



Increasing Visibility for LGBTQ Students:

What Schools Can Do To Create Inclusive Classroom Communities

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Abstract

The number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning students is increasing in schools. School districts, administrators and teachers need to increase awareness of these students and work to make them feel included and welcomed in a safe school environment, one free from offensive languages and practices. This article discusses some of the problems that these students and teachers face and some strategies that educators can use to help them be a valuable part of a learning community.

Keywords: LGBTQ, homophobia, sexual identification, sexual stereotyping

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Increasing Visibility for LGBTQ Students: What Schools can do to Create Inclusive Classroom Communities

On Friday, April 17, 2009, the family of Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover should have celebrated his twelfth birthday. Instead, they mourned his loss. Eleven-year old Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover made efforts to participate in his school and community. He played football and basketball. He belonged to the Boy Scouts. Despite Carl's participation in these team-oriented activities, he felt isolated. He did not identify himself as being gay, but his classmates repeatedly teased him implying that he was in fact gay. Carl could not continue living with the torment he underwent every day at school. He felt he had nowhere else to turn, and he decided suicide was his only choice, his only way out. He hanged himself on April 6, 2009. In an effort to influence policy makers, to enact policies and procedures, which may help to prevent future tragedies, the authors examine the stigma surrounding non-heterosexual students and explore ways to make schools more welcoming, inclusive communities. There are many issues that have worked to shape the current school environment which require a variety of actions in order to make positive changes.

Literature Review

Society has a long history of stigmatizing homosexuality. While lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people have always been in society, they were not often mentioned (Campos, 2003; Sullivan, 2003). Occasionally in history, famous individuals, such as playwright Oscar Wilde (Oscar Wilde Online, 2009), were jailed for the crime of sodomy. At one time, doctors classified homosexuality as a disease. While the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV-TR, 2000) does not list homosexuality as a disease and society has a somewhat more enlightened

view of the science behind sexual orientation, the societal stigma behind homosexuality remains. Students commonly dismiss something that they dislike or disapprove of, situations that make them uncomfortable or demands that they do not want to hear as being “gay” (DePaul, Walsh & Dam, 2009; Savage & Harley, 2009; Daniel, 2007). As a result of this kind of talk in the hallways, classrooms, locker rooms and bathrooms, many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning students (LGBTQ) may feel unwelcome and left out in the school community. As a direct result of the harassment, the bullying and the unwelcomed comments, students are at risk for suicide. Although Savin-Williams (2005) postulates that these students actually feel quite good about themselves. In fact, Savin-Williams (2005) believes that those students who identify themselves as being gay show no difference in self-esteem from their heterosexual peers. But, Curwood, Schliesman, & Horning (2009) indicate that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning students often live in a world that is not safe for them. Blackburn (2006) indicates schools are often not safe places for students who see themselves outside of the gender rules. There still remains the issue of defining what is meant when referring to people who themselves in a different light.

LGBTQ’s are defined for ease of clarification and to focus on meeting the issues, obstacles and concerns of these school-age youth. Additionally, the use of the acronym LGBTQ includes all sexual minorities, serves to raise curiosity about each letter and can cause intellectual inquiry as to what each letter represents (Savage & Harley, 2009). The order of the letters is often changed, usually for political reasons (Macgillivray, 2004). The following serves to define each of the letters as it represents a different group of students in schools. Macgillivray (2004) explains that the L, G, B, and Q in LGBTQ have to do with sexual orientation. Sexual orientation represents physical, emotional, and spiritual attraction. The word Lesbian identifies

women who are sexually attracted to other women. The term Gay represents men who are attracted to men for sex. Bisexual individuals find themselves attracted to both men and women. The Q indicates a person who is Questioning his or her own sexual preference; allowing this type of person the ability not to claim a sexual orientation identity. Savage & Harley (2009) state that, the focus of Transgender people is on the identification of being male, female, or somewhere in between, rather than on sexual preference for either males or females. In addition, Transgender deals greatly with a person whose physical sex (male or female) conflicts with his or her psychological identity of being either male or female or somewhere in between. Students who identify themselves as LGBTQ have reasons to fear for their physical and emotional safety in schools. There is plenty of documentation that substantiates this sense of being uncomfortable.

