HANDBOOK OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

EDITED BY

WILLIAM AYERS

THERESÉ QUINN

DAVID STOVALL
Creating Safe Schools for Queer Youth

Kimberly Cosier

A school can make a difference in a young person’s life. More precisely, the people in a school can make a difference. For kids who don’t fit neatly into rigid social norms, schools can be alienating and hostile places. Every child has a right to a safe and supportive learning environment, yet the school experiences of children and youth who are negatively impacted by gender and sexuality-based issues can be fraught with trouble, even danger. Because such children and young people are diverse, I begin this chapter with a section devoted to brief descriptions of who I mean when I say “queer Youth.”

To describe the range of problems that can arise for queer kids, I discuss ways schools have traditionally done a poor job of protecting queer students from discrimination. I argue that school experiences need not be negative for queer kids, and appeal for help from educators who are committed to working for social justice. My appeal is situated within stories about my own experiences as a queer student, teacher, and researcher.

As a way to celebrate the possibilities of social justice for all, I highlight two safe public schools: New Dawn Alternative High School and Alliance High School. Educators must meet their obligation to provide safe, supportive places for all kids to learn about themselves and the world around them. The stories of the kids, who found homes at New Dawn and Alliance after they had faced roadblocks to equal education in traditional schools, will help make the case for that. Finally, in order to support such change, I provide helpful resources for concerned educators including: a list of 10 action points developed by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN), a glossary of terms, and web resources.

Understanding the Problem: Who Is At Risk?

Children and young people whose lives are impacted by LGBT issues are far from homogeneous. Therefore, “queer youth,” as a population, must be conceptualized and theorized quite broadly. About the difficulties of this endeavor, Sears (2006) writes, “it is apparent that there is no consensus on...what it means to be a queer adolescent” (p. 2). When we factor in younger children, who may be gender variant, or who have lesbian or gay parents, our scope becomes wider still.

In this context, I use the word queer as an umbrella term to encompass all children and youth who are impacted by their own and other people’s reactions to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer/questioning issues. A queer kid might be someone who has a gay dad, someone who is straight but whom others perceive to be a lesbian; or the term might refer to someone who is saving up money from a job at a burger joint for sex reassignment surgery. The possibilities are numerous, fluid, and wide-ranging. That said, I’ll attempt to categorize the uncategorizable.
Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth (and Those Perceived to Be So)

Claire: There are some out people at my high school, but they’re treated like lepers. I don’t really care if people call me names; it’s the physical abuse I couldn’t take. And believe me, our school has been reported numerous times for the violence against my friends. But that’s all—they get reported and then it’s hushed up and nothing gets done. (Young Gay America, 2006)

Perhaps the first people to come to mind, when we think of queer youth, are those who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Today, there are growing numbers of kids who come out to their peers or school personnel as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Owens, 1998; Savin Williams, 2001). Gay–Straight Alliances are springing up in schools across the country. This phenomenon is astonishing to me. When I was in high school in the 1970s, I would have never dreamed of coming out! I was aware of being attracted to other girls, but I knew that while I was at my high school I had to play a game of fitting in with the prevailing heterosexual norm—or risk being teased, ostracized, or worse (I was successful at the game to the point of being a runner up homecoming queen, which people who know me now find quite funny). A great deal of progress has been made with regard to lesbian, gay, and bisexual kids, but as a later section on research in schools will reveal, many still face dangerous challenges in schools.

In addition to students described above, there are also kids who are perceived to be queer. They may actually be gay, lesbian, or bisexual but not out of the closet (perhaps not even to themselves) or they may not be gay, lesbian, or bisexual but are still perceived to be, or accused of being, queer for a variety of reasons. Students in this group often deviate from heterosexual social norms; for doing so, they are censured by their peers. This can take a variety of forms, but one example would be a girl who is unreceptive to boys’ sexual advances who is then stigmatized and labeled a “dyke” or “lezzie.” In one such case, Emily, a sweet girl whom I met through my work at Alliance High School, experienced bullying due to the perceptions of her peers at her former, traditional high school. A survivor of sexual abuse by an uncle, she had lashed out at a group of male student athletes when they grabbed at her as she tried to pass them in the hallway. The boys began calling her “dyke” and other names; before long, many of her classmates were bullying her.

Gender Variant and Transgender Youth (and Those Perceived to Be So)

Katherine: My third grade teacher was very fond of boy-versus-girl activities. I guess that’s because everybody, but me, got so into it. I didn’t like it. Why did we have to compete with everything: spelling bees, math problem races to the board, etc, etc, etc? Why’d I have to get stuck on the “boy” team when most of my friends were on the “girl” team? I’d even asked if I could switch teams. But the reply was the laughter of students and my teacher’s scolding not to cause trouble. Third grade was the first time I was clearly in the “outgroup.” (YouthResource, 2006)

Other young people are at risk of harassment, or worse, because of issues associated with gender identity. In our culture, gender behavior is split into a heavily regulated, false binary system. The policing of this system begins at a very early age. There are toys for girls and toys for boys. Even colors are policed; I have seen boys who choose pink or violet crayons reprimanded by kindergarten classmates! Children who are gender variant do not fit neatly into one of the two categories that are typical of boys and girls in
our society. Gender variant children are often a source of great anxiety for parents and teachers. Negative reactions of parents, teachers, and other adults in their lives, as well as teasing and bullying from their peers can take a toll on kids with atypical gender behaviors (Menvielle & Tuerk, 2006).

I was fortunate to hear Catherine Tuerk and Edgardo Menvielle, MD speak at a conference on gender variant children in 2005. They run a clinic at Children’s National Medical Center (CNMC) in Washington, D.C. At this time, it is the only clinic dedicated to the well-being of gender variant children and their families. According to Tuerk and Menvielle, boys who behave in ways that are considered in our culture to be typically feminine are at considerable risk at a very early age. The vast majority of the families who participate in the CNMC program do so out of concern for gender variant boys (Menvielle et al., 2006).

