

Out Front

What schools can do to fight homophobia

By Annie Johnston

My prep period was half over. I still had to prepare for a sub the next day and copy the materials for my next class when a student appeared at my door. Nervously clutching a bathroom pass as her eyes darted from the room number to me, she asked, "Are you the one who does that support group for..." Her voice trailed off.

"The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning youth support group?" I answered. "Yes. They meet Thursdays at lunch. They are working on a conference of gay/straight alliances around the Bay Area. It's not a large group" As my explanation continued I could see I had lost her.

"That's not what I want," she said. "I need to talk to someone, right away."

Oh dear, I thought, crisis management. This is not what I can do today. I had to leave early to get my daughter to an appointment.

Instead I said, "What do you need to talk about?"

Slowly and hesitantly it came out. A good friend was attracted to her. She might actually be interested. That scared her to her very core. She sought me out because my room number was announced weekly as the location of the support group meetings. I took her name, found out what period she could stand to miss, and spent the rest of my prep period finding someone in the health center who would be positive about the possibility that this child might have feelings for someone of the same sex. I was lucky. More often, I end up playing amateur psychologist.

I teach history at Berkeley High School, considered one of the better schools for queer-identified youth (an all-inclusive term, preferred by the students, for queer and questioning youth).¹ Yet even at Berkeley, there are limits to the school's openness to queer youth, who tend to graduate early or to leave for a semester or two of "Independent Studies." The

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Independent Studies program is an alternative track in which students only meet with each teacher for one half-hour per week and do all their work on their own.

I have been teaching at Berkeley eight years and have been coming out to my classes since my first year. There are a few other staff in this school of 3,000 students who do not

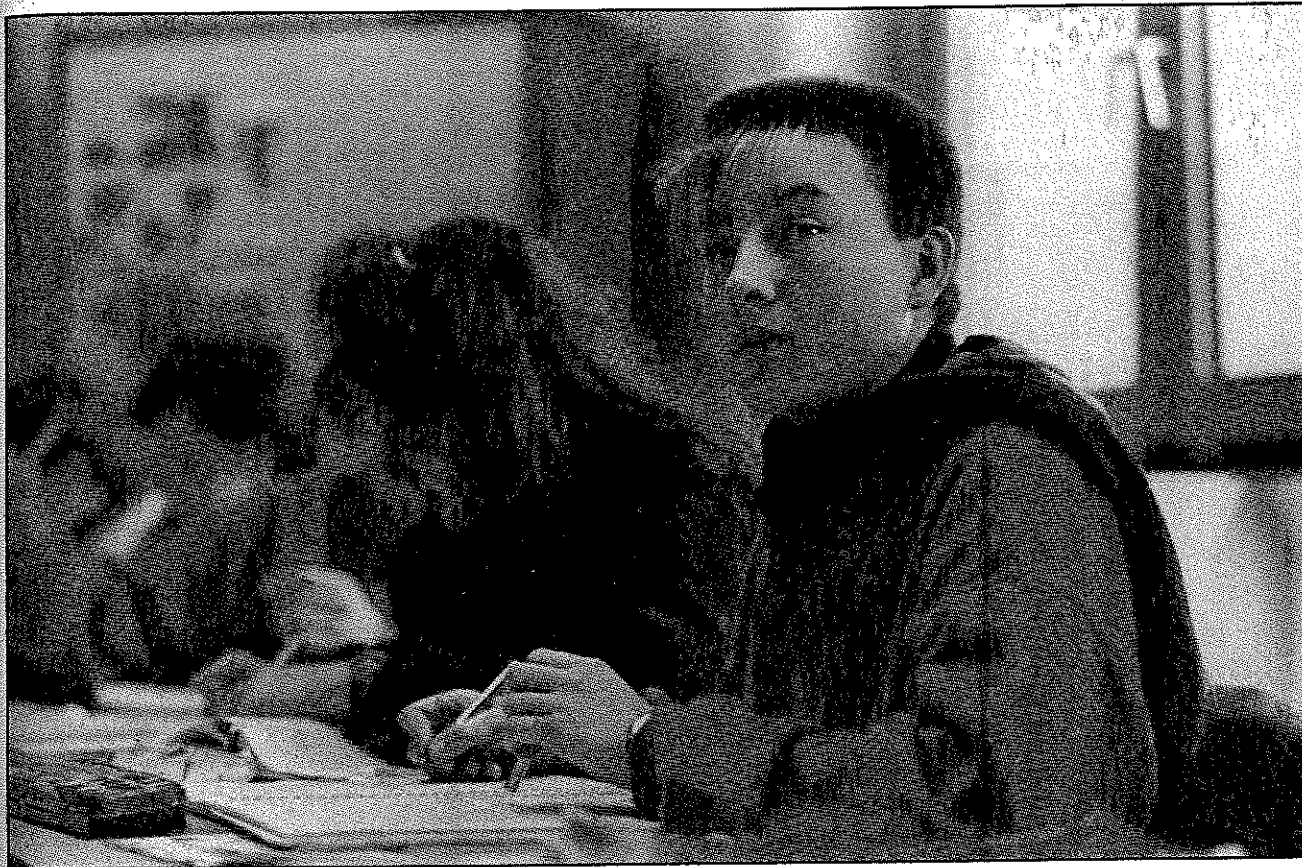
hide our sexuality. We know that we have to be seen — that it's important not just for the gay youth but for all the students to have gay role models. We also know that at Berkeley because of district and city policies forbidding discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, we won't be fired.

