People just looked at you different in the hallways. It’s so hard to go in day-in and day-out and know people are looking at you based on something that you can’t help. And it’s like “dyke this, dyke that.” You’re just that—a stereotype—and not who you are. —Linda

The opening quotation provides a glimpse into the inhospitable environment many young lesbians experience school to be. Schools are typically heterosexist and homophobic institutions where all members of the school culture are presumed to be heterosexual, expected to conform to rigid gender role stereotypes, and punished for doing otherwise (Blackburn, 2004; Macgillivray, 2000; Payne, 2007). Heterosexism is “one of the most significant realities of adolescents’ day-to-day experiences in schools” (van Wormer & McKinney, 2003, p. 409). Possibilities outside the “norm” of heterosexuality are not officially acknowledged in school curricula (Macgillivray, 2000) and rarely acknowledged through school sanctioned programming (Payne, 2007). The existence of these “silences” also goes unacknowledged (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004, p. 152). Such schooling practices reproduce heterosexuality and the gender performances associated with it as “normal,” “morally superior,” “dominant,” and “privileged” (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004, p. 152) over other ways of experiencing sexuality and gender. The silences surrounding nonheterosexualities often leave lesbian students feeling “invisible” (Quinlivan & Town, 1999) and alone (Payne, 2002a) while simultaneously marking lesbian identities and the young women who claim them as “Other” (Youdell, 2005).

Adolescent girls who refuse to conform to the sexual and gendered expectations of heterosexuality often face isolation and ridicule (Thurlow, 2001; Wyss, 2004) in school. Girls without social status are accused of being lesbian (Duncan, 2004; Durham, 2002), as are girls who exhibit less interest in their own physical appearance or in heterosexual romance (Eckert, 1994) than their (presumably) heterosexual peers. Also named “lesbian” are young women who continue to compete in athletics (Chambers, Tinkell, & Van Loon, 2004; Shakib, 2003). Once named as lesbian, a young woman is “socially and politically marginalized” (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004, p. 152). Fear of being called “dyke” limits the behaviors of many young women in school (Macgillivray, 2000; Shakib, 2003) and shapes the responses of many young lesbians to their homophobic school environments. Those who are taunted as “lesbian” usually “lack the protection” of teachers or other school staff (van Wormer & McKinney, 2003, p. 410). Teachers become so accustomed to hearing the name calling that they rarely react (Macgillivray, 2000), further reinforcing the heterosexist culture of school and “sanctioning the culture of intolerance” (van Wormer & McKinney, 2003, p. 410).

With curricular and institutional silences and an “othered” identity, how do lesbian adolescents experience school? Little is actually known about adolescent lesbians’ lives as
they are living them. The majority of research focused on adolescent lesbians has utilized adult recollection to examine adolescent sexual identity development (Boxer & Cohler, 1989) rather than exploring the stories of young lesbians. Additionally, little research has been done on the discrimination experienced by lesbian youth or on reducing heterosexism in schools (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004; van Wormer & McKinney, 2003).

This chapter utilizes portions of a broader life history study with adolescent lesbians, conducted in a large metropolitan area in Texas, to explore their experiences of school and their resistance to its heteronormalizing culture. Their stories demonstrate not only the “ways in which heterosexual identities are constructed as normal while lesbian…identities are constructed as outside acceptability” within schools (Youdell, 2005, p. 251), but the creative strategies these young women employed to “stick it out” (Lindsey) and stay in school. These young lesbian women coped with the stresses and institutional silences around their nonhetero genders and sexualities by choosing their own silence, attempting to blend in, addressing the homophobia directly, and through telling their stories.

Method
Participants
The participants in this life history research were eight white, middle class, lesbian-identified women, ages 18 to 21, who had attended or were attending high school in a large metropolitan area in Texas. At the time of the research, two were in high school, one had recently graduated high school and was working, and five were in college. None of the young women attended the same high school. The two high school students and one working high school graduate were accessed through the local LGBT youth support group. The college students learned of the study through campus postings on several campuses or through contact with the researcher as a former instructor. All of the participants in this study self-selected. Because the young women in this study were in late adolescence at the time of the interviews, they were still within the period they were being asked to recall, and could share stories not yet fully reconstructed through adult experiences (Payne, 2002a; Wyss, 2004).

For this study, self-labeling as lesbian during high school, attending high school in the area of Texas where the research was conducted, being born with the attributed sex of “female,” and age were the only criteria for research participation. There were no racial criteria for participation in this study. The lower age limit was set by IRB at 18. All of the young women who participated claimed a lesbian identity, but it is not assumed in this research that all attached the same meaning to the label “lesbian,” that “lesbian” is a stable category, or that it has ever had a singular meaning. No research participants claimed the identity of “queer.”

