"I am not insane; I am angry"[1]

Adolescent Masculinity, Homophobia, and Violence

MICHAEL S. KIMMEL

Violence in our nation's schools has emerged as one of our most gripping social problems. All over the country, Americans are asking why some young people open fire, killing or wounding other students and their teachers. Are these teenagers emotionally disturbed? Are they held in the thrall of media-generated violence—by video games, the Internet, rock or rap music? Are their parents to blame? Our shock and concern, and the wrenching anguish of parents who fear that their children may not be safe in their own schools, demand serious policy discussions. And such discussions demand serious inquiry into the causes of school violence.

In November 2000, the FBI released its report of all twenty-eight cases of school shootings in the United States since 1982.[2] These cases—in which a young student opens fire, apparently randomly, and shoots teachers and students—are the only type of school violence that has increased since 1980.[3] This followed two earlier government studies: the Surgeon General's *Report on Youth Violence* and the Bureau of Justice Statistics' *Indicators of School Crime and Safety 2000*. These were followed quickly by a major new study of bullying behaviors.[4] Clearly, questions about safety and school violence are of pressing national concern.

All these studies, however, concentrated on identifying potential antecedents of school violence; for example, media influence, drug and alcohol Internet usage, and family dynamics and structure. They paid little or no attention to the fact that *all* the school shootings were committed by boys. This uniformity cut across all other differences among the shooters: some came from intact families, others from single-parent homes; some boys had acted violently in the past, others were quiet and nonsuspect; some boys expressed rage at their parents (two killed their parents the same morning), and others seemed to live in happy families.

For a contrast, imagine what these studies would have examined had it been girls who had committed all the shootings: Would not gender be the *only* story? The single greatest risk factor in school violence is masculinity. The analytic blindness of previous work runs even deeper than gender. All but one of the thirty-eight school shootings were committed by White boys who lived in the suburbs. As a result, the public has assumed that these boys were deviants, their aberrant behavior explainable by some psychopathological factor.

While this is no doubt true, at least in part—the boys who committed these terrible acts probably did have serious psychological problems—such a framing also masks the way race and class play a significant role in school violence. Again, imagine if all the school shooters had been poor African American boys in inner-city schools. It is unlikely that our search for causes would have pathologized the boys as much as the culture of poverty or the "normality" of violence among inner-city youth.

Still, most students—White or non-White, male or female—are not violent, schools are predominantly safe, and school shootings are aberrations. As a public, we seem concerned with school shootings because the story is not one of simply "when children kill" but, specifically, when suburban White boys kill.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

There were four cases of school shootings documented between 1982 and 1990; there were twenty-four cases in the 1990s. Figure 1 presents a map the United States with the sites of these shootings marked. It is immediately apparent from this map that school shootings don't occur uniformly or evenly in the United States, which makes one skeptical of uniform cultural explanations such as violent video games, musical tastes, the Internet, or television and movies. School shootings are *not* a national trend. Of the

Figure 1   Sites of Documented School Shootings in the United States, 1982–2001

twenty-eight school shootings between 1982 and 2001, all but one (in Chicago) were in rural or suburban schools. All but two (in Chicago and Virginia Beach) were committed by White boys. In addition, twenty of the twenty-eight school shootings took place in states that voted for George W. Bush in the 2000 presidential election. Among the other shootings, one was in suburban Oregon, one was in rural eastern Washington State, two were in Southern California, one was in rural and another in suburban Pennsylvania, and one was in rural New Mexico.

Of course, all of this does not suggest that rural and suburban Whites who vote Republican are responsible for school violence. But it does suggest that school violence is unevenly distributed, and that understanding it requires that we look locally at the factors that accompany political affiliation particularly in rural and suburban areas. We need to look at local gun culture" (percentage of homes owning firearms, gun registrations, NRA memberships), and at local gender culture and school cultures—attitudes about gender nonconformity, tolerance of bullying, and teacher attitudes. We need to focus less on the form of school violence—documenting prevalence and presenting a demographic profile of the shooters—and

more on the *content* of the shootings, asking questions instead about family dynamics and composition, psychological problems and pathologies, local school cultures and hierarchies, peer interactions, prevailing gender ideologies, and the interactions among academics, adolescence, and gender identity.

What we have ignored is a striking consistency in the stories that have emerged about the boys who did commit the violence. All had stories of being constantly bullied, beat up, and, most significantly for this analysis, "gay-baited." All seem to have been mercilessly and constantly teased, picked on, and threatened. And, most strikingly, it was *not* because they were gay (none of them was gay as far as we can tell), but because they were *different* from the other boys—shy, bookish, an honor student, a "geek" or a "nerd." Theirs are stories of cultural marginalization based on criteria for adequate gender performance, specifically the enactment of codes of masculinity. (By contrast, boys in inner-city schools are structurally marginalized by racism and income inequality; their violence often takes a different form.)

This chapter reports some preliminary findings from my investigation of these issues. I locate the causes of school violence in the constellation of adolescent masculinity, homophobia, and other gender-related factors that may help us understand—and prevent—school violence before it occurs.[5]

TAKING AWAY THEIR MANHOOD

Before beginning any inquiry, it's often helpful to ask an expert. When confronted recently about his homophobic lyrics, the rap star Eminem offered the following explanation. Calling someone a "faggot" was not a slur on his sexuality, but on his gender: "The lowest degrading thing that you can say to a man when you're battling him is to call him a faggot and try to take away his manhood. Call him a sissy. Call him a punk. 'Faggot' to me doesn't necessarily mean gay people. 'Faggot' to me just means taking away your manhood."[6]

In this rationalization, Eminem perhaps unwittingly addresses the central connection between gender and sexuality, and particularly the association of gender nonconformity with homosexuality. Homophobia is far less about the irrational fear of gay people or the fear that one might actually be gay or have gay tendencies, and more the fears that *heterosexuals* have that others might perceive them as gay.[7] The terror that others will see one as gay, as a failed man—the fear I call homophobia—underlies a significant amount of men's violence. Put another way, homophobia might be called "the hate that makes men straight."

There is much at stake for boys during adolescence, and heterosexual boys engage in a variety of evasive strategies to ensure that no one gets "the wrong idea" about them. These strategies range from the seemingly comic (though telling)—such as two young boys occupying three movie seats by placing their coats on the seat between them—to the truly tragic, such as engaging in homophobic violence, bullying, excessive risk taking (drunk or aggressive driving), and even sexual predation and assault. The impact of homophobia is felt not only by gay and lesbian students, but also by heterosexuals who are targeted by their peers for constant harassment, bullying, and gay-baiting. In many cases, gay-baiting is "misdirected" at heterosexual youth who may be somewhat gender nonconforming.

