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## Inclusive spaces that support everybody can make all the difference for LGBT students

In our last column, we wrote about the need to expand the notion of cultural proficiency to explicitly address diversity in all its forms. As we continue to focus on cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity, we must also recognize that students have additional identities that affect their understanding of the world and their educational experiences. This is particularly true for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students. Because many school communities are reluctant to acknowledge the existence of LGBT students or consider their needs, LGBT



students often feel disenfranchised and can become targets of bullying, harassment, and violence. In this column, we

discuss strategies for helping educators develop the knowledge and skills to create inclusive spaces that support LGBT students.

### ACKNOWLEDGE LGBT STUDENTS

Creating inclusive spaces begins with acknowledging that LGBT students are in our classrooms and schools. Recent reports indicate that more than 750,000 high school students in the U.S. identify as lesbian or gay. This means that, on average, every high school class has at least one lesbian or gay student. This count is likely a low estimate because students

are often reluctant to identify as LGBT even on anonymous surveys since LGBT students are disproportionately the target of harassment and discrimination in school. In fact, 80% of LGBT students report verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation. Even students who identify as heterosexual but are perceived to be LGBT experience higher levels of discrimination.

### ESTABLISH ANTI-DISCRIMINATION POLICIES

To address harassment and discrimination, schools must establish anti-harassment policies that explicitly prohibit harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation. While all forms of discrimination and harassment should be prohibited, some groups are more likely to experience unfair treatment, LGBT students among them. Specifying the categories of discrimination that are prohibited increases the likelihood the policy will be effective. This is particularly true for sexual orientation because so many educators

are confused about whether they have an obligation or a legal standing to protect LGBT students. A clearly stated anti-harassment policy removes any doubt and sends a message to LGBT students that they will be protected.

### EMPLOY INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES

Policy alone will not result in inclusive classrooms and schools. To create educational environments in which LGBT students feel safe and valued, educators must develop practices that address the needs of LGBT students. For some educators, this can be a challenge, particularly if the educator knows little about issues that are central to LGBT students. One place to begin is by visiting the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) web site ([www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)). GLSEN is a national organization dedicated to creating safe and inclusive schools for all students with a special emphasis on the needs of LGBT students. GLSEN provides useful information for students, parents, and teachers.

In each issue of *JSD*, Patricia L. Guerra and Sarah W. Nelson write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. Guerra ([pg16@txstate.edu](mailto:pg16@txstate.edu)) is an assistant professor and Nelson ([swnelson@txstate.edu](mailto:swnelson@txstate.edu)) is an associate professor in the Department of Education and Community Leadership at Texas State University-San Marcos. Guerra and Nelson are co-founders of Transforming Schools for a Multicultural Society (TRANSFORMS). Columns are available at [www.learningforward.org/news/authors/guerranelson.cfm](http://www.learningforward.org/news/authors/guerranelson.cfm).

## ISRAEL'S STORY

As an elementary school student, I was not a particularly masculine boy. Many of my classmates perceived me as being gay. While most of the neighborhood boys participated in football, basketball, and other physical contact sports, I participated in the performing arts. I excelled in acting, speaking, and reading, and I won first place in many competitions. The other boys in school, including my only neighborhood friend, frowned upon my interest in the arts and academics and made fun of me for what they believed was not normal for a boy, especially a Latino.

One day in 4th grade, as the bell rang for dismissal and all the students ran to retrieve their belongings, I accidentally stepped on another student's backpack strap, causing his bag to drop. "Get off my backpack, faggot!" he yelled. His remark stung and left me in tears. Boys in my school often used this term casually, but I knew his use of the word toward me was purposeful. Although I was not attracted to boys (or girls) at the time, I certainly knew I was different because I talked, walked, and acted in ways that were dissimilar to the other boys in my class. In this one moment, I learned my differences were not acceptable and experienced rejection.

My teacher, Ms. Moreno, saw me crying, and asked what was wrong. After I told her about what happened, she gave me a hug and suggested that I should not let what others think of me hurt my feelings. The next day, Ms. Moreno asked the class to read a story about a young orphaned girl who no longer wanted to go to school because students viewed her lack of parents as too different and refused to speak to her. Ms. Moreno used this story to engage the class in a lesson about accepting others who are different and as a springboard for a class project. Students were asked to bring pictures, letters, stories, or other artifacts that could help us tell about ourselves to better understand each other.

For several days, I looked around the house for something to show my classmates. I gathered pictures and newspaper clippings of me at competitions and cleaned my trophies. I also interviewed some of my uncles and grandparents, which provided me with information on some popular Latino traditions and values my family observed. During the week, I shared my artifacts and thoughts with Ms. Moreno. She supported me and had constant contact with my mother about the project. Working through this process with Ms. Moreno made me feel proud of the artifacts I was going to share, especially because I felt she understood the innate differences inherent in each of us in the classroom.

From the information other students and I presented, it was clear that differences existed among us. For example, since I didn't play sports, I didn't have any trophies or ribbons that showed my interest in athletics. Instead, I had a picture of me with two girls who received second and third place in a school acting competition. Before this presentation, the fact that I was a small boy with a squeaky voice who did not play sports automatically categorized me as a gay boy. After it, the number of uncomfortable questions or comments that students asked me decreased significantly. It seemed that my classmates accepted my differences, and, as a result, my self-esteem increased.

Ms. Moreno's efforts were a major source of my success in 4th grade. As a result of her instruction, I no longer felt ashamed of how I acted or what I thought. My differences in her class were always present, sometimes unclear and confusing to others, yet always safe in her class.

## DEVELOP AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Cultural proficiency requires developing authentic relationships. Resources such as those available from GLSEN are critical to working with LGBT students because, unlike other student groups where families share a similar background and can help educators better understand the needs of students, parents of LGBT students frequently are not LGBT and may not understand issues and concerns that are important to their children. In fact, some families may not even acknowledge they have an LGBT child. This means that educators must rely on external resources to build the background knowledge that will help them develop authentic relationships.

## THE POWER OF ONE TEACHER

Often we hear from educators who say they would really like to be more supportive of LGBT students but do not know how because they feel they are alone in wanting to address the issue. They may not have policy to support the work or, worse, the community may be hostile to even discussing LGBT issues. They ask, "What can one educator do?" In response, we have invited one of our graduate students to share his story of one teacher who made a difference that the student remembers nearly 20 years later.

## CONCLUSION

Through inclusive teaching strategies such as using literature on differences and having children learn about each other, Ms. Moreno instilled a sense of identity and pride in each student, valued their differences, and developed authentic relationships among students. She created an inclusive space where each one felt safe and accepted. Whether this was sufficient to eliminate biased beliefs in all the students is doubtful, but it was a start. And, for at least one student in that room, it made all the difference. ■