

“Who’s that Faggot at the Board?”: A School-based Intervention with a Gay Student

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Abstract: This article describes a successful intervention conducted in a public high school in Miami, Florida, to address an incident of harassment based on a student’s sexual orientation. The implications for educators and other school personnel to intervene in such instances are considered.

The media has recently reported numerous incidents of violence and harassment against lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students. Some of these incidents have occurred in school settings. On February 12, 2008, Lawrence King, a 15-year-old student in Oxnard, California was shot and killed by a classmate allegedly because of his sexual orientation and gender expression. In the latest FBI report, hate crimes against gays made up 16% of total documented hate crimes across the United States in 2006, up from 14% in 2005 (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2006). Unsafe conditions at school are a reality for most students in the United States (Nansel et al., 2001; Nolin, Davies, & Chandler, 1995). National Center for Education Statistics (as cited in Nolin, Davies, & Chandler, 1995) indicate that among students in grades six through twelve, 71% reported having knowledge of bullying or physical attacks at their schools during the current school year; plus, 12% of them reported having been directly and personally victimized at school during the same time period and of these, the vast majority (8%) was victimized by bullying. More recently, 10.6% of students in grades six through ten experienced moderate or frequent bullying (Nansel et al. 2001). Consistent with the earlier study, males were more likely to be bullied and were more likely to experience physical attacks, whereas females were more likely to experience verbal or psychological abuse. A statistically significant racial difference was found: 70% of Blacks reported no experience of being bullied compared to 56.3% of Whites and 59.4% of Hispanics. There were no significant differences in frequency based on density of population: youth from urban, suburban, town, and rural areas reported similar rates of bullying.

Abuse of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth

Although victimization is experienced by students from all demographic categories, increasingly lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students are increasingly targeted significantly more often than any other group. The findings of recent studies are rather startling: self-identified LGB students were more than five times as likely to be threatened or injured multiple (four or more) times with a weapon at school compared to heterosexual students (Faulkner & Cranston, 1998). LGB students were more than three times as likely to have been in ten or more fights during the preceding year. Similarly, LGB students compared to heterosexual students were three times as likely to have their personal property stolen or deliberately damaged at school. Additionally, more than eight times as many LGB students reported skipping school multiple (four or more) times during the preceding thirty days because of feeling unsafe at (or on the way to or from) school. The disparity between self-identified LGB and heterosexual students on all of the above measures of victimization was statistically significant ($P < .05$).

There are gender differences amongst LGB students on various measures of at-school

victimization: 51% of males, compared to 32% of females, reported three or more incidents of verbal abuse (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002). Plus, 12% of males versus 8% of females reported three or more threats of violence, and 6% of males and 1% of females reported three or more incidents of having objects thrown at them. Also, 6% of males and 4% of females reported three or more incidents of being punched, kicked, or beaten. Finally, 3% of males and no females reported three or more incidents of sexual assault. Gay male students were victimized significantly more often than lesbian students (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger (2002). The more gender atypical students appeared or acted, the more they were attacked; similarly, being openly gay or "out" led to attacks and once "out," victimization of those students remained stable. These findings are consistent with literature that conceptualizes violence in school as an issue of masculinity (Burstyn et al., 2001; Mills, 2001). That is, homophobia, sexism and violence are all viewed as hegemonic forms of masculinity. Thus, those who step outside the bounds of accepted or even idealized gender roles are punished (Fone, 2000; Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Although verbal abuse was the most common form of victimization, stress caused by this type of assault cannot be underestimated. In fact, a national study of sexual harassment in high school by the American Association of University Women (as cited in D'Augelli & Patterson, 2001) found that being called "gay" or other synonymous terms was the most psychologically upsetting form of verbal harassment. This is indicative of the stigma associated with being a member of the minority sexual orientation. For adolescents to feel accepted by their peers is highly important.

Given the widespread abuse of gay students, it is not surprising that most LGB individuals do not reveal their sexual orientation until later in life (Savins-Williams, 2001). Those who do not exhibit stereotypical mannerism or appearance can blend in with the heterosexual population and most who can, do so. Remaining "in the closet" is also stressful, however, and has been correlated with multiple health risks (Meyer, 2003). For example, gay men who conceal their sexual orientation experience a significantly higher incidence of cancer and several infectious diseases (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, & Visscher, 1996). Conversely, despite the heightened risk for victimization, being "out" is correlated with better health and well-being for LGB individuals (Meyer, 2003). Only by revealing one's sexual orientation can the individual identify and associate with LGB peers. These social connections are an important source of support and relieve the sense of isolation experienced by many LGB adolescents.

