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# Being different, teaching difference : challenges and possibilities for non-heterosexual men in elementary school teaching

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Being Different, Teaching Difference:  
Challenges and Possibilities for  
Non-Heterosexual Men in Elementary School Teaching

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**Abstract**

This inquiry brought together the experiences of six male teachers working in NYC schools who identify as either gay, queer or bisexual. Drawing primarily on interviews, which addressed topics such as personal history, educational philosophy and classroom practices, I examined the contextual and cultural factors involved in being "out" as a queer, gay or bisexual teacher and the importance of teaching with an eye towards gender and sexual diversity (GSD). Focusing on the decision to be out, discussion and exploration of GSD in the classroom, and the hidden curriculum of gender performance, I was able to explore the complex and thorny issues surrounding this social justice mission. The purpose of this study was to obtain rich qualitative data to create a portrait of these teachers, each with unique backgrounds and opinions about the challenges or responsibilities of working with young children.

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## Introduction

In the fall of 2010, I began my first job as an assistant teacher at an independent school in Brooklyn, New York. For a week prior to the first day of school, I attended a series of orientation events and workshops designed to welcome new faculty. The theme of one of the workshops centered on social justice and diversity. The facilitators, both head teachers in the lower school, led a short discussion about identity and multiculturalism and then introduced an activity. We were all assured that this was a safe space and that whatever came up during this meeting would be kept confidential.

Around the room were taped several sheets of paper, each with a cultural identifier printed on it: age, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender, class, and ability. We were first instructed to stand next to an identifier that we feel gives us power and, if we wished, offer an explanation for why we made that choice; then we were to stand next to the identifier that is least powerful. For the former, I stood next to *gender*—recognizing that in our culture being a male in the teaching profession is unique and could be seen by some to be an asset.

What I did next, though, was only made possible by the atmosphere of acceptance nurtured in the room and in the school as a whole. When we were asked to stand next to the identifier that gave us the least power, I stood next to *sexuality*. I then explained to a group of colleagues I just met that I am bisexual, and that I feel many people are either confused or incredulous when they find out I am in a committed relationship with a woman. The group responded by nodding and smiling graciously and we moved on.

This is just one of a series of coming out stories I have been collecting since I first told my mother that “I didn’t know what side of the boat I was on” at age 19. I tell this

story about that diversity workshop to illustrate that, when the moment is right, I have no problem talking about my sexuality in public. I am always ready to talk about it when I get the chance—if only to dispel rumors or misunderstandings: being bisexual does not mean I am promiscuous or indecisive, and it doesn't mean that I'm half in the closet. However, being out to the parents and students at my school is more complicated.

Being an openly gay male teacher has its own set of perils in our society. In recent years, the media has been saturated with stories of sexual abuse: priests in the Catholic Church, teachers at Horace Mann, a coach at Penn State University, etc. Indeed, teachers have been fired en masse for being gay or lesbian, as was seen in Florida from 1959 to 1964 (Graves, 2007). Knowing that there are those who believe children should not have any social contact with homosexuals, there is a part of me that remains guarded, self-monitoring. And, I am all the more guarded knowing that, if I am not open about my identity, parents or colleagues might see me as sexually ambiguous.

While I have been committed to responding honestly to any question presented to me about my sexuality, somehow this stance has left me feeling powerless. At lunch one afternoon, one of my first graders asked me if I had a girlfriend. I said, simply, “yes.” I was disappointed that he didn't ask me if I was gay, but then, I wondered, what would I have told him if he did? I did *not*, as a matter of semantics, identify as gay. “I am queer.” “I am a bisexual.” “I have a girlfriend, but I had a boyfriend before that.” “It's complicated.” Did these answers require more explanation than a first grader would be able to process? Around parents, too, I couldn't help but feel at times like I was the object of some speculation. And so, while I felt I had made peace with my colleagues, I remained, as far as I knew, in the eyes of parents, a mystery.

For this reason, I decided to initiate this social action research project on the topic of gay-, bisexual- and queer-identified male teachers in elementary grades. The questions that guided this study were: What are the challenges a non-heterosexual male teacher faces regarding being out in the classroom; what might that teacher do, in addition to being ‘out,’ to nurture the recognition and acceptance of gender and sexual diversity; and what factors might stand in his way. I undertook this research with the understanding that there might be, as Thomas Duke (2007) claimed, a dearth of empirical data on the subject. And so I sought out interviews with other gay or bisexual teachers to compare their experiences with my own. With this research I hoped to gain some insight on what my responsibilities were to the GLBTQI movement, and how I could care for children whole-heartedly, with an eye toward making a better world.

### **Literature Review**

**For non-heterosexual male teachers, deciding if, how, and to what extent they are out in school can depend on context as well as culture.** Jennifer Bryan, a psychologist and educational consultant specializing in gender and sexual diversity (GSD), unpacks the misleading concept of “coming out” in *From the Dress-Up Corner to the Senior Prom: Navigating Gender and Sexual Diversity in PreK-12 Schools* (2012). Bryan describes the act of coming out as complicated, uneven, and unending. In fact, she says, the term “coming out” can be problematic; there is an assumption that it is a clearly defined, one-time event. It connotes an either-or status—you are either out or not. Additionally, while being out has traditionally been applied only to gay or bisexual identities, it is further complicated by the inclusion of other sexual and gender identities

(transgender, intersex, etc.). Bryan suggests instead that there is a continuum of being out, which might involve who you are out to (or not), where you are out (or not), and when (or if) you decide to come out. Yet as complex as this process is, Bryan suggest that “the only way for LGBTQI educators to fight invisibility is to ‘come out’” (p. 326). Michael White, for example, writes about this invisibility in an article about his years as a teacher: “I feel like I'm letting down all those students who would benefit from the knowledge that one of their teachers is gay” (1998).

Janna M. Jackson (2006) points to context (personal characteristics, gender conformity, family status, professional experience and community atmosphere) as being an essential consideration in a teacher’s individual decision to come out to his/her students. The participants in Jackson’s quantitative study recognized that a number of factors influenced their growth as gay and lesbian teachers. Jackson concluded that “these internal and external influences were not isolated factors as participants described complex interactions among them when making decisions about disclosing their sexual orientation at school” (p. 33).

There are additional cultural considerations facing gay male educators. As James King (2004) states, gay male teachers who chose to teach young children risk being suspected of being perverts and sexual predators. King pinpoints three key cultural issues that contribute to the challenges gay male teachers face: (a) teachers are supposed to be asexual and problems arise when that assumption is challenged; (b) male teachers are out of place because teaching is seen as “women's work;” and (c) society fears that gay teachers will recruit children to be homosexuals (2004).