“Tomboys” or girls who behave in ways that are typically regarded as masculine (preferring to play contact sports over playing with dolls for example) have traditionally been tolerated more readily than gender-variant boys (Menvielle et al., 2006). Recently, in my visits to elementary schools, however, I have noticed that tolerance for young tomboys is evaporating. It may be a phenomenon that is limited to the particular schools I have visited; however, it seems plausible that as children become increasingly sophisticated in their knowledge of gender and sex roles at earlier ages, they become less tolerant of girls’ gender difference. In any case, when girls reach an age of sexual maturity, they are no longer free to behave in ways reserved for males because at adolescence, tomboys become a threat to the status quo (Halberstam, 1998).

Transgender individuals are gender variant to the degree that they feel their biological gender is incorrect. According to YouthResource (2006), a website “by and for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) young people”:

Transgender people feel that the gender to which they were born, or assigned at birth, does not fit them.... Transgender people also include people who identify as “genderqueer”, gender neutral, and/or gender-free—people who may not identify as either male or female. Transsexual people are those who choose to medically transition to the gender that is right for them. (http://youthresource.com/living/content/trans/brochure.htm)

Most transgender people are born with biological sex characteristics that are typically male or typically female. There are some people, however, who are born intersexed. There is a growing understanding of intersex, which can manifest in wide-ranging ways. Some children are born with obvious genital variations, while others have only chromosomal differences that may never visibly emerge. According to the Intersex Society of North America (2006):

Intersex is a relatively common anatomical variation from the “standard” male and female types; just as skin and hair color vary along a wide spectrum, so does sexual and reproductive anatomy. Intersex is neither a medical nor a social pathology. (http://www.isna.org/compare)

In many cases, intersex conditions do not impact a child’s educational life, However, those whose gender identity is different from the one assigned at birth can experience some of the same challenges faced by other gender variant kids. A great resource for understanding the public and private life of a person who is intersexed is Middlesex: A Novel by Jeffery Eugenides (2002).
Children and Youth with Queer Families

Joshua: I live with my two moms in Louisiana. I am very lucky to have my family because they give me great things like lots of love and support and security. We take care of each other and take turns making dinner. We play games, make up silly songs in the car, and like to go fishing. .... The hardest thing about having lesbian parents is that people make fun of my family but you get used to it because it doesn’t matter what other people think. It only matters what I think and I like it. (Young Gay America, 2006)

Finally, some children experience bias in schools because they have gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender parent(s) or other family members. For these children, problems often arise due to unexamined heteronormativity, which can be defined as the social and institutional support of a compulsory heterosexual worldview (Warner, 1991). Although these children can be the victims of overt bullying and discrimination, it is often the case that they suffer as much from unexamined assumptions on the parts of school personnel. One can imagine, for example, that Father’s Day can be fraught with complications and emotional stress when a child has two moms and “dad” is an anonymous sperm donor.

In sum, not all queer kids are the same, nor do they all come from similar home situations. Some queer kids take everything life hands them in stride, while others suffer from depression and anxiety as a result of their own or others’ fears and biases. The one thing all queer kids share is a need for supportive, caring, and ethical school personnel. Sadly, these needs quite often go unmet. As the following research reveals, queer students can be at great risk of social aggression, even violence in schools (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Russell, Franz, & Driscoll, 2001). To make matters worse for some queer kids, they may also be rejected or abused at home by family members (D’Augelli & Grossman, 2006; Savin Williams, 2001). Caring educators need to make a difference.

Research on School Experiences

Freddie Fuentes, a student in the Morgan Hill Unified School District in California, endured years of abuse at school—and even ended up in the hospital after a group of students beat him while shouting “faggot” in the presence of a school bus driver. (GLSEN, 2005, p. vii)

Emily sat alone and depressed at a lunch table in the cafeteria of her former school. A nearby group of students began taunting her, calling her “lesbian” and “bulldyke.” She ran out of the building after they threw opened cartons of milk at her. Such abuse was a regular feature of her life in her former school. Though she had gone to them for help, school officials had done nothing to stop the bullies. This is why, she says, she came to Alliance High School. (personal communication, 2006)

Jim came to New Dawn after two years of taunting by a group of boys at his former school. Though Jim didn’t identify as gay, the bullies had decided that he was a “faggot” and set out to make his life miserable. When he was cornered in the shower after gym class one day he became fearful of going to school altogether. He began skipping school regularly and his grades fell. Jim’s mother heard about New Dawn and encouraged him to apply. If not for the principal, teachers, and students of the New Dawn community, Jim believes he would have dropped out school and thrown away his future. (personal communication, 2000)
Sadly, such stories of harassment, violence, and neglect are not rare (American Association of University Women, 2004; Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2001). Research shows that social aggression, or bullying, is extremely common in schools. Twemlow, Fonagy, and Sacco write, “[s]chool violence continues to be a major menace, ranking with cancer and heart disease among America’s most serious public health problems” (2002, p. 304). According to Harris Interactive and GLSEN (2005) “overall, two-thirds of middle and high school students reported that they have been harassed or assaulted in the past year at school because of their appearance, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, race/ethnicity, disability or religion” (p. 4).

Harassment that is connected to queer issues is nearly ubiquitous (Baker, 2002; Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Macgillivray, 2004). The 2003 and 2005 GLSEN studies of school climate found that “[a]ctual or perceived sexual orientation is one of the most common reasons that students are harassed by their peers, second only to physical appearance” (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005, p. iii). Kosciw (2003) writes:

> Violence, bias, and harassment directed at LGBT students continue to be the rule—not the exception—in American schools...The bottom line remains that more than 4 out of 5 LGBT students reported being verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation, and more than 9 out of 10 reported hearing homophobic remarks such as “faggot,” “dyke” or “that’s so gay” frequently or often. (p. 5)

According to Kosciw, LGBT students are over three times more likely than non-LGBT students to report that they feel unsafe at school.

