly socioeconomic context in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), we can apply his liberatory strategies in the context of the tragedy that is anti-LGBT harassment, abuse, and assault in our nation’s schools.

Freire (1970) posited that dehumanization “...is the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed” (p. 26). He further stated:

Being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both.

This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape, by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. (p. 26)

It is important to note that not all LGBT youth feel oppressed; in fact, Morris (2005) posits that much LGBT (now collectively known as queer) thinking and activism has made a shift to “parody, acting out, acting up, rude, and ludic performance” (p. 10). But for those LGBT youth who do feel oppressed, liberation could come from a Freirean perspective.

Freire (1970) indicated that the first steps toward liberation must be made by the oppressed and their authentic allies because it is only the oppressed who truly understand what it is like to exist in an oppressive society, and it is only the oppressed who understand the absolute necessity for liberation. Freire cautioned, however, against attempts to weaken the oppressors’ power. In such instances what results is false generosity or false charity, which serves to “...constrain the fearful and subdued, the ‘rejects of life,’ to extend their trembling hands” (p. 27). Oppressors will go to great measures to maintain injustice, even perpetuating it themselves so that they can continue as powerful “generosity” givers.

It is only when the oppressors relinquish their charity work and instead work tirelessly together with the oppressed in a true partnership toward a mission to liberate that authentic transformation takes place. Freire (1970) also warned that this working partnership between oppressed and oppressor is only successful when initiated by the oppressed and their allies, and as the oppressed fight “...for the restoration of their humanity they will be attempting the restoration of true generosity” (p. 27). So not only do the oppressed initiate the conversation, they assume “...total responsibility for the struggle” (p. 50).

Unfortunately, at least in the beginning stages of the struggle, the oppressed, in their quest for liberation, themselves often become oppressors or “sub-oppressors.” According to Freire (1970), this movement from oppressed to oppressor occurs because the oppressed have operated under the guidelines of the oppressors for so long that they have often internalized the guidelines, causing the oppressed to become fearful of their own liberation. To fully liberate themselves the oppressed must reject the urge to adopt the guidelines of the oppressor, and

instead they must work to “...replace them with autonomy and responsibility” (p. 27). This is accomplished, according to Freire, by utilizing the pedagogy of the oppressed, beginning with its first stage, which requires the oppressed “...unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation” (p. 36).

A Dialogical Meeting

Therefore, applying the first stage of Freire’s (1970) pedagogy to the problem of oppression of LGBT youth must involve a request by the oppressed (LGBT students)—because for success, the oppressed must initiate the need for action—for an assembly of LGBT youth, their peers, and teachers for a dialogue about the issue. There is some preparatory foundational cognition required of the oppressed though before the dialogue can commence.

They must first recognize that, through their oppression, they “...have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things;” they cannot effectively “...enter into the struggle” without this acknowledgement (p. 50). Once the oppressed acknowledge their existence as objects rather than subjects and realize that they have been dehumanized, they must then commit to taking complete responsibility for the forthcoming struggle and enter into the struggle as humans for their own humanization (Freire, 1970).

Once a dialogical meeting is called, and stakeholders are present, the setting should ideally be arranged in such a way that oppressed and oppressors face one another at the same physical level (preferably in a circular fashion) so that the oppressed become subjects rather than objects in the environment and to facilitate looking inward together toward a shared concentration.

Identifying and Describing the Problem

Next, the oppressed must open a dialogue by identifying and describing the problem for reflection. Ideally, a few LGBT student leaders (Freire’s revolutionaries) would begin the discussion by naming the problem (revealing it) and by personalizing it for the oppressors and sharing their individual experiences of harassment, discrimination, and abuse, and including how those experiences have influenced their self-esteem, educational progress, feelings of safety at school, health and well-being, world-views, consciousness, and ethics.

Freire (1970) stated:

It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation

that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection; only then will it be a praxis. (p. 47)

Oppressed individuals must include authentic reflection as they describe their experiences (objects), for as Freire states, "...to speak a true word is to transform the world" (p. 87) by naming the reality (reflection) and altering it (action). It is also critical that the language of the oppressed incorporate humility, faith in humanization, equality, hope, love for the world, and critical thinking. This humanization of the dialogue allows for a horizontal (equitable) relationship between oppressed and oppressors—without humanization the dialogue becomes hierarchical (vertical and oppressive). The oppressed should also encourage oppressors to examine and share their own consciousness, "...their behavior, their view of the world, and their ethics" (p. 37), and encourage questions, commentary and critical object engagement (Freire, 1970). This Freirean methodology provides an opportunity for both oppressors and the oppressed to become empowered to experience transformative knowledge.

Using a Mediator

An interesting addition to consider for Freire's methodology toward critical consciousness is the utilization of a mediator (one who acts at the middle level of an intervention), as is often used in victim offender mediation programs. Schehr (2000) posited that such mediators (completely objective non-stakeholders) should not remain neutral parties, but rather should enter into the dialogue by creating spaces for the deconstruction and reconstruction of harm in the context of schools as cultural institutions while empowering the oppressed within the dialogue.

Freire (1985), referred to this as conscientization, a process whereby the oppressed "...achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality" (p. 93). Thus, mediators in this context would be known as transformative mediators, whose goal would be to empower both parties. Bush and Folger (1994) identify two means by which transformative mediators might empower both oppressed and oppressors: (1) listening during the dialogue for opportunities for those involved to make decisions that will empower them in the context of the conflict, and (2) encouraging and supporting stakeholders in the careful

deliberation of any options available for resolution.

