Locked in the Classroom: Teachers Coming Out to Students

Alicia Vann
St. John Fisher College

Follow this and additional works at: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur

Part of the Education Commons, and the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Recommended Citation

This document is posted at http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur/vol13/iss1/7 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

The use of the "S" word among students and teachers can become quite controversial. Sexuality is becoming a topic of open discussion, but also one of avoidance. The process of "coming out" about one's homosexuality is a long and hard progression. This is largely due to people assuming that heterosexuality is the sexual identity of those around them. Due to the assumption of heterosexuality, homosexuals have a harder time "coming out" to others. This course becomes harder for teachers than for other homosexuals, as teachers are seen as role models for many students and colleagues. Opposing forces have argued that gay and lesbian teachers will "recruit" students to follow a homosexual lifestyle. Some fear that if homosexual issues are dealt with in school, more students will pursue this way of life. These negative feelings towards homosexual teachers can be expressed by parents, co-workers, and students alike.
Locked in the Classroom Closet:
Teachers Coming Out to Students
Alicia Vann

The use of the "S" word among students and teachers can become quite controversial. Sexuality is becoming a topic of open discussion, but also one of avoidance. The process of "coming out" about one's homosexuality is a long and hard progression. This is largely due to people assuming that heterosexuality is the sexual identity of those around them. Due to the assumption of heterosexuality, homosexuals have a harder time "coming out" to others. This course becomes harder for teachers than for other homosexuals, as teachers are seen as role models for many students and colleagues. Opposing forces have argued that gay and lesbian teachers will "recruit" students to follow a homosexual lifestyle. Some fear that if homosexual issues are dealt with in school, more students will pursue this way of life. These negative feelings towards homosexual teachers can be expressed by parents, co-workers, and students alike.

Not only do homosexual teachers face opposition from peers, they also have to consider the different job and career complications involved with their "coming out" process. Because a heterosexual lifestyle has always been dominant in American society, the older generations have a seemingly harder time accepting non-heterosexual ways. Although non-heterosexual practices have always been around, they have not been as prominent as they are in the present-day American society. For these reasons, teachers who choose to be open about their homosexuality also have to deal with different issues that may arise from their schools' administration. The whole working atmosphere may be jeopardized for teachers as they become open about their homosexuality. However, despite this opposition, "coming out" is a beneficial experience for teachers who decide to venture out of the closet. The results affect the teaching styles and the students in a positive manner. Homosexual teachers, who have come out to their students, have found that it helps the teaching environment in a positive way because it allows for them to relate to their students and colleagues. Homosexual teachers that have come out to students are able to be more open and honest in the classroom, which impacts the learning atmosphere in a constructive way. Although a difficult process, teachers' opening up about their sexual identity is beneficial and affects teachers and students in a positive manner, despite opposition from parents and colleagues.

There are many people who are forced to hide their true identity in order to sustain relationships, family life, and a comfortable working environment. This especially holds true for homosexual school teachers. Homosexual teachers face a plethora of challenges when trying to be honest with colleagues and students about their sexual identity. One of the many challenges is dealing with an atmosphere that is not necessarily open to homosexuality. Homosexuality is an issue that is being dealt with more today than in the past. This is not to say that homosexuality was non-existent in the past. Homosexuality is just becoming more open, talked about, and dealt with in present times. Due to the dominance of heterosexuality in the past, the older generation may have a harder time dealing with the opening up of non-heterosexual people. In the past, homosexual couples have had to hide their relationships due to the lack of acceptance by peers. Slowly, more homosexual couples are deciding to "come out of the closet" about their relationships. The older generation has not completely accepted this lifestyle. For example, up "until 2004, same-sex couples couldn't wed anywhere in the country [(United States)]" (Vestal). Today, only six of the fifty states have legalized gay marriage (Vestal). The present-day "parent" generation is slowly becoming more accepting of the homosexual lifestyle as it becomes more prominent. This affects homosexual teachers who plan on opening up to colleagues because it is a tossup whether an administrator or co-worker is going to be accepting of their lifestyle. Depending on an administrator's outlook, this complicated choice can ultimately affect a teacher's wages and promotions. Not only that, the administrator may treat the co-worker in an unfair manner.

