

# RESPONDING TO ISSUES OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY IN SCHOOL

Stewart Rudy  
*University of Pennsylvania*

## Introduction

It's hard not to notice how attitudes around sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) have changed over the past two decades. Comparing my time as a public school student to my time as a public school educator, it is clear that school systems are doing more to create an inclusive environment around SOGI than they once did. However, I question whether improvement in the school system has translated into improved experiences for students as they navigate issues of SOGI in the school environment. My reflections here are based on personal experience and are also informed by discussions with several colleagues at my most recent workplace, a high school in Philadelphia.

## Background

Adolescents' process of sexual development and discovery can be uncomfortable and even downright traumatic, particularly for LGBTQ youth, who are at higher risk of isolation, depression, suicide, and substance abuse than their heterosexual counterparts (Ciancotto & Cahill, 2012). So, when faced with issues of SOGI that threaten the comfort of individual students, or the school climate in general, practitioners must thoughtfully consider their response: respond too mildly, and permit an environment of intolerance; respond too harshly, and risk putting students' SOGI under a judgmental microscope. Through my own practice and inquiry, I have seen four schema guiding our responses—streams through which we intervene when faced with issues of SOGI in school: the legal, the academic, the emotive, and the sociological. Though none of these exist in isolation, examining each in turn provides insight into how our responses can impact students' experiences.

## Legal Responses

The legal stream posits that one of school's essential functions is to protect students' safety, dignity, and well-being. The legal framework starts with a Student Code of Conduct at the school level, and extends up to the Equal Protection Clause of the US Constitution. States play a crucial role by enumerating protected categories, which since 2000 have expanded to cover ten times as many students under enumerations of SOGI (Ciancotto & Cahill, 2012). Practitioners use the legal stream whenever they enforce rules and invoke disciplinary protocols, particularly around harassment of SOGI. While the legal stream is essential, and arguably one of the most significant ways that school responses to issues of SOGI have changed, it is unclear if laws and school policies directly improve student experiences, as they are mostly enforced reactively.

In my teaching, I have resorted to legal responses minimally, mostly by promoting students' right to feel safe, and occasionally by reporting behavior through official protocols. This may be because I came of age when legal responses were practically non-existent—my high school's 1995 Student Handbook did not mention SOGI as protected categories—or because I am skeptical of the efficacy of the legal response, as someone who was bullied about perceptions of my sexual orientation as a student. Occasionally, legal responses increase the negative attention experienced by victims, while also punishing, rather than educating, perpetrators who may be unaware of the impact of their actions. A colleague of mine reported a similar concern about punitive responses: "At first I try to talk to them cause sometimes people do things but they don't truly grasp how it makes someone else feel... If I try to write 'em up or suspend, it doesn't help," (HQ, personal communication, 12 April 2016).

Nonetheless, several colleagues emphasized the legal stream in our discussions, occasionally implying that the effectiveness of school rules and policies is exhaustive. One colleague, apparently dismissive of the need for any inquiry about student experiences around SOGI, stated, "It's kinda strange to ask about because people are treated the same across the board," (WN, personal communication, 13 April 2016). Such responses indicate a certain dependence on the legal stream to create a positive

climate around SOGI. However, as another colleague hinted, the improved legal measures may be about something else entirely: “Bully used to be defined as someone who is always looking to kick somebody’s ass. It becomes verbal bullying now because we all learned about verbal abuse... messing with somebody’s mind until the point where they lose it,” (QN, personal communication, 13 April 2016). Is it possible then that the legal apparatus results from growing concerns about mental health, and not from a responsibility to make school safe for navigating SOGI? If so, then there is little reason for practitioners to believe that legal responses alone can improve student experiences.

## **Academic Responses**

The academic stream is utilized when practitioners purposefully include SOGI-related issues in academic activities and instruction. While SOGI may be superficially covered by certain curricula, such as in school Health classes, there is no obligation for other subject teachers to discuss systemic issues around SOGI through literature, history, or current events. Therefore, teacher discretion plays a huge role in how SOGI is addressed through the academic stream.

As a middle-school English teacher, I did not proactively incorporate discussions of SOGI into classroom activities. While finding age-appropriate material was one challenge I faced, there were also risks with bringing these topics into class discussions, such as students responding with offensive outbursts, fits of laughter, or withdrawn discomfort. One colleague similarly observed that when SOGI comes up, “It can either be a small speed bump in the lesson or completely derail the class,” (HZ, personal communication, 15 April 2016). This can lead educators to avoid the topic altogether, as another colleague noted, “It’s a tough area for a teacher... Sometimes you almost want to leave it alone because it’s being left alone in the classroom,” (HQ, personal communication, 12 April 2016).

While I wasn’t proactive in including issues of SOGI in my lessons, I gladly facilitated discussions when the topic arose. Frequently in these instances, when I have prompted students to demonstrate maturity around issues of SOGI, they have handled the forthcoming discussions appropriately. At times, I was even impressed by their thoughtfulness. One colleague made a similar observation, referring to a class discussion on Caitlyn Jenner’s transition: “The kids handled that with a plumb. You might have not like some of the language they used. But in terms of the thought process, they thought a lot about it” (QN, personal communication, 13 April 2016).