**Research indicates that, while there continue to be heated debates about whether and to what extent GLBTQI issues should be addressed in the elementary grades, all children benefit from developmentally appropriate discussion about gender and sexuality.** While teachers are increasingly expected to cultivate an awareness and appreciation of diversity among students and families, according to a 1999 article in *Childhood Education*, there remain in our society "legitimate concerns about whether it is appropriate or necessary to teach young children about gay and lesbian issues" (Boyd, p. 40). Teachers, parents and administrators continue to debate whether homosexuality is a biological issue, a moral or religious issue, or a social or lifestyle issue; and even those who may support gender and sexual difference in their personal lives may find it inappropriate to discuss such issues in a school setting (p. 41). Another 1999 publication, *Gay Parents/Straight Schools* (Casper & Schultz), argues that "just as race, culture, and gender are being seen as important contributors to the development of children, it is also important to examine the ways that sexual orientation may alter or contribute to our notions of development" (p. 172).

Jennifer Bryan claims that, if educators are committed to educating the "whole child," then they are responsible for addressing issues about gender and sexuality "at every grade level" (2012, p. 7). She cites the work of the Sexuality Instruction and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), which published its third edition of *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education* in 2004: "SIECUS is a tremendous resource, modeling ways to talk to students at every age about issues that range from gender roles to sexuality and religion" (p. 258). On a more basic level, Sapp (2010)

argues that adults must model for children at a young age that all people, regardless of sexual orientation, deserve to be treated with respect.

**From a young age, research shows, children learn the cultural and institutional norms regarding gender performance and sexual identity, and those who violate those norms are ridiculed and excluded by their peers.** Research has indicated that the beginning of gender and sexual “education” occurs much earlier than adolescence (Smiler, 2009). Smiler argues that, as soon as children enter school, social values regarding gender performance and beliefs about desire are “are transmitted informally through school structures, teachers' comments, curricula, and students themselves” (p. 358). Indeed, there is evidence to support the assertion that “all children are dramatically affected by anti-gay prejudice, and most, by a relatively young age, already have had ‘exposure’ to LGBT-related information...most of it...misleading and harmful” (Chung & Courville, 2008, p. iii). More than twenty years ago, Grayson argued that “schools have depended on rigid sex role definitions to control their students. Homophobia helps keep boys and girls 'in their place' better than any written rule” (1988, p. 135).

The problem, says Smiler (2009), lies partly in the binary constructions of gender that are perpetuated in school structures. He cites a recent instance of a Finnish boy not being allowed to play field hockey because, in the United States, it is considered a women's sport (Kadaba & Shea, 2005). Also, there are numerous instances of transgendered youth facing resistance and hostility for their desire to access girls- or boys-only bathrooms or changing facilities (Pfeiffer & Daniel, 2000; Reischel, 2002). Smiler also cites Rebecca Bigler's (2006) comparison of gender prejudice and racial

prejudice in schools: “Any teacher who began class with ‘Good morning Whites and Blacks’ would be quickly fired and potentially jailed . . . why [should teachers] be allowed to begin with ‘Good morning girls and boys’” (2009, p. 365).

### **Methodology**

This portraiture study analyzes the experiences of six male teachers working in private and public schools in New York City, all of whom identify as either gay or queer. These teachers were asked to reflect on their experience as gay or queer teachers, with a focus on the challenges of being ‘out’ to students, parents, fellow teachers and administrators. Through these interviews, I hoped to collect data about their coming out experiences as well any special responsibilities they might feel as a non-heterosexual male teacher in advocating for gender and sexual diversity. The scope of this study of non-heterosexual teachers is limited to those who identify as male in order to explore more directly the interaction between these two contextual factors. It should also be noted that the six respondents discuss their experiences as teachers in New York City; their experiences may not reflect those in other geographic areas.

For each subject, I conducted a qualitative interview using an “interview guide approach” (Patton, 1987), in which questions and topics are predetermined in an outline form, but the wording and sequence of questions are determined over the course of the interview (Appendix A). With one exception, interview data was collected using a digital recording device and transcribed. Observations were recorded using a note-taking program and then transferred to a word processing document. These notes were examined using an open-coding process in which marginal notes and comments are

added; these notes were aggregated into clusters (axial coding) to identify emerging themes; and three key themes were then chosen based on frequency and relevance to the inquiry and organized into the research findings (Strauss & Corbin, 2007).

### **David**

At the time of this research, David was a second grade assistant teacher at a private school in New York City. David is white, in his mid-twenties, with an athletic build that comes from his previous career as a gymnast. He was recently engaged to be married to his boyfriend and were planning their wedding for the following summer. At school, he typically wears slacks, a button-down shirt and leather dress shoes. Last year, he received his master's degree in elementary education. He is originally from the southwestern United States, where his mother taught at a public elementary school for over 30 years. David identifies as gay and, the year this interview took place, came out to his class for the second time. In addition to our interview (personal communication, March 11, 2012), one observation was conducted in David's classroom while he was leading an activity with the head teacher out of the room (fieldnotes, March 2, 2012).

### **Chauncey**

I first met Chauncey, a third grade teacher at a public school in New York City, during my student teaching field-placement—a component of my graduate work at Bank Street College. Chauncey is a single Caucasian man, mid thirties, with a shaved head and short-cropped beard. He has three master's degrees—one in eastern philosophy, another in fashion design, and a dual degree in special and elementary education—and has been

teaching in public schools for more than eight years. When asked how he identifies himself, he explained, "My own nature is more fluid. I don't strongly identify as male or female" (personal communication, April 22, 2012). He has never discussed his gender or sexuality explicitly with his students. Chauncey requested not to be tape-recorded in order to protect his privacy, so handwritten notes were my primary data-source. To preserve the accuracy of our informal, conversational interview, Chauncey reviewed, amended and approved my notes after they were transferred to a word processing document. I also collected observational data, unrelated to the present inquiry, during a field placement in June, 2011.

### **Sebastian**

Sebastian is a native New Yorker in his late twenties. He worked for three years as a 4th grade assistant teacher at a private school (the same school he attended as a child) while working towards his masters degree in education. He has now completed his degree and is working as a middle school French and Science teacher at another private school in New York City. At the time of our interview, after school on a dark autumn afternoon, he arrived from work wearing slacks, a blue button-down shirt and tie. He has short, dark hair. Sebastian is a Haitian-American who identifies as "a gay male that goes by he/him" (November 19, 2012). The year before our interview, Sebastian was asked by the dean of student life at his middle school to come out to 8th graders; however, he does not generally discuss his sexuality with students in his classes.