As we examined all available media reports of these school shootings, a striking picture emerged. In the overwhelming majority of these cases there were also reports that the boys were teased and bullied mercilessly by classmates, that they were constantly called "faggot," "homo," and "queer." For example, young Andy Williams, who shot several classmates in Santee, California, was described as "shy" and was "constantly picked on" by others in school. (They stole his clothes, his money, and his food, beat him up regularly, and locked him in his locker, among other daily taunts and humiliations.)[8] Classmates described Gary Scott Pennington, who killed his teacher and a custodian in Grayson, Kentucky, in 1993, as a "nerd" and a "loner" who was constantly teased for being smart and wearing glasses.[9] Barry Loukaitas, who killed his algebra teacher and two other students in Moses Lake, Washington, in 1996, was an honor student who especially loved math; he was also constantly teased and bullied and described as a "shy nerd."[10] And Evan Ramsay, who killed one student and the high school principal in Bethel, Alaska, in 1997, was also an honor student who was teased for wearing glasses and having acne.[11]

Fourteen-year-old Michael Carneal was a shy and frail freshman at Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky, barely five feet tall, weighing 110 pounds. He wore thick glasses and played in the high school band. He felt alienated, pushed around, and picked on. He was said to be very upset when students called him a "faggot" and almost cried when the school gossip sheet labeled him as "gay." On Thanksgiving 1997, he stole two shotguns, two semiautomatic rifles, a pistol, and 700 rounds of ammunition, and, after a weekend of showing them off to his classmates, brought them to school hoping that they would bring him some instant recognition. "I just wanted

the guys to think I was cool," he said. When the "cool" guys ignored him, he opened fire on a morning prayer circle, killing three classmates and wounding five others. Now serving a life sentence in prison, Carneal told psychiatrists weighing his sanity, "People respect me now."[12]

At Columbine High School, the site of the nation's most infamous school shooting, this connection was not lost on Evan Todd, a 255-pound defensive lineman on the Columbine football team, an exemplar of the "jock" culture that Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris found to be such an interminable torment. "Columbine is a clean, good place, except for those rejects," Todd said. "Sure we teased them. But what do you expect with kids who come to school with weird hairdos and horns on their hats? It's not just jocks; the whole school's disgusted with them. They're a bunch of homos. . . . If you want to get rid of someone, usually you tease 'em. So the whole school would call them homos."[13] In the videotape made the night before the shootings, Harris said, "People constantly make fun of my face, my hair, my shirts." Klebold added, "I'm going to kill you all. You've been giving us shit for years."

What Klebold said he had been receiving for years apparently included constant gay-baiting, being called "queer," "faggot," "homo," being pushed into lockers, grabbed in hallways, mimicked and ridiculed with homophobic slurs. For some boys, high school is an interminable torment, a constant homophobic gauntlet, and they may respond by becoming withdrawn and sullen, using drugs or alcohol, becoming depressed or suicidal, or acting out in a blaze of overcompensating, violent "glory."[14] The prevalence of this homophobic bullying, teasing, and violence is staggering. (See "Growing Up in the Shadows" by Michael Sadowski, pp. 85–101, in this volume.)

My hypothesis is decidedly *not* that gay and lesbian youth are more likely to open fire on their fellow students. In fact, from all available evidence, *none* of the school shooters was gay. But homophobia—being constantly threatened and bullied *as if they were* gay, as well as the homophobic desire to make sure that others knew that they were not gay—seems to play a significant and understudied role in these school shootings.

Still, several key questions remain. I've already suggested that the first question to ask is, why boys? But more specifically, why White boys? Today we explore "masculinities" to denote differences among boys and men based on race, class, region, age, and sexuality. Failure to see race while looking at gender often makes us miss the real story. We know that African American boys face a multitude of challenges in schools—from racial stereotypes to formal and informal tracking systems, low expectations, and

underachievement. But the one thing they do not do is plan and execute random and arbitrary mass shootings. And this is particularly interesting, since the dynamics of the classroom and academic achievement have different valences for African American girls and African American boys. In their fascinating ethnographies of two inner-city public high schools, both Signithia Fordham and Ann Ferguson discuss these differences. When African American girls do well in school, their friends accuse them of "acting White," but when African American boys do well in school, their friends accuse them of "acting like girls."[15]

Perhaps cultural marginalization works itself out differently for subordinates and superordinates, the privileged and the unprivileged. Even if they are silenced or lose their voice, subordinates—women, gays and lesbians, students of color—can tap into a collective narrative repertoire of resistance, "the ongoing narrative of the struggle for racial equality."

White boys who are bullied are supposed to be real men, supposed to be able to embody independence, invulnerability, manly stoicism. The cultural marginalization of the boys who committed school shootings extended to feelings that they had no other recourse. They felt they had no other friends to validate their fragile and threatened identities; they felt that school authorities and parents would be unresponsive to their plight; and they had no access to other methods of self-affirmation.

WHY THESE PARTICULAR BOYS?

There have to be some reasons why school shootings take place in these places and not others, as well as why these boys, and not others, become perpetrators. Obviously some boys—many boys—are routinely picked on, bullied, and gay-baited in schools across the country on a daily basis. How do they cope? What strategies do they use to maintain their composure, their self-esteem, and their sense of themselves as men?

David, a student who had been victimized by bullies at school, was interviewed recently for a *Time* magazine story about resilient youth. For David, the bullying started when he was thirteen: "At first I tried to brush it off. But it got worse. I got beat up every day and couldn't take it. I'd fake being sick. My grades slipped." His parents tried to intervene with school officials, but the attacks continued. David's thoughts got darker:

I felt, "What did I do to deserve this?" I wanted revenge. I never sat down and planned anything—I personally couldn't pick up a gun and kill some-

one, it's not who I am—but I will tell you I did want to hurt them. I wanted them to feel how bad I felt.[16]

But he didn't. Most boys who are bullied, harassed, and baited survive—as do their classmates. Several possible factors may help explain this. Perhaps there is a "charismatic adult" who makes a substantial difference in the life of the child. Most often this is a parent, but it can also be a teacher.

Perhaps the boy can develop an alternative pole around which he can experience and validate his identity. Bullying suggests that the boy is a failure at the one thing he knows he wants to be and is expected to be—a man. If there is something else that he does well—a private passion, music, art, someplace where he feels valued—he can develop a pocket of resistance.

Similarly, the structures of a boy's interactions can make a decisive difference. A male friend, particularly one who is not also a target but seems to be successful at masculinity, can validate the boy's sense of himself as a man. As one male high school student commented, "If you go to school and people make fun of you every day, and you don't have a friend, it drives you to insanity."

But equally important may be the role of a female friend, a potential if not actual "girlfriend." Five of the school shooters had what they felt was serious girl trouble, especially rejection. It may be that the boys who are best able to resist the torments of incessant gay-baiting and bullying are those who have some girls among their friends, and perhaps even a girlfriend—that is, girls who can also validate their sense of masculinity (which other boys do as well) *as well as* their heterosexuality (which boys alone cannot do).

The successful demonstration of *heterosexual* masculinity—which is the foundation, after all, of gay-baiting—requires not only successful performance for other men, but also some form of "sexual" success with women. (I put the word "sexual" in quotation marks because this doesn't necessarily mean actual sexual contact but rather a sexualized affirmation of one's masculinity by girls and women. If the girl is not a "girlfriend" she is at least a girl and a friend, and therefore a potential romantic and sexual partner; therefore the boy can assume some degree of heterosexual competence.)

These sorts of questions—the dynamics of local culture, the responsiveness of adults and institutions, and the dynamics of same-sex and cross-sex friendships—will enable us to understand both what led some boys to commit these terrible acts and what factors enable other boys to develop the resources of resistance to daily homophobic bullying.

Take a walk down any hallway in any middle school or high school in America. The single most common put-down today is, "That's so gay." It is deployed constantly, casually, unconsciously. Boys hear it if they dare to try out for school band or orchestra; if they are shy or small, or physically weak and unathletic; if they are smart, wear glasses, or work hard in school. They hear it if they are seen to like girls too much, or if they are too much "like" girls. They hear it if their body language, their clothing, or their musical preferences don't conform to the norms of their peers. And they often hear it not as an assessment of their present or future sexual orientation but as a commentary on their masculinity.

Eminem had at least this part right: Calling someone a "faggot" means questioning his manhood. And in this culture, when someone questions our we don't just get mad, we get even.

