



Micro Workshop #8

Homophobia in the School Environment: A Discussion Model

Focus

The focus of this micro workshop is to develop a critical dialogue that examines teacher and school community attitudes, dispositions and beliefs about homosexuality in an educational context. Schools, classrooms and communities should be models of diversity in which *every* student is given the potential to *be, become* and *belong* as a full contributing member who can feel valued, welcome and safe regardless of sexual orientation.

Objectives

1. Identify perceived barriers to discussing homophobia within the school environment.
2. Recognize the importance of this issue in creating a safe and caring school environment.
3. Discuss the development of a school–community action plan. (See handout “What Can One Teacher Do?”)
4. Provide resources for further inquiry.

Format

Introductory Activity

Give participants one or two minutes to reflect and write down their thoughts on the following question: “*Is homophobia an issue in your school environment/classroom for teachers, administrators, school staff and/or students?*” Next give participants one or two minutes to share their thoughts with the person beside them.

Facilitator Note: You may wish to include a definition of *homophobia*.

Homophobia—a hatred or fear of homosexuals or homosexuality that undermines safe and caring school environments.

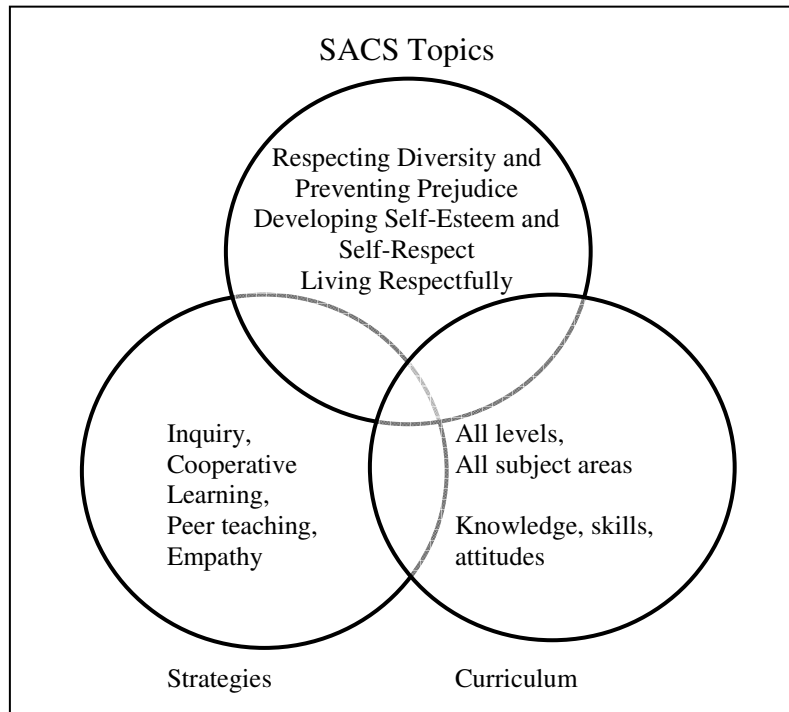
Discussion Activity

1. Have participants number themselves aloud and form groups based on their numbers.
2. Post large sheets around the room entitled “Discussing Homophobia in the Schools: Factors That Hinder and Factors That Help.” Give each group five minutes to list ideas and to designate a speaker to report back to the larger group.
3. Ask each group speaker to share the group’s key thoughts with the entire audience (5–10 min.)

Personal Reflection/Issues for Inquiry

From what the participants have heard or from personal experience, ask them to take five minutes to write down the most important issues for teachers addressing homophobia in schools/classrooms.

SACS Principles



Discuss how dealing with homophobia reflects safe and caring school principles (For example, preventing bullying, name calling, harassment and exclusion, and fostering self-esteem.)

Optional Quote to Share with Participants

I know a lot about bullies. I know they have a specific social function: they define the limits of acceptable conduct, appearance, and activities for children. They enforce rigid expectations. They are masters of the art of humiliation and technicians of the science of terrorism. They wreaked havoc on my entire childhood. To this day, their hand prints, like a slap on the face, remain stark and defined on my soul..." Suzanne Pharr, 1998.