**Josiah**

Another native New Yorker, Josiah has been teaching in various capacities for ten years, the last four years in a private school setting. He completed his masters degree in education in 2011. Josiah is in his second year as a full-time assistant teacher in a preschool classroom. Josiah is a white male, in his mid-twenties, with medium length dark hair and a tall, slender build. At the time of our interview, which took place in his classroom after school, Josiah was wearing jeans, red Converse sneakers and a striped t-shirt. He identifies as gay. This year, Josiah introduced his boyfriend to his class of 4-year old students. (personal communication, November 28, 2012)

**Michael**

Michael is in his second year as an assistant teacher at a private school in New York City. He received an undergraduate degree in mathematics and a masters degree in education. He completed his student teaching in public school before becoming a second grade assistant teacher. A native of New Jersey, Michael is in his mid twenties, white, with short dark hair and, on the day of our interview, he was wearing a short-sleeve button-down shirt and jeans. Michael identifies as queer. While he is generally reticent to discuss his sexuality with others unless he is asked, this year he chose to come out to his students for the first time during a week-long diversity initiative at the school. (personal communication, December 3, 2012)

## **Ganesh**

Ganesh first came to the United States in 2000 on a student visa from Nepal. After college, he moved to New York City and worked as an assistant teacher for four years in private schools before being hired by the Department of Education to teach second grade at a public school in Brooklyn. During his second year as a head teacher, Ganesh submitted his application to become a permanent resident of the United States. His application was denied and Ganesh is currently preparing to return home to Nepal with his boyfriend. He is in his early thirties, wears thick rimmed glasses and has short, dark hair. Ganesh identifies himself as a gay male and, while he has been out to some faculty, he has never come out to his students. (personal communication, December 5, 2012)

## **Findings**

As addressed in the review of literature, being a non-straight male teacher in elementary school is fraught with challenges (King, 2004; White, 1998; Jackson, 2006; Graves, 2007). And, while there continues to be a debate over whether and how sexuality and gender should be discussed in schools, research has shown that, even if sexuality and gender are not addressed explicitly, children are still taught to obey cultural norms through a hidden heterosexist curriculum (Smiler, 2009; Pfeiffer & Daniel, 2000; Reischel, 2002; Bigler, 2006). It was with this research in mind that I conducted this qualitative study, in which I brought together data from six individuals who shared their own unique experiences as non-heterosexual male elementary school teachers in New York City. I found that, in general, this study corroborated the research and added to the

growing body of evidence (Bryan, 2012; Jackson, 2006; Casper & Schultz, 1999) that young children benefit from having a teacher who is "out" and engaging in explicit discussion about gender and sexual diversity.

After analyzing the data collected on the challenges and responsibilities of queer or gay male teachers, three issues stood out as being essential to understanding this unique situation: (a) the factors involved in the decision whether or not to be 'out'; (b) the teacher's role in helping students understand sexuality and gender; and (c) gay shame and the unintentional reinforcement of gender stereotypes. These themes, taken together, make a profound case for Parker Palmer's assertion that "Good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (1997, p. 16).

### **Being Out**

My data seemed to confirm that, while being a non-straight teacher can provide an organic reason to discuss gender and sexual difference, the extent to which a teacher is out depends largely on their specific contextual and cultural situation. Tied to this is the notion, also supported by my research, that having an openly gay, queer or bisexual teacher is beneficial for all children, not just those who may later identify as non-straight. The cultural and contextual factors that were discussed with the six men I interviewed mirrored many of those described by Jackson (2006). They included: *school climate, family and cultural background, personal history (including relationship status), teaching philosophy and personal temperament.*

**David** has been out to his students for two years in a row—first while he was student teaching in a fifth grade class, and then while he was an assistant teacher in second grade. For his fifth graders, the issue came up to the class accidentally when a student started announcing to children on the playground that David was gay. When he informed his lead teacher what had happened, she took the student aside and, to David's chagrin, scolded her for the way she had behaved. David disapproved of the way the teacher handled the situation so, when his head teacher was absent a few days later, he initiated a conversation with the class. "I did a read-aloud and we talked about what it meant to be gay and I came out to them...and I told the girl afterwards [that] there is no shame in talking about this. You know, don't feel like you're in trouble. And so I think that smoothed things over with her" (personal communication, March 11, 2012).

This year, when David came out to his second graders, the decision was more deliberate. He was on a field trip when one of his students asked where David's dog stayed when he was at school. "At that point you could either lie or could tell the truth knowing that it could open a can of worms, so I kind of knew what I was doing when I answered her honestly and I just said, he stays with Charlie. And she was like, who's Charlie? And so at that point you have to be honest with a child... and she was shocked, for sure" (personal communication, March 11, 2012). David informed his head teacher about their conversation. She suggested that David chose a read-aloud and, during the discussion afterwards, tell the class about his boyfriend.

David cites the supportive school environment as being a significant factor in his decision to come out the second time. "I got vibes very early on that it was fine [to be out]" (personal communication, March 11, 2012). For example, he said, the school

hosted a workshop with a Jennifer Bryan, an expert on gender and sexuality issues in schools, and there was a staff meeting devoted to a discussion of gender and sexual diversity. David's teaching partner also made her support known. "She definitely encouraged me to be out and to tell the kids and to be a role model for those children who are questioning" (personal communication, March 11, 2012). David also shared his concerns about starting a new job at a charter school the following year: "I know there's a part of me that's going to have to put myself in a box and close that side of me off because they aren't so into bringing your personal life to work" (personal communication, March 11, 2012).

Growing up in a rural area in the Southwest, David didn't have any gay role models and, after eighth grade, when it became obvious that he was more effeminate than his male peers, he started feeling alienated from the boys in his grade. He developed close relationships with the girls around him, but still identified as straight throughout high school. There were some kids at his high school who were out as gay, but they were considered outcasts, which discouraged him from coming out all the more. He came out to his parents after he had been at college for a year, at age twenty. By the time David came to teaching, he was out to all the important people in his life. David, remembering his own childhood, makes it a priority to be out to his students because, "If I had had a really cool teacher at some point in my life who I really respected and respected me and I knew that he or she was gay, I would have felt a thousand times better about [being gay]" (personal communication, March 11, 2012).

David described his family and relationship history playing a role as well. His mother—herself an educator for 25 years—and father were very supportive of him being

gay, though they did worry that David's job might be threatened when he decided to come out to his students. David's relationship with his fiancé also contributed to the ease with which he has been able to be out to students and parents: "I don't say, oh, you know I'm gay. I just refer to [my boyfriend] a lot of times" (personal communication, March 11, 2012).

David believes that sexuality and gender are appropriate topics for an elementary school classroom when it comes up organically, "and I feel like if a teacher is gay...that's an organic way of it coming up" (personal communication, March 11, 2012).

**Chauncey**, who views sexual identity as fluid and does not strongly identify as either male or female, explained that he never discusses his own sexuality or gender with his students. He pointed out, though, that there is a lot of discussion around *identity* at his school (a public school in New York City) and that, overall, he has been happy about the relationships he's had with parents and children. In a school context, he claims, "my identity is inconsequential...it is only important in that it is a touchstone to conversations about anyone's identity, whatever that might be" (personal communication, April 22, 2012). He was glad that no parents had ever asked him if he was gay, saying, "I think it would be inappropriate for a parent to ask directly" (personal communication, April 22, 2012). Chauncey did not indicate whether his school environment or relationship status (without a committed partner) played a role in his decision not to discuss his own sexuality with his students. (personal communication, April 22, 2012)

Chauncey takes issue with the way, more generally, education has become systematized—which may shed light on his decision to not to address his own identity

more explicitly. Liberal Arts, he says, has done a disservice to students over the past 100 years. In his opinion, society should never have abandoned the practice of apprenticeship learning. Much of the learning that takes place in classrooms, he says, is silent and energetic. There is an interaction that happens when a more developed consciousness comes into *direct* contact with a less developed consciousness. By more developed consciousness, he specifies, he means only that more intellectual pathways have been explored. Part of a teacher's job is simply to acknowledge the being of his/her students. For Chauncey, with that simple acknowledgement, an expansion and opening follows, which is the initiation of learning.