## **Emotive Responses**

The emotive stream stems from a practitioner’s efforts to address students’ emotional needs. It is employed whenever one facilitates activities or discussions designed specifically to reflect upon and elicit emotional, rather than intellectual, responses. This frequently occurs outside of instructional time, and necessarily invokes the practitioners’ own emotions, as well as their relationships with the students involved. While the legal stream requires that schools guarantee some level of emotional safety, the emotive stream is unique in that it involves a school practitioner’s deliberate choice to engage, and confront, student emotions around SOGI.

The most important outcome for this stream is a student’s ability to find emotional support at school when faced with issues around SOGI. This was not always the case, as one colleague reminded me, “[Back then], even with the teachers, it was kinda like, ‘No, you stay in the closet,’” (OX, personal communication, 16 March 2016). Another confirmed that this had changed, noting that students can usually find a faculty member they trust when faced with issues of SOGI.

As someone who was bullied as a student, witnessing harassment around SOGI as a teacher evokes many emotions, and often compels me toward emotive responses, such as asking students privately about their feelings and engaging in group discussions on the emotional toll of such harassment. Consequently, I’ve had to confront whether these responses are more about my own emotions than the emotions of the students. Still, I believe students learn best when they connect emotionally to a topic, and several colleagues throughout my career have emphasized how practitioners’ emotional connections with students can be transformative. The emotive stream thereby allows students to float their feelings around SOGI through practitioners’ relationships with them, helping them to confront biases, locate empathy, and air grievances safely.

This stream may also be a strong way for creating greater acceptance. For example, even with a student that regularly expressed discomfort in their perceptions of my sexual orientation, I was able to engage in a conversation to help them confront the biases behind these perceptions and discomforts, and to ultimately build a stronger relationship with them. One colleague similarly

observed: "There are moments of acceptance and acknowledgement... because of a sort of 'Love Conquers All'-attitude or because of the talent/kindness of people who identify as LGBTQ," (HN, personal communication, 12 April 2016).

## **Sociological Responses**

The sociological stream, which often occurs in tandem with other responses, is based in schools' function as a site for socialization. Sociological responses can take various forms, which can be reactive, such as using restorative justice circles to address SOGI-related conflicts; proactive, as in the formation of Gay-Straight Alliances; or both, such as through explicit instruction, or assemblies, that address social norms around SOGI. Classroom educators are always engaging the sociological response since they are performing and operating in a social environment in which seemingly insignificant acts can have great influence. Thus, practitioners need to be acutely aware of, and responsive to, the social environment students establish. As one colleague noted: "There's been times when I've dealt with [SOGI] first... 'cause I see a dynamic that could make this tricky. So I just bring it to the forefront, not knowing the kids, which is kinda risky, (HQ, personal communication, 13 April 2016).

A key concern of the sociological stream is the establishment of social norms around SOGI, particularly with regard to language. Students frequently use terms like "faggot" and "dyke," which, according to one colleague, "they typically used and didn't know that they were offensive," (OX, personal communication, 16 March 2016). Such terms may be common among community or family members. Therefore, the sociological stream is often working to combat a separate set of norms that exist beyond the reach of school practitioners. Arguably though, the sociological stream most informs school climate, and thus, a student's ability to comfortably and safely navigate SOGI at school.

## **Toward Building Better Student Experiences**

One of the biggest challenges for creating a positive school climate around SOGI is understanding exactly what students experience, how the different response streams affect students, and what responses most help students navigate SOGI in a challenging environment. Researching student experiences and reflecting on our educational practices are necessary components of finding these answers, though they also come with all the risks and controversies associated with SOGI, and sex education more generally. However, I found that the research process itself confronts the preferred silence—two colleagues informed me that my inquiries forced them to reconsider how they were addressing SOGI with their students, and another added: "The more you talk about things of that nature, the better off for everyone concerned" (QN, personal communication, 13 April 2016).

Involving students in these discussions is key. Being proactive in addressing SOGI is much riskier than being reactive, as it willingly puts sex, and all of our discomforts around it, into the spotlight. However, students are navigating complex social-sexual circumstances and forming sexual identities with or without us. If we are satisfied only with reactive responses concerned with mitigating legal blowback, then we do little to prevent negative student experiences. If, on the other hand, our students see that we value their experiences enough to create spaces to discuss gender and sexuality, I believe they will surprise us with thoughtful and sensitive insights.

*Stewart Rudy is a master's student in the Penn Graduate School of Education's International Educational Development Program. Prior to his studies, he taught elementary and middle school and worked as a mental health counselor for middle and high school students in Hayward, California. He is a returned Peace Corps Volunteer, having served as an English teacher in rural Namibia from 2009-2011.*

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## **References:**

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