

# Helping Students Understand and Accept Sexual Diversity

*To help all students realize their full potential, schools must acknowledge the special needs of homosexual students; but they must also enhance students' understanding of the sexual diversity within each person.*

JAMES T. SEARS

Back from summer vacation, Phillip ambled up the red brick steps of Strom Thurmond Junior High School. At the top of the steps stood Edith, a big-boned 9th grader. A group of "redneck brats" stood behind her. Phillip had feared something like this would happen. "The night before I started 7th grade, Edith called me up. She said, 'I hope you know I have a lot of friends. I told them all about you. We're going to make your junior high days pure hell.'"

Mary sat in study hall staring out into the unknown. "Are we deciding too fast? Maybe we should just not label ourselves and just experiment. But Connie says 'I don't think we should knock being with a boy until we've tried it.' I like boys—I just don't think about them so much sexually or emotionally. I like Connie. Am I the only one who feels this way?" Mary lays her head down on her unopened math book.

Though Phillip and Mary may feel alone, they are not. There are many Phillips and Marys who experience intimidation and suffer in fearful silence within our nation's schools. In response to their plight, the NEA, the AFT, and ASCD recently passed resolutions calling upon their members and school districts to acknowledge the special needs of students like Phillip and Mary, to provide supportive services to these students, and to adopt anti-harassment guidelines. The in-school counseling program for homosexual-identified youth established by the Los Angeles

Unified School District, the Harvey Milk School supported by the New York public school system, and the anti-slur/anti-discrimination policies adopted by school districts in cities such as Cambridge, Des Moines, and Cincinnati exemplify such efforts (Grayson 1989, Rofes 1989, Sears 1987).

Educators, school board members, and parents who have spearheaded these efforts acknowledge the simple social fact that being sexually different in a society of sexual sameness exacts a heavy psychological toll. Struggling to cope with their sexual identity, gay and bisexual students are more likely than other youth to attempt suicide, to abuse drugs or alcohol, and to experience academic problems (Brown 1987, Gibson 1989, Martin and Hetrick 1988; Remafedi 1987, Sears 1989). Of course, gay and bisexual students do not always display these symptoms—in fact, they may excel in schoolwork, extracurricular activities, or sports as a means of hiding their sexual feelings from themselves or others (Sears 1991). When they hide their feelings, however, their emotional and sexual development languishes (Martin 1982).

## The Diversity of Sexuality

Tagging these young people "at risk," providing supportive services, establish-

ing policies and guidelines, and integrating homosexuality into sex education acknowledges sexual differences among people. Splitting the school and society into unequal heterosexual and homosexual categories, however, does not enhance an understanding of sexual diversity within each person.

Being gay or lesbian is a modern-day phenomenon. Just as "homosexual" is a 19th century, enlightened, medical construction, "gay" and "lesbian" are social artifacts popularized in contemporary America (Altman 1982, Greenberg 1988). However, the basic emotional and erotic attraction to members of one's own sex is not a social artifact. As Freud (1964), Bullough (1976), and Kinsey and Associates (1948, 1953) have shown, *human beings are diverse sexual creatures*: Our capacity to relate emotionally and physically to other human beings is not limited to the other gender.

More than 40 years ago, Alfred Kinsey and his associates found that nearly half of the adult population engaged in both heterosexual and homosexual activities—a finding that still troubles many Americans. Kinsey concluded that the world is not divided into sheep and goats; he contended that "patterns of heterosexuality and patterns of homosexuality represent learned behavior which depends, to a considerable degree, upon the mores of the particular culture in which the individual is raised" (Kinsey et al. 1948, p. 660). The construction of sexual identities does not take place within a social vacuum.

On the contrary, scholars such as Kenneth Plummer (1981), Carol Kitzinger (1987), and Michael Foucault (1978) have illustrated that *sexual biographies are integrally related to soci-*

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ety. Society provides the collective cultural history, social scripts, and language that form the foundation for these constructed identities. The personal meanings of our regional, social class, racial, gender, and sexual identities are inextricably woven into a culture in which being upper class or working class, black or white, male or female, homosexual or heterosexual, from the North or the South, have social significance. While the intersections of social class, race, gender, sexuality, and region vary for each person, their existence and importance within our culture are, for those who do not share membership in the dominant groups, social facts with social consequences.