NOTES

1. Luke Woodham, age sixteen, perpetrator of school shooting in Pearl, Mississippi.
2. Mary Ellen O'Toole, *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective* (Quantico, VA: National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, FBI Academy, 2000).
3. See Barry Glassner, "School Violence: The Fears, the Facts," *New York Times*, August 13, 1999, as well as Glassner's book, *The Culture of Fear* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).
4. Tonja R. Nansel, Mary Overpeck, Ramani Pilla, June Ruan, Bruce Simmons-Morton, and Peter Scheidt, "Bullying Behaviors among U.S. Youth: Prevalence and Association with Psychosocial Adjustment," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285, no. 16 (2001): 2094–2100.
5. This ongoing research is being undertaken with Matt Mahler in the Department of Sociology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.
6. Cited in Richard Kim, "Eminem—Bad Rap?" *The Nation*, March 5, 2001.
7. Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," in Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (eds.), *Theorizing Masculinities* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1994).
8. Kristen Green and Bruce Lieberman, "Santana Gunman Targeted with Anti-Gay Epithets," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, March 10, 2001.
9. Jerry Buckley, "The Tragedy in Room 108," *U.S. News & World Report*, November 8, 1993.
10. "Did Taunts Lead to Killing?" *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, February 4, 1996.
11. Steve Fainaru, "Alaska Teen's Path to Murder," *Dallas Morning News*, December 4, 1998.
12. Jonah Blank, "The Kid No One Noticed," *U.S. News & World Report*, October 12, 1998.

13. Nancy Gibbs and Timothy Roche, "The Columbine Tapes," *Time*, December 20, 1999, 50–51.
14. Timothy Egan, "Patterns Emerging in Attacks at Schools," *New York Times*, June 15, 1998.
15. Signithia Fordham, *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity, and Success at Capital High* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Ann Ferguson, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).
16. Robert Sullivan, "What Makes a Child Resilient?" *Time*, March 19, 2001, 35.

Interview

Male Adolescent Identity and the Roots of Aggression: A Conversation with James Garbarino

DARCIA HARRIS BOWMAN

James Garbarino has done extensive research into the issues that affect boys and men in contemporary society, including why a disturbing number of boys behave in ways that are aggressive and sometimes even violent. Garbarino is a professor of human development and director of the Family Life Development Center at Cornell University. He also has authored or coauthored seventeen books, including Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them and, with Ellen deLara, And Words Can Hurt Forever: How to Protect Adolescents from Bullying, Harassment, and Emotional Violence.

What has your work with violent boys taught you about the link between male adolescent identity and aggressive behavior?

I've learned that there's a culturewide problem, that the definition of male identity is wrapped up in three messages: that it's better to be mad than sad, that to be a man is to be powerful and strong, and that aggression is a legitimate way of responding to conflict and problems. Vulnerable and otherwise at-risk boys are likely to combine these three cultural themes with their own difficulties—family troubles, psychological problems, poverty—and are therefore at a high risk for aggressive or violent behavior.

What about boys who don't necessarily fall into this "at-risk" category?

These cultural principles apply to all boys, but most don't ever bring them all together in the form of extreme violence. Boys who don't have obvious social risk factors like poverty, exposure to racism, or family disruption may

nonetheless be at high risk because they carry with them psychological troubles that predispose them to negative behavior. When that's coupled with the three cultural themes, they may act in aggressive or violent ways.

And, certainly, the average level of violence and aggression is higher for boys than it is for girls. Much of that is related to these cultural issues of identity. There are institutional forms of aggression that are particularly tied to male identity. An example would be in ice hockey, where they make rules for boys and men that give permission, even encouragement, for a high level of aggression, whereas rules for women in ice hockey preclude precisely that particular kind of behavior.

Are boys genetically hardwired for aggression and violence, or is such behavior solely an expression of how boys are socialized?

I think boys on average are predisposed genetically to patterns of behavior and arousal that make them more vulnerable to learning aggression if it's taught. The fact that boys are more physically aggressive than girls in virtually every culture in the world suggests that boys are more ready than girls to learn and demonstrate aggressive behavior.

But the fact that American girls are more aggressive than boys in some other societies would suggest that, while the average within a society may very well be a function of gender, the average across societies is mainly a matter of culture and experience. But will girls ever get to a point in America where they are as aggressive as boys? I, and I think most people, would be startled if that happened.

In your book _Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them_, you use the term _progressive conformity_ to describe how human behavior is a reflection of what is learned, encouraged, and rewarded in a given social context. What do boys learn about violence and aggression in the school setting, and how do these messages influence their behavior?

A school, like any setting, is a social context, and that means it can either enhance or inhibit aggressive behavior. We've learned very clearly, for example, that to deal with the issue of bullies is not simply a matter of finding the bullies and stopping them, but also of recognizing that some social systems in schools tolerate and encourage bullying and others encourage less aggressive behavior. The same kid may be four times more likely to be an aggressive bully in one school than in another, and that speaks to the role of con-

text and the validity of the principle of progressive conformity. Kids over time will to a large degree resemble what the setting rewards, models, and accepts. When it promotes positive character traits, most of the kids will fall into line with that. But when it tolerates aggression, that's particularly what the high-risk kids will do. I think the message is that being a male in a school doesn't make you a bully. Being a troubled male makes you more ready to take on the role of bully, but what the school offers has a lot to do with whether you will take on that role or not.

Who _is_ the school bully? How does he view himself in relation to his peers, particularly the targets of his aggression, and what prompts his behavior?

There are several pathways to becoming a bully. One is this institutionalized form of bullying. You're a freshman, the seniors haze and bully you, and it becomes the cultural expectation that when you get to be a senior you'll do the same thing. Some boys will relish that role more than others. And all the usual factors that predispose kids to aggressive behavior generally—abuse or deprivation at home, for example—certainly predispose them to come to school and act aggressively. There's also a sort of generational passing on of bullying. Maybe half the kids involved in bullying at any one time have themselves been victims. So there is a violence-breeds-violence side to it as well.

And again, whether or not these predispositions and risk factors translate into bullying seems to depend on the school itself, and that may begin in elementary school. Take research by Shepard Kellum [of Johns Hopkins University] that looked at aggressive kids, particularly boys, who come into first grade and find a weak teacher who allows a chaotic classroom and the formation of aggressive peer groups. By sixth grade, those kids may be twenty times more aggressive than they would have been if they'd walked into first grade and found a strong teacher who took charge of the classroom and didn't allow chaos and the formation of aggressive peer groups.

There's always that social-system dimension to it, and that's really the thing people are least likely to get. They're more likely to see it as a problem of "aggressive individuals are bullies and vulnerable individuals are their victims." Certainly there are influences in that direction, but whether or not it actually happens depends much more on the social system, including the bystanders and what their norms are, what they support, and what they tolerate.

Are there social systems in schools that are particularly culpable when it comes to modeling or teaching aggression to boys, or perhaps some that are helpful in stemming the problem?

I think one important social system within the school is adult monitoring and control. When adults are in evidence throughout the school, that has a suppressing effect on aggression. Secondly, when the school models and rewards competition rather than cooperation, you're more likely to set loose the process of aggression. You see this in the classroom: the activities that are offered, the way academic rewards are structured. Also important is the way the adults in the school deal with issues of the various "isms"—sexism, racism, homophobia. If they give messages that these are acceptable ways to think about people, it is more likely to unleash phobias based on those things, or problems like sexual harassment.

What about the role of school athletics and other extracurricular activities?

I think extracurricular activities play several roles. The more widespread the participation, the more likely you'll get participation across cliques and groups. When diverse groups are involved in cooperative activities—winning a game, painting, performing a concert—that creates cooperative behavior and suppresses aggression.

Now, some of these activities have bullying built into them in the form of hazing. Certainly, there are many stories about how athletics have this problem. That may drive some kids out of these activities and the message becomes, once again, that the adults support bullying.

If the goal is to stem aggressive and violent behavior in boys and socialize them to be caring, considerate, and sensitive, what do schools and educators need to do?

Character education is fundamental to violence prevention, because the theme is "everybody in our school lives by some core values." It's not just "find the bullies and stop them." It's "we all live by the core values, and that makes bullying incompatible with the culture of our school." In addition to the usual meetings and discussion, this is translated into the adults being really on top of things and not tolerating certain behavior in the halls—and their actually being in the halls. A big issue is often that teachers stay in their classrooms during the changing of classes, so the halls become a no-man's land and the kids are on their own out there.