According to Freire (1970), "In the second stage, in which the reality of the oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation" (p. 36). At this point, the oppressed and oppressors enter into a co-intentional relationship where both are subjects working together to "...re-create knowledge" and in the process "...discover themselves as its permanent re-creators" (p. 51).

How Schools are Responding

Many school systems have finally recognized that the bullying of LGBT students is unacceptable and have begun to implement various programs and strategies to counteract such behavior. Unfortunately, many of these strategies are isolationistic, oppositional to what we know about the hidden curriculum, non-transformational, and counteract Freire's work.

For example, in response to the bullying of LGBT students, some districts have opted to open schools that primarily serve LGBT students who have been identified as high risk for dropping out of the educational system. One such initiative is the Harvey Milk School, supported by the Hetrick-Martin Institute, a gay-rights youth advocacy organization, that opened in 1985 in New York City. The school's mission is to "...establish and promote a community of successful, independent learners by creating a safe educational environment for all young people" (as cited in Bethard, R., 2002, p. 419). In addition, in Milwaukee in 2004, a gay-friendly school called Alliance opened its doors.

The removal of LGBT youth from traditional school settings does help ensure their safety, but the action is itself heteronormative, and classifies these individuals as so radically different from their heterosexual peers, that they must be schooled in a completely different setting. It does not address the behavior of the harassers; it removes the "cultural space for possibility" (Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, & Gair, 2001, p. 15) in which the possibility for transformational dialogue could occur. Sadly, the outcomes of these efforts are that the harassers' homophobia is reinforced.

Somewhat more hopeful, but still not in line with Freire's approach, is Project 10, a counseling and education program that addresses the needs of LGBT youth, that was tested in 1985 at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles in response to a gay student's decision to quit school due

to repeated harassment. Project 10 is an initiative that provides school staff training on LGBT youth issues, funds to purchase library materials related to LGBT concerns, assistance with nondiscrimination compliance, and various other services, none of which appear to encourage dialogue between LGBT youth and their heterosexual peers and teachers that might spur transformational change.

In addition, the literature is rife with many other recommendations to address LGBT mistreatment in the school setting (Jeltova & Fish, 2005; McFarland, 2001; Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Ronds, 2002; Winter, 2008). Graybill et. al. (2009) recommend:

First, educators should include LGBT issues in the curriculum to increase the visibility and accomplishments of the population. Second, advocates should provide staff development related to LGBT issues. Third, advocates should support the organization of a gay-straight alliance (GSA), or an after school student club, to provide a safe space for LGBT students and their heterosexual allies. Fourth, sexual orientation should be included in existing antidiscrimination policies. Fifth, the visibility of LGBT populations should be increased by displaying supportive posters and resource fliers around school, in addition to including LGBT-related media in school libraries. (p. 571)

Numerous other recommendations have been made, including (a) schools establishing LGBT Parent Affinity Groups, (b) planning and delivering events that serve to deconstruct heteronormativity (such as an event that celebrates all family types), (c) informing new hires of the expectation to support LGBT students and their families (Winter, 2008), (d) offering "safe spaces" where LGBT students can go for counseling and encouragement (Mayberry, 2006), (e) naming a particular school administrator to handle all anti-LGBT complaints, (f) establishing a student sexual orientation confidentiality policy of nondisclosure for all school workers, (g) providing specialized training related to issues specific to LGBT students for guidance and counseling staff, (h) developing recommended reading lists that include texts on gay issues, (i) having information available for LGBT students and their families regarding local resources and organizations that support or aid LGBT youth, (j) maintaining gender neutral dress codes, and (h) evaluating curricular materials for discrimination and stereotyping (Human Rights Watch, 2001). While all of these recommendations are steps in the right direction, and many of the recommended strategies will decrease

LGBT bullying, none serve to liberate the oppressed.

Summary

LGBT youth represent a population in schools at risk to bullying in and by the schools. Evidence does suggest that the practice is widespread and emanates from both peers and professional staff. We have examined some of the causes of maintenance structures for this current climate and forcefully argued for immediate change in policies and activities to protect students.

But going a step further, we conclude that true liberation and acceptance cannot be attained by these policies alone. Indeed, from a Freirean perspective, many common and apparently well intentioned practices actually support and extend the misbehaviors directed toward LGBT. But this is unnoticed as separation reduces surface conflict.

Perhaps we have seen this phenomenon before in schools and failed to take heed from the outcomes. In many ways the initial civil rights struggles associated with school integration followed similar paths in bullying and the reduction of full humanity. Only when integration in schools began to take hold was an actual dialogue across racial perspectives achieved.

In addition, the struggles of LGBT are not dissimilar from the struggle to educate special needs students with others. The current push for inclusion masks the decades of self contained classes and outright denial of services in public schools. There is no doubt special needs students suffered bullying and only with the advent of litigation and legislation has this been reduced as proximity with normal (general education) peers became the norm.

Progress in both of these instances followed closely the requirements described by Freire (1970). We find this abbreviated history of previous instances of bullying and harassment distressing, and yet, potentially comforting. It is certainly a distressing event because it seems difference promotes a negative response, including bullying and abuse, and seemingly we have difficulty learning from previous events. But both situations, the integration of students by race and full inclusion for special needs services, have been initiated and continue to evolve.

In many places integration, unquestioned acceptance, full acknowledgement of basic rights and privileges are the norm and, as we look forward, will certainly become the norm. Can it be otherwise for LGBT? We think not, and that is, we believe, a comforting precedent.

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