

CHAPTER ONE

The Silent Minority

Things will get better. And more than that, with time you're going to see that your differences are a source of pride and a source of strength. You'll look back on the struggles you've faced with compassion and wisdom. And that's not just going to serve you, but it will help you get involved and make this country a better place.

—President Barack Obama (Savage & Miller, 2011, p. 9)

OUR SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Some students in our public school system fit into the school culture without an issue. Many of these students go through their school experience unscathed because they are popular, good looking, or a good athlete, or they do well in school. They enter school each day feeling engaged and safe, and when they get older, as we all do, they will probably remember their high school days as one of the best times of their lives.

These students grow up, attend college, or go into the workforce and most likely do well, just like they did in high school. They attend their 10th, 20th, and 25th high school reunions where they talk about the “good ole days” when they scored the winning touchdown or pulled a great class prank, kissed their first girl, or had their first beer. When meeting up with old friends, they see their high school experience as the solid foundation to whom they became as an adult.

We have another segment of our K–12 students who feel differently. They do not fit in, were never popular, no one gives them a second glance, unless of course it is to abuse them for being different. Many of these students do not go a day unscathed and are more

likely to never attend a high school reunion or remember school fondly. They cannot wait to graduate and get out, and typically vow to never return to their roots because they were gay and their peers knew it. Their memories often include being called a “faggot,” “homo,” or “dyke.”

The unfortunate fact is, according to the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) *2009 National School Climate Survey*, “84.6% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported being physically harassed and 18.8% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation.” In addition, “72.4% heard homophobic remarks, such as ‘faggot’ or ‘dyke,’ frequently or often at school” (2009, p. 26).

With any luck, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students attend a college where they meet other “like-minded” people, find their niche, and become successful. Unfortunately, that may not be the norm for many of our students, and as early as elementary school we recognize who some of those students will be, and we do not always do enough about it.

“Growing up is, for all children, a process of discovering who they are in relation to self and others. In a predominately heterosexual society constantly and pervasively reinforcing heterosexual behavior, identity conflict will inevitably occur for most persons who have a homosexual orientation.” (Marinoble, 1998, p. 54)

Parents play an important role in the growth and development of students. However, sometimes we underestimate the role that we as educators play in their development. Either that, or we just choose not to recognize it so we feel better about the fact that these students are not fitting in. As educators, we find ourselves saying, “Yeah, kids can be tough on one another,” or “I just wish he would act differently so he doesn’t make himself a target.”

What if we could do things differently? What if we could make an impact on these students? What if we found ways to engage them through curriculum or after-school activities, or made them feel welcome in our schools by providing a safe space? Many LGBT students feel threatened, unloved, and alone. Sure, there are those LGBT students who are fortunate enough to grow up in a supportive household where they are loved. They go to a supportive high school that educates the whole child and creates diverse experiences

for them, which will help them grow into contributing members of society. However, I would venture to guess that is not the norm.

“Whether manifested or not, there is a sense of being somehow different than the world expects them to be, and this is a source of considerable identity conflict for most homosexual students” (Marinoble, 1998, p. 55).

Over the past few years, there has been a slew of suicides. The young people who have died by suicide range from kids who did not reach the teenage years to others who cut their lives short before they finished college. It is clear that we have an issue in our society that needs to be changed, and those of us who are fortunate enough to call education our choice of career can help change it.

As an elementary school principal, I have seen children walk through our halls being able to be who they are, and having teachers and other students support them in their endeavors, such as wearing outrageous clothing or flirting with gender norms by wearing their hair short if they are a girl or long if they are a boy. I had a male student who liked to wear a long scarf and say that he wanted to grow up and be a female supermodel. He did not do it to make fun of anyone; he did it because that is how he felt. Kids with individuality should be encouraged and applauded rather than forced to change and fit in. Every student should have the same opportunities, no matter their race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation.

However, the harsh reality is that I do not see all the teasing and torment that goes on in our school, and I think we can change that. Our LGBT student population is the most marginalized. Every time we turn the other cheek, we have lost another student and helped prevent them from finding themselves. When we ignore opportunities to help those students, we give them a reason to hate the school system.

Teenage years are hard enough because of all the storm and stress that happens with our studies, family relationships, and friends. Having the extra element of needing to hide who you are because others will not like or love you anymore, including your family, is painful. LGBT students painfully walk in our doors everyday trying to be someone they are not, and our society does not make that any easier.