Homosexual teachers not only have to deal with these mistreatments when trying to come out to colleagues and students, but they also have to deal with the different stereotypes associated with these mistreatments. David E. Newton, an advocate for gay and lesbian rights, argues that, "the most popular argument[s] against allowing gay men to teach in schools [is]... that gay men will seek out
younger boys as sex partners" (199). This pedophilic stereotype can cause great conflict when seemingly gay men pursue an educational career. This not only encompasses sexual harassment of younger boys, but also recruiting younger boys into their way of life. James R. King, a professor of childhood education, is a homosexual teacher, who once had to deal with the conflicts involved with teaching younger students. King states that "gay men are especially troublesome because they are seen as pedophilic" (122). These men are also thought to be perverted and wrong-headed in their intent to teach youngsters (123). He continues to say that, "the combination of these largely inaccurate mappings between homosexuality, teaching, and gendered behavior have had disastrous effects on teachers" (123). To better deal with these pedophilic labels, King "constantly monitored [his] behavior around children" (123). As a gay teacher, he "was anxious about how other teachers, parents, and principals would interpret [his] interactions and relationships with [his] students" (123). King further states, "if I had been open about being gay, others would assume that being gay meant being sexual. Because I was aware that others believed that social contact with homosexuals was harmful to children, I monitored myself carefully" (123). Due to this stereotype, homosexual male teachers tend to "purposely call on girls more often than boys to avoid showing favoritism" (124). In order to keep from this label, King would be careful not to show preference for his boy students. Due to societal pressures, homosexual teachers must carefully examine their every move in order to avoid this stereotype.

Although this pedophilic label can be seen as a reason for homosexual males to avoid the pedagogical setting, the stereotype is faulty and not properly supported. Newton states that "there turns out to be no empirical evidence for believing that there is any connection between homosexual behavior and child molestation" (199). Further, Newton argues that "a recent review of all available research studies relating to this topic showed no evidence whatsoever to support fears that gay men are more likely than straight men to molest children... [and] most gay people, as with non-gays, prefer partners near their own age" (200). Further, "all studies of the problem show that the most important form of molestation with which we should be concerned is heterosexual rape" (200). Robert N. Rowe, author of a "Speaking Out" article in the journal The Clearing House, says that "homosexuals have been 'teachers' since the process of teaching first evolved and have displayed no greater proclivity for the sexual abuse of children than heterosexuals" (72). To put it simply, homosexual male teachers, even though they are seen as different from heterosexual male teachers, statistically have not harmed students any more than heterosexual teachers have.

Despite this statistical evidence, parents and students who are opposed to a non-heterosexual lifestyle can create conflict for homosexual teachers who are looking to come out of the closet. One of the most prominent reasons that parents are opposed to gay teachers is that parents do not want their children to be influenced by the teacher's homosexual lifestyle. Patricia White, a researcher of 'philosophy of education' states that a "fear is often expressed that if homosexuality is dealt with in school then school students may be influenced against their best interests to take up a homosexual lifestyle" (400). It is often believed that "proximity to homosexuals will influence the children's sexuality in some way" (King 124). Newton states that "it is apparently just assumed that 'everyone knows being gay is bad, so we should do everything we can to make sure kids don't become gay by seeing gay teachers'" (200). Many people in today's generation imply through their actions and beliefs, that there is something wrong with being gay; however the implication that being gay is 'wrong' and 'contagious' is inaccurate. The theory that proximity causes homosexuality can be proved faulty. One logical flaw to this theory is that by saying that gay people should not be role models for students, one is saying that there is actually something fundamentally wrong with homosexuals (Newton 200). In the past, homosexuality was seen as a mental illness that could be treated. However, homosexuality should no longer be treated as a mental disorder or illness because it is not something that can be "cured". Newton states, "the removal of homosexuality from its list of mental disorders by the American Psychiatric Association and later by the American Psychological Association in the mid-1970s would lead us to believe that those professional organizations do not regard homosexuality as a sickness or disease" (198). Recent studies have actually shown that gay people may be healthier...
psychologically compared to heterosexuals (199). Newton explains:

This should hardly be surprising to those who are familiar with the literature on the sociology and psychology of minority and oppressed peoples. Members of such groups often must, simply for survival, develop certain kinds of coping behaviors and ego-strengths not required of members of the majority group. (199)

Homosexuals must develop these different coping mechanisms in order to deal with the ostracism from the majority group. In any case, parents cannot argue that there is anything truly psychologically wrong with homosexual teachers as a group.