Last year, **Sebastian**, who is out to the faculty and administration at his school, was asked by the dean of student life at his school to speak to eighth graders about his coming out experience. The school was doing a lot of work, Sebastian said, around anti-bullying and name-calling and they wanted Sebastian to work with these students and share his story. He came out to two groups of twenty eighth graders, and it was the first time he had talked openly about his sexuality with students. As he prepared to speak to the class, Sebastian was conscious of making his message relevant to all students, and decided to frame his talk about being an ally, or someone who is supportive of equal rights for the GLBTQI community and actively challenges homophobia and transphobia. “I wanted to instill in them that they are an important part of their close community...that they should watch their words and be conscious of their actions” (personal communication, November 11, 2012).

Despite the fact that Sebastian came out to that group of eighth graders, he still struggles with the extent to which he feels it's important to be out to all his students. There are two schools of thought, he explains: "There is the camp that says, what's our personal business is our personal business and we shouldn't be talking about it openly like that if we don't need to" (personal communication, November 11, 2012). For instance, he has not mentioned his sexuality to his French class or his Science class because the topic has not come up. "The other school of thought is that, as teachers are in such a minority group, especially in such an environment as an elementary school, it's our duty to make ourselves visible so that students can feel like school is a safe place for them;" and, he says, "I'm caught in the middle" (personal communication, November 11, 2012).

In his three years as a fourth grade assistant teacher, Sebastian was not out to his students though, he said, he was given multiple opportunities. "I was always with a girl assistant, and they were always teasing us that we were going to get married and that we were dating or whatever. I could have easily, easily, at any point in those three years been like, I don't like girls. And it could have been the end of the conversation. But, I never did and I still question why" (personal communication, November 11, 2012). Perhaps, he thought, the kids were too young (though his experience told him otherwise), or maybe he worried about backlash from parents or the administration. He may have also worried about kids asking questions that he wasn't prepared to answer: "It's the fear of opening up a can of worms and getting a bunch of questions that are inappropriate . . . and that lead down different slippery slopes that we're not prepared to handle" (personal communication, November 11, 2012). It is worth mentioning that Sebastian is single, so

the tactic of mentioning a boyfriend as a means of coming out is not available to him at this time in his life.

Ideally, he says, he would say it's a teacher's duty to come out. But at the same time, he can't see himself telling his students, without any scaffolding at all, "Hey guys, guess what? A very special episode of science class today: I like boys" (personal communication, March 11, 2012). Sebastian believes adults put their own obstacles and barriers to this conversation, and that perhaps not addressing gender and sexuality is harmful to fostering a welcoming community for everybody. "And yet, I'm still not out to my fifth graders, so...I guess it's just waiting for that time, but then not knowing what that looks like, and if I would recognize it if it came" (personal communication, November 11, 2012).

In thinking back on his own experience and identity formation, he says he had always assumed that homosexuality was only for adults. So, even though he had an early awareness that he might be gay, he kept it to himself. "I just shelved it until eleventh grade because...I was too young, even though I knew the entire time" (personal communication, November 11, 2012). Sebastian was ambivalent that his being out might encourage students who might be questioning to come out sooner, but acknowledged the importance of being visible. "We could apply the same rhetoric that we do with teachers of color—that just seeing another black teacher or another Latino teacher is enough to make a Latino or black student feel welcome" (personal communication, November 11, 2012). Perhaps, he explains, it is similar for students who may one day identify as GLBTQI. "At least they [would] know I'm there, whether or not they use me as a

resource or whether they care; at least I'm a presence" (personal communication, November 11, 2012).

Sebastian suggested four specific things school administrators could do to create a safe space for teachers to be out: (1) create a mission statement with language directly addressing the inclusion of GLBTQI people; (2) host events dedicated to presenting the stories of GLBTQI people; (3) highlight GLBTQI students at alumni events; and (4) host regular workshops for faculty so they might develop a common language around GLBTQI issues.

**Josiah** came out to his class of preschoolers for the first time this year. The process began when he and his boyfriend attended a weekend Halloween celebration for families, hosted by the parent association at his school. During this event, he introduced his boyfriend to the parents and students he encountered. Perhaps because of the frenetic nature of the event, Josiah explained, the students he saw didn't seem to be phased by meeting his boyfriend. "They were just sort of like, oh, that's nice and then they promptly forgot about him" (personal communication, November 28, 2012). At one point during the festival, though, Josiah's boyfriend taught some the students a Japanese song. A few days later during circle time, a child mentioned learning the song; Josiah took the opportunity to say, "That's right, and the person who taught you that song was my boyfriend" (personal communication, November 28, 2012). There was silence for a few seconds before a child asked, "Is he a girl?" Josiah said, "No, he's a boy," and the child responded, "Oh, okay." Josiah laughed and said, "I'm not sure what they understand to

be our relationship, but they know the word boyfriend. They're like, 'Oh, your boyfriend'" (personal communication, November 28, 2012).

Josiah was not in a major relationship until the the spring of last year and before that, he said, his sexual preference never came up. "I think that's just part of the getting to know you process. You find out more about your teacher and they're like, oh, this is what your life is like and do you have a wife?" (personal communication, November 28, 2012). Josiah believes that, because young children have a lot of experience with family, the best way to come out to them is to mention that you live with your partner. Keeping the conversation grounded in the idea of family is preferable to the more abstract idea of being sexually attracted to a certain kind of people. "Because you love them and they live with you," he might explain to students, "they're a part of your family" (personal communication, November 28, 2012). He has been asked before by children he was babysitting if he had wife. Sometimes he would say, simply, "No;" but if the child pressed the issue he would respond, "No, I have a boyfriend" (personal communication, November 28, 2012). One child asked, "But how do you kiss him?" Josiah replied, "Oh, you can do it." And the boy said, "Oh, okay" (personal communication, November 28, 2012).

Josiah points out the double standard of coming out. For example, says Josiah, a straight male teacher doesn't say to his preschool children, "I love women," and a straight female doesn't say, "I love men." However, there is a normalization that takes place when a straight teacher mentions their husband or wife. That, says Josiah, is reinforcement for children that, "Oh, that's a man who is married to a woman; that's a

woman who's married to a man" (personal communication, November 28, 2012). For Josiah, having a concrete example is most effective.