The situation is better at Berkeley than at most schools across the country. But even at Berkeley, homophobia is a constant reality. Girls who are close friends and lean over each other's desk are called "lezzies." Boys who seem in any way weak or "womanly" are called "faggots." Despite advances in the struggle against homophobia in our schools there is still a long, long way to go.

One teacher recently described a situation in which a young man, who had been consistently called "faggot" by his peers, took an all-too-typical approach to stop the taunting. He came into her class one day and went up to a shy, relatively unpopular girl and, in front of his buddies, proceeded to make sexually humiliating remarks. He was conforming to teenage male culture, in which "Hey, baby, why don't you suck my..." means, "See, I'm a real man." The club of homophobic ridicule is held over the heads of all young people — it is one of the main means by which gender roles are enforced.

Backlash Era

In this backlash era, out teacher role models are an endangered species. Even in the progressive Bay



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Area, there have been major flaps over a teacher allowing a brief discussion of the *Ellen* coming-out episode, and a teacher simply letting it be known to her classes that she is lesbian.

At the same time, Gay/Straight Alliances are growing at a phenomenal rate. When students in Salt Lake City formed a Gay/Straight Alliance in 1995, the district banned all clubs rather than allow the alliance to meet. But protesting students walked out en masse and marched to the state capital, forcing the state legislature to intervene and countermand the district. In addition, there have been significant legal victories in recent years — in particular the case brought by Jamie Nabozny, which held school administrators liable when a gay student was harmed by harassment that the administrators had ignored despite the existence of a district anti-harassment policy. Many districts have also been more open to training staff on how to create a safe environment for lesbian and gay youth.

At my school, the lesbian, gay,

bisexual, and questioning youth support group is an important place for students to find each other and establish a supportive community. It is difficult, however, for those students to be activists around gay issues at school. They face constant harassment and ridicule. It is equally difficult for students who are unsure of their sexual identity to take the radical step of coming to such a gay-identified group.

Take the situation facing Jake, who was ridiculed by other students the entire semester two years ago in my World History class. He came midyear, he said, because he had been so ostracized in his last school. He had a manner about him that just spoke of weirdness and difference. By the end of four months, students would write things on the board about him, no one would work with him, and he would take it all in as if he deserved it. After he brought in a crucifix he'd made in shop class and announced to me that the bloody body hanging from it was himself, I redoubled my efforts to get him seen by a

counselor, but to no avail. It was May by that time, the university interns who helped out at the health center were gone for the year, and there was really no one who could help.