As adolescents self-labeling as lesbian within the same sociohistoric period in the same geographic area, these young women encountered similar systemic pressures related to gender and sexuality and had similar resources (or lack thereof) available to them. Encountering these same systemic pressures from similar social positions (adolescent white middle class female) during the same sociohistoric time frame created similarities in experiences. These young women should not, however, be seen as “representative” of young lesbians from this or any other historic moment. Their experiences are best understood by examining the structural elements and systemic pressures that they encountered as adolescent women in the early 21st century. Shared elements between these stories and the stories of older generations of American lesbians highlight the marginalized positions LGBTQ people and women continue to hold within American culture, and the deep
unchangedness of sex and gender expectations, despite advances from the feminist and LGBT rights movements (Payne, 2002a).

**Subjectivity**

In my last two years of teaching high school, I participated with a group of students in starting an AIDS awareness club they called SAAV, Students for AIDS Awareness and Volunteerism. There was no GSA in this high school and the SAAV meetings also served as sites of acceptance for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning students. Through the club, I met Lissa. Lissa was a sophomore in high school who had experienced a relationship with another young woman in her freshman year when she was 14. Her parents had read her diary describing this relationship and punished her severely. She was threatened with eviction from her home if she didn’t renounce all things lesbian. Her every move was monitored both in and out of school, and her parents forced her to quit SAAV when they learned of her involvement. I remained a source of adult support for Lissa and she would sometimes come to my classroom at the end of the school day to talk. I was in awe of Lissa throughout her high school experience. Her strength and determination to succeed, despite a painful family life, were moving, as was her conviction that it was the rest of the world—not her—that had a problem. Through Lissa, I became interested in adolescent lesbian self-labeling and in the agency and resilience of young lesbian women. I changed my research and professional focus to explore the lives of young lesbians. I remain most interested in the ways in which young lesbians “make sense” of their experiences of gender and sexuality and in self-labeling. The high school, while not my primary research focus, often provides the stage for these identity processes.

**Interview Method and Analysis**

Carspecken’s (1996) method of critical qualitative research was applied to life story methodology, based upon the work of Linde (1993). Life history method and its variants can be well-suited to giving “voice” to individuals and has held particular appeal among feminist researchers interested in exploring and representing women’s lives, but the traditional forms of life history lack the critical potential to locate that voice within a larger sociopolitical context. By adding critique to life history method, the process of articulating hierarchical structures which devalue groups of people, limit voice and power, and locate processes which undermine or weaken subjects’ opportunities to fully recognize potential is facilitated.

The interview format was fully open-ended with all interviews beginning with the same lead-off question requesting descriptions of high school experience: “Describe a high school experience that really stands out for you.” The immediate responses of five of the young women to the “lead off” question reveals the difficult time they had in high school:

  - I hated it until senior year (Nicky).
  - I was like in a big depression for several years (CiCi).
  - I had some really horrible experiences (Lindsey).
  - I don’t think I’ve had a great experience in high school (Amy).
  - I hated going to school. I just hated it. I didn’t want to be there. I felt like crying everyday (Linda, on her freshman year).

The participants continued to talk about their lives until they became tired. The interviews averaged 3 hours and 25 minutes in length. Questions specifically about sexuality
were asked only in the form of probes after the participant had introduced the topic as central to an area of her story.

A life story is a constantly changing narration of self bound by cultural contexts. The “truth” of the story is in the meaning it holds for the individual who tells the story and the navigation through social situations made possible by the story. The “validity” of the events and whether or not they “really” happened as reported and were “really” causal in the experiences of the teller is not the focus of this methodology. For example, a participant recalls a teacher making a specific statement regarding homosexuality in school. Whether or not the young woman remembers the teacher’s comment “correctly” is less important than how she presents the event as pertinent to her story.

Note: All words or phrases within quotation marks in the data sections of this chapter reflect the words of the research participants.

Hanging in There Until You Can “Get the Hell Out”

Some of the young women in this research were “out” by choice, some had been “outed,” and others had chosen not to disclose their sexuality, keeping it a carefully guarded secret. All of the young women in this research experienced the verbal and emotional abuse of a homophobic school environment. Each young woman developed her own form of resistance, her own way to survive in school as a lesbian student. All but one of these young women felt alone in her efforts to cope with her heterosexist school environment. Each of the experiences these young women described offers us the opportunity to ask what might have been done differently by a teacher, a counselor, or an administrator that could have made a positive difference in the lives of these lesbian students. Through their stories we are given the opportunity to imagine a school without the fear and isolation experienced by these young women, to imagine change and possibility.

