

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON INCLUDING GAY AND LESBIAN  
ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM

by

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# ABSTRACT

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<u>Teachers' Perceptions on Including Gay and Lesbian Issues in the Classroom</u>			
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Social values—including beliefs about gay and lesbian people—develop at an early age. But a common assumption in most school communities is that gay and lesbian issues are not relevant to children. It is thought that there is no age appropriate way to bring up the subject without discussing sexual acts.

The purpose of this study was to describe elementary school teachers' perceptions of including gay and lesbian issues in the classroom. This study also investigated the support and opposition elementary school teachers would face when including these topics during classroom discussions. A questionnaire was developed by the researcher to gather information on discussing homosexual issues in the classroom. Eleven elementary school teachers within the Menomonie, Wisconsin area completed the questionnaire.

The findings of the study illustrated perspectives of teachers faced with the issue of including gay and lesbian topics in the classroom, and determined the reasons behind their decisions. All of the teachers shared feelings of

uncertainty and caution about discussing gay and lesbian issues in their classrooms. None of the selected teachers included education about this topic. The goal was for educators to examine the possibilities of how to include gay and lesbian issues in the classroom and better prepare themselves to respond to students' concerns surrounding this topic.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Human diversity is a normal, natural thing. It needs to be nurtured and studied. The most common place to study differences of the world is in the classroom. It is here where young minds strive to gain knowledge and learn to appreciate different lifestyles. Teachers realize that if children are to grow up prepared to live in a complex, multicultural society, more issues of diversity need to be discussed in the classroom and become a part of the curriculum (Banks, 1993). One aspect of diversity that often goes unstudied in American schools is gay and lesbian issues.

Although the exact number of gays and lesbians in the population is not known, it is often estimated that one in every ten people is homosexual. According to Boyd (1999), "Even if it were only one in twenty, we could project that every classroom has at least one child who will, at some point, realize that he or she is gay, lesbian or bisexual" (p. 40). It is also estimated that 6 to 14 million children live with a sexual minority parent (Rubin, 1995), and these numbers are only increasing. Still most school curricula are virtually without subjects that discuss gay and lesbian issues (Marcus, 1999).

Most people would agree that the topic of homophobia carries negative undertones. In majority of the states, it is legal to discriminate against individuals based on sexual orientation (Walling, 1996). On the issue of homophobia, Kevin Jennings, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network states, "If you really want a long-term solution to homophobia, you'd better start

when kids are young, and start teaching very early" (Quinlan, 1999). Again it comes back to the idea of including gay and lesbian issues in the schools.

When Eric Marcus, a homosexual man and author, addressed the question, "What do students learn about homosexuality in elementary school and high school," his answer was simply stated.

"Students learn plenty about homosexuality in school, almost all of it informally, and nearly all of it bad. The first lesson occurs when one child calls another a fag in the elementary school cafeteria, and the lessons continue right on through high school, when a group of students decides to torment a theater teacher they think is gay" (Marcus, 1999, p.173).

The issues of homosexuality are rarely put in a positive context in our schools. As Marcus alluded to, "gay" is used as an all-purpose insult in many schools across the United States. No matter if it is said, "You're gay!" or "That's so gay!" it is understood that someone or something just received the uttermost ridicule. Soon these students grow up and enter junior/senior high schools. Now these homosexual slurs are not only an insult to heterosexual peers, but also an absolute torment to fellow gay students. It has been reported that 97% of students in public high schools report regularly hearing homophobic remarks from peers ("Making Schools Safe", 1993), while 39% of the gay students surveyed reported that no one ever intervened when homophobic remarks were made in school (GLSEN, 1999). Children need to feel safe in school and learn to

feel good about themselves and value differences. Educators need to learn to handle difficult and sensitive issues in a fair and tactful way.

Imagine for a moment that little Susie is sitting with her Kindergarten class on the first day of school. Everyone is sharing stories about their families with the class. When it is Susie's turn she tells the class that she has two mommies and they are lesbians. All the students turn to the teacher with looks of confusion and little Tommy asks, "What is a lesbian?" If you were Susie and Tommy's teacher how would you respond? Many people wouldn't know what to say, some may even ignore the issue and change the subject. Is that fair for the students in the class? Is that fair for little Susie?