Josiah said his school had done a lot to make him feel safe to be out to his students. The atmosphere, he says, is one of inclusion, tolerance and respect for diversity. There are a number of families who are same-sex couples and, across the board, the administration champions the opinion that we should teach children that there are many kinds of families, that diversity must be valued as an asset to the community. He mentioned two concrete examples of work that the school had in place to spur a dialogue with parents and students about diversity, GLBTQI issues particularly: (1) a day of the year is wholly devoted to adults and children having discussions about identity; and (2) the curriculum in his classroom has a focus on countering bias by teaching that difference should not be thought of as weird or abnormal. (personal communication, November 28, 2012)

When **Michael** came out to his class of second graders this year, he not only had to tell them he identified as queer, he also had to explain to them just what that meant. Michael and his head teacher (who identifies as lesbian, and had come out to their students earlier in the year) took an opportunity provided by a school-sponsored week dedicated to reflection on how to be an "ally." During Ally Week, Michael and his head teacher, Madeline, had a discussion about each identity represented in LGBTQ, one letter per day. Sometimes they read a picture book first; other times they simply asked what the class knew about each term and let the discussion be guided by the children's questions. (personal communication, December 3, 2012)

In addition to the classroom discussions, in the lobby there was also an exhibit of photographs, submitted by members of the school community, depicting loved ones who identify as GLBTQI. Both Michael and his co-teacher had submitted photographs. His head teacher had a picture of her with her wife. Michael submitted a photo of himself with his band, each of whom represent a different letter in the list of gender and sexual identities: L, G, B, T, and Q. The class went down to visit the exhibit during the week and, when they saw Michael's picture, were curious about it.

When Michael explained the concept of his band, his students asked which letter he identified with "and I explained—queer, I identify as queer" (personal communication, December 3, 2012). During their discussions, queer was the one letter the class had the most trouble understanding and, since it was the last term in the list, it was also the one they had least time to process. They asked him to explain again what it meant. "I sort of said it was similar to bisexual, but it means—queer is a term that means different things to different people and you might hear a different answer from anyone who calls themselves queer...for me it means that [I] might be in love with someone no matter what their gender is" (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

The only fear in coming out to his second graders, Michael said, was that as a new teacher, he might not explain himself succinctly and articulately. "I wasn't scared of actually saying that I was queer so much as doing justice to explaining what that meant to them, and if I would explain it in a way that conveyed a tone of seriousness. That it wasn't met with, like, silly giggles or anything" (personal communication, December 3, 2012). The final day of Ally Week, the class was going over the terms one last time. When they got to Q, one of the students shouted, "Michael's queer!" and ran up to him

for a hug. “And I was like, that’s a really beautiful thing” (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

For Michael, coming out was a personal choice. “I think it depends on so many factors. I’ve felt comfortable doing that in this school, but I certainly wouldn’t in other places. And I’m almost certain the conversations we’ve had here I would have gotten fired for elsewhere” (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

Michael mentioned one school where he had worked in which he would not have felt comfortable being out. In this NYC public school, Michael saw more attention being paid to high stakes testing than to discussions about diversity. In addition to the focus on testing, he said, “During Christmas time, everything was about Christmas, and that left the one Muslim student feeling left out” (personal communication, December 3, 2012). If there wasn’t any discussion of religious diversity, Michael reasoned, how could they have possibly tolerated discussion about sexual diversity?

Michael credits the support from the diversity office and from the administration, who made clear at faculty and planning meetings their support for classroom discussion of sexuality and gender, and that they would field any concerns that might arise from parents. For example, there was significant involvement of administrators in the planning of the school’s Ally Week, devoted to discussions of LGBTQI issues. Michael also cites the fact that several faculty members are already out to students as a significant factor contributing to the relative ease he felt in coming out. “There’s already this environment set in place where it’s better to be open” (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

On the other hand, Michael notes a colleague who identifies as transgender, but is not out to students. “I can see why being transgender presents its own set of options

within an institution and that there's understandably a greater reluctance on being out on that front" (personal communication, December 3, 2012). This situation underscores the assertion made by Bryan (2012) that being out can be complicated by identities that are not generally understood and accepted.

**Ganesh's** experience offers another example of a situation where an accepting school culture only goes so far in creating an optimal situation for a teacher to be out. Since arriving in the United States from Nepal in 2000, Ganesh has been in a gradual process of coming out—first to his friends, then to his brothers and some extended family, then to select co-workers and, only recently, to his parents. In his years as a teacher, he did not mention his sexuality to his students. (personal communication, December 5, 2012)

His decision not to come out was based on a number of interrelated cultural and contextual factors. To begin with, Ganesh says, homosexuality was simply not discussed in Nepal. "It's as if there are not any gay people—and of course there are gay people—but it's completely not part of the cultural tradition" (personal communication, December 5, 2012). Though he began to experience same-sex attraction at age 9 or 10, and had his first sexual experience with a boy in fifth or sixth grade, he didn't learn about the concept of homosexuality until 1998, when he was going into 11th grade. (Incidentally, he says, that was when the internet came to Nepal and information became more readily available.) "I didn't think of it as something bad," he says, "but I also didn't think particularly about it. It was what it was—kind of a fun thing" (personal communication,

December 5, 2012). Ganesh didn't begin to discuss his sexuality with others until he reached the United States.

The most serious turmoil he has confronted about being gay, he says, involves his relationship with his father. "I have a really terrible relationship with my dad. I mean, I grew up with a lot of fear" (personal communication, December 5, 2012). That fear, he says, was related to Ganesh being gay. When he finally discussed his sexuality with his father in 2011, Ganesh expected the worst. "I thought he'd freak out, [have a] tantrum because he can be very angry and abusive. But it went really calmly" (personal communication, December 5, 2012). Later, though, when Ganesh sent his father an article about a Southeast Asian man coming out to his parents, his father replied with a long, angry email expressing his shame. Ganesh has not spoken to his father since.

Being an immigrant with a working visa also affected Ganesh's experience as a teacher. "Being gay in Nepali culture, and not having the stability here . . . I was always really worried [that] I'd have to go back to Nepal" (personal communication, December 5, 2012). These three factors—growing up in Nepal where homosexuality is not part of the culture, his troubled relationship with his father, and the fear of being deported if he should lose his job—all contributed to Ganesh's difficulty in being out to his students.

He added, "Maybe I avoided certain questions; maybe I wasn't comfortable in the school or . . . wasn't yet at that stage to really fully actively address certain issues; or [maybe] it was just my personality. I think I am a bit shy and not as much of an extrovert" (personal communication, December 5, 2012). Ganesh said his students would ask him from time to time whether he had a girlfriend, but he never used the opportunity to come out to them.

One private school in particular, he said, was extremely supportive of LGBTQI issues. The head of the lower school was openly lesbian. The Social Studies curriculum included a study of families; teachers were provided picture books and were expected to discuss what makes a family. At the school's annual Thanksgiving celebration, at which families are invited to share what they are grateful for in front of the community, a gay family was always represented. "You couldn't imagine a more accepting environment" (personal communication, December 5, 2012). At that school, he said, it was very common to have a child from a gay family. "I think two of my years there we had a child or two who had either two moms or two dads" (personal communication, December 5, 2012). But Ganesh was still ambivalent about being out. "You don't normally go up to someone and say, 'Oh, by the way, I'm gay'" (personal communication, December 5, 2012).

Nevertheless, when Ganesh was working as an assistant teacher in private school (he did this for four years) he did come out to his cooperating teachers. "I actually, very straight forward one day told one of them, 'I want to tell you something—by the way I'm gay.' And so that was it. And she said, 'Oh, I kind of knew, thanks for telling us'" (personal communication, December 5, 2012). Ganesh noted the awkwardness of the admission. "Straight people don't have to say, 'Oh, I'm straight, by the way.' So do you—does that mean you have to say, at work, 'Oh, by the way, I'm gay?' or do you bring it up actively when certain topics come up?" (personal communication, December 5, 2012).