Agentic Silence

Amy, CiCi, and Nicky were not “out” at their high schools but that did not protect them from the homophobia of their school environments. Hurt by the curricular and institutional silences of school and aware of the dangers they could face if their lesbian identities were discovered, each young woman chose her own silence as protection, keeping her sexual identity a carefully guarded secret from fellow students and teachers. Silence is often seen as inaction and framed in opposition to agency. Here, silence is a strategic choice carefully made based upon these young women’s assessment of their high school scenes.

Amy attended a large suburban high school where she never heard anything positive about LGBTQ people, and she knew she could not disclose her sexuality:

...that [homosexuality] was never [officially] talked about in high school. If it was talked about, it was negative—very negative—like, in different people’s, you know, conversations or, um, people calling each other “fags” or, or especially, like, I don’t know, just difference in people’s conversations. And I heard no one say anything positive about homosexuals. [It made me feel] very bad. It made me—like, because I wouldn’t say anything when people would talk about stuff like that. I was very hurt because—in a way—because they were talking about me, but they didn’t know that. And some of the things they said were just really hurtful and, um, I took it straight to heart.
When Amy heard other students telling “gay jokes” and calling each other “fags,” she wanted to speak out—she wanted to defend others and herself—but she was afraid to do so. At Amy’s school, there was an assumption that all students were heterosexual—and students were careful not to act against this assumption. Amy said: “Some people, some people who are, like friends, like Nancy, who are defending homosexuality, it’s like ‘They must be gay.’” Students who spoke out against the homophobic language were marked as homosexual. Teachers who heard these comments did nothing.

Homosexuality was not mentioned in Amy’s school except through the pejorative name calling. She felt alone and without allies and she felt bad about herself for not speaking up, but she knew that to speak up was to risk being named. Amy tried to blend in and though she never “lied” about her sexuality or talked about boyfriends she didn’t have, she wanted others to assume she was straight. Amy attended the prom with a male friend, and many of her peers assumed they were dating. On the night of prom, she disclosed her sexuality to her date. He was the first and only person she had told in her school. Though “he said he was OK with it, he was fine and all with it,” she was “really extremely nervous” that this information might now spread in her high school. She was one month from graduation at the time of the interview and hoping that the month passed without her becoming the subject of the rumor mill. Her silence had protected her for three years and she was afraid she had made a mistake in confiding in her prom date.

Amy knew of no one at her school that was “out.” She said, “For all I knew, I thought I was, like, the only gay person in the state, you know. I think I actually thought that for a while, but there’s not many of us, and I thought I was the only one in high school.” Amy’s coping strategy, to withdraw from most social interactions, created a space for her where she felt both isolated and insulated. She ate lunch with other members of her sports teams, but never associated with them outside of school. She limited what she would discuss over lunch to the activities of the sports team or class assignments. She did not develop close friendships with other students. She said “I was pretty much a loner.” Though she was a strong student and “made good grades,” she rarely spoke in class. Amy’s silence was her shield.

CiCi also attended a large suburban high school and chose not to “come out” at school. She said, “I wasn’t going to encourage getting my butt kicked.” CiCi felt her high school was a dangerous place to be “out.” She had already experienced verbal harassment from other students for “being different” and for “being from California.” Though she feared she might be physically harmed if her sexuality were discovered, she was uncomfortable with directly lying about it. If someone called her “a dyke” she recalled “I didn’t say yes and I didn’t say no. I just left it. If someone thought I was, well I wasn’t going to tell them I wasn’t, but I’m not going to confirm it either.” The teachers in her school did nothing to punish homophobic comments and CiCi often felt they sided with the abusers. In the cafeteria one day, boys were throwing food at one another. Then they started calling each other “fag” and they said, “Oh, I’ve got AIDS,” and the teachers weren’t doing anything about it. They weren’t saying anything to them. One of the teachers I saw watching it with a kind of smirk on their face heard me say the word “bastard” later that day and said, “We don’t talk like that here.” I was like “Oh, the word faggot is completely acceptable,” and so I just found it to be a big joke and dumb. But, I mean, it sure wreaked hell on my self-esteem, you know?

She learned not to trust teachers and did not report incidents of harassment she witnessed or experienced.
CiCi’s response to the homophobic climate was to “not think about school.” When she wasn’t in class, most of her time while on campus was spent reading in the library. She said “So, I started getting really into reading…I’d spend lunch, free period [in the library]. A couple of times I skipped class. I just stayed in the library.” CiCi did not make friends at her high school. She said: “I didn’t hang out really with anyone. I just did a lot of reading.” CiCi resisted the homophobic climate of her high school by removing herself from it to the extent that she could. She felt safe in the quiet of the library and says “books were (her) friends.”