Now imagine this scenario. Josh is sitting in his 5<sup>th</sup> grade class among all of the other males in his grade. Today is their special section of sexual education. The teachers have split up the classes into male and female in hopes to make this subject more comfortable for the students. As Josh listens to the teacher explain the natural feelings of being attracted to females he becomes confused. He wonders is something wrong with him because he has feelings of attraction towards Jeff who is sitting next to him, not other females. Josh does not understand why his feelings are not talked about.

This paper will examine the literature on children of gay and lesbian parents, gay and lesbian students, and gay and lesbian issues in schools. It will also gain the perspectives of teachers faced with the issue of including gay and lesbian topics in the classroom, and determine the reasons behind their decisions. This study will also investigate the support and opposition elementary



school teachers would face when including these topics during classroom discussions. The goal is to examine the possibilities of how to include gay and lesbian issues in the classroom and better prepare educators to respond to concerns like those of Susie and Josh.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of Literature

When discussing the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in the classroom, it is important to understand the diversity of students in a classroom. There may be students of gay and lesbian parents, students that are currently struggling with their own sexual identity, or students that realize a few years later they are gay or lesbian. Learning the needs and backgrounds of these students, along with the findings of research regarding the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in the classroom is important in understanding the complexity of this issue.

#### Children of Gay and Lesbian Parents

Educators may see children of gay and lesbian parents as very different from children of heterosexual parents. This difference could produce fear (Clay, 1990). It is common for people to fear the unknown. This reason alone shows the importance for understanding these families.

An estimated 6 to 11 percent of school children have gay or lesbian parents (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1997), approximately 6 to 14 million children live in households with gay and lesbian parents (1997), and there are up to 5 million lesbian mothers and up to 3 million gay fathers in the United States (Johnson & Colucci, 1999). It has been indicated that these parents are constantly being attacked from the courts to the state houses ("Children's Right," 1999). Several legislative tactics are used to deny children homes with gay and lesbian parents ("Children's Right," 1999). Yet, prospective parents are using their options of artificial and donor inseminations, domestic and international adoption, foster

care and surrogacy to build the loving family of their dreams (Johnson & Colucci, 1999).

There has been a long-standing myth that the only acceptable home for a child contains a mother and father who are married to each other. But today the traditional definition of the married, heterosexual couple with 1.5 children is only one of the many types of families. There is no evidence that children of gay and lesbian parents face any more difficulties socializing in school than children of straight parents (Flaks, 1995). The fact is that gay and lesbian parents must work harder at protecting their families by creating legal relationships to assure that their children will have the same equal rights and protections as children of heterosexual parents (Patterson, 1992).

Many times these families are at the end of brutal resentment and hatred. Even with all of the court battles and discrimination, the people that we are supposedly trying to protect, the children, are getting hurt the most ("Children's Right," 1999). Why? Research shows that these children are no worse off than any other child in any other family (Patterson, 1992). Some studies suggest these children are better adjusted (Patterson, 1992). Children of gay, lesbian, and bisexual parents appear to be more open-minded about a wide variety of things than people with heterosexual parents (Patterson, 1992). Daughters of lesbian mothers appear to have higher self-esteem than daughters of heterosexual women, and sons of lesbian mothers seem more caring and less

aggressive (Patterson, 1992). These children seem to find it easier to be different and independent (Clay, 1990). Lesbian mothers indicate their family structure gives their children strength, sensitivity, compassion, and maturity beyond their years (Clay, 1990).

There is no evidence to suggest that lesbians and gay men are unfit to be parents or that psychosocial development among children of gay men or lesbians is compromised relative to that of children of heterosexual parents. Not a single study has found children of gay or lesbian parents to be disadvantaged in any significant manner compared to children of heterosexual parents. Indeed, the evidence to date suggests that home environments provided by gay and lesbian parents are as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to support and enable children's psychosocial growth (Patterson 1992).

It should be acknowledged that research on lesbian and gay parents and their children is still very new and limited. Less is known about children of gay fathers than about children of lesbian mothers (Johnson & Colucci, 1999). Little is known about the development of offspring of gay or lesbian parents during adolescence or adulthood (Johnson & Colucci, 1999). Studies that follow lesbian and gay families over time would be extremely helpful for providing long-term effects and providing a clearer picture of what these families generate.