Aside from this argument, a parent may still argue that being in the proximity of homosexual teachers may influence their child to follow in the homosexual lifestyle. This idea affects students in a negative manner in a number of ways. Parents believe that if a student were influenced to take up a homosexual way of life, the student may feel discomfort when trying to fit in to the school setting. Scholars Todd A. Savage and Debra A. Harley explain that “efforts to [try] to fit in to the majority culture of the school can lead to difficulty with concentration and decreased participation in the classroom and extracurricular activities” (5). Heterosexuality appears to be the majority culture found in high schools in present-day society. Furthermore, a student battling with homosexual feelings may have more anxiety due to their conflicted sexual identity than a heterosexual student due to the lack of social acceptance of homosexuality. Savage and Harley state that “lack of acceptance by their peers put [homosexual] youth at great risk for a variety of social, emotional, physical, and educational hardships” (5). They further explain that “heterosexism often appears to [be permanent in] school communities, permitting them to remain a zone of great vulnerability for the larger [gay] community” (2). These feelings of ostracism held by homosexual students can affect their performance in the classroom and their relationships with other students. Mistreatment by fellow students is also evident in those following a homosexual lifestyle. Savage and Harley comment on a survey that was conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force involving 2000 adult respondents (5). The survey concluded that:

20% of the females and 50% of the males reported having been harassed, threatened with bodily harm, or physically assaulted by other students in junior and/or senior year of high school as a result of being known as or perceived to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. (5)

Although these academic, emotional, and social struggles are faced by homosexual students, there is a fault to the parents’ perception that homosexual teachers push students to a homosexual way of life.

A second hole found in the idea that ‘proximity to homosexual teachers may result in homosexuality’ is that homosexuality is found by researchers to be something that is discovered at a young age. Newton explains that, “many authorities believe that one’s sexual orientation is determined very early in life, perhaps within the first five years” (200). However, these people may not actually “become gay” until later in life. To further explain, one may notice homosexual tendencies early on in life, but not act on them until later in life. These tendencies sometimes can be viewed in the way a child acts at a young age. Many homosexuals have said that, “although they ‘came out’ fairly late in life, they felt a primary emotional attraction to others of the same sex much earlier than that” (Newton 200). If this actually holds true, then homosexual educators should not really have much, if any, influence on students and their sexual preferences, making this theory faulty.

Although the process of homosexual teachers coming out to students and colleagues may be difficult, taken as a whole, this progression is beneficial for students and teachers. The individuals affected in this process are affected in a positive manner. There are several positive effects resulting from this process. Some of these possible outcomes include reduced stress on the homosexual teacher, helping to correct misinformation about homosexuality, allowing for a better, stronger connection with students, and helping non-heterosexual ideas enter the classroom curriculum.

When homosexual teachers restrain their sexual identity, they also hold in many emotions, stresses, and tensions resulting from hiding their true selves. Newton states that the current social system “constantly denies and denigrates a fundamental aspect of [the teacher’s] character” (192). Homosexual teachers must constantly battle with an environment where the majority practices a
heterosexual lifestyle. This time spent worrying about their sexual identity is time wasted from teaching authentically in the classroom. Professor Katherine R. Allen was once married with children and has recently come out as a lesbian. Allen states that, “being authentic in the classroom is one teaching strategy to help students engage with course material in personal and analytical ways” (137). By opening up in the classroom, homosexual teachers feel more genuine and are able to be themselves to their students. Teachers who hold back their true selves are never “totally free to channel their full psychic energies into their work” (Newton 192). Newton explains that, “there is no way that this enforced secrecy can do any individual or society any good” (201). The dominant heterosexual population is enforcing this secrecy of homosexuals through their different beliefs and actions against homosexuals. Newton argues that this enforced secrecy “scars teachers and diminishes their effectiveness as supportive, warm friends of students” (201). Homosexual teachers who mask their true identity in the classroom further deny their students as a result. The students are deprived of a learning experience that has the potential of being more honest and real from a closed-off homosexual teacher.

Homosexual teachers who do open up in the classroom about their sexual identity provide the most authentic teaching experience for their students because they have an easier time dealing with their inner emotions and battles. Allen is an example of a lesbian teacher who managed her home and school life in an effective manner. Allen did so by coming out to her students about her homosexuality. She found that her learning environment was influenced in a positive way. Allen tried to follow society’s majority. She was once part of a heterosexual marriage. Allen states that she never had to say “out loud I am a heterosexual,” because the cultural expectation to be heterosexual [was] so strong that it [was] not necessary to proclaim it” (138). This changed when she uncovered her true sexual identity and embraced it. Once she accepted her sexual identity, she began to struggle through “[her] divorce and [struggle] to accept [her] love for another woman” (138). This struggle outside of the classroom began to play into the classroom as she slowly “stopped casually mentioning [her] marital status in class” (138). Allen found it “too risky to mention [her] changing marital circumstances and sexual orientation because of the stigma associated with being lesbian, bisexual, or gay” (138). In other words, Allen found it hard to open up about her sexual identity to her classes due to the assumed identity of heterosexuality placed on teachers by students. Because heterosexuality is the assumed identity by present-day society, Allen felt discomfort talking about her family life. Allen states that it “eventually... became stressful to allow people to think [she] was heterosexual and painful to hide [her] family circumstances” (138). Allen says that in the classroom “authenticity [is] important” (138). Therefore, Allen made the decision to open up about her homosexuality to her class. By doing so, Allen prevented her inner emotions from controlling her any longer and also allowed for a more authentic and positive experience for her students.