The heterosexist climate of Nicky’s large suburban high school made it clear to her that she needed to hide her lesbian identity and she felt very alone. She says: “In high school, I think I knew gay people existed out there, but I still thought I was like the only one…. There weren’t any [gay people] at my school.” Nicky carefully crafted an entertaining school personality. It was important to her that no one suspect she was struggling with her sexuality and her feelings of isolation. She said:

I didn’t really open up to anybody because I knew they wouldn’t understand, you know. Like, well, why should I tell this person this, because, I mean, they wouldn’t understand. So I was more like the class clown to like cover it up, and, like, crack comments to just make people laugh or just to be stupid…I’d be like happy-go-lucky you know, so people aren’t going “Oh, so what’s wrong?” or “Is something bothering you?” I just wouldn’t want to put myself in that situation where they would ask or they would want to know. And so I just put this act on, and I wouldn’t talk to anybody. I didn’t want to show anything other than the happy-go-lucky perky. I kept everything bottled up inside. And that’s not good. I would, I would like lie in bed late at night and I would just cry…. This was pretty much all of high school, actually.

Nicky said when she got to college:

It was great because I didn’t have to censor myself, you know, whereas in high school, like, I had to watch every little thing I said and really worried about it. I could talk about things and say “Oh, that girl’s cute” or whatever. In high school, I’d have to watch—I just couldn’t say that. It was so different, like, in college I could say whatever and not really care, you know, not really have to worry about it. Nothing [bad] would, would like, happen to me. It was great. I was like that was really cool.

Nicky was careful to “mask” her “true” identity as lesbian to protect herself throughout high school. She was “always playing a role” as class clown and as straight. She gave herself regular pep talks to help her keep up the front: “I was like, ‘Oh, you don’t have to be yourself. You can do this, you can,’ you know?” She felt “secondary, like a second class citizen” in high school because she was not free to express who she “really was.” Nicky was afraid that something would “happen” to her if her sexuality was discovered. This fear led to the creation of an elaborate coping strategy that often placed Nicky at the center of attention. Though people laughed and joked with Nicky, she did not consider them friends. She developed a small friendship group in her senior year of high school but chose to keep her sexuality secret until she entered college. She said of high school, “I was just ready to get the hell out.”

Rather than have their gender and sexuality questioned and risk naming, some young women strive to conform to the expectations of heteronormativity (Shakib, 2003) or to give the illusion of doing so through constructing a “false heterosexual self” (O’Conor, 1993). This silence and masking around their sexuality is often associated in the “coming
out” literature with “shame” or a lack of “pride” (Payne, 2002b). Amy, CiCi, and Nicky all chose forms of silence to help them cope with school. These acts of silence are not borne of shame but rather are agentic choices made by young lesbians operating in the heterosexist culture of school. These strategies were well thought out by each of these young women based upon her evaluation of her school environment. Amy and Nicky presented themselves as straight, though neither lied about relationships with or interest in boys. Each felt that being perceived as straight increased her personal and social safety in school. CiCi, while not actively creating a straight persona, believed that claiming a nonhetero identity would put her in danger of “getting (her) butt kicked.” All three young women chose forms of isolation as protection from other students getting too close and perhaps discovering their sexuality. These choices, which these young women felt necessary to help them cope with school, allowed them to feel that they had some power in their respective situations and that they could regulate the abuse they suffered through these strategies.

Broken Silence

Silence is not always an option, and sometimes young women are named “lesbian” before they have fully claimed that identity or thought about revealing it to others. This was the case for Lindsey. Lindsey attended a large, prestigious magnet school for the arts where she says “You’d have thought they’d be OK with it (lesbian identities), but it was really, really bad.” Lindsey began to experience verbal assaults her freshman year of high school after she was unexpectedly “outed.” The ramifications were devastating to her. Lindsey felt she was under constant assault and that no one would help her. She said:

I was outside eating lunch and all these guys came over and, like, started reading Bible verses and telling me how wrong I was and all this kind of stuff, and so I went into the counselor’s office, which was right at the front of the school. I ran in there and I said, “Look, these guys are taunting me and I can’t get them to stop,” and she said “Well what did you do to provoke them?” I didn’t have a response for that at first. I said—I think I started crying actually—and I said, “I don’t know.”

Lindsey received no support from the school counselor after she disclosed her sexual identity. In fact, the counselor called Lindsey’s parents—without her knowledge—and told them about her sexuality, creating a new set of problems for Lindsey at home. Lindsey says she was “taunted every day in school.” “I was a little girl; it was easy to pick on me.” “God, it was horrible. Everybody was talking about me. Everybody.” She shifted her strategy:

In order to completely disarm people that were taunting me, it was easier to say—instead of hiding—when they would, if they had said, “You’re a faggot” or whatever, if I had said “No,” then that would have given them more to play with. Instead, when they, like, called me “dyke” and “faggot” or whatever, I’d say, “Yeah, I am. Do you have a problem with it?” And I’d just get really defensive and try to disarm them so they couldn’t come at me more than they already had.