Our LGBT students are dropping out of school at an alarming rate. They experiment with drugs and alcohol at a higher rate than their straight peers, and are more likely to suffer from depression.

According to Thiede and colleagues, “[Sixty-six percent] reported use of illicit drugs; 28%, use of 3 or more drugs; 29%, frequent drug use (once a week or more); and 4%, injection drug use” (2003, p. 1915). “For heterosexual students, alcohol is the most commonly used drug among high school students with 35.4% of 10th- and 48.6% of 12th-grade students reported to have used it” (Burrow-Sanchez & Lopez, 2009, p. 72). A supportive school environment may not change that abuse of alcohol and drugs, but it can go a long way in helping these students find their niche in life.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE GAY

“I knew I was gay when the most exciting part of my Bar Mitzvah was meeting the party planner” (Trachtenberg & Bachtell, 2005, p. 5).

Members of the LGBT community will tell you they knew they were gay at a very young age. In the decades leading up to the new millennium, people in the LGBT community did not feel as if they could be openly gay in society, let alone within their own communities. Many went on to get married only to come out at a later age, after they had children and found that they could no longer hide who they are. A large percentage of gay and lesbian women did not come out in high school because they feared the chance that they would be disowned by loved ones. Many of them did not even realize they were gay because they lacked role models in the LGBT community and were never exposed to gay characters on television or in books.

Identifying, whether privately or publicly, as gay or lesbian can be a very traumatic experience for anyone, regardless of their age, income level, or the level of support they get from their family. It can be especially difficult for a teenager who has to enter a school setting on a daily basis. Sears states, “Our capacity to relate emotionally and physically to other human beings is not limited to the other gender” (1991, p. 54). LGBT youth are coming out at an earlier age, with some coming out as young as 12 years old (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011). Many young adults in the LGBT community come out by the age of 15, and some have known their sexual identity since the age of 10 (Ryan, 2009, p. 1).

There are a variety of steps those going through the experience can take after this realization. One possible step is to hide those

feelings and try to fit in with their heterosexual peers, which has often been done in the school setting. Another step is to “come out” to friends and family by openly admitting to being LGBT. This act of coming out often takes a great deal of thought and reflection because there is a possibility that the teenager coming out could lose close friends or be disowned by family. Fearing the loss of being disowned by those you love because you have feelings for someone of the same sex is a terrifying experience.

Harbeck states, “Many of us have grown up with a feeling that our being lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) is bad, and that we must hide it” (1995, p. 126). Being openly gay is not easy for many students and adults. Society is predominantly straight, and the word gay is constantly used in a derogatory manner. LGBT people know they are different, and they are often reminded of that fact on a daily basis. It takes time, reflection, and strength to overcome those realities. Over the past year, there have been countless stories about youths who died by suicide because they were perceived to be gay.

What can clearly be referred to as a continuing epidemic, within only the past few weeks, a number of gay young men have taken their lives by all indications as a result of the unrelenting homophobic taunts, harassment, and attacks they had to endure by their peers: Seth Walsh, 13, hung himself from a tree outside his California home; Billy Lucas, 15, hung himself in Indiana; Asher Brown, 13, from Texas, shot himself in the head; Tyler Clementi, 18, a first-year student from Rutgers University, took his life by jumping off the George Washington Bridge. (Blumenfeld, 2010, para. 1)

This sad slew of suicides that has taken our young people has taught us that we have an epidemic involving LGBT teens and that we need to do our best to make it stop. Our schools are the places where we can teach students about acceptance and also teach students how to accept who they are.

Whether LGBT students are out or “in the closet,” there is a feeling of guilt. These individuals long to be accepted, and they are at risk of looking anywhere to find that acceptance. If they are in the closet, there are a variety of mixed emotions. Closeted LGBT students feel guilty for not being honest to their families, friends, and themselves. In addition, they feel ashamed for the feelings they have. Not having anyone to turn to for guidance and support can be

debilitating and a very lonely experience. That feeling of aloneness is why LGBT students make unsafe decisions.

