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## Wouldn't It Be Cool If Everyone Turned Out To Be Blue? Building a Curriculum About Sexual Orientation for Nine- and Ten-Year-Olds

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## **WOULDN'T IT BE COOL IF EVERYONE TURNED OUT TO BE BLUE? BUILDING A CURRICULUM ABOUT SEXUAL ORIENTATION FOR NINE- AND TEN-YEAR-OLDS**

stephanie nelson

*STEPHANIE NELSON grew up in western Europe and found her way “home” to New York City after moving around the northeastern United States. She holds a B.A. in communication from the University of Hartford, and worked in the business world before pursuing an M.S. in education from Bank Street College (1996). She has taught nine- and ten-year-olds at the Bank Street School for Children for five years. Stephanie wrote this essay during the 2003-04 school year while on leave on the island of Maui, where she spent her days writing, working with flowers and animals, hiking, surfing, and savoring island life.*

The first time that I addressed the meaning of the word “gay” with nine- and ten-year-old students was in my initial year at Bank Street School for Children, my third year of teaching. We had just finished a community discussion on how to deal with anger and to avoid giving “put-downs.” It had been a productive talk, or so I thought, filled with the students' heartfelt pledges to accept each other, take deep breaths in moments of frustration, and negotiate conflict rather than to verbally or physically fight back. Suddenly, from across the room, I heard Lana yell in anger at Danny, her good male friend, “Well, you're gay!” A few minutes later, Lana admitted that she had made the comment to get back at Danny. She was angry with him for divulging to his friends that she had a crush on a boy in class.

On a personal level, I felt deflated and disappointed. After all, I had just finished what I assumed was a successful meeting, only to have my feelings of success shattered. I run what I think is a safe, open-minded classroom where diversity and individuality are respected. The outburst reminded me of how much more complicated creating a safe environment is in practice than in theory. As I was standing in the middle of the room, feeling unsure of what to do next, Sid became very upset with the two involved in the conflict. He yelled that there is nothing wrong with being gay and that it isn't a put-down. I knew right away that we all needed to deal with this.

First, I talked to the two arguing friends, who were clearly in distress, frustrated, and teary. Lana was upset with both Danny's indiscretion and her own behavior. I then called a class meeting. We talked about the meaning(s) of "gay," including its use as a derogatory term. Most students knew that "gay" means homosexual, and many were adamant that there was nothing wrong with being gay. Of course, this was also Lana's position, the girl who had used "gay" in retaliation.

At the end of the day, I was pleased that I had dealt with the incident in a straightforward manner. I also knew that my actions were reactive, not proactive. In addition to questioning my effectiveness in making the classroom safe, I asked myself how I was dealing/not dealing with lesbian and gay issues. Later, pursuing research on safe classrooms, I understood that I shared with many others the uncertainty about creating real safety for all students and changing the curriculum accordingly. T. Prince (1996) comments:

When well-meaning teachers begin to address discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation, their first impulse usually is to declare that they no longer tolerate such words as 'faggot' and 'dyke' in the classrooms... These teachers are not creating 'hate-free' zones; they are creating 'speech restriction' zones.... Unless students have been genuinely educated with solid information about homosexuality and bisexuality and the real people who are and were what they are calling 'fags' and "dykes," these students will have no reason not to want to name-call and almost certainly will engage in such behavior as soon as the teacher is not around to prevent it. (p. 29)

At the School for Children, a conscious effort is made to address difficult issues across the age levels. Several teachers regularly include questions about sexual identity in their curriculum. During my student teaching placement with the 9s/10s, for example, my cooperating teacher read out loud *Am I Blue?*, the story of a young teenage boy who struggles with the possibility that he might be gay. I did not know the context for this reading and I realize now that I did not even know enough to ask. I had never been exposed to such literature before, and the story had a profound effect on me.

Growing up, I don't remember homosexuality being discussed in school, and do not believe that I knew any lesbians or gay men. It was not a topic with which I was comfortable. In recent years, however, I have developed close friendships with both women and men who are gay. We have talked about

their experiences growing up and going through schools in which homosexuality was rarely acknowledged, let alone addressed in the curriculum. As my own comfort level discussing sexual orientation has increased, so has my interest in making it a topic that children can talk about in school.