Lindsey spent her first two years of high school aggressively defending herself and being “really, really mad.” She was “the only ‘out’ person in the entire school.” She had no help from faculty or school counselors, though many were aware of her experiences. She stated “My high school career was tainted from the beginning because people didn’t
see me as Lindsey anymore. They saw me as a lesbian and that’s that.” She cried nearly every day. “Everybody (at school) hated me.” After two years of school that she described as “so horrible,” her father moved her to a new school in the suburbs. In preparation for her move, Lindsey “grew (her) hair out” so that “no one would know (she) was gay.” She felt she needed “time off” from the harassment. Lindsey acted “straight” when she got to her new school, successfully hiding her identity. She concentrated on her music and didn’t socialize with other students. She allowed other students to assume that she and her only friend, a young man who sat next to her in band, were dating. “It was just easier,” she said. “I needed that time.” She came out at her new high school during the second semester of her senior year when she developed a crush on a classmate. She said, “I wanted to be as out as possible and as outlandish as possible because I had been in the closet for a long time.” She began boldly wearing “freedom rings” and said, “I was almost done [with school]. I figured I could stick it out.” Lindsey believed that her teachers treated her differently in those last months of high school, that she was graded more harshly, and that she was given less opportunity to be creative in her work. She said, “my grades dropped from As to Bs and the quality of my work never wavered.”

Lindsey chose three strategies, each one matched to the school situation in which she found herself. When she could not gain support from school administration, faculty, or staff in her first high school, she chose to become verbally assertive in defending herself. She tried to shut down her attackers by claiming the pejoratives they threw at her. It was constant work and it drained her. By the end of her sophomore year, Lindsey said, “I was exhausted. I just couldn’t take it anymore.” When she had the opportunity to “start over” Lindsey chose a different strategy: silence. She removed all the markers of lesbian identity she had embraced as her defense in her first two years of high school. She let her hair grow, “took off (her) thumb ring,” and got a new binder that “didn’t have Melissa Etheridge stickers on it.” For a year and a half, she told no one she was lesbian and preferred others assume she was straight. In her senior year when there were just three and a half months of school left, she chose to “come out” using an offensive, rather than defensive, approach. Though the response from her school was not positive, she was determined to “stick it out.” As Lindsey struggled to find strategies to deal with the heterosexist environments in which she was trying to get her education, teachers and staff remained silent or contributed to her difficulties. No one helped her.

Standing Up, Speaking Out

Silence is one strategy for dealing with heterosexism in schools. Sometimes young women feel, as Lindsey did at her first high school, that they must actively stand up for themselves and address those who are harassing them. As with silence, these strategies take many forms. Melanie played sports throughout her childhood but as she entered adolescence, her athleticism led to accusations and taunts with peers calling her “butch” and “lezze.” Teachers in her suburban junior high school often heard the remarks, but did nothing. Melanie felt that if she altered her appearance and dressed “more girly,” she could continue her sports activities with less attention. With the help of her mother, Melanie recreated herself to conform to “girly” expectations of appearance, wearing “girl” clothes, “sometimes dresses and skirts,” a “little makeup,” and carrying a purse. The taunts continued. The teachers remained silent. One boy particularly tormented her and wouldn’t let up.

So I, like, go to school and I’m there and he starts laying into me. He says “Oh, look what we have here,” and he picks up my purse and he starts ridiculing me to the
whole room of people…. And he’s just talking away, and I get up and I just run over and slug him. And I just start beating him up, and I beat him up wearing a dress….

Melanie was taken to the principal’s office and received punishment for her actions. The boy did not. After the incident, Melanie stopped trying to be “girlie” and returned to her “comfortable” clothes that supported her “sporty” lifestyle. Though the name calling continued behind her back, the boys no longer taunted her directly. Melanie decided she could not rely on the teachers to stop others from harassing her and would have to rely on herself. She chose first to try to stop the harassment through active gender conformity and when that strategy failed, she quieted the mockery through asserting her physical strength. Melanie let it be known that she was not going to be openly ridiculed.

June and Linda were out by choice in their high schools and each experienced verbal assaults and discrimination directly. The young women asserted their resistance to the homophobia they experienced in school by speaking up to acknowledge the homophobic climate or trying to educate for tolerance.