THE NEED FOR ROLE MODELS

“During my childhood and young adulthood, gays and lesbians were invisible in my community. But while they were invisible, they certainly were not absent; their presence was just not acknowledged. The behaviors I observed in the adults I loved and looked up to suggested that gays and lesbians were people one whispered about; spoke of in vague, masked terms; or ridiculed, abused, and violated because of who and what they were. The world that formed me and shaped my values did not honor, afford humanity to, or bestow dignity on those who were gay. I grew up in a world where gay, lesbian, and bisexual people were invisible, isolated, powerless, and voiceless” (Roper, 2005, p. 81).

As much as society has changed, same-sex couples can still not get married in well over 40 states, and they do not have the same rights as their heterosexual friends and family—LGBT teens who have not come out yet know that fact. They watch television and hear negative conversations about the LGBT community. In the 2012 presidential campaign, Michele Bachmann was accused of calling LGBT people “barbarians,” and her husband was accused of offering reparative therapy to gays and lesbians in an effort to change them to become heterosexual (Ross, Schwartz, Mosk, & Chuchmach, 2011). “She once likened it to personal bondage, personal despair and personal enslavement” (Stolberg, 2011, p. 1).

Worse than that, closeted LGBT students could potentially hear the opinions that their loved ones feel about gay people. Unlike other minorities, being in the closet provides you with insight into two worlds. One world is the life you know, surrounded by family and friends. However, those family and friends, not knowing they have a gay member of their own family, could potentially talk about their dislike for members of the LGBT community. Even before a student may know they are gay, she is hit by many images that offer an anti-gay sentiment on television or through conversations at home if she lives within a conservative household. That sends a very powerful message to our LGBT youth.

“Most adolescents realize that the expression of homosexual feelings within the dominant peer group, where there is tremendous pressure to conform to heterosexual norms, will result in alienation from peers at best, and violence at worst” (Anderson, 1995, p. 24). All students face those heterosexual norms in the public school setting, where students often feel stress about fitting in with their peers.

The other world, the one the LGBT students want to belong to, is the group of their LGBT peers, where they can find like-minded friends and perhaps even a partner. Teens in the LGBT community lack role models around them and are typically in the minority with their peers. Anderson says, “It is not surprising that gay and lesbian adolescents, wanting involvement in a peer group that accepts them, and offers the possibility of establishing intimate relationships, often begin to search for other gay persons” (1995, p. 25). Most heterosexual teens can look to their parents or other members of society to learn about gender roles in relationships, but LGBT teens often cannot do the same. LGBT teens do not always have positive gay role models in their lives and often have to identify with what they see on television.

Books, films, classroom discussions, guest speakers, and field trips almost always reinforce heterosexual norms and values. Lesbian and gay adults, teachers and other school staff, most often are closeted, depriving gay and lesbian youth of positive role models. (Marinoble, 1998, p. 55)

HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION OF LGBT STUDENTS

While the intersections of social class, race, gender, sexuality, and religion vary for each person, their existence and importance within our culture are, for those who do not share membership in the dominant groups, social facts with social consequences. (Sears, 1991, p. 55)

At a time in life when teenagers do not want to be seen as different from their peers, being gay, which puts students in the minority of a school population, makes those students feel as if a spotlight is on them and often opens them up to harassment and verbal abuse. That type of discrimination creates a fear for students

as they walk into the public school setting. These students who have “come out” as gay or lesbian often hear harassing remarks from peers, and other students who are gay and lesbian do not come out at all in fear that they will lose friends and alienate themselves from their families. This discrimination that sexually diverse students face creates a feeling of helplessness and isolation, which leads some students in the LGBT community to drop out of school or run away from home.

Unks explains, “Picking on persons because of their ethnicity, class, religion, gender, or race is essentially taboo behavior, but adults and children alike are given license to torment and harm because of their sexuality” (1995, p. 3). Although that quotation is from the mid-1990s, it still holds true today because LGBT students are being bullied and harassed frequently. This fear of torment, discrimination, and the isolation gay and lesbian teenagers face when coming out can be detrimental to their existence, not only as students in a school system, but as human beings as well. The constant concern about losing those around you is a debilitating experience. Having the right support system, whether it is through school, friendships, or family, is vitally important:

No one should underestimate the value of teachers’ including gay people when they talk with students about cultural diversity. Just hearing the words “homosexuality” or “gay/lesbian/bisexual” in an accepting context sends a powerful message to young people, and creates the potential for a tolerant environment. (Lipkin, 1995, p. 39)

GLSEN is doing landmark research in the area of sexual diversity and school climate. GLSEN’s 2005 report stated the following:

As leaders of their schools, principals strive to ensure a positive learning environment for all students; one where students feel safe and free from harassment. Yet for many students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), school can often be a very dangerous place. The 2005 report, *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America* by Harris Interactive and GLSEN found that the most common reasons for bullying and harassment in America’s middle and high schools were physical appearance, sexual orientation and gender expression,

showing that LGBT-related characteristics account for two of the top three reasons students are singled out for mistreatment. (Kosciw, 2007)

Students who identify as gay and lesbian often face a great deal of criticism and harassment from peers. If this is mixed with a lack of support from home, many gay students turn toward behaviors that can be harmful to them. “One in three has reported committing at least one self-destructive act. Gay and lesbian youth make up approximately one quarter of all homeless youth in the U.S.” (Gibson cited in O’Conor, 1995, p. 13). These statistics are staggering, but only through education and awareness can teachers and administrators understand how to meet the needs of these students. Lugg and Shoho (2006) state, “Educators should ensure that public schools would become models of democratic and socially just practices. Quite simply, public schools would become exemplars of American democracy” (p. 200).

NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES OF LGBT STUDENTS

Much of the research in the social justice field revolves around gender, race, and economic status. Sexual orientation is a topic that has been explored, but it is an area that needs further exploration because it affects a large population of students and adults. “The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, a sexual orientation law and public policy think tank, estimates that there are 8.8 million gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons in the U.S based on the 2005/2006 American Community Survey, an extension of the U.S. Census” (Gates, 2006, p. 1).

Most of the existing research revolves around promiscuity, HIV/AIDS, and suicide and mental health services, which are all very grim, but they are realities in the homosexual community. Harbeck states, “With this extreme and sole focus on teen suicide, we may be trading one negative stereotype for another” (1995, p. 126). Although the suicide rate of gay and lesbian teens is high, it is one more perceived negative consequence of being gay to those sexually diverse students who want to come out. Harbeck goes on to say, “Young people who are exploring identities may conclude that suicide is the consequence of being LGBT” (1995, p. 126). We, as

educators, need to provide LGBT students with better examples of who they can be and show them that their lives do not have to have a tragic ending.

CONCLUSION

Young gay people come out at different times following their self-awareness and self-identity. In some cases, the person is outed, meaning that their sexual orientation, or perceived sexual orientation, is disclosed by someone else (McNinch & Cronin, 2004, p. 35).

Clearly, LGBT students have a great deal of negative issues facing them as they grow up and mature. Whether they are gay, or perceived as gay, they face the fear of being tormented, which comes in the forms of name calling, physical and psychological punishment, or being outed. Schools can step in and be the positive resource and influence these students need in order to move forward in their lives and help the student become a contributing member of society. In order to properly assist these students, we need to know what issues they face so we can assist them in overcoming those issues. We need to offer supports such as curriculum, student codes of conduct, board policies, and teacher professional development on how to address LGBT issues to allow the students to take ownership over their lives and become successful.

This fragile student population needs support from teachers and administrators because of the discrimination they often feel when they are coming out to peers and family. LGBT students who are supported by teachers and administration feel a sense of safety in their school environment, and that sense of safety allows them to take healthy and positive risks, which builds their engagement in the school community. Students who are engaged in school are more inclined to succeed academically.

Action Steps

- Begin by using the proper language. It is a sexual orientation, not a sexual preference. Preference indicates that they have a choice whether they want to be straight or gay.
- People do not want to be defined by their sexual orientation, but it should not be ignored either. Ask an LGBT student how things are going in school and at home. Reach out in an authentic way.

- If you have openly gay students in your school, ask them if they feel safe. Involve them in the conversation about LGBT safeguards.
- Talk with your school counseling team to see what resources they can offer to LGBT students and their families. Make sure resources such as pamphlets are easily accessible.
- Reading this book shows you care. The best quotation I have heard was from a Rochester, New York, LGBT student who said, "You don't have to do everything. You just have to do something."

Discussion Questions

- Why do you believe some adolescents do not know they are gay until they reach their 20s or attend college?
- Do you know anyone who is LGBT? Have a discussion with your group about someone in the LGBT community that you respect.
- Why do some families disown their LGBT children rather than accept them?
- Why do you feel LGBT students are at risk to experiment with drugs and alcohol?
- Why is it important to reach out to an LGBT student?
- What is one thing you can do to reach out to an LGBT student?