**Teachers’ Perceptions of the Problem**

In addition to surveying students, the Harris Interactive and GLSEN (2005) study also investigated secondary school teachers’ perceptions of bullying and harassment in their schools. Half of teacher respondents said they believed that bullying “is a serious problem at their school” (p. 4). A majority of the teachers surveyed said they felt it was their responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of LGBT students, with only a very small minority of teachers saying they did not believe it was their responsibility to help make schools safe for queer kids. Most teachers said they would feel comfortable intervening if they heard students making homophobic slurs or other bullying behaviors.

**Student Perceptions of Teachers’ Ability and/or Willingness to Respond**

Unfortunately, there is a discrepancy between what teachers reported about supporting queer kids, and what students themselves believed to be true. The majority of students reported that they felt teachers would not intervene. If they did step in when trouble arose, students felt that teachers would be powerless to change a hostile situation. Thus, most students do not report bullying and harassment to school personnel. According to the GLSEN study:

> Despite the fact that only nine percent of the teachers who participated in the study said they disagreed with the view that they have an obligation to ensure a safe learning environment for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students, these kids do not tend to go to teachers for help. Most of these students (57%) never report this harassment or assault to a teacher, principal or other school staff person. One in ten
students do not report these incidents because they believe the teachers or staff are powerless to improve the situation. (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005, p. 80)

This finding suggests that there is a need to address the “gap between the support that teachers say they would provide to students and students’ perceptions of teachers’ willingness to take action” (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005, p. 80).

Queer kids know they are less likely than others to be able to depend on the majority of school personnel to intervene when problems arise. Some teachers, staff, and administrators feel that it goes against their religious beliefs to support the needs of LGBT children and youth. Parents or students may also claim that their rights are being violated by not being allowed to express negative attitudes about homosexuality, but “there is no constitutional right to bully or intimidate other students” (Kosciw, 2003, p. 12). While all school community members have a right to express their views, particularly where religious beliefs are concerned, they cannot do so in a way that makes LGBT students feel unsafe or feel as if their education is being imperiled.

As noted, only 9% of the teachers surveyed stated that they did not believe they were responsible to ensure a safe learning environment for queer kids. Most others simply do not understand the problem. They blame the victims of antigay bullying and harassment rather than working to fix the problem. Or they underestimate the degree to which such bullying can affect queer children and youth. It is the responsibility of every educator to help create an emotionally healthy, safe, and equitable learning environment for all students, including queer youth (National Education Association, 2006). Caring teachers, who are committed to social justice, must develop strategies to identify themselves as resources for students experiencing harassment.

An Uphill Battle

My own experience as a teacher supports student perceptions that school personnel will not take steps to make schools queer friendly, as the following story reveals. Though I work at a university now, I was once a middle school art teacher. A couple of years prior to my time there, the Strategic Planning Committee had conducted a school climate survey through which they found that a substantial number of students were fearful of passing in the hallways, using the restrooms, and so forth. A smaller but significant number of students reported that they found the whole school to be an unsafe place. To address the problem, school officials took steps, which ranged from encouraging teachers to engage positively with students in the hallways between classes, to hiring a tough (but fair) ex-marine as an assistant principal.

By the time I started teaching there the school was, on the whole, a nice place to be. There was one thing, however, that remained distressing. At this school, as in many others (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2001) homophobic slurs were used constantly. Why, if I had a nickel for every time I heard the word faggot I swear I could have retired early! So far as I know, there were no kids at our school who openly identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or any other queer category. I knew that they were out there, just the same (either in the closet, as I had been, or not yet able to name their difference). I also believed that hate speech hurts everyone in a community, so I tried to do what I could to stop the use of such ugly slurs. I found myself, like Sisyphus, toiling under impossible circumstances.

My fellow teachers told me I was being “too sensitive.” I knew that my colleagues meant this as a warning to me—“We like you kid, don’t push your luck!” Still I pressed on (being young and stubborn). At one point, I got myself in a pot of considerably hot
Creating Safe Schools for Queer Youth

291

water because I refused to ignore a homophobic slur. I gave Mitch, a boy whose parents were prominent citizens in the community, an after-school detention when he kept taunting a classmate by calling him a “fag” after I told him to stop. The next day, his mother dropped by my classroom: She said her son was “very upset” and felt the disciplinary action I had taken was “unfair.” I explained the situation to her, telling her that I had clearly warned him of the consequences he would face should he continue to use the word fag in our classroom. Since he disregarded my warning and disrespected his classmate again, I said that I felt my actions were appropriate.

She did not agree and suggested that I was letting my “personal feelings” cloud my judgment (implying a threat, of course). I held fast to my decision. The matter was taken to the principal, who gave Mitch a perfunctory talk about respecting teachers and classmates and let him go. As Mitch and his mother left the office, he smirked at me. After they left, the principal made it clear, through her apple cheeked smile, that she would prefer it if I would just let these things go. She said I “must understand that the district is family oriented” and that I had better think about “choosing my battles.” At that point, I did not feel that I was ready to lose my job over this particular battle, so I let it go.