### Gay and Lesbian Students

Adolescence is an exciting yet perplexing stage of life. It is not an easy time for the average heterosexual teen, so one can imagine how difficult it is for a gay or lesbian teen. It is during this confusing stage that identity development comes into play. A gay or lesbian teen may encounter vague feelings of being different, or experience feelings of isolation (Bass & Kaufman, 1996). It is important for these teens to gain a sense of universality, to not feel alone but to feel accepted and understood (Bass & Kaufman, 1996). By providing support and open discussion in the classroom, this sense of universality may be obtained (Bass & Kaufman, 1996). But first their needs and struggles need to be understood by the educators and other students as well (Mallon, 1996).

It may come as a surprise how early gay and lesbian youth come to self-realization. One report indicated that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth first became aware of their sexual orientation at age 10 (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). While the mean age of lesbian and gay youth becoming aware of their first same sex attraction is 9.7 (Herdt & Boxer, 1996). When that age is put into perspective, it represents a 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade student.

Along with self-realization, this stage brings a wide array of feelings and emotions. It takes a lot of courage for one to admit that he/she is gay. It is common for a young gay or lesbian person to experience inner conflict (Bass & Kaufman, 1996). Society still, to a degree, teaches that same-sex relationships

are a negative thing, yet this is exactly what feels natural to these youth (Bass & Kaufman, 1996). One young, gay man remembers feelings of shame, reporting, "I'd feel so guilty and dirty..." (Bass & Kaufman, 1996, p.21). Some youth experience denial and spend a great deal of effort suppressing their same-sex feelings of attraction in order to fit in with the norm. These vague feelings of being different may result in isolation. Eric Marcus (1999) recalls his feelings; "The two emotions that most dominated my life at that time [of self-realization] were fear and a sense of isolation. I was fearful of what my friends and family would think of me if they knew the truth and I felt enormous isolation because there was no one I could talk to" (p. 34). This experience is more typical, than not (Bass & Kaufman, 1996; Mastoon, 1997; Bennett, 1997; Kaeser, 1999).

Many feelings become immeasurable when toying with the idea of "coming out" (Bass & Kaufman, 1996). Responses to a gay or lesbian's "coming out" can range from shock, denial, and anger to grief, guilt, and even bargaining or pleading. Although, many friends and family, in time, respond with love and compassion. Coming out is a life long procedure. Every time a gay or lesbian person tells someone new that they are homosexual, it is as if they are coming out again for the first time. But once a gay or lesbian person has found the support and self-acceptance, it is a stimulating experience to discover a world where one can be him/her real self (Bass & Kaufman, 1996).

Sadly enough during a gay or lesbian youth's school years, s/he is rarely able to be accepted or become him/her real self. Many gay and lesbian students do not feel comfortable or safe in school, nor do they feel comfortable talking to school staff about their issues (GLSEN, 1999). It has been reported the average high school student hears anti-gay epithets 25 times a day, yet teachers who hear these slurs fail to respond 97% of the time (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). A majority of the gay and lesbian youth surveyed (69%) by The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, reported experiencing some form of harassment or violence (GLSEN, 1999). Of those 69%, 61.1% reported experiences of verbal harassment, 46.5% reported experiences of sexual harassment (having suggestive comments made, being touched inappropriately, etc.), and 27.6% reported experiences of physical harassment (being shoved, pushed, kicked, etc.).

Many people are shocked to find that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are more than 4 times likely to attempt suicide than other youth (GLSEN, 1999). It is explained that this homosexual risk factor stems from the effects of hostility against people who are gay (Hyde & Forsyth, 1994). Instead of being able to be themselves and feel good about who they are, these youth deal with isolation, fear, and harassment. Nathan a 21-year-old gay man sums up the intense isolation with this powerful analogy,

“If anyone wants to know what it feels like to be in the closet, find a deep, empty well, jump down to the bottom, and sit there. Wait a day...and a night...and the next day...never knowing if you'll move in a wide open space again” (Mastoon, 1997, p. 21).