The decision to be out, Ganesh reasoned, is deeply personal. "Like, [either] I'm going to do this because I think it's important to my teaching and then face the

controversy, or I say okay, I'm going to do this so I know there won't be a controversy" (personal communication, December 5, 2012). Another way to deal with the situation, he says, is to engage in conversation only when a child brings it up. If a child ever said something negative about gay people or used 'gay' as a slur, he might intervene then. That, he says, would be a teachable moment. If teachers feel strongly about sharing their identity, they might use the opportunity to come out but, says Ganesh, "It depends on your school's policy" (personal communication, December 5, 2012).

### **Teaching Gender and Sexual Identity**

Regardless of the sexual orientation of the teacher, my research data supports the conclusion that the exploration and discussion of gender and sexual identity is an important social and curricular goal for all children.

**David** believes strongly that gender and sexuality are appropriate topics for children. "You don't want to your kid never having talked about gender or sexuality and then getting into middle school and start feeling weird things and then feeling like a freak" (personal communication, March 11, 2012). Introducing these topics early, he says, might be controversial, but it's important for people to know that, while there may be discussion of sexuality, it is rarely about sex. Instead, he says, the focus is on who people love. David frames his teaching around gender and sexual diversity by getting children to acknowledge that "there's another way to be a part of a family or to love someone" (personal communication, March 11, 2012).

**Chauncey** made a case for the inclusion of dramatic play that allows children to experiment with gender expression (personal communication, April 22, 2012). Every day for about 50 minutes, Chauncey explained, his students have an opportunity to work in the dress-up area of his classroom (personal communication, April 22, 2012; fieldnotes, July, 2011). This experience, while important for gender experimentation, is not only about a boy being able to put on a dress—it is more generally useful in children being able to take on different perspectives. Nevertheless, Chauncey described a former student for whom dress-up was a way to work out her masculine gender identity.

Chauncey also uses *process drama* (Schneider, Crumpler, & Rogers, 2006) to activate students' exploration of identity. In one process drama activity that he uses for a Social Studies unit, Chauncey begins by laying out photographs of Native Americans. He then asks his students to examine the images and choose one they might wish to perform. He instructs his students not to choose an image with which they *identify*—but one that speaks to their *hearts*. Once they've chosen an image, children spend two months “being” that person as a part of their Native American study. Chauncey mentioned one notable instance in which a boy in his class (who otherwise exhibited generally heteronormative traits) chose to be a grandmother. He said, “at first I wanted to pick the chief, but then I thought about it and decided I could learn a lot by playing the grandmother.” Chauncey says, “It was wonderful to see him enact the grandmother coaching a pregnant daughter” (personal communication, April 22, 2012). Perspective-teaching, he told me, can change lives.

To Chauncey, sexuality is the least important part of identity; it is more about the role an individual plays as part of their community. While he did not say if he mentions

this explicitly to his students, Chauncey cites a tradition among certain Native American tribes that honors homosexuality or, as it has been called among the Hopi, “two-spiritedness” (Roscoe, 1998). Two-spirits, he says, are incorporated into the tribe as shaman, name-givers, and councilors. Instead of being marginalized for their difference, two-spirits are given positions of the highest honor.

**Sebastian** believes it’s best to start talking to children about gender and sexuality when they are young, even as early as junior kindergarten. “There’s no such thing as too young or developmentally appropriate when it comes to these kinds of conversations” (personal communication, November 19, 2012). In the early grades, he said, it is perfectly acceptable for teachers to discuss different types of families, different forms of love, and treating their classmates with respect. Nowhere except in the human sexuality and puberty class, Sebastian argues, would a teacher need to go into detail about human sexuality and puberty. “That’s the fear, that it’s going to go into sex. That we’re going to talk to second graders about how gay men have sex” (personal communication, November 19, 2012). That, says Sebastian, is not the case. If a teacher does go into that kind of detail with young child, that would be grounds for dismissal. School administrations and families must trust that teachers are going to do the right thing. If there is not a school-wide dialogue around sexuality and gender, Sebastian believes gay families will never feel included. (personal communication, November 19, 2012)

**Josiah** believes thinking about the developmental appropriateness of talking about gender and sexuality is tricky in a classroom, because a teacher must consider each

child as an individual. Working one-on-one with a child is simpler, he said, because a teacher can respond directly to a child's questions. If a ten year old asks about sex, he said, the answer you can give is obviously different from an answer you would give to an 18 year old. "But you can talk to them because they know the word, and you can talk to them about 'it's a way grown-ups love each other, it's a thing grown-ups do, when they're in love, with their bodies. It's only for grown-ups'" (personal communication, November 28, 2012).

A general rule, he said, is to address issues as they come up in the community. "If one kid says, 'Only a man and a woman can get married, and not two women and not two men,' and another kids says, 'My two mommies are married to each other,' then that's a way to get into what's right and what's moral" (personal communication, November 28, 2012). Teachers, he said, must be forthright about passing on values to children and let them know that, in the classroom at least, these are the values children are expected to live by. If a teacher wants to address sexuality and gender in a more abstract way, without a living example making the topic directly relevant to the class, Josiah recommends waiting until children reach age 8 or 9, when they've reached the age of reason, and are able to conceptualize subdivisions and talk about people having partial characteristics. (personal communication, November 28, 2012)

Josiah also advises that parents can be an important resource for teachers when an issue about gender and sexuality comes up in the classroom. If an issue came up in which a child said or did something that required a teacher to answer questions about gender or sexuality, sending an email home to keep parents apprised, Josiah said, is a smart thing to do. He might have a similar communication with parents if there was an issue that came

up that necessitated a discussion about skin color. (personal communication, November 28, 2012)

If addressing gender and sexuality is a curricular goal (a family study, for example), Josiah might also invite parents into the classroom to talk about their families. By including many different kinds of families in this kind of activity, he says, teachers can help normalize difference. (personal communication, November 28, 2012)

According to **Michael**, regardless of whether a teacher chooses to be out to his or her students, it is important to address gender and sexual diversity in an elementary classroom. He believes that sexuality is an important aspect of students' development and, as more gay families are allowed to adopt children, the topic will only become more relevant. (personal communication, December 3, 2012)

For **Ganesh**, the most important value to instill in children is that gay people are a lot like straight people—that we should be allowed to love who we love, no matter what gender. If a child has questions about procreation, he says, a teacher could simply confirm that gay people cannot create a baby, but are able to adopt a child who needs a home. “Children just need to know the real facts plainly put and they get that. That’s all” (personal communication, December 5, 2012).

### **Gay Shame and the Reinforcement of Stereotypes**

Even openly gay teachers may carry around shame learned as a child, which may affect the decisions they make in the classroom. Also, teachers may need to actively

work against reinforcing gender stereotypes in the day-to-day management of the classroom.