Jake spent time hospitalized over the summer for severe depression and on suicide watch, I think. He spent more time hospitalized in the fall. After he left the hospital, he came by to tell me he had known he was gay since he was seven years old. He'd been in denial, hoping and praying that something would change him.

I'm not sure where Jake got the strength, but he finally decided to stand up for himself, to shove the hatred and ridicule back at his tormentors. He also began reading books about gay male sexuality, and came to a staff development inservice I had organized to speak to teachers about the damage a homophobic environment does to youth.

Jake started to like himself, and it changed his life. He is now a junior at Berkeley High and has a number of friends. And while he still gets gay-bashed, the last time he got kicked



SKOLD PHOTOGRAPHS

and punched he lodged an official complaint rather than just turning the other cheek.

Jake could have been a statistic. According to a study done by Paul Gibson for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, gay youth are two to three times more likely to commit suicide and comprise up to 30% of all completed suicides.

Help!

As an openly gay teacher, I do what I can to help the Jakes of our school. I talk to the social living classes, work with others to organize staff inservices, get students to speak on panels about their experiences, and advocate for the youth who end up on my doorstep. I struggle with how to make support services available to all students, not just those who come to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning youth group. This is particularly crucial for students of color, for whom the issue of identity is much more complex.

I know I should do more, but I can't. "Out lesbian teacher" is not my only identity. I can take the lead on these issues for only so long without getting burned out. I need allies, and

so do the youth. I need young gay teachers who are supported and encouraged to act as out role models in the schools, instead of being scared that they will be persecuted and driven from their jobs. I need straight teachers to sponsor forums on the issue and push for an "anti-slur" policy.

You don't always get what you need, but you don't get much of anything unless you ask. So here are a few things I would ask of other teachers:

- Set a clear anti-homophobic standard for what is acceptable language and behavior in your classrooms and your schools.
- Incorporate gay issues into the curriculum — not just in social living classes when talking about sex, but in history, English, science, and Spanish.
- Support gay teachers' ability to be out role models for our youth.

Anti-Slur Policy

Establishing policies on language and behavior is sometimes the best place to start. Even at Berkeley, it has been difficult to develop a culture in which anti-gay language is unacceptable. When I recently asked a group of

queer-identified youth what teachers had done to make a positive difference in combating homophobia, they could not think of a single thing. One teacher tried last year to make an issue of anti-gay language, but she was quickly overwhelmed by students' negative responses. For the remainder of the semester, not a single student in her class suffered any consequences for using anti-gay language.

Once, after a 45-minute argument with students in my class over why anti-gay language is harmful, Ryanna, still unconvinced, said, "I'll do it, Ms. Johnston, because I respect you. But I just want you to know that none of my other teachers ever has demanded this of me. It is extremely difficult to remember to watch my language here when this is the language I use at home all the time, and when every other teacher in the school considers it acceptable."

Despite her reluctance, however, Ryanna has managed to watch her language since. Moreover, during the initial class discussion, many other students expressed their disapproval of anti-gay language, and reevaluated words they had been using.

Such conversations and policies have a ripple effect. One closeted bisexual student told me that he later felt able to raise gay issues in a current events discussion, knowing a large number of the students in the room would take them seriously. In this case, events that affected gay people became a normal, acceptable thing to talk about.

These conversations require a large chunk of class time. Further, policies must be backed up by immediate consequences when students forget or violate the rules. For instance, many students don't understand why calling a test they hated "gay" is insulting to gay people. They don't connect the emergence of "gay" as a slang word, meaning "really yucky," to homophobia. It takes teaching to make that connection. Usually a talking-to in the hallway is adequate, although not always. Once in awhile, a student will be unwilling to suppress his or her homophobia and will use homophobic

remarks to seriously taunt another student. In such cases, teachers need to be aware that gay-baiting is a form of sexual harassment and that state education codes require schools to create a safe place for all students.