Empirical studies are identifying the trends and incidence of LGB victimization in school. Case studies and/or qualitative research can provide richness of detail that allows us to understand the importance of this issue. Human Rights Watch is an independent, non-governmental organization that routinely conducts systematic investigations and reports on human rights abuses throughout the world. After interviewing 140 LGB and transgender youth and 130 adults (including youth service providers, teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents) in seven states from 1999--2000, Human Rights Watch (2001) concluded that U.S. schools are unsafe for LGB youth. Too many school officials condoned the cruelty perpetrated on these adolescents through inaction and in some cases were abusive themselves. Furthermore, they hold the government at the local, state, and federal levels accountable for refusing to dismantle laws, policies, and practices that effectively discriminate against these youth.

Associated Risk Factors

Researchers are beginning to study the risk factors associated with sexual orientation. Virtually equal proportions of LGB students and heterosexual students used moderate

(approximately once per month) levels of alcohol and marijuana (Faulkner & Cranston, 1998). Amongst students who use excessive amounts of alcohol, marijuana and other illegal drugs, however, LGB youth are significantly over-represented. LGB students (10.9%) are nine times more likely to report using alcohol on *each* of the past thirty days. They are nearly four times as likely to have used marijuana forty or more times in the past month and nineteen times more likely to have used cocaine ten or more times in the past month. Finally, a shocking 20% of LGB students reported having used intravenous illegal drugs, nearly seven times the percentage of heterosexuals (3.1%). Similarly, LGB students are eight times more likely than heterosexual students to attempt suicide multiple times and are four times more likely to require medical attention for suicide attempts. The reason for LGB youth making up a disproportionate share of the heavy drug use and serious suicide attempts is the level of victimization at school (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002). Consistent with earlier studies, these researchers found that victimization at school was disproportionately associated with LGB status. LGB students experiencing low levels of victimization were similar to their heterosexual peers on other risk factors (substance use, truancy, risky sexual behavior, and suicide attempts). LGB students experiencing high levels of victimization, however, evidenced significantly more health risk behavior compared with heterosexual students in the high-victimization group. Therefore, being victimized because of one's sexual orientation is more damaging than other types of victimization. Even the most "flamboyant" LGB students experience little or no victimization at some schools. Generally, faculty at these schools do not tolerate bigotry of any form, including anti-gay harassment (Human Rights Watch, 2002). Faculty and staff promptly intervene on behalf of LGB students. Thus, homophobic taunting is not permitted to escalate in these schools.

Intervention

High school counselors face students crying, distraught over comments just made in their classroom about being gay or lesbian. This paper answers this question and provides a literature review of harassment of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth.

First, I (Javier Berezdivin) closed the door and listened to his story. Michael had participated in my support group for gay and lesbian students since he was a ninth grader, for the past two years. He knew that he could trust me and that I would pay close attention. He recounted how his teacher had entered the room after welcoming other students and asked him to go to the blackboard and write a journal entry. Suddenly, a voice in the background mockingly asked, "Who's that faggot at the board?" With his emotions assaulted, his self-respect attacked, feeling frozen, he didn't know how to respond. Gaining composure, he managed to ask his teacher if he could talk with a counselor, and the teacher immediately sent him to my office. After telling his story, he asked me if he could change this class since he hated the kids did not want to return. I acknowledged his feelings of being terribly insulted, and that it truly was not his problem that others were insensitive and uncaring of his feelings. I suggested going back to the class to speak with the teacher and students directly, but he said he couldn't and didn't want to do it. So I alone went promptly to his science class and spoke with the teacher. She was aware of what had happened, and when I asked her if she would allow me to speak with the students, she enthusiastically accepted my invitation. I asked her to stand with me in front of the class to provide support, given that I didn't know them. The strength and motivation to do this came from running a gay-lesbian support group for the last five years in the school. I knew about the harassment students frequently face and I combat it. Also, several years before, I had taken a two-day Communications Course offered by The Yes Institute. This course was one of the best courses I had taken in my entire professional career; the course prepared me to address the

issues, not from a defensive and confrontational perspective, but from a collaborative and conflict –resolution approach.

