

Lesson Plan: Controversy

Public school curriculum offers yet another heavy silence on gay and lesbian issues. Congressional legislation has prohibited schools from using federal funds for programs "designed to promote sexual activity," and such rulings often result in a clamp on the entire subject, an attitude of "just say nothing."

As a result, students learn no facts that could correct their fears and misconceptions about gay and lesbian life. The subject is absent not only from "family life" or "diversity" curricula but from discussions of important contributions in art, politics, literature, music and science. In the silence, stereotypes thrive.

But including material on gay men and lesbians in student course work is a controversial notion — even more so than making room on school library shelves for books with gay-positive themes.

One possibility is to "begin with the so-called 'diversity' curriculum, that part of the curriculum that aims to instill an appreciation for differences," said a member of the task force who did not want to be named. "The next step is infusing the entire curriculum — making the point that gays and Jews and blacks and Asians etc. have all contributed mightily to the artistic fabric of our community."

Taylor, director of curriculum, expressed doubts about this idea in a recent telephone interview. While teachers do highlight the contributions of women and plan lessons to coincide with Black History Month, "we don't necessarily do that for all particular groups," Taylor said. "I'm not willing to say that's something we need to do. That might overshadow our other curriculum because there are so many groups we would need to mention."

Gay Youth — At High Risk

With the formation of the task force, Portland joins the growing list of localities nationwide addressing issues for gay and lesbian teens. The need for attention to sexual minority youth has begun to earn print even in mainstream publications such as the *Journal of Counseling and Development*.

In an article in that journal's fall 1989 issue, two Minneapolis researchers said that addressing the concerns of gay/lesbian/bisexual youth and their families "is no longer an option but an imperative for every counselor working with young people."

Some of the most powerful prose on the issue of gay and lesbian teens came from the federal government, in a 1989 report from the Department of Health and Human Services on youth suicide.

A section of that report written by Paul Gibson, a San Francisco therapist and researcher, noted that gay and lesbian youth

are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers; they may account for up to 30 percent of youth suicides annually.

This high suicide rate may be the most drastic — but not the only — risk faced by gay and lesbian teens, Gibson said. Such youth are more likely to suffer other problems such as substance abuse, depression, school failure and relationship conflicts. They may be at high risk for AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases; many are forced to leave their families and survive on their own at an early age.

Many gay male teenagers are able to form close friendships with heterosexual girls, while lesbians are often rejected by classmates of both sexes

"One of the greatest risk factors in the problem gay youth face is the wall of silence surrounding the subject," the report said.

Gay youth often feel they have two unsatisfactory choices — to conceal their sexual identity or to risk the harassment that comes with disclosure. "Many gay youth choose to maintain a facade and hide their true feelings and identity, leading a double life," Gibson wrote. "They live in constant fear of being found out and recognized as gay."

While heterosexual teens may turn to their families or communities, gay teens are often rejected by those closest to them. Gibson estimated that gay male, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual youth comprise as much as one-fourth of teens living on the streets in this country.

Local and state statistics paint an equally sharp picture. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Oregon adolescents; 648 teenagers attempted suicide in 1988, and 35 died. A Multnomah County study of street youth showed that 25 percent of respondents identified as gay or lesbian.

The risks are higher for gay teens who are also members of ethnic minority groups. The double burden of racism and homophobia drives even more of these adolescents to desperation; racial/ethnic minority gay males are 12 times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers.

Such numbers have shocked school districts and community groups into action. Following the release of the Health and Human Services report on youth suicide, the president of the Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays called the treatment of gay and lesbian adolescents "a

serious national child abuse problem."

Paulette Goodman noted that P/FLAG chapters around the country include many parents whose children have attempted or committed suicide. "Not many of us could grow up with the burden of being called 'sick' by the medical profession, 'criminal' by the law and 'sinful' by our churches, without suffering serious emotional damage," she said.

School districts in major urban centers such as Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York have been the first to respond. In San Francisco, a teachers' group called the Bay Area Network of Gay and Lesbian Educators (BANGLE) launched an annual scholarship for a gay or lesbian high school student.

The gay and lesbian community center in Palo Alto sends speakers to high schools; the Heterosexism/Homophobia Educators Program in Amherst, Massachusetts has developed a "name-calling" curriculum to raise students' consciousness about racial, ethnic and sexual slurs and their impact. And a high school in a Chicago suburb recently added "sexual orientation" to the list of groups protected by the school's "human dignity and diversity" policy.

In New York, the Hetrick-Martin Institute provides services to gay youth between 12 and 21. As part of a campaign to boost visibility and reduce isolation for gay teens, the institute published a series of comic books called "Tales of the Closet." A poster also produced by the group shows a typical crowd of adolescents with the caption: "You are not alone. There are millions of gay and lesbian teenagers in the world. Gay people come in every size, shape, color, background, religion and race."

Project 10

The best-known of the school-based programs is Los Angeles' Project 10, begun in 1984 by teacher and counselor Virginia Uribe. The project, whose title refers to the estimated 10 percent of the general population that is gay or lesbian, aims to reduce harassment of gay students, keep them in school and educate non-gay students.

As part of the project, Uribe has counseled more than 400 students, sponsored workshops for administrators and school staff, offered outreach to parents and worked with health care providers for teens.

The project has drawn praise from gay advocates and educators; the National Education Association called for the development of similar programs in districts around the country. It also has drawn ire from conservative parents and politicians, including U.S. Rep. William Dannemeyer (R-California) and Sen. Gordon Humphrey (R-New Hampshire).

During debate in the House of Representatives last August on appropriations that included the money for Project 10,

Dannemeyer criticized the program, describing it as one intended to "provide instruction to the kids in that school district into the activities of homosexuality."

In his discussion of Project 10, Dannemeyer made clear his feeling that nothing less than the future of the country was at stake. "One of the major political issues of the 1980's and '90s will be whether or not we in our American culture accept and equate homosexuality on a par with a heterosexual lifestyle," he said.

During similar debate in the Senate, Alan Cranston (D-California) countered the criticism about Project 10. Such programs "are not about converting people, as some may misunderstand them to be; they are about acceptance, helping gay and lesbian youth accept themselves, as well as helping their peers and teachers accept them."

In California, the debate continues. In January, the education committee of the California Senate rejected a bill that would have required parents' permission before students could get instruction on issues including homosexuality and AIDS. The sponsor of that bill, state Sen. Newton Russell, withdrew a second bill — clearly aimed to thwart Project 10 — that would have prevented school staff from counseling students without their parents' consent.



In Portland, task force members express tentative optimism about the group's progress. While they are pleased with the initial reception from school administrators, they caution that it is too soon to say how many of their recommendations will be translated into action.

Prophet's response during a meeting on the issue was "encouraging," said a member of the task force who did not want his name used. "He didn't make any clear commitments. But even the meeting taking place would be controversial to some people."

Taylor, the curriculum director, said he is aware that any steps toward boosting support for gay and lesbian students may be controversial. "We realize there will be detractors, people who say that's not our business, that we should be spending our money in better ways. But that's not going to stop us. It needs to be a real pro-active approach." ▼

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