Espelage and Swearer (2008) reported that homophobic behaviors and attitudes appear to be interrelated with other forms of verbal and physical forms of peer victimization. Swearer, Turner, Givens, and Pollack (2008) found that 26% of boys (ninth through eleventh grades) who had experienced bullying indicated that they were bullied by being called gay. Williams, Connolly, Pepler, and Craig (2005) explored the social adjustment of LGBTQ students. These students expressed concern for their well-being, given the prejudices against non-heterosexual individuals. Safren and Heimburg, (1999) commented on the negative connotations associated with non-heterosexuality, indicating that this association may reduce the student's ability to have positive social interactions with friends and family. This was usually based on a perceived reduction in social support. Safren and Heimburg (1999) go on to conclude that the reduction in social support and increased harassment are detrimental experiences for these youth and pose a major obstacle to "normal" emotional and behavioral adjustments in social settings. In the

course of their work, Williams et al (2005) discovered that LGBTQ students reported incidents of vandalism coupled with being both physically threatened and emotionally isolated by their peers. Statistics indicate that harassment of LGBTQ students in schools is a significant problem. LGBTQ students are three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to have been verbally assaulted or involved in a physical altercation in school (Human Rights Watch, 2001). For every LGBTQ student who reported being harassed, four heterosexual students reported harassment based on a perception that they were also gay or lesbian (Reis, 1996). LGBTQ students often report that administrators, teachers and other staff do not get involved when derogatory language is used towards them (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). More recently, cyberbullying has been making the news. Tippett, Thompson and Smith (2010) reported that 1 in 10 children in our public schools have experienced cyberbullying. It is also apparent from the literature that girls are more often the victims of cyberbullying and boys the most likely to be cyberbullies. Boys, it seems, are most often the bullies whether it be face-to-face or in the cyber world.

Current Conditions

Harassment, bullying, including cyberbullying and violence are common in schools, and LGBTQ youth experience more extreme and persistent violence and harassment in school than their heterosexual peers. In a study conducted during the 2005 school year, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) found that although most schools have anti-bullying policies in place, less than fifty percent (50%) of the policies include sexual orientation or gender identity. Many principals do not acknowledge or are unaware of the extent of LGBTQ student harassment taking

place in their schools. (GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 2008). This lack of knowledge often manifests itself in a variety of ways.

Research has demonstrated that LGBTQ students are at high risk for dropping out of school, suicidal thoughts and actions, depression, self mutilation, drug and alcohol abuse, feelings of isolation and unsafe sex (Cochran & Mays, 2000; D'Augelli, 2002; McDaniel, Purcell, & D'Augelli, 2001; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). For many students, high schools are the center of life and culture, and they may be the most homophobic institutions in American society (Unks, 1995). High school culture does not tolerant sexual minorities. For the LGBTQ student, 'coming out' may be extremely dangerous (Savage & Harley, 2009). Sadly, school culture is often seen as a mirror of our society at large (Morris, 2005). With those thoughts in mind, it is no wonder that school curriculum and extracurricular activities reflect this heterosexual bias, reinforcing negative attitudes and stereotypes of any sexual orientation other than heterosexual (Savage & Harley, 2009). An equal and inclusive education is not possible for LGBTQ students when their physical and emotional safety is frequently compromised (Stone, 2003). LGBTQ students are not the only people to feel isolated within the school community. It has more far reaching implications.

LGBTQ stigma can also affect teachers. One example is that of Mike Fishback (2004) who spent many years as a closeted student. While he did come out in college, when he landed a teaching position in the Baltimore area he felt he had to hide his identity. Although he was just getting used to being openly gay, he decided that in his new school environment he had to proceed cautiously. During his first winter, scandal broke out within the Catholic Church, and the terms "gay male" and "child abuser" were thrown about interchangeably in the media. According to Fishback (2004) "Even though our school was "progressive," few teachers were

‘out’ to their fellow faculty, and none were ‘out’ to their students” (pg.5). Fishback (2004), with support of his school district, took a direct approach when he decided to come out to his seventh grade students. This gesture was not without some risk. His parents worried he might be falsely accused of molestation. Colleagues worried he would become the sole representative of gay culture. A survey conducted among students indicated most felt a gay person would not be accepted at school (Fishback, 2004). Nevertheless, he persevered, and with the support of the administration and his colleagues he told his students during a unit on gay rights (Fishback, 2004).

Rather than ridicule him, his students flooded him with questions about his life. They asked if he and his partner planned to adopt children. They wanted to know if he hated homophobic people and how he reconciled his Jewish faith with his sexual identity. They asked if he chose to be gay and how his parents accepted him. Many wondered if he had been scared to tell the class. One girl inquired why he told the students in the first place. She wondered why gay people didn’t just keep that part of their identity to themselves.