Homosexual teachers who come out in the classroom also help to correct the mass of misinformation about homosexuals. Newton explains that “most people form their opinions and act on what they 'know' about homosexuality. When the factual information they have is incorrect, their attitudes and behaviors may be inappropriate” (193). Newton finds that “it is a matter of practical concern that people be exposed to the best factual information available about homosexual behavior” (138). This especially holds true for male homosexuals who are looking into a career in education. Newton states that, “the strongly negative attitudes that many members of society have about homosexual behavior reflect in no small part some misinformation about the nature of this form of human behavior” (193). These negative attitudes are evident towards male homosexual educators. As mentioned earlier, some male homosexuals are automatically assumed to be pedophilic when around younger boys. This assumption greatly affects homosexual teachers. The coming out of homosexual male teachers has been extremely beneficial to help correct this pedophilic stereotype recently.

The presence of openly gay male teachers has been a staple in educational settings because it has helped to defeat stereotypes placed on homosexual males. Newton argues that “myths of the sinful, criminal, sick character of homosexual behavior are so persistent that it will require enormous efforts to overcome them” (200). Newton continues to say that “the simplest and most direct way to do this is to encourage healthy gay people to
make their presence known to the general public” (200). By making their sexual identity known “students-as well as members of the general public... see that in most ways, gay people are not different from non-gay people” (200). Newton furthers states that “there is virtually nothing about their lives that looks very much different from that of any other woman or man on the faculty, gay or non-gay” (200). In other words, homosexual male teachers should come out to colleagues, teachers, and students in order to help correct the assumptions and labels that homosexuals hold in present-day society. Homosexual teachers are not the only ones tainted by this pedophilic stereotype. Homosexual males, in general, have been linked to molestation of children. In order to help correct this pedophilic stereotype of all homosexuals, homosexual male teachers should come out to their colleagues and students about their sexual identity. Homosexual male teachers are best suited to help fix this pedophilic stereotype because they are especially influential to the younger generation. They also are seen as role models to the younger generation in the classroom.

The coming out of homosexual teachers may also help to correct one of the strongest stereotypes of homosexuals. Due to the assumptions made by the dominant heterosexual society, “gay men, for example, are presumed to manifest characteristics that are culturally defined as “feminine,” and lesbians are widely believed to manifest “masculine” characteristics” says researcher Gregory M. Herek (72). Because these stereotypes are so strong, Herek writes “men and women who manifest characteristics inconsistent with those culturally prescribed for their gender are more likely than others to be labeled homosexual” (73). The correcting of this postulation can not only help the gay community, but the straight community as well. Due to this stereotype, a heterosexual who is acting as the opposite gender may be labeled a homosexual and subsequently treated differently by others. Herek also states that “although not often discussed, antigay prejudice also has negative consequences for heterosexuals” (78). Due to these strong stereotypes of homosexuals, “heterosexuals [often] restrict their own behavior in order to avoid being labeled gay” (78). This is especially evident “among American males” (78). Herek continues to say that these “men [may] avoid clothing, hobbies, and mannerisms that might be labeled ‘effeminate’” (78). Heterosexuals who find it hard to cope with their true identity due to this homosexual stereotype can become more anxious about their perceived sexual identity. This can affect their school, work, and social lives.

Homosexual teachers can help to defeat this homosexual stereotype regarding the way gay men and lesbians act. Teachers who come out about their true sexual identity can allow students to form their own opinions about homosexuality and the way homosexuals live their lives. Students may then be more open-minded and better able to accept homosexuality in the future. Also, teachers play an influential role in student lives. By watching a teacher be authentic and honest in the classroom, students may feel that they can also be authentic and true to their identity.