Character education also implies that adults will be responsive when kids or parents report incidents, that they won't simply say, "Look, there's nothing we can do, our hands are tied." So, it's partly an attitude, it's partly specific behaviors, and it's partly implementing programs so that when something happens, you don't just go to the bully and the victim, you go to everyone else who was there and say, "Why did you allow this to happen? Why didn't you make a statement here?"

Is there anything else specific teachers can do?

I think they can be very aware of the fact that the models they present through themselves, as well as in videos, films, and biographies, should show male strength as something other than aggression. Highlighting those qualities is a way of changing the culture in a school.

Growing Up in the Shadows

School and the Identity Development of Sexual Minority Youth

MICHAEL SADOWSKI

Beginning in middle school, I became really depressed. At first I didn't know why. Didn't have a clue. But I knew it wasn't okay to be gay. No one was out at my middle school, but I heard lots of slurs all the time. Lots of homophobic comments. I was scared. Scared to be a lesbian. Scared to be out at school. Scared of being so alone.

—*Alix M., in* Hatred in the Hallways[1]

For a long time I always felt pretty good about myself. I was captain of our high school soccer team, pretty high up in my class, and really popular with just about everybody. At the end of my junior year, I won the "best looking" and "most likely to succeed" awards. But then I started drinking. At first I thought I was just being cool—you know, one of the guys—but then I knew that I was drinking because I *didn't* feel like one of the guys. It took me a long time to realize it, but for three years I'd had a crush on this other kid on the soccer team. . . . I thought that if I told my friends about falling in love with another guy, they'd start calling me "faggot" and stop hanging out with me. I thought that maybe I wasn't gay anyway. So instead of telling my friends or doing anything else about it, I just started to drink a real lot.

—*Jackson, in* Real Boys[2]

Psychologists have long considered adolescence a time of tremendous personal growth and transition. Erik Erikson, the adolescent psychology pioneer whose work is probably the most widely cited in the field, believed that young people experience the "crisis" of identity formation most acutely during adolescence.[3] They strive to know and accept who they are, which involves trying to establish a positive sense of self and envisioning a future role for themselves in adult society. A virtually universal aspect of this self-definition process is adolescents' keen awareness of how others perceive them. Indeed, any parent or teacher could likely echo Erikson's finding that adolescents are "morbidly, often curiously preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are."[4]

As the stories of Alix and Jackson illustrate, for youth who are sexual minorities,* the gulf between how they wish to be perceived "in the eyes of others" and "what they feel they are" can be enormous and difficult to navigate. While individual experiences vary, researchers have found that many lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth become aware of homosexual feelings roughly between the ages of ten and twelve[5] and begin to understand these feelings as homosexual or bisexual, at least on some level, by around age fifteen.[6] (Far less is known about when students might begin to identify themselves as transgender.) Some sexual minority adolescents, often those in the most supportive environments, "come out" as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer during high school or even middle school.[7] Others, however, respond to the expectation that their true identities will not be accepted by acting "straight": dating heterosexually, changing their physical appearance or behavior to suit society's gender expectations, possibly even rejecting others whom they perceive to be gay.[8] For both "out" youth and their closeted peers, coming through the crisis of adolescent identity successfully—establishing a self-accepting and optimistic answer to the question, "Who am I?"—is often fraught with special challenges.

Alix's and Jackson's statements also show how powerful school environments and peer culture can be in the self-definition process of sexual minority youth, as well as the risks these adolescents face coming of age in a world that is not ready to accept them. For Alix, the struggle of coming to terms with being a lesbian is accompanied by depression and fear of the school environment. Jackson resorts to heavy drinking as he tries to reconcile his homosexual feelings with the very real possibility of rejection from his peers.

Unfortunately, Alix's and Jackson's experiences are far from unique. A growing body of research shows that sexual minority youth are at disproportionate risk for depression and substance abuse, as well as a number of other negative outcomes both in and out of the school environment. The most recent Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (MYRBS), which includes the responses of more than four thousand youth from randomly selected high schools around the state,[9] found that sexual minority youth (those who identified themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, or said they had had same-sex sexual contact) were significantly more likely than their peers to have felt "sad or hopeless" for two weeks or more (49% vs. 28%).[10] They also were more likely to have used various illegal drugs, to have engaged in behaviors that can lead to alcohol abuse, and to have skipped school because they felt unsafe.

The most consistent—and most disturbing—finding about these youth is the disproportionate number who report suicidal ideation and behaviors. The 2001 MYRBS found that, among the roughly 5 percent of students identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, nearly one out of three (31%) had attempted suicide in the past year. This figure is nearly four times higher than the 8 percent reported for other students.[11] The MYRBS also found far greater incidence among sexual minority youth of seriously considering suicide, making a suicide plan, and requiring medical attention because of a suicide attempt, and these data are supported by previous versions of the study as well as other research that shows much higher rates of suicidality for this group.[12]

While it is obviously difficult for researchers to establish causal links between the experiences adolescents have in the school environment and risk factors such as suicidality and substance abuse, there is at least evidence to suggest that school climates contribute in some powerful ways—many of them negative—to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescents' sense of who they are.

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*When discussing the issues that affect youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), language is a problematic issue. Until recent years, most studies referred only to gay and lesbian youth, but researchers have become increasingly aware that bisexual people are a distinct group with specific concerns. More recent research also has recognized the special issues affecting transgender youth and adults, those who do not conform to traditional man/woman or boy/girl gender norms in a variety of ways. (Some transgender youth also identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, while others do not.) In addition, some adolescents identify as "queer," a designation that implies a rejection of societal norms around sexuality and gender, or "questioning," if they are unsure of their sexual orientation or gender identity. When speaking of the studies in general, I use the terms *lesbian, gay, bisexual,* and/or *transgender,* the abbreviation *LGBT,* or the term *sexual minority youth.* When citing specific studies, I use the terms the researchers used to describe the specific populations they sampled.

ANTI-LGBT LANGUAGE AND HARASSMENT

Spend five minutes in any middle or high school in the United States and you're likely to hear at least one of the many verbal slurs commonly used against sexual minorities: "Fag!" "Homo!" "Queer!" "Dyke!" A recent survey by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), taken among 904 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth in forty-eight states and the District of Columbia, found that 84 percent of these youth heard such homophobic remarks either "frequently" or "often" in their schools. Even more common, the respondents said, was the expression "That's so gay," a pejorative term used widely by adolescents to describe virtually anything perceived to be negative—a boring class, an ugly article of clothing, an unfair grade on a test. Ninety-one percent of the youth GLSEN surveyed said they heard that expression (or the variant, "You're so gay") at school "frequently" or "often."[13] Earlier GLSEN studies, as well as research conducted by a number of other organizations, have resulted in similar findings.