The situation is not always handled the same and the area may not be as receptive as was that of Fishback’s. Sanlo (1999) reported on a group of gay teachers in northeast Florida who were almost paralyzed by fear and living in silence. These teachers worked in an atmosphere that was uncomfortable in dealing with both students and colleagues. They came to distance themselves both personally and professionally, living in anxiety from day to day, hoping that no one would find out that they were gay. Like many school districts in Florida, sexual orientation was not a part of any non-discrimination policies for teachers (Mayo, 2008). Mayo (2008) indicates that this lack of legal protection heightens the teachers’ fears and makes it very difficult for them to do their jobs. This fear is not unique to just one part of the country. Anywhere in

this country where school districts do not consider sexual orientation as part of antidiscrimination policies, gay and lesbian teachers are experiencing similar fears and feelings of not being a part of the school culture. Often this translates into feelings of not being good role models for their students (Mayo, 2008). Even when school policies do exist, teachers often face issues of community standards that often go far beyond what is in school policy, and which the community outside of the school or classroom enforces either subtly or overtly. Attitudes cannot be legislated away, and it takes a school and a community, working together, to change them and to change the culture in the school. But there is hope on the horizon and there are positive steps being taken to address this issue.

Schools increasingly recognize the need to embrace a diverse student body taught by a diverse faculty. They are working to ensure bully-free zones, but not every school takes the time to address the subtle bullying of LGBTQ students and faculty. These students and faculty remain invisible, and their voices remain silent. Schools still need to address this issue, but given the stigma of homosexuality and the potential for controversy, many teachers and school officials may not know where to begin. Homophobia is still largely ignored as a bias. The question is: “How do educators begin to change antiquated attitudes?”

Suggestions for Future Improvements

What can schools, superintendents, principals, and teachers do to make schools and classrooms more inclusive and embrace diversity? The following discussion focuses on some ideas that could be implemented to achieve this end; looking at all levels of education and pointing to key personnel that can act to positively influence the classroom experience for students.

Research indicates that educators should first work on themselves, examining their own prejudices and misconceptions. How does teacher education programs prepare tomorrow's teachers to take positive actions toward the LGBTQ student population and to work with LGBTQ colleagues? Fletcher and Russell (2001) acknowledge a lack of training for pre-service teachers, suggesting a first step might be to help pre-service teachers feel more comfortable with topics surrounding homosexuality. As a starting point, Fletcher and Russell (2001) suggest that pre-service teachers begin by reviewing current research on homosexuality and education. Although that is a good first step, teacher- training programs need to be even more proactive. Wyatt, Oswalt, White, and Peterson (2008) explain that because students spend a third or more of each weekday at school, the school environment needs to be a safe, welcoming place for all students and staff. Teachers and administrators must learn how to develop and maintain a safe learning atmosphere that openly welcomes sexual diversity.

Wyatt et al (2008) also believe that teacher attitudes toward homosexuality contribute significantly to the classroom environment. They examined attitudes toward homosexuals among 334 teacher candidates. The findings indicated that while most of the pre-service teachers reported a moderate attitude toward LGBTQ, many had a more negative perception of gay males (Wyatt et al. 2008). As a result of their study, the researchers recommended that all students in teacher education programs take a course on sexuality to begin to address the needs of LGBTQ students and suggested teacher training programs provide ways for teacher candidates to examine their own values (Wyatt et al. 2008). Incorporating values clarification strategies into teacher preparation programs should increase future educators' awareness of their potential biases. The ability of teachers to be aware of their own attitudes can help them overcome

unconscious or subtle ways in which they inadvertently create a hostile environment for LGBTQ youth and teachers.

Therefore, Colleges and Universities engaged in training future teachers should introduce these issues into the regular curriculum. Many of these institutions have courses on multicultural education and diversity. Unfortunately, most are geared to addressing issues of race, religion, sex (male or female), and economic status but fail to address the issues integral to the LGBTQ community. An open discussion on language and terminology will enable these pre-service teachers the opportunity to be prepared to intervene once they are in the classroom. These students also need exposure to literature that is not based on heterosexual characters but allows them to explore the world of this alternative lifestyle. Also, pre-service teachers must be given strategies and coaching on how to effectively deal with LGBTQ students in their classrooms so that they do not feel left out. One final strategy is to help students understand that the home, the place where students go after school, may not consist of a mother and a father but could have just one parent or two guardians that are of the same sex. It is thought that as many as ten million school children in the United States have lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) parents (Pawelski , Perrin, Foy, Allen, Crawford, & Del Monte, M.et al.,2006). This last point can be best illustrated by the work of Bower and Klecka (2009) when they discuss the issue of children being asked to make Father's Day presents in school. First, many students come from single parent homes, usually without a father present, or more recently where the guardians are either lesbian or gay. Not knowing your students can have very negative effects on students and can put them in situations that are very uncomfortable. If we teach pre-service teachers to examine their own biases, then we may have more open-minded educators.