### Gay and Lesbian Issues in Schools

Although the literature with respect to gay and lesbian youth in general has grown rapidly, the literature concerning gay and lesbian issues within educational settings is limited (Mallon, 1996). Many would agree that education and sharing of information are the keys to eliminating homophobia (Bennett, 1997; Boyd, 1999; Marcus, 1999; Raymond, 1996). Unfortunately, when it comes to how one might include education to eliminate homophobia in the classroom, the agreement dwindles. “Sexuality of any kind in the schools is a touchy issue” (Bullough, 1979, p. 102). Boyd (1999) examines teachers' anonymous reasons for and against the inclusion of this topic in their classroom. Their responses are paraphrased in the following sections.

#### Reasons for inclusion.

Educators feel it is their responsibility to provide accurate information and clarify misunderstandings. They need to open up the classroom to discuss topics freely and allow the children to form their own opinions. Teachers need to educate their students to respect and accept all people and show compassion to everyone. This issue cannot be ignored; children will learn mixed messages from



society and the media. Educators feel it is important to explore understanding of all lifestyles openly in the classroom. Here they can teach not to discriminate but respect differences in the world. Finally teachers find it valuable to create an atmosphere to discuss social issues and keep them from being taboo. This is especially important for children of gay and lesbian parents. By not talking about something gives the message that there is something wrong with it. Including information about all families in educational programs and curriculums reassures children of gay and lesbian parents that their school thinks that their family is OK.

#### Reasons against inclusion.

Many teachers feel it is the responsibility of the family to discuss gay and lesbian issues. Topics involving sexual issues do not belong in schools, especially a topic of this nature, which tends to be seen as a moral issue. The issue of homosexuality is seen as a religious issue, which goes against many religious beliefs. Educators feel that many people see homosexuality as morally wrong and to discuss it in the schools would violate religious rights. Finally educators think children are too young to understand gay and lesbian lifestyles. Arguments state that elementary children should remain innocent and not be exposed to sexual issues. They are too immature to discuss such a mature topic.

Chasnoff and Cohen (1997) express that education about gay issues is necessary because negative language about gay and lesbian people is common in school hallways, classrooms, playgrounds, and even in teachers' lounges.

“Opening these conversations with young children gives us an opportunity to prevent prejudice, discrimination, and violence and to support the lives of all children just as they are” (Chasnoff and Cohen, 1997, p. 10). It is a common assumption, as mentioned above, that elementary school children are too young to be introduced to this topic. Owens (1998) feels education and tolerance training can begin as early as first grade, “Students need only become acquainted with diversity and learn that some children have one parent, some two, and a few three or more and that all-male, all-female, and mixed-gender parents are possible” (p. 135). It is a belief that helping students become more tolerant and accepting means starting at the very earliest ages (Aronson, 1995). As early as first grade negative name-calling begins. Even before children understand the meaning of the words, they have been made aware of negative images of what it is to be gay and what gay people are like (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1997). Because of this early knowledge, Chasnoff and Cohen (1997) believe it is not possible for a school to *introduce* gay and lesbian topics. Instead a school could correct misleading information and enforce a more accurate viewpoint.

George Sloan, an elementary school principal, reflected on the idea of gay and lesbian issues in the classroom by stating, “It should be mandatory. It’s a healthy way of teaching students to respect each other” (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1997, p.12). A student has the right to know about homosexuality. Freedom of thought decrees that each student be exposed to diverse information and be able

to make judgments based on factual information (Unks, 1995). Including gay issues in the curriculum not only educates students on the various themes, but also allows a gay or lesbian student to feel less isolated and better understood (Littig & Long, 1995). Yet, fears about inappropriately influencing the sexual orientation of students, and being seen as advocating or promoting homosexuality make school administrators reluctant to allow gay and lesbian issues in the classroom (Griffin & Harro, 1997).

According to Griffin and Harro (1997), even if there was not great reluctance, "Most schools are ill-prepared to address the needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, or lesbian, gay and bisexual parents with school-aged children (p. 142). Before these issues can be discussed in the classroom, students and staff should become sensitized. Davis and Reilly (1999) offer some first steps toward sensitizing students and staff.