The Impact of Social Aggression on Academic Achievement

The large-scale research studies noted above, as well as the American Association of University Women’s Hostile Hallways reports (1993, 2001), all found “a direct link- age between academic performance and experiences of harassment and an unsafe learning environment in school” (cited in Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005, p. 3). Queer students were four to five times more likely to report having skipped school in the last month because of safety concerns than the general population of students (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005; Kosciw, 2003). Queer students who experience frequent physical harassment were more likely to report they did not plan to go to college and their grade point averages were half a grade lower than their counterparts who were not physically harassed (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Russell, Franz, & Driscoll, 2001; Russell, Serif, & Truong, 2001). If nothing else, the academic performance of all students should be seen as every educator’s responsibility; therefore, making schools safe for queer kids to learn is everybody’s business.

Reversing the Negativity Narrative

Queer young people are at risk of any number of social problems, including poor academic performance, skipping or dropping out of school, and homelessness. They use drugs and alcohol at higher rates than their straight peers and engage in risky sexual behaviors (Kissen, 2002; Mallon, 1998; Padilla, Neff, Rew, & Crisp, 2006). Most alarmingly, LGBT youth also have significantly higher rates of suicidal thoughts and kill themselves at a much higher rate than heterosexual youth (D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001). In one study, “a very high proportion of GLB youth, 60%, reported that they had seriously thought about suicide, and 60% believed that their sexual orientation will be an obstacle in their life” (Padilla et al., 2006, p. 1).

Certainly such dismal reports are valuable. Those of us who work with, and on behalf of, queer youth must document the bullying and abuse they endure in order to make a case for the need to support them. Yet, I believe that this persistent focus on the negative places queer young people, and anyone who cares about them, in a psychologically and emotionally precarious place. With the danger always lurking “in the hallways” (Human Rights Watch, 2001) as well as in most publications about queer youth, there is little
place for them to see positive images of people like themselves. About the challenges of conducting research on queer issues in schools, Quinlivan (2006) writes:

The process of labeling queer students within a deficit framework...[is] problematic. It ran the risk of the students being attributed with a set of characteristics that pathologised and abnormallised them in relation to what was assumed to be the heterosexual norm. (p. 13)

 Dwelling on the negative does not celebrate the many contributions young, queer people are making in their communities. It does little to support queer kids, beyond engendering pity among some people who could potentially offer help. It makes parents and their children feel that they are doomed to a dismal and dangerous life if they don’t fit within the heteronormative paradigm. The negativity narrative does not offer hope to a kid who thinks she or he is the only person on the face of the earth to feel the way she or he feels. It asks them (borrowing from W. E. B. Dubois), “How does it feel to be a problem?” Therefore, positive stories for queer youth are sorely needed.

**Two Schools that Make a Difference for Queer Kids**

In the following sections, I offer narrative vignettes from my experiences in two public alternative schools that were created for kids who did not fit in the rigid social structures of traditional schools. These stories each begin in the negative but move forward, toward hope.

**New Dawn Alternative High School**

Passing through the glass doors that lead inside New Dawn Alternative High School, I was immediately struck by an absence of institutional frigidity. The secretary’s office was directly to the right of the entrance. I stopped at the door and peered in. Sandy, the very busy school secretary, greeted me warmly. A little unsure of myself on my first visit, I explained that I was there to see Noel, the art teacher. “Oh yes,” she said smiling, “Noel said you would be coming by today. If you wait just a minute, I can take you to her room.”

As I waited, a girl emerged from a large room, which I would later learn was called “The Commons.” The girl asked Sandy if she could use the phone to call her mother to inquire about adopting a kitten. Sandy, who was feverishly looking for something in a stack of papers on her desk, recognized the girl by the sound of her voice alone. Still riffling through the pile of forms, she didn’t miss a beat saying, “You can use the one in the conference room Samantha.” She quickly glanced up from her work, saw the kitten and exclaimed, “Oh my, what a sweetheart!”

The girl, who was holding the little creature tenderly in her arms, was tiny herself. Her clothing was strangely incongruous with her delicate features, which were almost obscured by heavy black eyeliner and lipstick. She wore a huge army surplus coat that seemed to enshroud her diminutive frame. Under the coat she had on an outrageously short patent leather skirt and a black spandex shirt that had been ripped up and stitched back together with about 57 safety pins. Her outfiit was completed with a thick, spiked, black leather dog collar, torn fishnet stockings, and black, knee-high Doc Marten boots. I guessed that her fashion sense was one reason she had not fit in at her former school.

Shortly, a boy joined the girl and the kitten. He wrapped his long arms around her. The dark girl with the kitten leaned backward into the newcomer’s embrace. The boy
was tall, well over 6 feet, with a fresh scrubbed, baby face and a shock of spiky, bleached blonde hair. He wore a pink, cap sleeved Rainbow Bright® T-shirt atop a baggy pair of orange cargo pants. As his long arms encircled the girl, the contrast of multicolored bangles against her black and olive drab clothing was striking. The tall boy bent and rested his head on the tiny shoulder of the girl and said (about the kitten) “I hope we get to keep her.”

I learned the stories of these two kids, and many other misfits, during the year I spent at New Dawn doing fieldwork for my dissertation. It turned out that Samantha and Caleb had become friends at a larger, more traditional high school prior to coming to New Dawn. While there, both had been harassed for being different. Samantha was routinely called a “Satanist” and other names because of the way she looked. Caleb faced even tougher treatment, being harassed on a regular basis and sometimes physically assaulted for being gay. The two had formed a false romantic union in order to try to protect one another from the other students; a scheme that had met with limited success. Thus, when they heard about an alternative school that welcomed kids who didn’t fit in traditional schools, they both jumped at the chance to apply (New Dawn is a public alternative school, but students must submit a written application to be considered for enrollment).