Surveys like GLSEN's show how widespread this kind of homophobic language is in schools, and the testimonials of high school students illustrate in more vivid terms how it permeates school cultures. *Hatred in the Hallways*, a 2001 report about U.S. schools by the international advocacy group Human Rights Watch, includes comments by three students who explain just how pervasive antigay language was in their schools:

> "People called everyone 'faggot,'" said Chance M., an eighteen-year-old senior in Massachusetts. "That's like the word of the century. It turned into a routine." "That's how you pick on someone, straight or gay. You call them a fag," said James L., a sophomore in the Los Angeles area. "I hear it a lot of times during the course of the day, a lot, at the very least ten to twenty times a day." "These guys, they'll stand in front of the lockers. They'll be like, 'Look at that faggot.' You hear it every day," Tommy L. told us.[14]

At the very least, this kind of language contributes to an uncomfortable, if not hostile, environment for LGBT students, or those who might be questioning their sexuality or gender identity. Many LGBT students, however, also experience such language in the form of verbal harassment targeted directly at them. More than 83 percent of the youth GLSEN surveyed for its 2001 report said they had been the victims of such verbal harassment in school. Similarly, in a 1999 report entitled *They Don't Even Know Me!* Beth

Reis, director of the Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State, summarizes reports made by targeted youth, their parents, or witnesses to in-school harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Reis recounts three of these incidents as follows:

> The insults fly from the back of the school bus: "Dyke," "Queer," "Faggot." The offenders are two guys and a girl. They've been harassing two particular middle school girls every day for two months now. Today, one tells the girls, "We don't want you here."[15]

> Ever since the start of the school year, a seventh grader has been the target of daily bullying in the hallways. Among other taunts, the kids call him "flute boy" because he plays with the symphony. One student walks right up to him and asks, "How come you are so gay? Are you gay?" He says, "No," and keeps on walking as if it doesn't bother him. But it does.[16]

> "Get away, Gay Boy!" "Don't let Gay Boy touch you!" For three or four months, this second grader hears these taunts from his peers. He's not sure why they say this about him or what he's done "wrong." Nobody will play with him at recess. He is becoming less excited about school and often prefers to stay home. While in the classroom, he is more reserved, less interactive, and less confident and is afraid of some of the bigger kids.[17]

These stories demonstrate how the harassment of students based on sexual orientation or gender identity affects more than just students who are "out" in their schools. As Reis notes, many of those who are called "fag," "dyke," or other such names in school may not even grow up to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Her data also point to another sobering fact: that harassment based on perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity begins very early for some students, in some cases in the early elementary grades. Thus, by the time they reach adolescence, some youth have endured years of taunting and harassment based on the way they are labeled as first or second graders.

Physical violence against sexual minority youth appears to be somewhat less pervasive than verbal harassment, but GLSEN's 2001 study still found that 42 percent of respondents had experienced physical harassment at school (being pushed or shoved because of their sexual orientation) and that 21 percent had been physically assaulted (punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon). Moreover, nearly two-thirds (65%) of the students said they'd been harassed sexually at school, for example, being targets of sexual com-

ments, inappropriately touched, etc. This number was even higher for lesbian and bisexual girls (74%) and for students who identified as transgender (also 74%).

Just what effect this kind of harassment has on youth who are at various stages in their awareness of their sexual and gender identities is difficult to measure. Based on their interviews with 140 youth in seven states, Michael Bochenek and A. Widney Brown, authors of the Human Rights Watch report, conclude that both direct harassment and the general toleration of anti-LGBT language in school environments cause extreme emotional distress for sexual minority students:

> The unrelenting verbal attacks on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students create a hostile climate that can be unbearable for them. . . . Although the youth we interviewed frequently focused on fear of physical and sexual violence, many noted that the experience of being called "faggot," "queer," dyke," and other slurs on a daily basis was devastating. One gay youth who dropped out of an honors program angrily protested, "Just because I am gay doesn't mean I am stupid," as he told of hearing "that's so gay" meaning "that's so stupid," not just from other students but from teachers in his school.[18]

The MYRBS also has pointed to possible connections between the kinds of stressors sexual minority youth experience at school and increased risk for depression and suicide. The study found that youth who were victimized at school were significantly more likely to report higher levels of depression, more suicidal thinking, and more actual suicide attempts than other students. Moreover, the study also linked suicide ideation and attempts to emotional isolation, an experience reported by many of the sexual minority students interviewed in qualitative studies.

LACK OF REPRESENTATION IN CURRICULUM AND SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

> It's not even in the curriculum. It's like we're not even supposed to know about it. "That's so gay" is the only thing we ever hear about it.
> —*Lauren M., in* Hatred in the Hallways[19]

If the language and harassment LGBT students face make them feel painfully conspicuous at school, the curriculum they are studying may do just the opposite. Despite the fact that many students are aware of homosexuality—or at least the slurs that are associated with it—from the early elementary grades, numerous studies have pointed to a lack of representation of anything having to do with LGBT people in school curricula.

In 1993, Rita Kissen of the University of Southern Maine surveyed forty-four youth, most of whom indicated that homosexuality was never mentioned in any of their classes in high school.[20] Moreover, as Kissen explains:

> Of the 19 "yes" answers, only a few were positive. Several said homosexuality was mentioned in health class, without any context and often in a **negative** way. One lesbian recalled that her health instructor told the class that homosexuality was a form of mental illness. A student who attended a parochial school said homosexuality was discussed as a sin in his religion class.[21]

Similarly, only three out of twenty-seven respondents to a 1997 survey by Kathleen P. Malinsky recalled any discussion of homosexuality in their schools that was not associated with AIDS.[22] One of Malinsky's participants remembered, "We did condoms, sex, teen pregnancy, suicide, eating disorders, every kind of cancer—you name it, we did it. But nothing on homosexuality."[23] Similarly, the majority of Malinsky's participants said there was no printed information available about homosexuality in the library or anywhere else in the school. While it may be that such information was available and the participants were simply unaware of it, other researchers have noted that information about homosexuality is often kept out of school libraries by officials who wish to avoid controversy.[24]

While Kissen's and Malinsky's studies both rely on small samples and data collected during the 1990s, more recent, larger studies suggest that little has changed. The GLSEN survey found that 81 percent of the 904 students surveyed said there were "no positive portrayals of LGBT people, history, or events in any of their classes." Yet the small percentage of students whose schools did present such positive portrayals were "more likely to feel they belonged in the school" than their peers whose schools did not.

"Students rarely hear anything about issues relating to sexual orientation or gender identity elsewhere [besides health or sex education classes] in the curriculum," note Bochenek and Brown. "If they do hear about someone who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, it is almost invariably in a negative light."[25] As the authors go on to point out, many teachers avoid discussing LGBT issues or people in their classes, even when to do so might seem natural and appropriate, for fear of repercussions from administrators and the community. As one teacher they interviewed in West Texas put it,

"My principal would faint [if I discussed LGBT issues in class]."[26] As a result of this kind of self-censoring, many sexual minority youth go to school receiving no information about homosexuality, nontraditional gender identity, or LGBT people other than the slurs they hear under uncontrolled circumstances.

Related to the lack of LGBT representation in curriculum is the often unspoken but very palpable taboo on LGBT issues in other aspects of the school environment. Central to the cultures of most middle and high schools, for example, are proms, dances, and other social events that, more often than not, present opposite-sex attraction and dating as the only possible "normal" option for youth. Similarly, the visible signs of pairing that go on in many school hallways, marked by the hand-holding and other public displays of affection that are seen as a rite of passage in adolescence, are usually exclusively heterosexual. In such a context, students who have same-sex attractions and may even wish to date members of the same sex may find themselves feeling left out (at best) and self-hating and shameful (at worst). In rare but inspiring examples of progress, some same-sex couples are now attending proms or asserting their right to be "out" in the school environment, but most students still find the price of such openness too high. Similarly, the heavily gendered culture of many high schools—where the most respected boys are sports heroes and the most popular girls are cheerleaders—provides little affirmation of the nontraditional gender identity.

LACK OF ADULT SUPPORT AND ROLE MODELS

One of the most consistent findings in psychological research with youth is the importance of caring, trusting relationships with adults. Such a relationship with even one adult has been demonstrated to give children and youth the resilience to cope with some of the difficult experiences they might face growing up.[27] And, as decades of adolescent development research has demonstrated, adolescents need adult role models to help them envision their futures, a central aspect of the identity development process.