**David** confided that, while he is comfortable being gay, “there's still a certain amount of shame that I think a lot of gay people carry around” (personal communication, March 11, 2012). He asserts that, perhaps because of that shame, gay people may unintentionally enforce certain stereotypes. Even in a supportive environment, he claims, being a gay *male* teacher makes him cautious about being alone in a room with a child—acknowledging the fears regarding pedophilia in American culture at large. (personal communication, March 11, 2012)

He cited a recent decision to line up his class by gender. But, as he did this he remembered being in high school and thinking it was unfair that he was forced to be separated into a gender category with boys he didn't have anything in common with (personal communication, March 11, 2012).

He also mentioned an instance in which he was passing out classroom materials based on assumptions about gender and color preference. “As I got halfway done, I was like—wait, what am I doing? So I started mixing it up and I was like, you know what, if they do have a problem with the color they got, let's have a classroom conversation about it” (personal communication, March 11, 2012). Gender norms, he said, are so ingrained that they are difficult to escape.

While I did not collect evidence that **Chauncey** does anything to reinforce gender stereotypes, he did make the claim that, in the world of recess, the reality of gender

performance must be acknowledged and allowed for. Sometimes boys, he says, will do ‘boy things’ and girls will do ‘girls things.’ While Chauncey feels it is important to encourage risk-taking, he also believes it is necessary to respect a child who wants to make typical choices. (personal communication, April 22, 2012)

**Sebastian** is frequently mindful of the decisions he makes in the classroom that may unintentionally reinforce gender stereotypes. As a French teacher, he said, one example of this he has noticed is in teaching a song to his students in which the girls and boys must bow and curtsy to one another. “There are definitely times where I say things, or want to say things like, ‘not all boys,’ or boys can curtsy too,’ but I don’t. Or I’m thinking, if this was college, I would totally unpack this statement I just made, but I don’t. And then I beat myself up over it because I, of all people, should be the one to say ‘that’s not right’” (personal communication, November 19, 2012). But in the course of a busy school day, Sebastian sometimes feels he doesn’t have the time to dwell on these problems.

**Josiah** told me he is mindful of gender bias in his classroom and frequently tries to work against it:

I definitely think there is that undercurrent, [those] sneaky cultural assumptions we all have. I think teachers sometimes come into the classroom with them and I think even more children and families come into the classroom with them, so even if a teacher is aware of things like gender stereotypes and color stereotypes, they

will definitely meet ideas that they have to counter. (personal communication, November 28, 2012)

Josiah gave an example of a situation in which he addressed gender bias in his classroom. During ‘Community in Action’ day, in which his class dedicated time to think about identity, Josiah wore a pair of new pink converse sneakers. One child, he explained, thought it was funny that a boy was wearing pink. He and his head teacher initiated a conversation at the end of the day by asking the class if they noticed that there was a boy wearing pink. When the class indicated that they had, the teachers asked if they thought it is okay for a boy to wear pink if he really wants to. By presenting it as an issue of choice, Josiah said, more children were willing to agree that boys and girls should be able to wear whatever color they wish to. (personal communication, November 28, 2012)

As for gender, Josiah admits that he has never tried to challenge children’s notion of a gender binary or introduced them to the concept of transgender. “I’m fully willing to admit that that comes partly from ignorance on my part, like, I don’t have the experience of either being a trans person or knowing someone who is, so I don’t feel comfortable talking to children about that” (personal communication, November 28, 2012).

I asked **Michael** if he had ever worried that, working with young children, he might receive heightened scrutiny from parents. “Yeah,” he said, “I get that impression a lot...[my head teacher] and I haven’t talked about that explicitly, but sometimes we’ve talked about this internalized homophobia where we feel like we have to explain ourselves or do something differently. And I think it’s this archaic trope that still exists of gay men as sexual predators” (personal communication, December 3, 2012). He notes

that for a straight female teacher, having a child on her lap or interacting with young boys is not seen as problematic as it is for men. “It’s just inconsistent” (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

Michael tries to be vigilant about gender bias in the classroom. “We don’t let things slide. We ask questions when something is assumed or presented as a given” (personal communication, December 3, 2012). In a situation where boys won’t allow girls to play with them at recess, there are some teachers, Michael says, who might downplay the sexism by framing the issue around fairness in general. Michael claims that he, in contrast, would be likely to point out sexism more explicitly by asking children why they think girls can’t play.

Michael cites another example of stepping in to counter gender bias:

I remember once, for example, I was having a math lesson on the rug and I called on two girls in a row, which is not a crazy thing to do—and I’m actually quite conscious of maintaining a gender balance in terms of participation. But often, I think, girls have internalized not to speak as much when boys feel empowered to speak all the time. So I try to compensate for that by calling on girls more often. But, I called on two girls in a row and one boy screamed out, “That’s not fair, you called on two girls in a row!” And I just said, “It’s interesting, I’m sure I’ve called on two boys before but I’ve never heard any complaints about that.” (personal communication, December 3, 2012)

In Michael’s current class, students never line up by gender—which he said was an issue at the traditional public school where he worked previously. “Everything was boy, girl, boy, girl, reinforcing this gender binary and, again, imposing identities on

students at an age when maybe they're not so sure" (personal communication, December 3, 2012). This year's classroom, Michael said, used to have a bathroom pass for boys and one for girls. Now, they have replaced those with a single pass that doesn't specify a gender. "It's obviously not a perfect solution because we still have gendered bathrooms. There are some elementary schools with gender-neutral bathrooms...[but] I don't think we're at that point yet" (personal communication, December 3, 2012).

For **Ganesh**, the topic of shame was deeply relevant to the quality of teaching he felt he could accomplish:

I feel that yes, my whole story about teaching is tied to all of this . . . I feel that because of my personal baggage I couldn't—as much as I tried, as dedicated as I was—I couldn't fully commit to being a teacher because I had so much insecurity and so much stress in my personal life. And doing observations and stuff I would always be extremely stressed out and afraid, thinking: oh my god, if I lose my job I'll have to go back to Nepal. I always have this fear that I would fuck things up or not be able to perform as well; so it was just a bad situation. I think it affected me really deeply. I couldn't even be a teacher [because] of all those factors.

(personal communication, December 5, 2012)

### **Conclusion**

As Parker Palmer argues, "We teach who we are" (1997). This idea was clearly evident in the data collected for this action research. Being 'out' as a non-heterosexual male teacher, it was made evident in these interviews, is a staggeringly complex decision,

depending as much on personal ideology as ecological context and culture. The teachers interviewed for this study, with the exception of Chauncey (who believes discussion of his own sexuality and gender identity is inappropriate in the classroom), felt that being out to their students was important to them, even if their individual situation didn't seem to allow it.

Whether or not a teacher makes the choice of being out, though, gender and sexual difference remain important topics for discussion and exploration. This assertion is supported by all six of the interviewees. David frames his discussion of gender and sexual diversity as another way to think about family. And, in Chauncey's classroom, gender identity is explored through work in the dress-up area and through the use of process drama pedagogy as a part of his Social Studies curriculum.