### **The Evolution of a Curriculum**

Until three years ago, I did not discuss sexual identity in a systematic way. Discussion of gay and lesbian issues was limited to meetings about AIDS. Research confirms this to be a common practice. Lipkin (1996) comments:

Mention of homosexuality, if there is any, is most often done in the context of health and HIV curricula. Although it is perfectly appropriate to discuss some aspects of homosexuality in these venues, there is a strong possibility that students' views will be distorted in the process. We run the risk of having them think that homosexuality is inevitably linked with deviance and illness. Even if the teacher is gay-friendly and the curriculum is accurate, placing the matter under the subject of "health" or "disease prevention" carries its own message. (p. 57)

Lipkin gave me pause to consider how often, and in what contexts, the questions of sexual identity are addressed in my classroom. For example, homosexuality is broached during our Boy/Girl Talks. These talks were part of the curriculum when I began teaching the 9s/10s. The girls and boys are split up in gender groups and have a forty-five-minute meeting once a week with a teacher of the same gender. The talks are informal, relaxed, and based on the children's questions. The children anonymously write their gender and sexuality questions on index cards and hand them to me. As the students become more comfortable with the talks, they often request to take a new direction in our meetings. I give a mid-curriculum questionnaire asking about their comfort levels with the topic and what they want to discuss.

The boys often ask directly about homosexuality, and their questions are usually focused on sexual intercourse. In the five years I have led the Girl Talks, I don't ever remember a girl asking about gay sex. I don't assume they don't wonder. But out in the open, the girls express interest in their bodily changes and social relationships. In that first year of leading the Girl Talks, I was aware that I wasn't dealing with sexual identity because I did not know what to say. The girls did not bring up the topic and so I was silent. I was frustrated with my own uncertainty and failure to act.

Then, during one of my talks with the girls (we were discussing crushes—What is a crush? How do you know if you have a crush? How do you act when you have a crush? How do crushes affect friendships with both boys and with girls?)—something changed for me. Crushes are a common and confusing phenomenon for my students. They express excitement as well as fear of peer pressure about the need to have a crush, even when they don't feel ready. It suddenly hit me that if the children at this age have crushes on the opposite sex, it is very likely that some children have crushes on someone of the same sex. I knew from my discussions with gay friends that they had felt different for as long as they could remember, and certainly at nine and ten. So I asked the girls, "Do only boys have crushes on girls and girls on boys?" Right away someone answered that boys could have crushes on boys and girls on girls. The girls did not volunteer more information and there was some giggling. I simply allowed the question and answer to hang in the air.

Two other experiences relating to the Girl Talks helped me understand the types of questions my girls were having about sexual identity. First, Jena wrote in her Writer's Notebook about feeling gay. I talked to her parents, who were very supportive and reported that Jena had spoken with them about her questions. I wanted to be sure that Jena's sense of self was affirmed in school and that her concerns were included in our Girl Talks, because I knew she might not be the only student with these questions. Around the same time, Susan's parents told me that she wondered whether having crushes on other girls and female teachers meant that someone is gay. A shy child, Susan didn't want to ask me these questions and didn't know her parents were telling me, so I needed to weave this into my talks carefully.

With this in mind, I started discussions on crushes and on different kinds of love in the Girl Talks. I made sure to emphasize that sexual identity is not something that is clear as soon as adolescence starts, and that many people don't figure out "who they are" and "who they like" until they are adults. I pointed out that crushes and sexual feelings are not always indicative of sexual orientation. I reassured the students that adolescence can be a confusing time and that it's okay to be confused, but I encouraged them to find a "safe" adult with whom to talk openly about their feelings. I was keenly aware of how difficult it can be to reassure some students that they probably are not gay, while also validating others who might be.

## Gay Talks

Eventually, with the help of the middle school coordinator, I decided to follow the Boy/Girl Talks with Gay Talks, which would begin with anonymous questions from the children. I wondered if I needed to make a special announcement to the parents. I didn't do that when an extension was added to the social studies curriculum or when we had a classroom meeting on recess disagreements. And yet, this had the potential to be controversial. We decided not to make a separate announcement to the families, but rather to include it in my general report at Spring Curriculum Night. Afterwards, I received feedback from one parent. He was very supportive about what I was doing. No parent disapproved of the Talks. I do not interpret the silence to mean that everyone is on board. But over time I have become more explicit in discussing both Boy/Girl and Gay Talks with parents.

Each year, I make changes to the curriculum that reflect new materials and activities, current events, and the students' interests.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, much of the literature I have found is addressed either to adolescents and young adults or to young children. Little is appropriate for the upper elementary grades. My students are still children, yet they are on the cusp of adolescence. Their anonymous questions reveal that they have many thoughts about sexual orientation and that they often don't understand the information that they have acquired via television, movies, and older siblings. Their questions have included:

- Why do people want to be gay?
- Why do people become gay?
- How do people become gay?
- Why do people think gays are disgusting?
- Why do homosexual people have different rights from heterosexual people?
- Do gay people feel uncomfortable letting other people know they're gay?
- Do gays have big weddings?
- Are there lots of gay people?
- Do gays have sex?
- Are lesbians discriminated against as well?
- What does gay and lesbian mean?
- How do you know if someone is gay?
- Why do other people make fun of people that are gay?
- How should you react if a person who is gay approaches you?