Many adolescents find the caring relationships they need with parents or other adult family members. But for sexual minority youth, coming out often means being rejected by their families. In a 1993 study, only 11 percent of youth who disclosed to their parents that they had same-sex attractions reported a positive response, and there is little reason to believe the statistic would be much higher for a study conducted today. The 2001 MYRBS found that sexual minority youth were significantly less likely than their

peers to believe they could talk to adults in their family about "things that are important" to them. "Generally, sexual minority youth experience a lack of parental, sibling, and extended family support, which can exacerbate many of the problems they experience," note Deborah Tharinger and Greg Wells of the University of Texas at Austin, who have researched the relational experiences of LGBT adolescents.[28] Tharinger and Wells also point out that when sexual minority youth seek support from their families, the results are sometimes extreme. They cite one 1995 study that found that 10 percent of sexual minority youth were physically assaulted by family members for reasons related to their sexual orientation, and note that lesbian girls may be at the greatest risk in this regard.[29]

Given the unpredictability of parental support for LGBT youth, teachers, counselors, principals, and others in the school environment can play especially important roles. Indeed, many teachers are making crucial, possibly life-saving differences in the lives of sexual minority students who otherwise might be completely lacking in adult support. Unfortunately, however, a number of studies suggest that the attitudes and actions of some educators may be a significant detriment to LGBT youths' ability to develop a positive sense of self. The GLSEN survey found that 40 percent of the youth polled did not believe there were any teachers or counselors in their schools who were supportive of LGBT students. Also, in a 1998 survey of 101 guidance counselors, Janet Fontaine (an expert on counseling issues and LGBT youth) found that most counselors rated teachers' attitudes about lesbian and gay people as less favorable than "neutral."[30]

Several of the students Human Rights Watch interviewed, including Dahlia P., a lesbian student from Texas, and Gerald A., a transgender youth from California, describe in painful detail the negative role unsupportive adults play in their school lives:

> [One of my teachers would] say, "Well, if you weren't a lesbian you might pass this class," or "If you'd get your head out from between those girls' thighs, maybe you'd pass." The message was I would be so much better off if I weren't gay.[31]

> In my social science classes, sometimes topics dealing with sexual orientation or gender identity would pop up, and I'd get put on the spot. . . . Another time, we were talking in class about what each of us would do if we had $70,000, and when it came to me the teacher said, "Oh, I know what you're gonna get." This was for a final project. Mine was really about the Russian economy, but he assumed I was going to write about getting a sex-change operation.[32]

Human Rights Watch also found that administrators, when faced with complaints of harassment by LGBT students, sometimes "blame the victim" and suggest that students who do not conform to expected gender norms are bringing the harassment upon themselves. They cite the example of one gay student who was told by his school's principal, "You chose this lifestyle; you need to carry all the baggage that comes with it,"[33] and an assistant principal who reportedly said of a student who was being harassed, "If he didn't walk around telling people that he's gay, there wouldn't be any problems."[34]

One of the most damaging ways some school staff contribute to the creation of identity-detrimental environments for LGBT youth is in their failure to respond to hostile language and harassment. Eighty-two percent of GLSEN's 2001 survey respondents indicated that faculty and staff "never intervened" or "intervened only some of the time" when they heard anti-LGBT language. Even more disturbing, nearly one-fourth (24%) of the youth surveyed said they had heard faculty and staff *use* such language.

Even school staff who are LGBT themselves may fail to address homophobic language and harassment when they are aware of it for fear of drawing too much attention to themselves and thereby risking their jobs.[35] In thirty-seven states, it is still legal to fire an employee, including a teacher, based solely on her or his sexual orientation, and in forty-nine states transgender people have no laws protecting them if they are fired based on their gender identity.[36] Fortunately, in a growing number of schools, especially those in states and municipalities that outlaw such employment discrimination, more teachers are coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, providing role models for students who may or may not be prepared to acknowledge their own sexual orientation or gender identity during adolescence.

SPECIAL CHALLENGES FACING LGBT YOUTH OF COLOR

New research is beginning to explore the ways in which sexual minority status and race intersect in the school lives of adolescents. GLSEN's 2001 survey, for example, found that 48 percent of LGBT students of color reported having been verbally harassed because of both their race or ethnicity *and* their sexual orientation. As noted previously, LGBT youth often have few safe places to turn for help in dealing with this kind of abuse. Yet some LGBT youth of color may be especially isolated in this regard, even where school-based support is readily available.

In his analysis of the issues facing queer youth of color at a California high school (CHS), Lance McCready of the University of California at Berkeley notes how the racial and gender composition of groups intended to support LGBT youth may actually be alienating to sexual minority youth of color, leaving these students without the identity affirmation such organizations are intended to provide.[37] McCready, who had been a faculty member at the high school he studied, recalls his first encounter with Project 10, the school's support organization for LGBT students:

> On the day of the Project 10 meeting, I walked into Fran's classroom expecting to see a collage of students that reflected the racial and ethnic diversity that CHS is famous for. Instead of diversity, I found homogeneity: the group was composed of twelve White, female, lesbian and bisexual-identified students.[38]

McCready notes that Jamal, a gay African American student he interviewed, found that Project 10 "was not particularly safe or confidential." Moreover, McCready found peer groupings and activities at CHS to be segregated by race, virtually forcing students like Jamal to choose which aspects of their identities to foreground in their social interactions:[39]

> Jamal recognized that at CHS, where social groups are often defined by race, identifying himself as gay (a social identity he and other Black students perceived as White) in every situation would put him at odds with his Black peers. Consequently, he chose to de-emphasize his sexuality and involve himself in extracurricular clubs and activities (such as student government) that are legitimated by Black students. Downplaying his sexuality also meant that Project 10 was off-limits. Particularly among Black students, to align oneself with Project 10 meant risking harassment and public ridicule.[40]

As Jamal's story illustrates, LGBT students of color can often face rejection from one identity community if they choose to align with another. Again, it is difficult to measure the effects that this "choice among identities" has on these young people. Though research in this area is just beginning to emerge, it suggests—at the very least—that the specific issues facing these adolescents warrant special consideration by educators.

ELEMENTS OF AN IDENTITY-SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL

While there is strong evidence that U.S. schools are not doing enough to help sexual minority students develop a positive sense of identity, there are

numerous steps educators can take to effect change in their schools. These steps include, but are certainly not limited to, the following.

Frank discussion of anti-LGBT language and harassment. Perhaps the easiest and most obvious thing educators can do is take active steps toward interrupting and discouraging anti-LGBT language and harassment. While much of the success of such efforts depends on the vigilance and consistency of individual teachers, principals and school leaders also can play an important role in setting a tone of mutual respect and addressing the issue head-on with both staff and students.

Beth Reis, who has facilitated LGBT awareness programs in schools, recommends that at the beginning of each school year principals hold assemblies or class visits in which they frankly discuss the kinds of harassment and bullying that are "not OK" at school. In such presentations, she says, it is critical for school leaders to use terms such as *gay* and *lesbian*, as well as the slurs associated with them, in order to communicate strongly and clearly with both would-be harassers and potential targets: "I think the leadership of having a principal be the one who [talks about anti-LGBT harassment] is critical for every kind of child who's experiencing difference or being bullied," Reis says. "Even if they don't go to an adult when it happens, it means something to know that they could, and to know that the principal knows that this happens sometimes."

Visibility and inclusion. Another benefit to discussing anti-LGBT harassment in specific and frank terms is that such discussion raises the visibility of sexual minority issues at school. On the other hand, only presenting LGBT issues as problems can be damaging to youths' efforts to develop a healthy sense of self. As a starting point toward a more positive approach, educators can use inclusive language when discussing relationships, families, and other issues rather than assume that all students—and their parents, brothers, sisters, or friends—are heterosexual and traditionally gender identified.