Research Findings

Research (Friend 1993) indicates that they experience many negative consequences: victims of homophobic targeting in schools: (1) truancy or dropping out, (2) drug and alcohol abuse, (3) withdrawal from social activities, (4) running away from home, (5) turning to prostitution, (6) depression (7) suicide.

Acknowledge that this is a controversial issue and that a lot of progress has been made (For example, Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, provincial human rights legislation, ATA Professional Code of Conduct, the School Act). Still, discussion, of these issues is often impeded by people's social, cultural and personal values. As educators we have the responsibility to treat these discussions as ethical issues. We need to ask ourselves, *what is the right thing to do? Does the way we teach respect people's identity and integrity?* We need to establish an ethic of respect for all students. We must make room for different voices and ideas that challenge the

status quo. Our ultimate goal should be to transgress boundaries and become “warriors against certainty,” who encourage and engage students to become critically reflective thinkers.

Why Do Schools Need to Address This Issue?

1. An issue of safety.

Schools must be safe places for all students and must provide environments that positively contribute to students’ physical and emotional development. This responsibility extends to all students regardless of sexual orientation.

2. Ensuring the emotional well-being of students.

Negative experiences in school settings can have a profound impact on the emotional and physical well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) students.

- 97 per cent of students in schools report regularly hearing homophobic remarks from their peers. (*Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth: Report of Mass. Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993.*)
- 53 per cent of students report hearing homophobic comments made by school staff. (*Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth: Report of Mass. Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993.*)
- Suicide is the leading cause of death among LGBT youth.
- Gay male youth in Alberta are 14 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual male youth.

3. Human Rights Issues

Students are protected against discrimination by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and provincial human rights legislation. All students have the right not to be discriminated against in school settings. For LGBT youth, this right is often violated. The most common forms of discrimination are verbal and physical harassment. But even in schools that attempt to minimize verbal and physical harassment, LGBT youth still experience the oppression of silence. The silence may come in the form of avoidance of discussions of homosexuality or in the absence of positive information or images of LGBT youth.

4. The ATA Professional Code of Conduct

(1) “The teacher teaches in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of all persons without prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, colour, sex, sexual orientation, physical characteristics, age, ancestry, or place of origin.”

5. The School Act

Section 28(7) “A board shall ensure that each student enrolled in a school operated by the board is provided with a safe and caring environment that fosters and maintains respectful and responsible behaviours.”

Teachers and administrators have a mandated responsibility to ensure that LGBT youth are treated with respect and integrity within their classrooms and school communities.

What Can One Teacher Do?

(Adapted from *Pride and Prejudice: Working with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth, and Understanding Homosexuality: Changing Schools.*)

1. Develop knowledge and awareness
 - Examine your own attitudes and beliefs about sexuality and consider your own biases. (Low Risk)
 - Learn about LGBT issues and culture by reading books, journals and periodicals. (Low Risk)
2. Examine the language that you use
 - Assume that there are LGBT youth in all your classes and consider if the language that you use on a daily basis reflects that reality. (Low Risk)
 - Use inclusive language that allows for LGBT possibilities (for example, *partner* instead of *girlfriend* or *boyfriend*). (Low Risk)
3. Take a close look at your classroom
 - Consider the posters or images on your walls or the materials on your bookshelves. Are there opportunities to show students that you value diversity, including diversity concerning sexual orientation? If posters become defaced or removed, put new ones up and consider this an opportunity to engage students in a discussion about intolerance and discrimination. (Some Risk)
4. Challenge homophobic jokes or remarks
 - Make an effort to create a classroom atmosphere where students can talk about the impact of discrimination that they have faced. Draw parallels between sexism, racism and heterosexism, and talk about oppression in all its forms. Take the opportunity to challenge stereotypes and correct false assumptions or misinformation about LGBT persons. (Some Risk)
5. Develop inclusive material
 - Consider including a unit related to sexual orientation in a course you teach. Provide for inclusive education in everyday lessons that honour and respect diversity and difference. (Greater Risk)
 - Invite LGBT speakers into your classroom. (Greater Risk)
6. Advocate directly for LGBT youth
 - Speak up for LGBT youth and straight youth who are targeted or harassed. (Greater Risk)
 - Volunteer to provide staff facilitation to form a gay–straight alliance and or support group for LGBT and questioning youth. (Greater Risk)
 - Educate other staff members about the needs of LGBT youth. (Greater Risk)
7. Develop a support network
 - Develop a broad base of support among students, teachers, administrators and parents. Identify people to turn to for emotional support. (Greater Risk)