Once they both settled in at New Dawn, Samantha and Caleb were able to forego their charade. They were free to be themselves. Over the year I spent at New Dawn, I found that the caring and supportive environment purposefully created by the principal, teachers, other school employees, and students of New Dawn was incredibly important to nearly all of its kids. Like Sandy, the school secretary who knew Samantha by the sound of her voice alone, students knew they could count on members of the New Dawn community to “see what makes them tick.” For Caleb, and others, this caring community turned out to be a lifesaver. After I was at the school for several months, Caleb told me that if it wasn’t for the people at New Dawn, he was sure he would have killed himself by then. Caleb was not the only student who expressed such feelings to me while I was at New Dawn. Schools, and the people in them, can make a difference.

**Alliance High School**

Billed as the first school for kids who have been bullied and harassed in other schools, the Alliance School of Milwaukee has garnered wide-ranging interest on local, national, and international levels. One of the unintended outcomes of this media attention has been a public debate about bullying. There were talk radio jocks calling it a school for “losers;” some even declared such a school to be the end of democracy. For example, a professor of public interest law at George Washington University was quoted in an article about the school as saying:

> High schools are often the last opportunity to instill basic citizenship values, including tolerance for a pluralistic society, and removing victims from that environment is, in many ways, a concession. If these administrators cannot guarantee a healthy and safe environment, the solution is to get new administrators, not create a new school. (Carr, 2006, p. 1)

While I agree with the heart of this statement, the reality is this: some students don’t have the time to wait! For many of the kids at New Dawn and Alliance bullying and harassment were simply too dangerous in the moment for them to wait for adults to reach such long-range and complex goals. Emily didn’t have the time to wait for adults to fix this enormous societal problem when she was being called “dyke” at her former school.
and having cartons of milk thrown at her in the cafeteria. She had to leave, to find a place where she could safely get her education. Fortunately, for Emily and others in the Milwaukee area, there is Alliance.

In the fall of 2005, opening day of Alliance High School was abuzz with jittery, expectant energy. Many students arrived well before the first class was to begin. Though some tried not to show it, everyone there seemed to have high hopes and expectations for the school. Collectively, the student body looked like it sailed over from the Island of Misfit Toys. They stood outside the building anxiously waiting for their lives to be transformed.

Though the school was not exclusively for queer students, it was not surprising to see so many students who appeared to be so. I knew some of the kids from work I had done at Project Q, a youth-led LGBT community center in Milwaukee. A group, which appeared to be mostly young transgender women shrieked each time they saw someone they knew. One little guy, who apparently had not been prepared for the gender (and other forms of) diversity was visibly shaken. I watched, relieved, as the lead teacher and founder of the school, Tina Owen, walked over, gently put her arm around him and spoke to him quietly about his obvious fears. This school was for everyone.

The doors finally opened. We had some time to mingle before classes began. I sat down next to a 6'4” Goth kid, named Chris, who I had never met before. He was sitting, hunched and alone, trying very hard to put out “don’t f**k with me” vibes. Chris’s ghastly makeup, heavy black eyeliner and lipstick expertly teased at the corners of his mouth into sharp, downward points, was worn like protective mask. He had on a variation of the Goth uniform that Samantha had worn at New Dawn—mostly black clothing with lots of zippers, safety pins and other menacing, bondage and vampire-inspired accessories. Undaunted by his appearance and demeanor, I cheerily chatted him up. I found, as I suspected, that he was actually quite sweet and vulnerable.

At his former school, I learned, Chris had been a football player but his grades slipped and he wasn’t able to stay on the team. Then he became interested in Goth culture. He told me he considered himself a “genderqueer,” which meant that he wanted to be free of gender labels and stereotypes—not that he wanted to be a girl. With his newly minted identity, he began to be taunted cruelly by his former teammates, which was why he had left his former school. On opening day of Alliance High School, with a double-edged look of defiance and dejection in his black-rimmed eyes, Chris grumbled that he hated school and he didn’t hold out much hope that this school would be any different.

Later that year, during their final all-school community meeting before winter recess, I was moved to tears when Chris stood and addressed the Alliance school community. With a huge smile on his black lipsticked face, he dramatically swept his arm around the room and thanked his fellow students and teachers for making him feel welcomed at Alliance. He seemed on the verge of tears himself, when he said with absolute conviction that he knew Alliance had saved him from dropping out of school and that it might have even stopped him from taking his own life. This sort of talk was common in both school settings.

Emily (the girl who had milk cartons thrown at her) was equally connected to the Alliance community. By the time she worked with me on an art project in the spring of 2006, she told me she felt part of a school community for the first time since elementary school. She said she loved Alliance because the teachers showed that they cared about her and other kids by really listening to them and sticking with them to make sure they were learning. “Sometimes it feels like they want to get on your nerves,” she said, “but you know its ‘cause they want you to do good and succeed.” Emily also said that she thought it was very important that the students had a voice in the way the school was run. The
weekly community meetings were important to her because it was a time and place where you could speak your mind to the whole school. Emily thought that Alliance being based on an antibullying, social justice mission made it a safe place for everyone.

By that spring, Emily was no longer afraid to be herself. Though she told me she had become very shy and “shut down” during the time she was being bullied at her former school, Emily was very open and talkative during the afternoons we spent working on huge banners for the school’s entrance. Since coming to Alliance, Emily had come out as bisexual. She was in a relationship with Jake, a talented graffiti and “zine” artist and self-styled punk anarchist. Emily said she liked Jake because he was “funny—and just as pretty as a girl.”

With his foot-tall Mohawk and punk clothing, Jake tried hard to look tough, but Emily is right, in spite of his efforts he is pretty. For his art project, Jake made a couple of banners but his favorite was a huge painting in the form of a comic strip. It featured his signature graffiti character, Morty the Rat. In the painting, Morty is walking along, happy with his new “Liberty Spikes” (which I learned are what you call those spiky Mohawks). In the next frame, his happiness is squashed when he gets “stuff” thrown at him by some frat boys. Later, Morty finds a brochure for Alliance that intrigues him. He goes to investigate the school and discovers a home among other misfits. For Jake, who tries to be a tough guy, this was the highest form of praise for Alliance, which got a little more publicity when the piece was shown at an exhibition at the Gay Arts Center.