As for veteran classroom teachers, this same exercise of examining their biases can have a positive effect on the classroom. Teachers need to be aware of the language that students are using during the school day. They also need to be made aware of the biases in the textbooks that they are using. In addition, veteran teachers need to consider issues such as the Father's Day exercise (Bower & Klecka, 2009) when they are doing classroom projects or making homework assignments. The authors are not advocating immersing students at all grade levels into an open discussion of LGBTQ issues, but do encourage classroom teachers to be sensitive to those issues and reinforce positive elements when appropriate. This is the place where solid professional development can be very useful to veteran teachers. A well planned open discussion with opportunities to express fears and anxiety can help teachers be more sensitive to LGBTQ students, colleagues, and families.

Veteran teachers should also examine their beliefs and misconceptions. A common misconception is that only adults are gay. Teachers need to be aware of the numbers of LGBTQ students that are potentially sitting in their classrooms. Savage and Harley (2009) indicate that as many of 10% of students in schools are LGBTQ youth or are from homes that have gay or lesbian family members. Some students may not be gay, but they may have gay parents. This trend is becoming more prevalent as more states adopt laws permitting same sex marriages and adoptions by gay and lesbian couples. These parents can bring a different perspective to school when it comes to dealing with their students in the classroom.

Bower (2008) interviewed twelve lesbian mothers asking them questions about teachers and how they viewed their experiences in dealing with them. The mothers shared both positive and negative teacher experiences. The best teachers, according to this group, embraced diversity, encouraged creativity, involved themselves with the students and their families both in

school and in the community, and actively discouraged any sort of bullying or intolerance (Bower, 2008). Unfortunately, the mothers interviewed did not always encounter teachers who met these criteria. They had a long list of objections to some teachers. In Bower's (2008) study, the participants were concerned about teachers who remained unaware of differences in the classroom and who ignored the changes in family structures. The same participants were not happy with teachers who were quick to label students without really knowing much about them or their families or to categorize students based on the family. This dissatisfaction included teachers thinking that if the parents are gay, then the student also must be gay (Bower, 2008). There is still the thought among some teachers that boys rough house and engage in athletic activities while girls play with dolls and want to learn to cook and be mothers. The general theme from the Bower's (2008) study was that the lesbian mothers were really upset with teachers who allow bullying to take place and turn their backs on the situation whenever they see these types of incidents occurring.

This leads to another area where teachers and schools can take positive steps to make the school environment more open and friendly: language awareness. Teachers need to be aware of the language that students are using during the school day. They also need to be made aware of the biases in the textbooks that they are using. Not all schools address this issue. Weinberg (2009) explored this issue of language usage. Words and phrases such as "fag", "dike" and "that's so gay," serve to hurt and demean LGBTQ students (Weinberg, 2009). Unfortunately, very few teachers say anything or take any actions when they hear these types of comments being made in their classroom. Imagine the different response if a teacher heard an African-American student referred to using the "n" word. It appears that in many of our schools, we have a double standard for what is and is not acceptable. Weinberg (2009) goes on to suggest

teachers search for more inclusive language for LGBTQ students in the classroom. Weinberg (2009) advises avoiding comments such as being a sissy or acting like a man because these comments reinforce the concept of a heterosexual view of gender. Weinberg (2009) also advocates using gender-neutral terms such as date, parents or guardians instead of mother and father, and spouse to help reduce heterosexual language. Words have power, and they can inflict invisible but painful wounds on students. Students, whether we see it or not, can be deeply hurt by them. Even seemingly innocent phrases perpetuate stereotypes. Heightening language awareness is one way to make the school community more welcoming for LGBTQ students and parents. In addition, veteran teachers need to consider issues such as the Father's Day exercise (Bower & Klecka, 2009) when they are doing classroom projects or making homework assignments. The authors are not advocating immersing students at all grade levels into an open discussion of LGBTQ issues, but do encourage classroom teachers to be sensitive to those issues and reinforce positive elements when appropriate. This is the place where solid professional development can be very useful to veteran teachers. A well planned open discussion with opportunities to express fears and anxiety can help teachers be more sensitive to LGBTQ students, colleagues, and families. But there are more things that schools can do.