Still, as every educator knows, the curriculum is at the center of any student's instructional experience. If a school's curriculum silences lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and issues, then the isolation with which LGBT students experience this aspect of their identities is exacerbated. In making his case for a gay-inclusive curriculum, Arthur Lipkin, author and former teacher, writes:

> In addition to these pragmatic considerations [including that virtually all students will know and work alongside gay and lesbian people at some

point in their lives], educators should be spurred by their professional duty to impart accurate and complete information in their classes and counseling sessions. Expurgation is dishonesty.[41]

Specific guidelines for an identity-positive (and age-appropriate) curriculum in the various school subjects are beyond the scope of this chapter, but as Lipkin points out, opportunities exist not just in health and sex education, but also in English/language arts, history and social studies, science, the arts, and a variety of other subject areas.

Adult support and role models. As indicated previously, researchers have found that some sexual minority youth receive crucial support from teachers, counselors, and other adults at school. GLSEN's survey found that students who said their schools had a supportive faculty and staff were more likely to feel they "belonged" in school than those who did not. Also, the Massachusetts Department of Education found that sexual minority students who believed there was an adult they could talk to were less likely to skip school, use drugs, or make a suicide attempt than other lesbian, gay, or bisexual **youth.**[42]

Along with "straight" teachers who show that they are supportive of LGBT youth, LGBT adolescents benefit greatly from "out" teachers and other role models who can represent for them what it means to be a successful LGBT adult. Since Erikson and others have noted that a key part of identity development is the ability to envision a future role for oneself in adult society, such role modeling can be especially meaningful for sexual minority youth, for whom positive portrayals are all but invisible.[43]

"I've heard young adults talk about how there was an openly gay teacher in their school, and they never let the teacher know at the time that they were also gay or lesbian or bi or trans," says Reis. "Yet having that teacher present was the thing that kept them from committing suicide."

Gay-straight alliances. Perhaps the most ubiquitous form of in-school support for sexual minority youth, gay-straight alliances (GSAs) now number more than one thousand in schools across the United States.[44] These groups are cocurricular organizations in which students can seek the support of peers and faculty advisors, discuss issues such as homophobia and heterosexism that might exist in the school and community, and plan programming about sexual orientation and gender identity issues. Fifteen years ago, these organizations were virtually nonexistent, so the research on their ef-

fectiveness is extremely new. Still, a few recent studies have resulted in some promising findings.

In an evaluation of the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students, an initiative to support GSAs and other programming administered by the Massachusetts Department of Education, Laura Szalacha found statistically significant differences on several measures between schools that had GSAs and those that did not. Based on questionnaires completed by 1,646 randomly selected students, Szalacha discovered that 35 percent of students in schools with GSAs said gay, lesbian, and bisexual students could be open about their sexual identity in school, compared to 12 percent of students in schools without GSAs. In addition, while 58 percent of students in schools with GSAs said they heard anti-gay slurs every day in school, 75 percent of the students in schools without GSAs said they heard such words daily.[45]

As Reis explains, "GSAs offer kids a safe place to socialize without having to watch your back, without having to worry that something you say will be used against you, without having to pretend to be someone you're not—whether that's social time, just playing Scrabble, or more therapeutic time, having people that you can talk with about having been harassed or about having broken up with your girlfriend or boyfriend."

As McCready's and other studies are beginning to show, however, GSAs can only fulfill their mission of providing a safe, identity-affirming place for all youth if all feel welcome. It is therefore important for any school with a new or existing GSA to consider whether students of all races, ethnicities, genders, social groups, and abilities feel welcome and supported.

THE CHALLENGE AND THE RESPONSIBILITY

It would be naive for any educator to expect that efforts to make a school environment more identity supportive for LGBT students would not meet with some form of community opposition on religious and/or political grounds. Changes in curriculum to include LGBT people and issues, even if made in age-sensitive ways, have prompted especially strong protests in the past.[46] Yet the high rates of suicide, substance abuse, alienation from school, and other negative outcomes that affect LGBT students make the needs of this population difficult to ignore. If noble slogans such as "No Child Left Behind" truly express the charge of American education, then meaningful efforts to support the identities of sexual minority students must be a part of that mission.[47]

NOTES

1. Michael Bochenek and A. Widney Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways: Violence and Discrimination against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students in U.S. Schools* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2001), 108.
2. William Pollack, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 207.
3. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968). Many later researchers have criticized Erikson's model as overly formulaic and lacking regard for such important factors as gender and ethnicity. Nevertheless, Erikson's findings about the identity crisis of adolescence have remained central to the field.
4. Erikson, *Identity*, 128.
5. Anthony R. D'Augelli and Lawrence J. Dark, "Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths," in Leonard D. Eron, Jacquelyn Gentry, and Peggy Schlegel (eds.), *Reason to Hope: A Psychosocial Perspective on Violence and Youth* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1995), 177–196.
6. Deborah Tharinger and Greg Wells, "An Attachment Perspective on the Developmental Challenges of Gay and Lesbian Adolescents: The Need for Continuity of Caregiving from Family and Schools," *School Psychology Review* 29, no. 2 (2000): 158–172.
7. For more on queer identity in adolescence, see "Why Use *That* Word?" by Arthur Lipkin, pp. 102–106, in this volume.
8. Tharinger and Wells, "An Attachment Perspective."
9. Youth Risk Behavior Surveys (YRBS) are funded federally by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In addition to the national survey, there are thirty-two state surveys and sixteen surveys administered in various municipalities. Massachusetts is the only state for which the YRBS includes questions specifically about sexual orientation and breaks out data along these lines. (Vermont's study includes some questions about sexual activity, but does not specifically include questions about students' self-identified sexual orientation.)
10. Massachusetts Department of Education, *2001 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey [MYRBS] Results* 59, available online (at press time) at www.doe.mass.edu/hssss/yrbs/01/results.pdf
11. Massachusetts Department of Education, *2001 MYRBS Results*.
12. In addition to the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Surveys, a key resource on this topic is Gary Remafedi (ed.), *Death by Denial: Studies of Suicide in Gay and Lesbian Teenagers* (Boston: Alyson, 1994), which includes the results of numerous studies on sexual minority youth suicide.
13. Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), *2001 National School Climate Survey*, available online (at press time) at www.glsen.org/templates/news/record.html?section=20&record=1029
14. Bochenek and Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways*, 33.
15. Beth Reis, *They Don't Even Know Me! Understanding Anti-Gay Harassment and Violence in Schools* (Seattle: Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1999), 32.
16. Reis, *They Don't Even Know Me*, 32.