What do you do if you hear others make fun of gays or say “put-downs”?  
Can a man be gay and still like a woman?  
Can a woman like a man and be married to him and still be a lesbian?

I always begin the first official Gay Talks meeting by asking the children what comes to mind when they hear the word gay. During this first brainstorming session, stereotypes and pop culture references usually cover the chart paper. The comments vary from stereotypes such as, “Gay men have earrings,” to noting gay-friendly prime-time shows such as *Will and Grace*. The children, themselves, recognize some of the comments as stereotypical, but all ideas are honored without debate in a brainstorming session. Later in the Talks, we address the possible origins and implications of these stereotypes.

### **Read Aloud: *Am I Blue?***

What began as a series of discussions about gay issues, has evolved into a mini-curriculum. For example, at the end of the Talks I have begun to read *Am I Blue?* to the children. The story tells of a sixteen-year-old boy who is confused about his sexual identity. He is beaten up by a bully because he appears to be gay. The boy is granted three wishes by his fairy godfather, Melvin, who is himself a gay man. The turning point occurs when Melvin changes anyone who is gay into the color blue. Many people now appear to be different shades of blue, some are clearly blue, while others who might have inclinations towards, or questions about being gay are a lighter shade. At the end of the story, the bully is bright blue.

The language of the book is geared towards adolescents. When reading aloud, I have made a decision to change some phrases, such as “jumping his bones.” That has been my judgement call because I know I’m reading a story meant for older students and I feel responsible for the language content. On the other hand, I question this decision and wonder if it would be more helpful to explain phrases like “jumping his bones” and talk about the language with my students. I do not, however, change derogatory words such as “faggot,” because this is language the kids have already heard or will likely hear.

We also discuss the ways in which the fairy godfather personifies gay male stereotypes that my students have inevitably mentioned earlier in our talks. In the post-story notes, B. Coville, the author, describes why he depicted the character this way, as well as his apprehension in doing so. I read this to the children before I read the story so that they might listen more critically and thoughtfully. The students are always engrossed. The first time I read the story,

the whole class applauded at the end. Another time, a student wondered out loud what color people around her might be. Before anyone could respond, I intervened. I said it was fine to share personal feelings, but it was important not to put others on the spot that way. In retrospect, I think I might have been less didactic. I could have asked the students why that question might make others feel unsafe. On the other hand, I hope that my quick reaction let the students know that their safety is of utmost importance to me.

I often overhear students' informal conversations following the reading of *Am I Blue?* This year, as I was walking into the auditorium, I heard one boy say to his friend, "Wouldn't it be cool if almost everyone in the world turned out to be blue?" By making it acceptable to talk about homosexuality in the classroom, it seems likely that more discussions will now take place without me. My hope is that our classroom discussions will help prepare my students to handle the topic on their own.

### **Debate: Pros and Cons of Gay Marriage**

One year, gay marriage came up early in the talks and the children kept coming back to it. The students were confused about whether or not gays could marry; and while most were clear that gays were discriminated against (e.g., name calling), they were surprised that gays might not have the same rights as others. At the next meeting, I confirmed for the students that homosexual couples were not allowed to legally marry.<sup>2</sup> The students did not understand why. We struggled with this conversation for a half-hour, and I asked the students why people might not want to legalize gay marriage. With each response, I tried to get them to dig deeper.

*Stephanie: Why would people not want everyone to have the same rights?*

*Noni: Because gays are different.*

*Stephanie: What makes them different?*

*Justine: Men want to be with men, and women want to be with women.*

*Stephanie: So why would that change whether or not they can marry?*

*Erik: It shouldn't.*

*Stephanie: But it does make a difference. They cannot marry. Why is this?*

We started going around in circles because we did not have enough information. In discussing this meeting with the middle school coordinator, and in brainstorming a way to "hook" the students with an activity, we decided to have the students research the pros and cons of gay marriage. A culminating debate would allow the children to use their new knowledge. In the 9s/10s, we

teach the students to write a persuasive essay, and a debate is a good link between skill development and curricular content.

Finding appropriate web sites, however, was not an easy feat. The material we found was written for adults, so I took time to teach the children how to scan the articles for key pieces of information and how to take notes. The students were excited about the research and worked in pairs. In the end, almost everyone wanted to argue pro-gay marriage, which speaks to both the student and parent body of the school. I had to ask for volunteers to switch to the anti-gay marriage team, and made it clear that their debate perspective did not necessarily reflect their personal opinions.