- ▼ **Never Make Assumptions About Someone's Sexuality**~ Always use neutral language such as, "Are you seeing anyone" instead of "Do you have a boyfriend?"
- ▼ **Validate, Support and Normalize Students' Feelings about their own or Their Parent's Sexuality**~ Let students know that you'll be there for them.
- ▼ **Have Something Gay or Equal Rights-related in Your Classroom**~ Supportive symbols will identify you as a safe person to talk to.

- ▼ **Challenge Homophobia~** Respond immediately and forcefully whenever you encounter an obviously homophobic “event.”

Once the school climate has been prepared, Chasnoff and Cohen (1997, p. 16-17) advocate five ways to address gay issues in the classroom.

- ▼ **Use the Words~** Frequently even the youngest children have heard the words gay, lesbian, and bisexual as negative connotations. Generally they do not understand the true meaning.
- ▼ **Be Prepared for Teachable Moments~** Everyday moments can be used to create a safe atmosphere for conversation. Block the derogatory name calling such as “fag” or “homo” by reminding students that it is not allowed. Then discuss why and how that particular name could be hurtful.
- ▼ **Draw On Current Events~** Bring in articles that relate to gay and lesbian rights and have students discuss what they think and how they arrived at their ideas.
- ▼ **Acknowledge the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender People Whom the Children Already Know~** “Prejudice persists when members of a group are invisible” (1997). By mentioning individuals who are gay in a respectful manner, that invisibility can be offset.
- ▼ **Be Conscious of the Sexual Orientation of Characters in Your Classroom Literature~** Generally all couples in children’s books are heterosexual. Sporadically read books that have gay characters in them.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe elementary school teachers' perceptions of including gay and lesbian issues in the classroom.

The objective of this study is to investigate the reasons behind elementary school teachers' decisions regarding whether to include gay and lesbian issues in the classroom. Also the goal is to determine what kind of support and opposition teachers would face when including gay and lesbian issues in the classroom.

#### Instrumentation

A questionnaire (Appendix) was developed by the researcher to gather information on discussing homosexual issues in the classroom. The survey consisted of six discussion questions. The researcher designed the questionnaire to assess teachers' perceptions of reasons for and reasons against including gay and lesbian issues, support and opposition teachers would encounter, ways to handle the opposition, and ways to include gay and lesbian issues in the classroom.

#### Participants

The researcher contacted principals at four elementary schools surrounding the Menomonie, Wisconsin area. The nature of the study was

explained and approval was granted to distribute materials at all schools. Sixty questionnaire packets were dispersed between the four schools. Eight females and three males returned their materials. The participants were from the following schools: two from Wakanda Elementary in Menomonie, two from Cedar Falls Elementary in Menomonie, one from Caddie Woodlawn in Durand, and six from Osceola Elementary. The participants' ages ranged from 27 to 58 with a mean age of 46; the grade level in which the participants taught ranged from first to fourth grade with the mean grade level being third, and the range of years teaching was 3 to 31 with a mean of 18.5 years.

#### Research Procedures

The researcher had intended on conducting structured interviews but when participants were reluctant to volunteer because of time restraints, the mailed questionnaire format was utilized. The researcher provided participants with packets that included: a self-addressed stamped envelope; a cover letter explaining the nature of the study and how to contact the researcher if any questions or concerns arose; an informed consent sheet; a demographic sheet which included questions about their sex, age, race, school district, grade level, and years teaching; and finally, the six survey questions. The participants also had the opportunity to check a box if they were interested in being contacted by phone for further questions, if needed. After all paper work was completed the

participants were asked to return all materials to the researcher in the provided self-addressed stamped envelope.

### Data Analysis

The information that the teachers provided was examined to determine their perspectives when faced with the issue of including gay and lesbian topics in the classroom, and reveal the reasons behind their decisions. The researcher analyzed information provided by male and female teachers, different grade levels, school districts, and age of participant.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

The objective of this study was to investigate the reasons behind elementary school teachers' decisions about whether to include gay and lesbian issues in the classroom. Also the goal was to determine what kind of support and opposition teachers would face when including gay and lesbian issues in the classroom. Eleven elementary school teachers participated in this study. The following are the results from their completed questionnaires.