For Chris, Emily, Jake, as well as for other kids who did not fit within the social structures of their former schools, teachers who take time to listen to their students can make a difference. Listening means more than offering a shoulder to cry on: It means designing a curriculum that reflects diversity, and attends to the needs and interests of the students. It means being willing to talk frankly about social issues, using students’ experiences as a jumping off point. It means acknowledging students’ alternative romantic and sexual desires and honoring gender diversity. Accepting sexual, gender, and other forms of identity diversity can contribute greatly to the well-being of kids who might otherwise fall through the cracks, or worse. For some kids caring teachers may actually save lives.

A First Step Toward Justice: Antidiscrimination Policies

Inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in school antidiscrimination policies has been found to have a positive effect on school climate for queer kids (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). Unfortunately, unlike students who are members of other groups who may experience bias and hostility in schools, queer youth cannot always count on being included in such policies (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). Hence, queer kids are often an invisible minority where official policy is concerned. Research shows that working to get sexual orientation and gender identity included in policy is an important first step toward equity.

A Framework for Change

I believe that understanding the interdependence of school structure and student/teacher relationships is vital to the creation of school cultures that support kids who do not fit the norm. In my research at New Dawn, three themes emerged, which are also appropriate to the school community at Alliance. The theme of Rule-Bound School Cultures versus Principled School Cultures helps explain differences in the ways schools structure themselves and how those structures impact students (Cosier, 2001, 2004).
Schools that are rule-bound focus on policing behavior. As a result, rather than fostering a caring community based on principles of social justice, rule-bound schools tend to be inhospitable to difference. They are, therefore, usually not safe spaces for queer kids. Principled school cultures, on the other hand, are built upon a small number of overarching principals rather than laundry lists of rules. As a result of a broader notion of school governance, these schools tend to be more open to difference and place the onus of behavior on the students. Student voice emerged as an enormously important feature of governance of both New Dawn and Alliance. This approach has the effect of empowering students and fostering a school climate that supports social justice.

A second theme, Bureaucratic Pedagogy versus Relational Pedagogy, explains differences in the ways teachers and students relate to one another within the systems described in the first theme. In a rule-bound school, teachers tend to be placed in the role of rule enforcers. They become servants of standard procedure, bureaucrats who are unlikely to approach teaching as a mutually beneficial relationship between an educator and her or his pupils. Principled school cultures are much more amenable to relational teaching. There are teachers who manage to take a relational teaching stance, even in the most rule-bound school. Relational teaching is arguably the single most important factor for at-risk student attachment and resilience.

The third theme, Student Alienation versus Student Attachment, explains differential outcomes that occur for individual students as a result of the interplay of the first two themes. When the students I met at New Dawn and at Alliance were in rule-bound schools they had mostly bureaucratic teachers and became alienated from school. Many of the students I came to know had been considered to be problems in their former schools. When they switched to schools that were based on principles, and centered on relational teaching, these students became incredibly attached to the new school community and became less likely to be “problem students.” In fact, many of them grew into strong, positive leaders.

No school culture is either wholly rule-bound or completely principled. Teacher/student relationships are all comprised of varying degrees of bureaucratic and relational elements, and from day to day, an individual student’s feelings of alienation or attachment to a school community can fluctuate. Overall, New Dawn and Alliance lean heavily toward being principled and relational; the students’ affection for the schools is proof. Students knew that they could count on their teachers to be open about topics often swept under the rug in rule-bound schools. As part of being principled, New Dawn and Alliance teachers allowed students access to “dangerous knowledge” (Britzman, 1999, p. 2). That is, teachers and students talk about gender variance and sexuality in a frank and honest manner. Diversity was treated as an asset rather than a violation of standard conduct.

Conclusion

In my work in New Dawn I found that queer students enrolled in the school because they had been targets of bullying and harassment by students, teachers, and administrators at their former schools (Cosier, 2001). This bullying seems to be rooted in both homophobia (the irrational fear and hatred of all things queer) and misogyny (the irrational fear and hatred of all things female). The same is true at Alliance. Though they came to Alliance and New Dawn from many schools, their negative experiences were surprisingly similar. Equally similar were their reasons for attachment to their new school communities: a principled school structure and relational teaching. Students in both alternative schools told me they stayed in school because they felt they had a voice in the school and that they felt valued and cared for by all members of the new school communities. A number
of them reported that when they joined the school communities, they felt safe in school for the first time in their lives.

Though New Dawn and Alliance are small, alternative high schools, I believe the principles that made them work for queer kids (and others who did not fit in) are simple and could work in more traditional school settings, either on a school-wide or individual classroom basis. Traditional schools do not have to be scary places; people in school communities can decide to make a change.

Even if a whole school is not moving toward acceptance of sexual and gender diversity, individual teachers can still make a difference. Before starting Alliance, Tina Owen had made her classroom a safe space in a huge, urban high school. Because of the stories her students shared with her over the years, Tina was inspired to start a different kind of school for kids who had been bullied and harassed. One or two teachers can make a difference. According to Harris Interactive and GLSEN (2005), “the presence of supportive staff contributed to a range of positive indicators including greater sense of safety, fewer reports of missing days of school, and a higher incidence of planning to attend college” (p. 12). So please, be bold and make your classroom a safe haven for queer kids and other misfits.

If your whole school is willing to make a change, then all players must understand the process to be broad and systematic. A schoolwide policy against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is a start. Restructure your school to become more principled and to support relational teaching—it is an ongoing, messy, democratic process—stick with it! Student participation in the development of curriculum and the governance of the school or classroom is also vital. Rules should be few but meaningful, for example, at Alliance and New Dawn, kids were not punished for letting the occasional swear word slip out so long as they were not “cussing out” another member of the school community. In order to truly feel safe in a school, young people must be allowed and encouraged to speak their minds, without fear of reprisal by school officials.