### Shaping Heterosexual Destinies

The culture of the school mirrors the larger society. Schools socialize boys and girls into their presumed heterosexual destiny. From every vantage point, there are couples: couples holding hands as they enter school; couples dissolving into endless wet kisses between school bells; couples exchanging rings with ephemeral vows of devotion and love. Sex, as many a high school student will freely admit, is an integral part of school life. And while educators may be reluctant to integrate this topic into the curriculum, covert sexual instruction comprises a large part of the hidden curriculum at any junior or senior high school: the exchange of lustful looks in the hallway or romantic notes in the classroom, the homoerotic camaraderie of sports teams, and the sexual energy pulsating in even the most boring of classes.

At any given day in any particular school these feelings span the sexual continuum, yet only those at the heterosexual end are publicly acknowledged and peer approved. When sexuality is formally discussed in health or biology class, heterosexual mechanics are most often presented (leave it to schools to make even the most interesting subject



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emotionally dry, moralistically rigid, and intellectually sterile). Homosexuality, safer sex practices, abortion ethics, and sources of birth control are the topics least discussed by sex educators (Forrest and Silverman 1989, Sears in press).

In many school districts, developing critical thinking skills is a stated priority, yet few districts extend these skills across the curriculum. Sexuality education is a case in point: sexual values are taught, not explored; sexual danger is stressed while sexual pleasure is minimized; heterosexual intercourse is presented as the apex of the pyramid of sexual desire. Questions such as how being male or female defines one's sexual options, how sexual options and values vary across time and culture, why masturbation is considered less desirable than sexual intercourse, and how one distinguishes the "gays" from the "straights" are never asked, never encouraged, never addressed.

### Breaking Through the Conspiracy of Silence

There is a great need for a healthy, frank, and honest depiction of the fluidity of sexual behavior and sexual identities. Yet too many educators are partners in a conspiracy of silence in which sexual knowledge is what is salvaged after the scissors-and-paste philosophy of religious zealots or anti-homosexual activists are applied.

The capacity of people to create and recreate their sexual identities is an integral component of the new holistic sexuality curriculum, which must redefine the meaning of "teaching for diversity." Then, we will not only recognize and support the development of the Phillips and Marys among us, but we will help all students realize their full human potential. □

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### Resources for Teaching About Sexual Diversity

*In Every Classroom: The Report of the President's Select Committee for Lesbian and Gay Concerns*. A useful compilation of statistics, essays, and suggestions for teaching staff concerned about the quality of campus life for lesbian and gay students. Rutgers University, 301 Van Nest Hall, New Brunswick, NJ 98903.

*Not All Parents Are Straight*. A film that examines the various questions surrounding the issue of children raised by gay, lesbian, or bisexual parents. Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

*Rappin', Teens, Sex, and AIDS*. A comic book written in the language of adolescents in which African-American and Latino youth visit a health educator who speaks frankly to them about sexual issues. Multi-Cultural Training Resource Center, 1540 Markey St., Suite 320, San Francisco, CA 94102.

*Sticks, Stones, and Stereotypes*. This film gives viewers an appreciation of differences by examining the negative effects of name calling and the desire

for assimilation. Equity Institute, 48 N. Pleasant St., Amherst, MA 01002.

*Dance On My Grave*, by A. Chambers. The story of a first gay experience with an emphasis on friendship. New York: Harper and Row, 1982.

*Annie on My Mind*, by N. Garden. An account of a friendship between Liza Winthrop, an intelligent and successful high school senior from a wealthy section of Brooklyn who meets Annie Kenyon, a working class girl who attends public school in the city. The two quickly become friends, then slowly and sometimes painfully acknowledge that their relationship has both a romantic and a sexual component. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982.

National Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the American Federation of Teachers. P.O. Box 19856, Cincinnati, OH 45219.

Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gay, P.O. Box 27605, Central Station, Washington, DC 20038.

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