While it is important to note that children will sometimes choose to make typical choices regarding gender performance, it is important to be aware of how our decisions as teachers can either shift or entrench certain stereotypes about gender and sexuality. As Chauncey explained, it may not be wise to intervene during recess when children divide themselves along gender lines (personal communication, April 22, 2012), but lining children up by gender or passing out pink folders to girls and blue folders to boys may do more harm than one might initially realize.

The implications of this research are that there seem to be a range of acceptable ways to be a queer male teacher of young children. What is essential is that teachers reflect upon their own identity and teaching practices and are able to share who they are with their students to the extent they deem suitable.

### **Social Action**

The data I've taken from this study has led me to a number of ideas that I intend to put use as social action. I have already discussed with my cooperating teacher the possibility of adding a dress-up area in our first grade classroom. We already have in place a regularly scheduled choice-time in which students might be able to play independently in such an area, so this addition to our class is as easy as finding a cardboard box and a mound of fabric and old clothes.

The second take-away requires more research. This is the practice, mentioned by Chauncey, of incorporating process drama into the Social Studies curriculum. My class is currently working on a study of Kenya. I have an idea that process drama might be an interesting way to deepen our work with one or two children's books about Kenyan communities. As Chauncey pointed out, this work allows for children to enact a gender role they may not be familiar with. However, in order to implement this into our curriculum, more research is needed.

David's idea that the concept of family diversity is an appropriate entry point for young children into discussions about gender and sexuality is one with which I'm already familiar—we have conducted activities in this way in our classroom—but his mention serves to validate this practice.

Regarding whether or not—and to what extent—I am “out” as a bisexual to my students, I am still working to build an appropriate context, though I am hopeful that incorporating possibilities for gender exploration in my class may offer a perfect moment for that discussion in the future.

## Reflection

This action research has been a fascinating process that has sparked a number of ideas that I plan to incorporate in my current and future classrooms. The process began by choosing from a group of topics that had special relevance for me personally. As a bisexual questioning my responsibility to students to be an advocate for gender and sexual diversity, it became evident that I needed to study the experience of gay male teachers. The next step was to choose the type of study that was going to provide the most useful data. I found that doing a portraiture study would yield the kind of qualitative data I was most interested in: personal stories and decisions.

Once I had identified the teachers I wanted to work with, I scheduled interviews and observations. I put together a series of questions, keeping in mind Patton's method of qualitative interviewing (1987), and conducted six interviews, each about an hour long.

For Chauncey's interview, I was asked not to use a recording device, which, while it made compiling notes more difficult, allowed for a more authentic conversation to occur. For that interview, I also decided moments before we began to abandon my interview guide and to approach the interview as an informal conversation. In addition to my interview data, I consulted field notes I took in June, 2011 and March, 2012.

This study supports my belief that children need to know, first and foremost, that their teachers are listening, watching, and responding to them as individuals and that the language we use must reflect an unwavering effort to understand them. If we provide children a safe place to take intellectual risks and nurture their love of creative exploration (e.g. in the dress-up area or through process drama), not only can we increase

children's awareness of gender and sexual difference, we will raise kids for whom learning is satisfying and fun.

Teaching is a political act (Freire, 1970). The decisions we make in the classroom, down to the most minute detail, are reflections of our beliefs and hopes about justice, democracy, and philosophy. It all matters. When we make our choices deliberately, never ceasing to question all we think we know, only then will we be on our way to—as Ruth Charney (2002) instructs—teaching kids to care.

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## Appendix A

### *Interview Questions*

*The following are sample questions that might be used in an interview. The questions will vary depending on the interviewee. However, many of the topics herein are likely to be addressed to some extent.*

- 1 Do you think your school has done enough to nurture safe space among faculty and students? Why or why not?
- 2 Do you feel that sexuality and gender are appropriate topics for elementary school students to discuss? Why or why not?
- 3 To what extent do you think it's important for gay/lesbian teachers to discuss their own orientation with their students? With parents?
- 4 How do you identify?
- 5 Are you out to your class? If you have decided not to be, can you describe the factors that led to that decision?
- 6 If you are out to your class, were there any special considerations you thought about before you decided to come out? How did you do it? How did your students react?
- 7 If you are open about your sexuality with your class, how did you feel about coming out to them? Were you scared? Excited?
- 8 How do you think the experience of GLBT teachers in urban areas compares to the experience of GLBT teachers in rural areas.

- 9 Do you think being out as a gay or bisexual male teacher is easier now than it has been historically?
- 10 Can you describe your experience as a student growing up?
- 11 At what age did you come out?
- 12 When you came out, did you feel supported by your parents, teachers and friends?
- 13 Do you feel that there are any prejudices that work against gay males working with children? Do you feel that prejudices affect your work with children in the classroom?
- 14 There are sociologists who claim that there is a hidden curriculum in schools that reinforces gender and sexual stereotypes. Do you think this is true?
- 15 What should our educational response be to gender and sexual diversity?
- 16 Do you feel any special responsibilities as a gay teacher?

## Appendix B

### *Sample Consent Letter*

Dear Teacher,

My name is Jonathan Farmer and I am a graduate student in Childhood General Education at Bank Street College of Education in New York. I am currently conducting research for my Master's thesis and will be acting as the sole investigator for this study. The goal of my Master's thesis is to interview a number of male elementary school teachers who identify as gay or bisexual in order to gain insight into the contextual and cultural factors involved in being 'out' in an urban school setting. I hope to address topics such as personal history, educational philosophy and classroom practices. Interviews will be transcribed and compared with a variety of perspectives on this important social justice issue. To this end, I am interested in learning about your experiences as a gay or bisexual teacher.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to take part in an audio-recorded interview at a time and location convenient to you. Please note that if the feedback you share during this time is included in the thesis, your name and the name and location of your school will be changed to protect your privacy. Please also note that the Master's thesis will be shared as a PDF with the Bank Street community in a password protected searchable database and may also be submitted as a PDF to the Bank Street Library where it would be catalogued as part of the Library collection and entered into an international database for wider circulation.

Sign on the line below to indicate that you grant permission for the information that you provide to be used for the purpose of this study.

Thank you for taking the time to share your experience with me. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at farmer@jwfarmer.com.

Sincerely,  
Jonathan Farmer

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*I understand that Jonathan Farmer, Master's Degree Candidate at Bank Street College, is studying the contextual and cultural factors involved in being out as a gay or bisexual male teacher in an elementary school setting. I agree to participate in this study.*

**Name of Participant (please print)** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

The Bank Street  
College of Education

Graduate School of Education



November 26, 2012

Jonathan Farmer

Dear Jonathan,

Your proposal and consent letters and forms for working with human participants for your Independent Study have been approved. You may commence your work with human participants. If you make any significant changes to your work with human participants, you need to inform the IMP Committee in writing of your plans. Please place a copy of this letter along with unsigned sample copies of any consent letters and forms in a Permissions section at the end of your appendix. Keep the original signed forms in a safe place for five years.

The best of luck with your study. We look forward to having the completed copy in the IMP database and possibly in the Bank Street College Library.

Sincerely,

*Nina Jensen*

Nina Jensen, Chair  
Integrative Master's Project Committee