17. Reis, *They Don't Even Know Me*, 30.
18. Bochenek and Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways*, 35.
19. Bochenek and Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways*, 120.
20. Rita M. Kissen, "Listening to Gay and Lesbian Teachers," *Teaching Education* 5, no. 2 (1993): 57–67.
21. Kissen, "Listening," 59.
22. Kathleen P. Malinsky, "Learning to Be Invisible: Female Sexual Minority Students in America's Public High Schools," *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 7, no. 4 (1997): 35–50.
23. Malinsky, "Learning," 40.
24. Bochenek and Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways*.
25. Bochenek and Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways*, 120.
26. Bochenek and Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways*, 121.
27. Among the articles frequently cited on this issue is one by Michael Rutter, "Psychosocial Resilience and Protective Mechanisms," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 57, no. 3 (1987): 316–331.
28. Tharinger and Wells, "An Attachment Perspective," 167.
29. Neil W. Pilkington and Anthony R. D'Augelli, "Victimization of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth in Community Settings," *Journal of Community Psychology* 23 (1995): 34–56.
30. Janet H. Fontaine, "Evidencing a Need: School Counselors' Experiences with Gay and Lesbian Students," *Professional School Counseling* 1, no. 3 (1998): 8–14.
31. Bochenek and Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways*, 65.
32. Bochenek and Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways*, 62.
33. Bochenek and Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways*, 83.
34. Bochenek and Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways*, 83.
35. Bochenek and Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways*.
36. As this book goes to press, the only states in which it is illegal to discriminate in employment on the basis of sexual orientation are California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin. Minnesota and the District of Columbia have laws protecting against discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation *and* gender identity.
37. Lance McCready, "When Fitting In Isn't an Option, or, Why Black Queer Males at a California High School Stay Away from Project 10," in Kevin K. Kumashiro (ed.), *Troubling Intersections of Race and Sexuality: Queer Students of Color and Anti-Oppressive Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).
38. McCready, "When Fitting In Isn't an Option," 37.
39. See also "'Joaquín's Dilemma'" by Pedro A. Noguera, pp. 19–30, in this volume.
40. McCready, "When Fitting In Isn't an Option," 42.
41. Arthur Lipkin, *Understanding Homosexuality, Changing Schools: A Text for Teachers, Counselors, and Administrators* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 332.
42. MYRBS, unpublished data, 1999.
43. See also Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson, *Being Adolescent: Conflict and Growth in the Teenage Years* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
44. *Source:* Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network data.
45. Laura A. Szalacha, "The Sexual Diversity Climate of Massachusetts' Secondary Schools and the Success of the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students," doctoral dissertation, Harvard Graduate School of Education (2001).
46. For a discussion of the controversy over the Children of the Rainbow multicultural curriculum proposed for the New York Public Schools, as well as other struggles involving the introduction of LGBT themes in curriculum, see James W. Button, Barbara A. Rienzo, and Kenneth D. Wald, *Private Lives, Public Conflicts: Battles over Gay Rights in American Communities* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1997), 146–152.
47. This chapter is based in part on an analysis conducted for my qualifying paper at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, "The Quality of School Life for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adolescents in U.S. Middle and High Schools: A Review of the Research Literature" (2002). Committee members were Jocelyn Chadwick, Michael Nakkula, and Terrence Tivnan, with additional assistance from James T. Sears.

Commentary

Why Use That Word? Adolescents and Queer Identity

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When someone recently whistled in class, the teacher told the student to stop, and then said that only "queers and shipmates" whistle.

—*From the* Houston Chronicle[1]

Me and Daniel, we even made a necklace that says "queer" and we used to wear it at school. Everybody would just laugh about it or look at it like, you know, "Wow, they're really open with it." That put them in assurance that you don't have to be scared of us because we're not scared of you.

—*From the* Orange County Register[2]

A small but growing number of youth whom others might classify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) are calling themselves "queer." In a recent California survey of high school gay-straight alliances (groups for the support of sexual minority students and the advancement of gay rights), queer-identifying youth made up about 12.5 percent of those who did not identify as "straight." Another 12.5 percent chose "bisexual" to describe themselves; those identifying as "gay" and "lesbian" were evenly divided at 37 percent each.[3]

It is important for educators who might be baffled or discomfited by this "queer emergence" to understand both its political and psychological roots. At its simplest level, adolescents' use of the term *queer* is a public appropriation of a demeaning epithet. Other stigmatized groups have tried to defuse the power of name-calling by transforming hurtful words into prideful ones. The adoption of *nigger* by some African Americans is a good analogue, as is the lesbian embrace of the slur *dyke*.

The word *queer* originally gained popularity in college and university communities. Besides helping them thumb their noses at insulting homo-

phobes, academics' use of the term *queer* furthered the goal of rejecting what they saw as arbitrary, rigid, and oppressive sexuality labels. They started using the term to undermine the diametric opposites of straight and gay. As a result of this new view of human sexuality, beginning in the 1980s many Gay Studies programs on college campuses came instead to be called Queer Studies. The 1990s activist organization Queer Nation took the name into the streets, and now adolescents have picked up on it as a form of self- and community identification.

Besides representing an attempt to de-fang their tormentors, "queer" offers some youth a relatively comfortable and open-ended way to say that they are "not straight." It is psychologically suitable because, rather than boxing them into a category, it allows possibilities for change and growth. Even as more youth come out at earlier ages as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, others wait indefinitely in what psychologist Esther Rothblum calls the "lingering" category.[4] Although some hesitate out of internalized homophobia or fear of family and peer rejection and harassment, others wait because they doubt the validity of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender categories. For them, the emergence of queer is a manifesto of their freedom from this kind of strict sexuality labeling.

For some adolescents, the word queer is more appealing than bisexual, either because they aren't sure of the scope of their attractions or because they reject the latter term's connotations. They are aware that bisexual means "omnivorously promiscuous" to many heterosexuals and "confused or cowering" to many gays. Those judgments, of course, are undeserved. Being open to exploring one's full sexuality is not the equivalent of being oversexed, confused, or frightened.

Queer also encompasses both sexuality and gender, incorporating a spectrum of gender expression that gay, lesbian, and bisexual do not necessarily imply. It recognizes the fundamental transgenderedness of all people who violate conventional male and female norms—in the bedroom, the wardrobe, the schoolhouse, the playing field, and so on. It rejects the oppositional designations of man/woman or boy/girl as the only possibilities.

Moreover, the spaciousness of queer invites community formation among sexual minority youth that was rare a generation ago. As one recent San Francisco high school graduate observed:

Queer unifies the community. We're so used to being sectioned off into our groups and subcultures. This is one word that embodies all of us. It's some-

thing we are struggling for in the younger generation. It's saying we're all in this together, this is who we are, our history, culture and everything we've been through.[5]

The term can even include adolescents who do not view themselves as sexual minorities but identify as "politically queer," sympathetic to their sexual minority peers, and resistant to dominant cultural values pertaining to sexuality and gender.

Finally, the breadth of queer creates space in the "not straight" community for those who bring a non-Western, non-White perspective to their same gender desires and sexualities. They may resist the terms *gay, lesbian,* or *bisexual* being applied to feelings and pursuits that are understood differently in their native and community cultures. Adopting these labels could estrange them not only from their established sense of themselves but also from their cultural supports, families, and friends who consider such homosexual identities alien. (Of course, multiple-minority people may find queer no less problematic than gay, even if the former is intended to be more accommodating. Native Americans, for example, might favor the term *two-spirit,* or African Americans, *being on the down low.*)

The appropriation of queer does not mean that the word has lost its poison entirely. As with nigger or dyke, context is everything; it's all in who says it and how. From kindergarten on, even the word gay can be a dagger, and schoolyard bullies and other gay bashers haven't discarded the term queer as a weapon. So it is no surprise that a majority of sexual minority youth aren't comfortable with the term queer—at least not enough to apply it to themselves.

The factors that influence anyone's sense of self and determine how one presents oneself to the world are an interdependent matrix. Gender, race, and ethnicity affect one's sexual identity; conversely, sexuality has an impact on one's gendered, racial, and ethnic "selves." As there are many ways to experience and express one's same-gender attractions and experiences, there are a number of corresponding sexual identities. All of them can be subsumed under the word queer and welcomed to the fellowship of sexuality difference. In the end, of course, young people need and deserve to be able to call themselves whatever they want. We should accept their choices with understanding, good humor, and optimism.

NOTES

1. Paige Hewitt, "Seeking Tolerance," *Houston Chronicle,* April 4, 2002.
2. Calisse, in Theresa Walker, "Out in the Open" (an interview with four gay teens), *Orange County (Calif.) Register,* May 13, 2002.
3. Geoffrey Winder, "GSA Network Anti-Racism Initiative Report, Summer 2001." (For more information, contact Gay-Straight Alliance Network, 160 14th Street, San Francisco, CA 94103; 415-552-4229; www.gsanetwork.org)
4. Tori DeAngelis, "A New Generation of Issues for GLBT Clients," *Monitor on Psychology* 33, no. 2 (February 2002).
5. Greg Zhovreboff, quoted in Christopher Heredia, "Older Generation Sneers at 'Queer,'" *San Francisco Chronicle,* June 24, 2001.