It takes courage, integrity, and committed effort on the parts of teachers who want to support queer kids. Educators who wish to work against the alienation many queer kids feel in school must recognize that listening is a key ingredient, as noted above. With these simple (not easy) qualities in place, New Dawn Alternative High School and Alliance High School can serve as models for safe schools for queer kids, even schools that are larger and more traditional in nature. Though not all schools can, or should, look exactly like either of the schools I have described, all schools should look more like them than they do at present. It is vital to the health and well-being of our youth that bullying and harassment be taken on as the public health crisis it has been shown to be. This can only be done when school people take seriously their responsibility to educate all children and youth equally and fairly.

Helpful Resources for Concerned Educators

**GLSEN’s Ten Things Educators Can Do To Ensure That Their Classrooms Are Safe Spaces for ALL Students**

1. **Do Not Assume Heterosexuality.** The constant assumption of heterosexuality renders gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people invisible. Such invisibility is devastating to the individual’s sense of self. Both the school as an institution and its professionals must be inclusive in their language and attitudes. By reminding themselves that LGBT people are found on every staff, in every classroom, and on every team, faculty can “unlearn” heterosexism.
2. **Guarantee Equality.** LGBT members of the school community need to know that their schools value equality and that they are protected against discrimination. Schools should add sexual orientation and gender identity to their nondiscrimination and harassment policies. In addition, sexual orientation and gender identity and gender expression should be included in multicultural and diversity statements as a way to communicate a commitment to equal treatment for all.

3. **Create a Safe Environment.** It is the school’s obligation to take proactive measures to ensure that all members of its community have a right to participate without fear of harassment. Schools must make it clear that neither physical violence nor harassing language like “faggot” and “dyke” will be tolerated. Creating a “Safe Zone” program—displaying posters, stickers, and other literature encouraging acceptance—is a great way to communicate that your school is a safe environment for all.

4. **Diversify Library and Media Holdings.** The library is frequently the first place to which students turn for accurate sexuality and gender information. Too often, few or no works on LGBT issues are found there. Librarians and media specialists need to be sure their holdings are up to date and reflect the diversity of our world.

   Materials that reflect LGBT themes and authors should be prominently displayed and easily accessible to students seeking them. The library and media center should reflect LGBT holidays and events in their programming, and should strive to make sure that individual classroom libraries are similarly inclusive. The GLSEN Bookstore is a great online “one-stop shopping” resource for LGBT materials.

5. **Provide Training for Faculty and Staff.** School staff need to be equipped to serve all the students with whom they work, including LGBT students and children from LGBT families. Understanding the needs of LGBT youth/families and developing the skills to meet those needs should be expected of all educators regardless of their personal or religious beliefs.

6. **Provide Appropriate Health Care and Education.** While being LGBT is not only a “health issue,” health education on sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases should sensitively address the issues of LGBT people. Counselors and health staff should be particularly careful to make their sensitivity to LGBT issues clear. By educating themselves about related support services and agencies, and making pamphlets and other literature available, health professionals can provide for the needs of the LGBT students and families with whom they work.

7. **Be a Role Model.** Actions speak louder than words. The most effective way to reduce anti-LGBT bias is to consistently behave in ways that appreciate all human beings and condemn discrimination of any kind. Though both straight and LGBT students will benefit from having openly LGBT educators, coaches, and administrators, staff members need not be “out” or LGBT themselves in order to be good role models. By demonstrating respectful language, intervening during instances of anti-LGBT harassment, and bringing diverse images into the classroom in safe and affirming ways, all staff members can be model human beings for the students with whom they work.

8. **Provide Support for Students.** Peer support and acceptance is the key to any student’s feeling of belonging in the school. Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) offer students this sense of belonging as well as the chance to effect positive change in their schools. GSAs welcome membership from any student interested in combating anti-LGBT bias and raising awareness of heterosexism and diverse gender/sexual identities. There are currently over 1,200 GSAs registered with GLSEN and countless more across the nation. Consider being a GSA advisor and helping students in your com-
Creating Safe Schools for Queer Youth

munity to form a club that provides support, understanding and an avenue for promoting equality and school change.

9. **Reassess the Curriculum.** Educators need to integrate LGBT issues throughout the curriculum—not just in classes such as health education, but in disciplines such as English, History, Art, and Science. Preexisting curricula should be broadened to include LGBT images where appropriate (such as in studies of the Holocaust and Civil Rights Movement). Current events, popular music and film, and other media that include LGBT people and issues should be regularly discussed in class. Classroom libraries, story times, and assigned reading should be thoughtfully structured to include the full range of human diversity. Finally, educators should take advantage of “teachable moments,” treating questions, comments, and instances of name-calling as opportunities to educate students about LGBT people and issues. Children spend the majority of their time in class. As long as LGBT issues are seen as “special” and outside the classroom, students will continue to see LGBT people as marginal.

10. **Broaden Entertainment and Extracurricular Programs.** Extracurricular activities often set the tone for the community. Programs such as assemblies, film nights, and school fairs should regularly include content that reflects the diversity of our world. Special LGBT events and holidays such as LGBT History Month (October) and Pride Month (June) should be incorporated into schoolwide celebrations. Guest speakers and lectures that can inform the school community about the unique needs and accomplishments of LGBT people should be a regular part of school programming (GLSEN, 2005).