I introduced myself to the class and told them why I was there: I was concerned about Michael's incident. A girl snickered, "Why do we need to do this?" I proceeded to ask them to tell me what had happened, and to hear from different students about their perceptions. I explained that 10-20% of the population was gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender and many students in our school fell into this population and had to deal with offensive comments often. Their peers, mistakenly suspecting them of being gay, sometimes harassed straight kids. I sensed animosity towards Michael from at least six or seven students and responded in as sensitive a manner as possible. They commented, "It's his fault. If he would have spoken up for himself, he wouldn't be treated this way." Or "We don't like gays here." I continually tried to acknowledge their uncomfortable feelings towards unfamiliar things that so many people consider "wrong." At the end of the class I sensed there was still a good distance to achieving a resolution. I called Joseph Zolobczuk, an Education and Training Specialist at The Yes Institute, and invited him to come in the next school day; I received the teacher's permission.

The next day, a few minutes before Joseph was scheduled to arrive, I got Michael out of his class and found out he was still very hurt. I spoke about the value of his presence in the class in question, not necessarily having to speak, and he accepted that. When Joseph arrived, about thirty minutes before the class started, we reviewed who would take what initiative/role, and then we went into the class. The teacher welcomed us, and again, could hear a disapproving remark from the same girl who had been against Michael the day before. She asked immediately why this issue had to be addressed again if we had spoken about it the day before. I responded that I felt the topic had been left unfinished. I introduced Joseph and what ensued was a lively discussion about what really had transpired. Joseph introduced himself and explained that as a younger person, he had similar experiences as Michael, and he was there to talk about their thoughts and feelings. He quickly established that what had happened was not so much "about Michael" but about the classmates. Negative feelings and fears emerged, as well as the idea that Michael was weak in not "standing up for himself": if he had confronted whomever voiced the disparaging remark, he would have gained his classmates' respect. Joseph responded by explaining that oftentimes kids are so hurt and fearful of the way they have been treated by peers in the past, that they simply do not have the emotional strength to "stand up for themselves." A Latin boy commented to Michael that he had noticed Michael separating himself from the class as weeks went by, but that he had nothing against him. In fact, he had a gay boss with whom he got along very well, and he personally would welcome Michael back as a member in the group. He openly expressed his friendship and support to Michael. This comment shifted the mood. This student spoke with inner strength, voicing acceptance and genuine appreciation for Michael and a willingness to bring him into his personal space. At the end of the class, we thanked for their openness and commended Michael for his bravery in being there to listen to the conversation.

The following week, when I saw Michael in the LGB support group, he commented on the great change in the class since the intervention and that students were now much more accepting and welcoming. He was amazed since this had seemed like a far-flung possibility. His teacher commented several months later, "Michael has integrated into the class as a whole since this happened. He no longer isolates, and has developed more typical behaviors, both good and bad. I am happy for him." Since I had never tried this intervention, I couldn't predict its success, but its success led me to think that if it were to happen again, I would know how to proceed.

Implications and Further Questions

It is essential for school personnel to become informed and proactive regarding the problems LGB students face with bullying and harassment in the schools and to intervene promptly and effectively when a student reports such incidents. The National Association of Social Workers has stated in its official policy position that there is a need to encourage the development of programs, training, and information aimed at ending all types of violence toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual people (NASW, 2003). It is clearly within our scope and moral mandate as educators, social workers, and other school personnel to do whatever is necessary to learn about and implement interventions that minimize and hopefully eliminate incidents of harassment. As students learn to be more tolerant of their differences they will fight less, and a reduction in school violence will result in a climate that is more conducive for learning.

Several issues related to this intervention deserve further inquiry. These include risks, both to the students and to the teacher or counselor, parental notification, and follow-up. This type of intervention requires a degree of professional preparation and comfort addressing difficult issues. Courses such as the one the author had taken and an outside expert would help prepare professionals. Another issue is whether parents must be notified about the harassment. Since the student was not “out” to his parents, preferred for this to remain confidential, and was seventeen years old, his confidentiality was respected. If this happened to a middle school student, parental notification may be necessary. Parental notification and the legal parameters need further clarification, especially to comply with state Department of Education guidelines and local school board policies. Finally, such an intervention requires close follow-up of the student who was harassed. If not, the counselor would not know if the harassment had ended or how well the student was coping with the situation post-incident.

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