- **What, if any, are your reasons for including gay and lesbian issues in the elementary classroom?**

Five of the eleven elementary school teachers saw no reason to include these issues in the classroom. One teacher stated, "Students at this level do not understand what these terms/issues truly mean." Two of the teachers would only discuss gay and lesbian issues if a student in the class brought it up. "In the elementary level, I feel gay/lesbian issues would only be covered briefly if it came up...a 'teachable moment'." The final four participants all shared the common theme of teaching about diversity. Allowing their students to understand that all people need to be treated fairly and justly, were reasons behind these teachers inclusion of gay and lesbian issues. A second grade teacher shared the following insight, "I believe it is important for children to know and understand the



great diversity we have today in terms of sexual orientation. Children need to understand the importance of being nonjudgmental and accepting of folks who may have a different style in life.”

- **What, if any, are your reasons against including gay and lesbian issues in the elementary classroom?**

All respondents except for one had reasons why they felt gay and lesbian issues were not suitable in elementary classrooms. Four teachers shared similar responses that matters of sexual orientation are not elementary age appropriate. “I would not bring up these issues because 8 and 9 year old children are not mature enough to comprehend sexual activity and it is not appropriate for a classroom.” Two second grade teachers and one third grade teacher expressed feelings of discomfort discussing this topic at their grade level. Their explanations went on to clarify that this being such a controversial issue, opposition could be harsh. As one second grade teacher explained, “My district is very small townish and conservative and I’m afraid I’d be hung if I discussed gay and lesbian issues.”

- **What kind of support would a teacher encounter if he/she did include gay and lesbian issues in the classroom?**

Three participants appeared very adamant in their responses of NONE! One teacher described support as “nonexistent”. A couple

teachers answered that they were honestly unsure of what support they would receive, while the rest felt if they searched for support from the school board, administration, guidance counselor, and fellow colleagues they would find it.

- **What kind of opposition would a teacher encounter if he/she did include gay and lesbian issues in the classroom?**

All teachers responded with some source of opposition. The responses ranged from “Lots” or “Intense” to “This goes against God’s teachings. God forbids homosexual behavior.” The participants expressed that students, parents, the community, fellow staff, the religious community, and administration could all provoke extreme opposition. One third grade teacher declared, “Even if you include these issues in a context of diversity you may still encounter severe opposition with parents, administration and fellow staff.”

- **How could he/she handle that opposition?**

Only a few of the participants gave suggestions on how to handle opposition. One third grade teacher expressed that if the opposition was coming from a parent it is important to make sure the principal is informed as to what is going on in the classroom so he/she can be prepared to answer questions and back up the staff. Another third grade teacher suggested providing research and statistics to back up any information

discussed. Also to look into school board policies regarding controversial issues that may provide support to handle the opposition. A first grade teacher recommended that explanations be given along with additional informative materials. She went on to suggest allowing the opposition to view the lessons and participate.

- **In what ways could a teacher include gay and lesbian issues in the classroom?**

Only one teacher indicated that there are no ways to include these issues in the classroom. Another teacher stated that gay and lesbian issues might be included with the assistance of literature and class discussions. By approaching issues of discrimination and fairness or role-playing differences and diversity were examples two teachers shared. Two third grade teachers expressed the issues could be included when discussing situations dealing with families and caretakers. "We always offer the option of making more than one gift/card on Mother's Day, Christmas, etc. MANY children have bonded with multiple caregivers." Lastly, two teachers expressed similar interest in having training in sensitivity and on ideas of educating and the proper terms to use before they felt comfortable including these issues in their classrooms.

## CHAPTER V

## Discussion

Summary

An estimated 6 to eleven percent of school children have gay or lesbian parents, and another 5 to 9 percent will at some point realize that they are homosexual (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1997). Nonetheless, school curricula are virtually without subjects that discuss gay and lesbian issues. According to Chasnoff & Cohen (1997), "To prevent prejudice and violence, we must begin to address this issue in elementary school, because if we wait until middle or high school, the task—if it's done at all—becomes one of 'unlearning' prejudice, rather than preventing it."

The purpose of this study was to describe elementary school teachers' perceptions of including gay and lesbian issues in the classroom. This study also investigated the support and opposition elementary school teachers would face when including these topics during classroom discussions. A questionnaire was developed by the researcher to gather information on discussing homosexual issues in the classroom. Eleven elementary school teachers within the Menomonie, Wisconsin area, completed the questionnaire.