**Glossary of Queer Terms**

**Androgyny:** having both masculine and feminine characteristics, as in appearance, attitude, or behavior.

**Bisexual:** persons who are attracted to partners of either (or any) gender.

**Biological Sex:** determined by our chromosomes (XX for females; XY for males); our hormones (estrogen/progesterone for females, testosterone for males); and our internal and external genitalia (vulva, clitoris, vagina for females, penis and testicles for males).

**Gender dysphoria:** A psychological term for being unhappy with your gender (physically, anatomically). Full-blown gender dysphoria syndrome is the same as transsexualism.

**Gender identity:** This is an individual’s innermost concept of self as “male or “female” what we perceive and call ourselves. Most people develop a gender identity that is aligned with their biological sex. For some, however, their gender identity is different from their biological sex.

**Genderqueer:** A person who identifies as a gender other than “man” or “woman,” or someone who identifies as neither, both, or some combination thereof.

**Gender role:** The set of socially defined roles and behaviors assigned to females and males. This can vary from culture to culture. Our society recognizes basically two distinct gender roles.

**Homophobia:** Refers to a fear or hatred of homosexuality, especially in others, but also in oneself (internalized homophobia). Transphobia is a newer and related term having to do with fear and hatred of Trans people.

**Heterosexism:** Bias against nonheterosexuals based on a belief in the superiority of heterosexuality. Heterosexism does not imply the same fear and hatred as homophobia.
**Heteronormativity:** The practices and institutions “that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and ‘natural’ within society” (Cohen, 2005, p. 24).

**Intersex (or intersexual):** People who are born with the full or partial sex organs or chromosomes of both sexes, or with underdeveloped or ambiguous sex organs. This word replaces the politically incorrect hermaphrodite.

**LGBT/GLBTQ/GLBTIQ (and so on):** A variety of acronyms are used by to refer to queer people; the order of the letters and number of initials varies by user. The letters refer to (L)esbian, (G)ay, (B)isexual, (T)ransgender, (I)ntersex, (Q)ueer/or (Q)ueer and (Q)uestioning: Now you see why I use the word queer, right?

**Out/Coming Out/Coming Out of the Closet:** To be “in the closet” means to hide one’s identity. Many LGBT people are “out” in some situations and “closeted” in others. To “come out” is to publicly declare one’s identity, sometimes to one person in conversation, sometimes to a group or in a public setting. Coming out is a life-long process—in each new situation a person must decide whether or not to come out. Coming out can be difficult for some because reactions vary from complete acceptance and support to disapproval, rejection, and violence.

**Queer:** Historically a negative term used against people perceived to be LGBT, “queer” has more recently been reclaimed by some people as a positive term describing all those who do not conform to rigid notions of gender and sexuality. Queer is often used in a political context and in academic settings to challenge traditional ideas about identity (“queer theory”).

**Questioning:** Refers to people who are uncertain as to their sexual orientation or gender identity. They are often seeking information and support during this stage of their identity development.

**Sexual identity:** The label used to identify oneself such as “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “bi,” “queer,” “questioning,” “undecided,” “undetermined,” “heterosexual,” “straight,” “asexual,” and others.

**Sexual orientation:** This is determined by whom we are sexually and romantically attracted to.

**Straight Ally:** Any nonqueer person who supports and stands up for the rights of LGBT people.

**Transgender:** People who are inclined to cross the gender line, differs from genderqueer in that transgender individuals present as the “opposite” gender rather than trying to be gender free.

**Transition:** The process of changing sex, including hormones, cross-living (see above), and finally surgery. A practical minimum for this process is about two years, but usually it takes longer, sometimes much longer.

**Transsexual:** Anyone who (1) wants to have, (2) has had, or (3) should have a sex-change operation.

Definitions adapted from GLESN: [http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/1278.html](http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/1278.html)

**Runaway Hotlines**

Many young people are turned out of their homes when parents discover they are queer. For those youth, these numbers may come in handy: National Network of Runaway and Youth Services at 202-783-7949 or the National Runaway Switchboard at 1-800-621-4000 (or 1-800-621-0394 TDD for the hearing impaired).
Creating Safe Schools for Queer Youth

Web Resources


Downloadable documents from GLSEN


PFLAG http://www.pflag.org/ Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.


- Intersex Society of North America http://www.isna.org/

Online Communities for Queer Kids. There are some new venues for youth that are positive!

- Coalition for Positive Sexuality (http://www.positive.org). This girl-friendly site also has a lot of queer-friendly images.

- Mogenic (http://www.mogenic.com) touts itself as “the world’s biggest gay and lesbian youth online community.”

- Youth Pride (http://www.youthpride-ri.org/youth/default.asp) YPI provides support, advocacy, and education for youth and young adults impacted by sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

- Outright (http://www.outright.org/) Outright’s mission is to create safe, positive, and affirming environments for young gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, and questioning people ages 22 and under. Outright aspires to a youth-driven philosophy in which youth needs and beliefs form decisions, and a collaboration of youth and adults provides support, education, advocacy, and social activities.

- Youth TIES (http://www.youthgenderproject.org/)

- Youth Trans & Intersex Education Services (Youth TIES) is a youth-led organization advocating for trans, gender-variant, intersex, and questioning (TGQI) youth.

Notes

1. I acknowledge that the term queer is problematic and politically charged (Macgillivray, 2004), but because there are so many children and youth who fall under this rubric, I am most comfortable with the general term queer. I have found many young people who use it freely and it is much easier to say than LGBTIQ.

2. Pseudonyms are used for New Dawn and its students. I do not use pseudonyms for Alliance because it has been extensively covered by local and national media, Chris was interviewed in the local paper and other students have been featured in national magazines.

3. Since this chapter was written, one of the two founders of Young Gay American (YGA) has undergone a religious conversion and renounced his gay identity and his queer-positive work. Young Gay America, the magazine, is in the process of renewal under new management. Readers are, therefore, advised to use resources other than UGA at this time.
References