Homosexual teachers who open up to students about their sexual lifestyle also tend to better their relationships with their students. Teachers in general tend to bring their family life into the classroom in order to help form connections with students. Allen states that she would often share stories about her “family life in order to illustrate the information [she] was teaching or simply to entertain students” (137). By opening up about their sexual identity, homosexual teachers are better able to relate to students through their teaching methods. Allen, when talking about coming out to her students about her lesbian lifestyle, says “[she] had to place [herself] in the tension between safety and risk and trust that [her] honesty would be a model for [her students]” (139). Homosexual teachers who are honest with their students are more likely to get honesty in return, which subsequently betters teacher-student relationships. Allen further says that:

This experience helps to create a living classroom of real students- mostly young women who will ask me for recommendations for graduate school and jobs, invite me to speak at sorority banquets, send me invitations to their weddings and pictures of their children, or come during my office hours to ask for a referral to speak to a counselor about a difficult experience. (139)

In saying this, Allen demonstrates how her students were affected after she came out to her classroom. Allen explains how her authenticity in the classroom led to better and more personal relationships with
students. This then leads to a better connection with the students in the classroom setting as well. Homosexual teachers, who come out in the pedagogical setting, will help to bring non-heterosexual ideas into the teaching curriculum, which is especially beneficial to homosexual students. Savage and Harley clarify that "the purpose here is not to promote or legitimize non-heterosexual sexual orientations over a heterosexual one," but merely to bring non-heterosexual ideas alongside heterosexual ones (7). These non-heterosexual ideas do not need to be emphasized over heterosexual ideas in order to be beneficial. Savage and Harley explain that "depictions of a variety of individuals and families, heterosexual and otherwise, [can be] infused throughout the curricula, and that discussions and questions about sexual orientation can be fielded as appropriate against the content of the curriculum at-hand" (7). They provide an example:

For instance, literature teachers could be more explicit about the sexual orientations of various authors students are reading and how an author's self-identification in this regard may have influenced her or his writing. Such potential could be extended to the assignments, required tasks, and discussions associated with math, science, social studies, music, physical education, health education, and so on, as well. (7)

Any small way to bring non-heterosexual ideas into the classroom without controversy can help benefit the classroom environment. Savage and Harley continue to say that "students will get a more realistic experience with the diversity of the community around them, and those families and students who identify as [homosexual] will find themselves reflected in the curriculum, which serves only to increase their self-esteem, feelings of affirmation, and academic success" (7). Homosexual teachers are better apt to bring this diversity into the classroom because these teachers are living this lifestyle day in and out. Homosexual teachers who come out in the classroom to students bring their experiences to the classroom, which helps homosexual students feel more accepted.

Everyone at some point in their life will attend a school or be a part of a pedagogical setting. With the changes in American society, it is becoming more likely that students or colleagues will encounter a homosexual teacher in these educational settings. The differences between peoples' sexualities are increasingly recognized in modern-day society. Even though heterosexuality is still considered the dominant sexuality, this is not stopping those who are non-heterosexual from opening up about their sexual identities. Homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals, and other people with different sexual orientations are beginning to open up about their lifestyles. Not only that, but present-day society is beginning to accept these lifestyles as they become more prominent.

The importance of introducing non-heterosexual ideas to the classroom is evident when referring to the diversity already witnessed in the classroom. Diversity is an issue that has been pressed to be conveyed in school settings. Teachers push students to accept each other for who they are, no matter what their differences are. Diversity in the school setting generally only applies to different races and ethnicities, however, this diversity needs to be stretched from being only about race to also include sexuality. Because non-heterosexual ideas are reaching the school community, it is important to deal with these changes. This can easily begin with the teachers. Homosexual teachers who decide to come out to students help to bring this diversity into the classroom.

The importance of addressing issues with homosexual teachers is needed as more teachers debate on coming out about their sexual identity. Homosexual teachers have been teaching across the world for decades. The idea of these teachers coming out to students was once something that was unprecedented. Nowadays, as more homosexuals are recognized and accepted for their lifestyles, more homosexual teachers are also coming out to students. The time has come that the topic of homosexuality reaches the schools (Newton 2011). The benefits of this act are worth considering, especially as more homosexual teachers are coming out to students about their identity. Homosexual teachers bring diversity from the real world into the classroom. Gay teachers who come out to students also help to correct all the misinformation about homosexuality, leading to a greater acceptance of the lifestyle. As more homosexual teachers evolve into the classroom setting, more individuals will be accepting of their ways of life.

The topic of homosexuality is becoming prominent in conversation and modern-day society. The importance of addressing the positive effects of
homosexual teachers in the classroom is beneficial as more homosexual teachers choose to come out to students. The diversity of the real world is something that teachers try to incorporate into the classroom because the real world is where the students are going to end up. By excluding homosexuality from the classroom, the diversity of the real world is also being denied access to the classroom, which is problematic in terms of the growth of society.

Works Cited