June attended a large city high school where sports were emphasized. She thought the school would be a good place for her because of her athletic abilities, but she found she didn’t “fit in.” June believed that other people knew she was “gay” before she did because she’s “just like more masculine than most people.” Though June has long hair and does not present herself in a way immediately identifiable as “masculine,” she felt that people “just knew about (her)” and that it affected the way she was treated even before she came out. Once she “came out,” the taunts and prejudice became overt. June felt that teachers were not supportive of her in classes, and that she could not get the academic help she needed because the teachers “didn’t like (her)” because she was “gay.” June also attributed the difficulty she had with a sports coach to homophobia. In addition to her basketball, June played volleyball, until she “got kicked off.”

Last year I came out and she [the coach] didn’t like homosexuals and she was very against it. I soon found out, and she told me to my face—kicked me off because of it. She comes up to me, she was like, “You want to know the reason I kicked you off?” “Yeah, tell me.” “Because you’re gay.”

June felt more accepted when she moved onto the varsity basketball team, but her sexuality remained a topic for comment and gossip. There was a girl on her team who “preached” to June about her sexuality while they were on a bus together. “She was sitting there on the bus ‘Oh God, help this person.’ And I’m going ‘God, get her away, get her away.” June also had trouble in the locker room with teammates after she came out to her basketball team. Though she felt helpless to change the strained situation, she also felt compelled to verbally acknowledge the treatment she received from them. She explained:

A couple of girls got really uncomfortable especially, like, in the locker room. They were hiding [behind] their clothes. I said “Don’t worry; I’m not looking at you.” And they were still uncomfortable. I knew I was making them like that so I took the liberty of like going to my own little aisle of lockers and stuff and changing. And when I would do that I knew—I wasn’t going to just like leave and not say anything to them, but when I go outside I have to go by that little strand of lockers where they all dress, and I said “Hey guys, I’m going outside now. You can actually dress now.” And they kind of looked at me like “What do you mean?” “You know what I mean.
You're so uncomfortable around me that it's not even funny, I mean I can cut the tension in the room.”

Though she heard taunts of “butch” and “dyke” in the school hallways, it was the homophobia from her teammates that most impacted June. Though her teammates praised her skill on the court, they chose not to interact with her outside of practice or games. She continued to have trouble with her teammates in the locker room yet continued to assert her right to be there. She says “They like me when I make the shots.”

I love always making the shots and always getting the ball because I'm the one like right underneath the goal. It's kind of like a little power surge, you know. I always make the shots.... But they don't want me in there [the locker room].

June felt alone in dealing with the tensions on the team but she continued to verbally acknowledge that she was being treated differently. She says, “I wasn't going to just not say anything you know, like about how they were (treating her). So I did. I said, you know.” June believed her basketball coach was aware of the situation and the tension between June and the other players, and chose to “stay out of it.” June speculated that this might be related to the coach’s own identity, which June suspected was lesbian.

June initially dealt with the homophobia she experienced in school by trying to ignore it. She didn’t respond to the name-calling she heard in the hallways and she didn’t speak with teachers about the ways in which she felt she was treated differently. Her strategy was to “not egg 'em on.” She hoped that the ridicule would stop if she did not escalate it. But June was not comfortable with this strategy in all arenas of her high school life. June’s athletics were more important to her than her academics, and her identity as a valuable team member was central for her. It is here that she felt she had to speak out. She wanted to be known for her athletic skill—not for her sexuality. She felt that it was unfair that she was ostracized from the team despite her contributions on the court. And she said so.

Linda had her first girlfriend in her senior year. Though they were “out” at her Catholic all-girls school, they always kept a physical distance between them. Linda said: “Michelle was my best friend also, she wasn't just my girlfriend, and I was scared to death to hug her in the hallways if she was crying, because I was so scared of the ramifications. It was hard.” Though Linda experienced discrimination and homophobia at school from the other girls, she was not alone. Several young women “came out” in senior year, and some of them “hung out” together. For the first time in her school experiences, Linda felt supported. The rampant homophobia sparked by the visibility of these out young women showed itself through “fears,” “myths,” and “rumors” that impacted the way in which the young women labeling as lesbian were treated by others. “Women who I'd see in the halls and talked to [in the past] and who I’d sat next to [during] freshmen orientation would smile and would just move on and things like that.” But the discrimination experienced by Linda and her friends went beyond the silent treatment.

A lot of them [other students] had come from very small private schools and weren't comfortable with sexuality and lesbianism, so there were rumors all over the place. They said we had orgies in the halls. I wasn't invited to any of them (smiles and giggles).

“Misconceptions” about the lesbian young women were rampant.
Where we sat, we sat between the gym and the cafeteria every morning for no other reason than it was a comfortable place to sit—and people would be scared to walk in the cafeteria in the morning, because people, I don’t know, they’d think we’d jump them.

The rumors about these young women created a picture of lesbians as not only deviant in desire, but deviant in their supposed promiscuity, having “orgies in the halls,” and as predators, waiting to “jump” innocent heterosexual girls. Being able to spot the dangerous lesbian became important.