Curriculum Issues

An anti-slur policy reduces the amount of negative vibes but is not sufficient to create a classroom that welcomes the existence of queer people. To take this further step, teachers must include queers and queer issues in their curriculum. It's likely that a tenth of the population is gay in this country, and gay people play a major role in our society. Students must see that fact reflected in what we teach. "Gay" has to be integrated into our picture of current events, historical reality, literary themes, and scientific exploration. We need curriculum in which "gay" is not relegated to the "Sexuality and Sexually Transmitted Diseases" discussion in health and social living classes.

Every subject area has openings for such curriculum, but it takes a conscious effort to develop or access and incorporate the materials. In U.S. history, for instance, when we teach the Civil Rights Movement, we can examine the role of Bayard Rustin, who helped organize the 1963 March on Washington, as an out civil rights activist. We can include the gay liberation movement as a civil rights movement. We can have students study the Black Panther Party's position on homosexuality. Here is what Huey Newton approved as the official Black Panther position on the subject:

Homosexuals are not given freedom and liberty by anyone in this society. Maybe they might be the most oppressed people in the society.... A person should have the freedom to use his body whatever way he wants to. The Women's Liberation Front and Gay Liberation Front are our friends, they are our potential allies and we need as many allies

as possible.... We should be careful about using terms which might turn our friends off. The terms "faggot" and "punk" should be deleted from our vocabulary, and especially we should not attach names normally designed for homosexual men to men who are enemies of the people, such as Nixon or Mitchell. Homosexuals are not enemies of the people.

There are countless pieces of literature with lesbian and/or gay themes, ranging from *Coffee Will Make You Black* by April Sinclair, to *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, to *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae Brown. A multitude of famous literary icons are or were lesbian or gay, such as

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Sappho, James Baldwin, Adrienne Rich, and E. M. Forster. Biology classes that discuss human reproduction can include the role of artificial insemination in allowing a growing number of lesbians and gay men to

become parents. The ongoing "biology versus environment" debate — i.e., whether sexual preference is determined largely through genetics or environmental factors — can be one of the topics students can choose to research and debate. Physical education teachers can talk openly and respectfully about gay athletes such as diver Greg Louganis and tennis star Martina Navratilova.

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From elementary school on, teachers need to talk about gay people so children learn they are a normal part of our society. Many students have lesbian and gay family members whom they love. They must not feel they have to hide or be embarrassed by these relationships.

My eight-year-old daughter, for instance, has decided she will not compromise on telling the world she has two moms, no matter what the consequences. Last year, she had a confrontation with a bunch of kindergarten boys who accused her and her friend of being gay because she was leaning on her friend's shoulder for support due to a twisted ankle. She told them there was nothing wrong with being gay. Then she announced that, besides, both her moms were gay.

The boys really went to town on that. The ridicule they subjected her to reduced her to tears. After 10 minutes of crying in the bathroom she returned to class and was given detention — her first — for tardiness. She called it the worst day of her life and said, "And Mom, how am I going to make it through high school?"

In every class, every semester, after I come out I find out about the aunts, cousins, brothers, and friends that young people are normally forced to be silent about. Children desperately need teachers to counter these taboos, to talk about gay people naturally, unabashedly, and positively.