One way is to seek a more diverse curriculum that would be inclusive and respectful of all students and families regardless of sexual orientation. Sieben and Wallowitz (2009) share observations about creating a curriculum that includes queer theory. Although warned by older colleagues to be mindful of the curriculum, Sieben and Wallowitz (2009) decided to develop a course of study that included queer theory. Queer theory looks at common labels, how people are affected by those labels and how those labels influence behavior (Sieben & Wallowitz 2009). They reasoned that teachers have an obligation to encourage students to question the status quo.

Today's students must become active participants versus passive observers of our society. Education has the capacity to cause students to engage in intellectual discussions that may challenge the everyday norm. From their work, Sieben and Wallowitz (2009) concluded that while students and our society in general may claim diversity, as a society we do not practice tolerance especially when it comes to sexual orientation. Just look at the issue of same sex marriage in this country. If Americans truly believed in tolerance, same sex marriage would be legal in all fifty states, not in just the current five.

In a second exercise, Sieben and Wallowitz (2009) asked students to reflect on two aspects of their lives that they would be reluctant to share with their teachers. They designed this exercise to illustrate to students that personal lives do not always impact performance in academic or professional environments. Through this exercise, students understood the plight of many LGBTQ students and professionals. This exercise helped cultivate more empathy and understanding for everyone. Students were made aware of the dangers of labels. Interestingly, like Fishback (2004), Sieben and Wallowitz (2009) reported a very positive response from both students and parents, suggesting that in hesitating to include queer theory curriculum, perhaps school officials are biased regarding student maturity levels and parental close-mindedness. Sieben and Wallowitz (2009) assert that "playing it safe" and ignoring LGBTQ issues in curricula only continues to fuel the stigma. Actively involving the students in the change process can reap many positive rewards.

Young (2009) agrees with Sieben and Wallowitz (2009) that LGBTQ issues should be included in curricula. In the Contemporary Issues class, a high school humanities elective, Young (2009) asked students what issues they wanted to study. After putting all the ideas on the board, the students voted to study homophobia. Young (2009) suggests that students voted

overwhelmingly on this issue because it was an everyday issue in many of their lives, yet it was also a topic rarely discussed in their other classes. Young (2009) emphasized critical literacy and social action. Students do not just study issues; they also explore means to positively affect the issues.

In the classroom, Young (2009) had students write about experiences with homophobia in journals. Students were drawn to language that minimizes LGBTQ individuals. All students came to the same conclusion that the term “gay” was often used to indicate that something was “stupid” (Young, 2009)). They were able to see how language can subjugate individuals, and they came to see the position of privilege held by heterosexuals. Young (2009) had students list the privileges that heterosexuals typically took for granted. The student-generated list included: being able to publicly talking about whom they were dating, having a curriculum geared to heterosexuals, religious agreement and receiving support in most homes, the ability to get married, and having a majority of printed literature that reflected heterosexual lifestyles (Young, 2009). The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (www.glsen.org) and the Gay Straight Alliance (www.gaystraightalliance.org) inspired many of the students to start a GSA at their school. Again, responding to students’ requests, Young (2009) invited a panel of LGBT people to speak at the school, and one panelist shared two strategies to raise awareness, “Jeans and White T-Shirt Day” and “Day of Silence” (<http://www.dayofsilence.org>). The clothing shows support for the LGBT community. By participating in the Day of Silence and not speaking, students demonstrated the difficulties endured by LGBTQ individuals (Young, 2009)).

Young (2009) acknowledged that addressing homosexuality is still challenging, particularly when trying to maintain respect for students’ religious and cultural diversity; however, she suggests that discussion can be centered on human rights issues which tend to stay

clear of religion thus alleviating some of the students' anxiety. This small sampling of research reveals that students are capable of handling a discussion on sexual diversity, particularly if it is taught as a source of an individual's identity. In general teachers can:

- Teach tolerance
- Eliminate stereotypes in the classroom
- Show no tolerance for stereotypical language in the school
- Include LGBTQ issues and examples of LGBTQ prominent people in discussions
- Provide emotional support for LGBTQ students and teachers
- Include materials that are truly inclusive when it comes to multiculturalism
- Be positive role models