Two of the women who were jocks wore white baseball caps and so people at my school were convinced that if you were gay you wore a white baseball cap. And there were all these other myths going around.

The rumor grew so that any one wearing any color baseball cap was suspect. Soon, girls were afraid to wear any baseball caps for fear of being labeled lesbian. Jewelry, haircuts, and ear piercing styles also were interpreted as markers of lesbianism. Linda says many of the rumors were “really silly,” but also painful.

For many of the students at her school, this was their “first exposure” to lesbians and they were not happy about it and felt that they should be “protected” from “people like us.” One young woman approached Linda and said “I don’t like you, I don’t like who you are, and I think you are detestable.” Having eight “out” lesbians was “a really big issue for a lot of the women at (her) school. And they went to the principal and complained.”

Not only did students complain to the administration about the “out” young women wanting the administration to “do something,” parents also complained:

This woman who gave a lot of money to the school—and because it was a private school they rely heavily on donations and things like that—and this woman gave a lot of money to the school. And she told Sister Mary Grace, who was my principal, to “Kick out the lesbians or I’m taking my daughter out along with the funding.”

Additionally, the boys’ school next door provided frequent abuse for the young women.

There was an all guys’ school next door and that was a really big problem for a lot of my friends. I would be driving out of the parking lot and people would scream, “dyke,” at me and they would throw things at my friends’ cars.

Linda’s friend “was driving out and, this guy, like, half-way, like, literally, like, jumped into her window and started screaming and, like, throwing things at her.”

The physical abuse from the Catholic boys’ school next door pushed the administration of Linda’s school to respond. Given the negative stance taken by the Roman Catholic Church on homosexuality, a Catholic girl’s school seems an unlikely site for promoting the tolerance of nonhetero identities. This school, however, began a systematic response to educate parents and students and to reduce the abuse.

The woman who was in charge of ministries at my school, who was disconcerted by this, and she asked to have a panel discussion at the senior retreat, so we did, and essentially the point was to dispel myths and, I don’t know, just say that there’s more—there was more to us than our sexuality.
Linda sat on that panel and felt empowered by the experience. For the first time she had the opportunity to talk about the abuse she and the other young women had experienced, and to state that she was “more than just a lesbian.” She said, “It was the first time I had ever stood up for who I was and I had ever said flat out this is who I am and I’m not scared to tell anyone. It was so empowering and so scary.”

The administration also offered “informational sessions for parents about homosexuality, about lesbianism. There was more information. They really emphasized educating people and tolerance.” The parent who had threatened Sister Mary Grace that she would take her daughter out of the school if the lesbians were not kicked out was told: “I hope you can find a good school for your daughter.” Though Linda acknowledged that the story was “hearsay,” she was proud of her principal’s response. Faculty began monitoring the halls for derogatory language and reprimanded students for homophobic remarks. The administration posted faculty in the school parking lot to watch the boys’ school and took down license plate numbers of cars and names of boys involved in harassing behavior. Linda’s school worked with the adjacent Catholic boys’ school to “promote tolerance” and increase security.

Though Linda felt hurt by the way other young people treated her, she also felt supported by the administration and bonded with others through the experience. She felt she had “made a difference” by sharing her feelings of marginalization on the panel. She said:

The point of being up there [on the panel] was to try and teach them a little bit more and to make them not scared because there’s nothing to be scared of.... There are just so many misconceptions and so much fear and so much hatred, and that just couldn’t go on.

Linda’s strategy to cope with the homophobic environment of her school was to work with the administration to help educate the student body on nonhetero sexualities, issues of injustice and discrimination, and to advocate for tolerance through school programming. While she was nervous about the public forum in which she agreed to speak, she wanted other students to understand the “pain and that it was really bad” for many of the out young women who had been tormented in school. She hoped that through her participation, she could reduce fear and educate others to see that she was “more than just a lesbian.” She hoped to make her school a better place for herself and for others.

Each of the young women in this study assessed the homophobic situation she faced in her school and responded by developing various coping strategies. All but one did so without any support from her school. While these stories are the stories of homophobia, harassment, and the neglect of lesbian students, they are also stories of young women’s agency in creating strategies to allow their survival in these homophobic environments. LGBTQ youth have a high school drop-out rate three times the national average (GLSEN) and yet all of the young women in this study graduated high school—a testament to the success of their various strategies. These strategies were not, however, employed without high cost. Amy, CiCi, and Nicky chose to conceal their lesbian identities but feared the discovery of their sexuality every school day. Efforts to maintain their secrets were taxing and included distancing themselves from peers and a choice not to develop friendships with other students. High school was a lonely and isolating place for them. Lindsey was left exhausted after two school years of aggressive verbal defense of her sexuality; Melanie came to believe that it was only through her physical strength that she could be safe at school. June and Linda, though they spoke up about the unequal treatment they received, were not immune from the damaging effects of that treatment. For each of these young
women, being lesbian and a high school student meant great expenditure of time and energy aimed at surviving school as a lesbian student. How might that energy have been otherwise directed if these young women had experienced school as a supportive and affirming environment? While we cannot know the answer for these students, through their stories we can see possibilities for creating a more affirming educational environment for lesbian and other nonhetero identifying students now and in the future.