8. If you are a LGBT teacher, consider coming out
 - If you are heterosexual, come out in support of LGBT persons. (Some Risk)
 - Consider the risks and realities of coming out to your staff and/or students (Greater Risk). Coming out can have a tremendous impact on student and teacher attitudes toward homosexuality.
 - LGBT teachers should not be required to stand on their own. With the support of administrators and colleagues, the decision of teachers to be open about their sexual orientation can be an extremely powerful message, because it shows students that their sexuality is not something to hide in shame.

Introductory Activity

Reflect and write down your thoughts on the following question:

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Personal Reflection

What do you see as the most important issues in addressing homophobia in your school and/or classroom? Are there areas of particular resistance in your school? If yes, what do you think they are?

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What do you see are the most important issues in addressing homophobia in your school and/or classroom? Would there be areas of particular resistance in your school? If yes, what do you think they are?

LGBT Resources

- Barnard, I. 1993. Anti-homophobic pedagogy: some suggestions for teachers. *Feminist Teacher*, V 7, No 3, pp. 50–52.
- Friend, R. A. 1993. “Choices, not closets: heterosexism and homophobia in schools.” In L. Weis and M. Fine (eds), *Beyond silenced voices: class, race, gender in the United States* (New York: State University of New York Press), pp. 209–235.
- Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth. 1993. *Making schools safe for gay and lesbian youth: breaking the silence in schools and in families*. Boston, Mass.:
- Griffin, C., Wirth, M.J., Wirth, A. 1996. *Beyond acceptance: parents of lesbians and gays talk about their experiences*. New York: St. Martin’s.
- Heron, A. (Ed.). 1993. *Two teenagers in twenty*. Boston: Alyson.
- Jennings, K. (ed). 1994. *One teacher in ten: gay and lesbian educators tell their stories*. Boston: Alyson.
- Lipkin, A. 1999. *Understanding homosexuality, changing schools: a text for teachers, counsellors, and administrators*. Colorado: Westview Press.
- Pharr, S. 1998. *Homophobia: a Weapon of Sexism*. Iverness, Calif.: Chardon Press.
- Schneider, M.S. (Ed.). 1997. *Pride and prejudice: working with lesbian, gay and bisexual youth*. Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services.
- Woog D. 1995. *School’s out: the impact of gay and lesbian issues on America’s schools*. Boston:

Web Resources:

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network
www.glsen.org

Safe Schools Coalition of Washington
www.safeschools-wa.org

Youth Quest: A Resource Booklet
<http://members.tripod.com/~twood/guide.html>

Gay and Lesbian Educators of B.C.
www.galebc.org

Diversity Conferences of Alberta Society
www.ualberta.ca/~cbidwell/eses/dcas.html

The Advocate Magazine
www.advocate.com

Matthew Shepard Organization
www.matthewsplace.com

Equality for Gays and Lesbians
Everywhere (EGALE) Canada
www.egale.ca

Pride Centre of Edmonton
www.pridecentreofedmonton.org

Bookstores:

Edmonton: Audreys Books Ltd (Ask for Orlando Corners)
 10702 Jasper Avenue
 Edmonton AB T6E 1Z5
 (780) 423-3487
 Website: e-mail: audrey@audreysbooks.com

* Edmonton's LGBT and Feminist book store:

Bookstores:

Vancouver: Little Sisters
 1238 Davie Street
 Vancouver, B.C. V6E 1N4
 1-800-567-1662
 Website: www.lsisisters.com

*Canada's largest selection of LGBT books