The findings of the study illustrated perspectives of teachers faced with the issue of including gay and lesbian topics in the classroom, and determined the reasons behind their decisions. All of the teachers shared feelings of uncertainty and caution about discussing gay and lesbian issues in their

classrooms. None of the selected teachers stated that they included education about this topic.

### Conclusions

Although there is a limited research base to draw from, several conclusions can be made regarding survey results from respondents.

Forty-five percent of survey participants indicated that there is no need to include gay and lesbian issues in the elementary classroom. This is contrary to the beliefs stated by Chasnoff and Cohen (1997). According to Chasnoff and Cohen (1997) education about gay issues is necessary because negative language about gay and lesbian people is common in school hallways, classrooms, playgrounds, and even in teachers' lounges.

Some results of this study were consistent with the literature in that the selected teachers reflected that education of gay and lesbian issues in their classrooms was minimal to none. Of the eleven teachers who participated, not one indicated that specifically gay and lesbian issues are discussed in their classrooms. This is consistent with a study conducted by Rienzo (1996), whose data from school districts nationwide indicated that most school districts are not offering recommended program elements related to sexual orientation issues. Thirty-six percent of teachers from this study, however, did indicate that diversity and learning to respect everyone was discussed. Yet, Owens (1998) reveals, "When schools attempt to promote and respect individual diversity, the term usually applies to racial/ethnic or religious differences. Notably absent are differences in sexual orientation" (p.2).

The demographics of the participants had no apparent contributions to the replies. There were no significant differences in responses depending on the teacher's sex, age or grade level being taught. However, teachers that have been teaching for less than 10 years tended to have less conservative views than those who have been teaching for longer periods.

### Limitations

There were limitations to this study that should be mentioned. First, the sample size of eleven teachers was relatively small and does not allow the results to be easily generalized. Second, the questionnaire format did not allow the researcher to probe the participants for further explanations. However, this format did allow the teachers to remain anonymous during a controversial topic of study. Last, this study involved questioning elementary public school teachers from predominantly small towns. There were no private schools included, nor were there schools from larger communities.

### Recommendations for Future Studies

Further investigation into the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in the classroom is suggested with the use of the following recommendations:

1. To better understand the comfort level and acceptance level of teaching gay and lesbian issues to the elementary school population by public school teachers, a larger sample of teachers and a wider sample of districts should be included.
2. To enhance the integrity of this study, it may be beneficial to include follow-up telephone interviews with each elementary teacher

respondent. The qualitative information that may be derived from these follow-up interviews would be beneficial in assisting the reader to understand how and why the individual teacher answered questions the way in which they did.

3. To gauge the level of advocacy for or opposition against teaching topics relating to gay and lesbian issues at the elementary level, teachers could be asked to fill out a Likert Scale. By statistically comparing specific questions, perhaps more dramatic results may occur.
4. To assist elementary school and post secondary training programs. It may be beneficial to engage university personnel in teaching whether gay and lesbian education issues are appropriately taught at the elementary level. By working collaborately with elementary teachers, university training programs may develop "state of the art" gay and lesbian curricula for elementary students.
5. To understand the global nature of this issue, research gathering beyond Wisconsin may prove to be valuable by offering different regional viewpoints. According to Owens (1998), negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians are more present in the midwestern and southern states than on the coasts.

This study aimed to assess elementary school teachers' perception of including gay and lesbian issues in the classroom. It may be useful to expand this study to include middle school and high school teachers' perceptions. It

would be especially interesting to include parents', students' and the community's perceptions of including these issues in the classroom as well. Lastly, investigating whether a correlation exists between homophobic levels of the teachers (obtained from a Homophobia Inventory) and the amount of inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in the classroom would be of great importance.



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## Appendix

### Questionnaire

1. What, if any, are your *reasons for* including gay and lesbian issues in the elementary classroom?
2. What, if any, are your *reasons against* including gay and lesbian issues in the elementary classroom?
3. What kind of *support* would a teacher encounter if he/she did include gay and lesbian issues in the classroom?
4. What kind of *opposition* would a teacher encounter if he/she did include gay and lesbian issues in the classroom?
5. How could he/she handle that opposition?
6. In what ways could a teacher include gay and lesbian issues in the classroom?