Conclusion

Public schools have an obligation to treat all students equally and in a socially just manner. This obligation requires providing not only a physically safe environment, but an environment where the emotional safety and self-esteem of all young people can be nurtured. Typically, high school is not an easy place for most young people—regardless of sexual identity, but the discrimination experienced by LGBTQ youth and the lack of support and resources available to them in the school setting make their high school experiences particularly difficult. The stories told by the young women in this research reveal missed opportunities for school administration and teachers to move their schools toward greater safety and equality for LGBTQ youth. Each young woman in this research could have been positively impacted by a teacher or school administrator who demonstrated awareness that not all students are heterosexual, who challenged the harassment of LGBTQ youth, who included LGBTQ content in the curriculum in ways that did not further marginalize lesbian students, and who stood up for the rights of LGBTQ youth to equal education.

So invisible were nonhetero identities in their schools that Amy and Nicky were convinced they were the “only gay people” there (each of their high schools had an enrollment of over 2,600 students, so it is highly doubtful that they were indeed the only ones). If these schools had offered Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs), these young women would have been able to see that they were not alone, even if they chose not to participate in the clubs. Gay–Straight Alliances have been shown to positively impact not only the self-esteem of LGBTQ youth, but their academic performance as well (Lee, 2002).

The stories of unchecked verbal gay bashing told by Amy, CiCi, and Lindsey provided missed opportunities for teachers to step in and to make clear to the students involved that harassment based upon sexual or gender identity and derogatory language about LGBTQ people would not be tolerated, just as such harassment based upon race or ethnicity would not be tolerated. Lindsey’s high school experience might have been less painful for her if the school counselor from whom she requested help in her freshman year had actually provided support and assistance to her. So too might Melanie’s school experience have been more positive if her teacher had stopped the harassment she was experiencing and talked with the class about gender diversity. The messages received by the other students in Melanie’s class would have been very different if both Melanie and the boy who tormented her had been made to visit the principal’s office after their altercation.

June and Lindsey speak of discrimination experienced directly from school faculty or staff members. A coach removed June from a sports team once she disclosed her sexuality. Lindsey feels her course work was differently evaluated by her teachers after she “came out” in her senior year. Unfortunately, teacher and school counselor preparation programs have been slow to include issues of sexuality in their courses. New teachers and school counselors often enter schools having never considered that they will be working with nonhetero identifying students and not knowing how to provide affirming learning environments for them. Districts rarely include sessions on LGBTQ inclusive curriculum
or the experiences of LGBTQ youth in their continuing education programs. Teachers need opportunities to challenge their own homophobia and to learn ways in which they can support all youth.

June’s difficulty with her sports team was exacerbated, she believed, by her coach hiding her own sexual identity. June believed that her coach was unwilling to work with the team to address the issues introduced by June’s sexuality for fear that her own sexuality might be implicated. Research has shown that many teachers fail to intervene on behalf of LGBTQ youth in schools because of this fear and the threat of job loss. Most states do not protect teachers from employment discrimination based upon sexual or gender identity, though individual cities or counties can offer that protection. Having strong nondiscrimination policies in educator employment can provide LGBTQ teachers with the safety they need to be open about their own nonheterosexual identities, to serve as role models for youth, and to advocate for the well-being and equal treatment of lesbian youth in schools.

Many teachers perceive “stopping anti-gay peer harassment as too risky an endeavor to undertake” and “fear retribution” for acknowledging lesbian issues in the classroom (Macgillivray, 2000, p. 320). Teachers who have “remained silent” (van Wormer & McKinney, 2003, p. 412) need support in speaking out. Clearly written school and district policies supporting efforts to end harassment of lesbian students would empower teachers and administrators to take effective action. Taking action requires schools to acknowledge the presence of lesbian youth in schools and challenges us all to question the heteronormativity that shapes our schools (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004). We must all question how that heteronormativity systematically excludes lesbian and other nonhetero identifying youth, and ask how it might be made different. These young women’s stories provide us with clear examples of how individual educators can act and how school systems can begin to provide more affirming learning environments for all students regardless of their sexual orientation or gender performance: acknowledge their presence; address the discrimination they experience; advocate for their inclusion in school life and curriculum.

References


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