Role Models

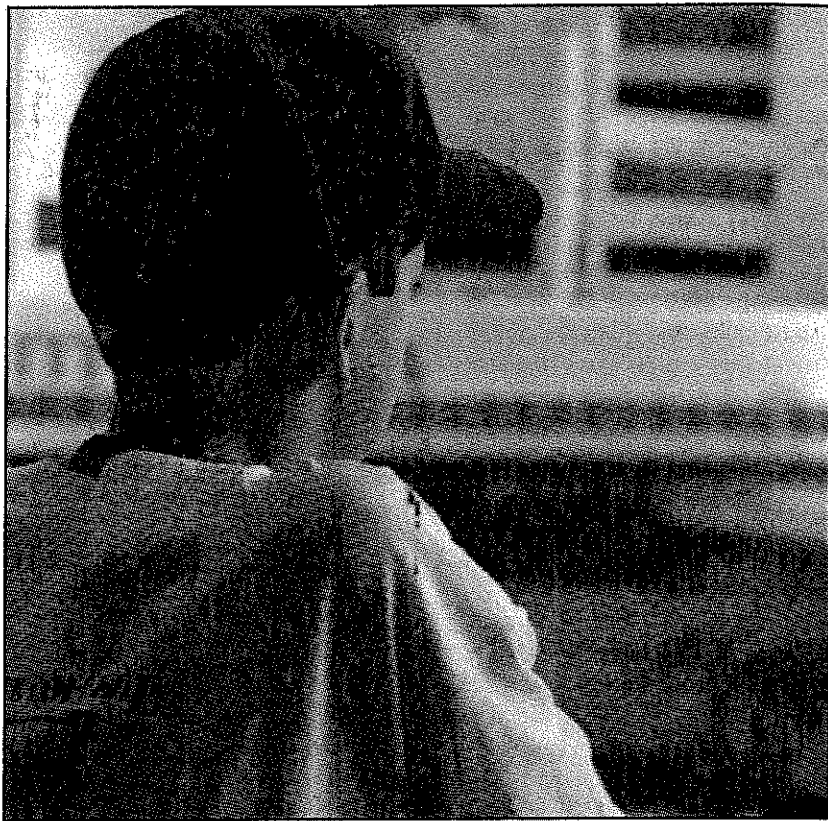
A queer-friendly school is one in which there are positive lesbian and gay role models, not just for queer students but for all students. Whether students are gay or bi or straight, they need to experience gay teachers as people who enrich their lives and care about them. An environment in which lesbian, gay, and bisexual teachers can be out to their students is critical to breaking down the culture of homophobia.

But it is extremely difficult to be out in a school setting. You feel isolated and pegged. In many districts, you can be fired for being out in the classroom. At the least, one risks censure by the administration and homophobic reactions from parents. Every gay teacher fears being targeted and persecuted if word gets out.

Consider my experience with Calley, who was a bright, energetic 14-year-old when first she came to my classroom. She had spent junior high fighting with the little league coach to be able to play on the all-boys baseball team. She spent her freshman year trying out boyfriends and sporting large hickeys. By her sophomore year, she'd had enough of all that. She began attending the lesbian/gay support group meetings in my classroom and signed up to be a proctor for me. Her mother searched her backpack and read her journal, in which she had a number of poems that made her feelings about sexuality quite explicit. Calley's mother immediately wanted to drag Calley to a therapist. And her mother was looking for someone to blame. I was a handy target.

In a conservative community hell-bent on targeting gays, I'd have been mincemeat. But at Berkeley, where there is no such organized opposition to the rights of gays, and where many straight colleagues and administrators are supportive of gays, Calley's mother could do little about me.

Calley ran away from home that summer, returning to an uneasy truce in the fall. She is out and has a strong circle of friends, but clearly it will be



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many years before she feels again the support of a loving family.

Gay teachers need to take more risks to provide strong out models of what it means to be gay. We cannot do that, however, without a supportive environment. Straight teachers can help to create such support.

If straight faculty members at my high school would raise a concern about the homophobia they so constantly see in their classes, it would be easier to develop an anti-slug policy. If there were any other teachers developing curriculum that included gay issues (besides when discussing HIV), I would feel supported. These actions do not require a particular sexual orientation. They only require concern and a commitment to act against homophobia. ■

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Note

1. For many years, "queer" was a pejorative only acceptable when used among gay people. But as the definition of this movement has expanded to include lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning people, many youth openly began using "queer" as an all-inclusive term. This was probably popularized by the short but exciting existence of the group, "Queer Nation," which did a lot of in-your-face type guerrilla theater against heterosexism. "Gay," on the other hand, was an acceptable term in general usage denoting all homosexual people and had a respectful connotation. Among youth now, however, "gay" is a slang adjective with extremely negative overtones. I use "queer" when talking about youth, partly because it covers so many bases, and so many youth aren't sure what base they'll end up playing. I use "gay" when talking about older people because we came of age when "gay" (or lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender) was the proper term.