Building principals play an important role in helping teachers, staff and students deal with issues related to LGBTQ individuals. Handbooks need to be written that openly address LGBTQ issues such as language and names used within the building, and discipline codes that back them up need to be enforced. Everyone in the building must be encouraged to be tolerant of the differences within the people present. Ideally the principal should lead by example, avoiding the use of derogatory terms and intervening when these terms are used by either students or staff. Putting together a planning committee to investigate in-service training that addresses these concerns is a positive step for any staff. Looking for student assemblies that address these same issues and even including students in that planning will serve to bring the entire building community together. The principal can also lead a curriculum committee that investigates literature that can be used as part of the curriculum that truly celebrates diversity and multiculturalism. These are important steps in moving the school forward to being a fully

inclusive school that respects all staff and students and does not judge them based upon sexual orientation. Principals can:

- Insure school forms, requiring signatures, are inclusive and take into account multicultural situations
- Be positive role models
- Support multiculturalism
- Encourage teachers to be pay attention to LGBTQ students
- Provide a support network for LGBTQ students and teachers
- Ensure LGBTQ students have equal access to all school activities
- Provide professional development on issues related to LGBTQ inclusion
- Use appropriate measures insuring full inclusion for LGBTQ students and teachers
- Be prepared to address controversial issues surrounding LGBTQ students and teachers

The superintendent plays a vital role in the entire process. As the chief school administrator, he or she must have frank and open discussions with the school board. Many schools have mission statements that address the issue of diversity. It is the role of the superintendent to enlighten board members that the term diversity includes LGBTQ individuals. Policies and handbooks need to be aligned with the idea of celebrating the diversity that exists. Kosciw (2004) indicates that approximately 5% of high school students in this country consider themselves to be lesbian or gay, which translates into, on average, every secondary classroom having one LGB student. It is the job of the superintendent to keep the board apprised of current literature and research findings such as this. The board needs to understand that anti-bullying

policies must also cover both the verbal and physical abuse of LGBTQ staff and students. The superintendent can:

- Be a positive role model
- Be an educational leader who supports multicultural education
- Be informed on issues surrounding LGBTQ students and teachers
- Be open, honest and actively engage in discussions about LGBTQ issues
- Be prepared to address controversial issues surrounding LGBTQ students and teachers
- Provide training for school board members on multicultural issues
- Support zero tolerance policies that address anti-gay harassment in all forms

School boards have both a legal and a moral obligation to provide a fair and equal education to all students. And this education must occur in a work environment that operates and protects the staff who may also be a member of the LGBTQ population. In addition, Boards need to be made aware of the growing tide of litigation that both supports students' First Amendment rights to protest and openly oppose homosexuality, the Title IX rights of students who are being subjected to harassment for expressing homosexuality, and Equal Access Act rights which also extend to homosexual students (Zirkel, 2007). This applies to policies that address diversity and multiculturalism and to other activities in the school, including athletics. In many cases, boards like to get involved in the athletic component. But every school board also has the important role of approving and adopting the curriculum. This task will become more difficult as the school board moves forward to meet the goal of offering a challenging and appropriate curriculum that is inclusive of all students, including LGBTQ students. Here is

where boards may face their greatest dilemmas, and it will be the job of the superintendents to guide them and walk them through the processes that will serve all students. School boards can:

- Pass policies that protect the rights of LGBTQ students and teachers
- Promote multicultural education
- Provide multicultural curriculum and materials
- Hire a diverse staff
- Encourage LGBTQ parents to take an active role in school district discussions

The superintendent must also serve as the liaison between the school board and the community. These issues need to be presented to the public. By working with the general population, the superintendent can help to alleviate fears and to make the district one that truly welcomes diversity. This requires having frank discussions on the law, diversity issues and the curriculum. The community needs to understand Equal Access and students' rights. Terms need to be explained and meanings clearly discussed while being open to community thought. These actions can serve as a beginning for any school or community in attempt to change the school environment in an attempt to make it a welcoming place for everyone.

Conclusion

A suicide, particularly the suicide of a child, always leaves survivors asking "what if" questions. What if schools incorporate the study of queer theory and add more diverse texts to the curriculum? Then students may have the chance to critically examine their own attitudes and beliefs toward non-heterosexual people. What if schools work with organizations like GLSEN and incorporate Gay Straight Alliances in schools? Then school environments may become more welcoming. What if schools work with communities to understand that families are changing? Then all families in the community can celebrate diversity. What if teachers simply intervene when they hear an anti-gay epithet? Then students may become more aware of how

these terms degrade people. If all these things were to happen, then maybe tragedies like Carl Walker-Hoover's death can be avoided in the future.

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