The debate project was a positive, if flawed, experience. On the positive side, by researching and hearing about the opposing views, the students came away with a better understanding of the complexities of gay rights and different kinds of discrimination. A number of students were frustrated by the lack of an answer to this situation. I would argue that frustration and struggle to comprehend is powerful and might eventually lead to action and social change. The project was flawed to the extent that the available material was too challenging. The tricky vocabulary and subject matter challenged many students, although their interest in the topic did not wane. This was not an activity they could do independent of adult support.

### **Civil Rights: Gays and Boy Scouts**

At the same time that I was working on the Gay Issues curriculum, the entire Middle School was reworking its civil rights curriculum that coincides with the Martin Luther King, Jr., day of remembrance. Each grade level decides to talk about discrimination and equality with a different focus. The 9s/10s teachers agreed to introduce a four-week curriculum on the history of the civil rights movement with a series of meetings and activities revolving around the following questions:

*What does it mean to “stand up for” something?*

*What kinds of things would you (the students) stand up for?*

*How do you stand up for something? What are the different ways?*

Two years ago, I learned of a documentary titled *Scout's Honor*. This film tells the story of Stephen Cozza, an active Boy Scout in California, who learns about the organization's discriminatory policy against gays and is part of a grass-roots movement to combat it. As soon as I previewed the film, I knew that I would incorporate it into this curriculum because it is focused on a young

adolescent with whom my students could identify. *Scout's Honor* could also enable me to link our discussions of gay issues to broader conversations about civil rights. The story shows a young person standing up for what he believes. It exemplifies how a student approximately my students' age, can make a difference.

Early in the film viewers are told that Steven is not gay. I have struggled with whether or not this is helpful to the students. I imagine that it is a comfort to some and makes Steve Cozza more accessible. Ian Barnard (1996) suggests that straight teachers should avoid proclaiming their sexuality because it can have the effect of making the classroom more comfortable for straight students, as in "she's one of us," at the expense of gay and lesbian students. I have wondered if Steven's heterosexuality takes away from the power of the film for students watching who might be gay. At the next showing, it is a question I will pose directly to them.

*Scout's Honor* is a challenge for nine- and ten-year-olds because it actually follows three stories and jumps back and forth among them. It is also filled with flashbacks and inserts of newsreels and interviews relating to the stories of Tim Curran and James Dale, who both fought in court for their right to be openly gay in the Boy Scouts. I need to be present and active during the showing of the film. I tell the students before we even start watching that they might get confused, and that I will be stopping the tape regularly to answer questions. Despite the challenge, the topic is engaging enough that they want to persevere through the tricky bits and get back to Steven Cozza's story. Every year, at least one student has been interested enough to visit the related website, [www.ScoutingforAll.org](http://www.ScoutingforAll.org).

Many of my students have voiced indignation that people have lost their opportunity to be scouts because of their sexual orientation. They are also stunned to find out that the Supreme Court has ruled in favor of the Boy Scouts. It is hard for fourth graders to understand the government system and lawsuits, so I do not belabor the point. What the students do come away with is the knowledge that ordinary people can fight for what they believe in, and that it can be a long and hard process.

### **Successes, Setbacks, and Moving Forward**

The year after the class debated the pros and cons of gay marriage, *The New York Times* began to include same-sex couples in the Weddings section. That year, Erik, a former student, brought the article about the decision to include same-sex unions into his current affairs meeting. Erik told his teachers

that he didn't completely understand the article, "but last year we talked a lot about gays with Stephanie and I think this is important." Then last fall I learned that two of my former students made homophobic comments in their new class. When I heard this, I was disappointed, especially considering that the students who made the remarks had been very vocal in their pro-gay rights comments the preceding spring. When I asked their teacher what she had said to them, she responded, "I didn't have to say anything. Their classmates called them on it!"

It is anecdotes like these that have helped me to re-examine my overall goal. When I began the Gay Talks, I had an idealistic vision of ridding the world of homophobia and making it a safer, more inclusive place. Truth be told, this is still my hope. But now I set my sights more modestly on raising the children's awareness of, and comfort talking about, sexual orientation.

There have been numerous times, especially when I was just starting to teach this curriculum, when I felt I was making no difference whatsoever. One of my earliest meetings on the topic, for example, led to a link between homosexuals and child abuse:

*Stephanie: Why do you think some people put down gays?*

*Juliann: Maybe people are scared.*

*Stephanie: What are they scared of? What makes them scared?*

*Juliann: There has been a rapist in New York and I saw his picture in the subway and I heard that maybe he was gay.*

From there the discussion moved quickly. Timo commented that some people feared that gays would hurt children. I was dumbfounded and unsure what to say next. I was certainly not prepared to deal with this, and yet, there it was. My thoughts jumped to my gay and lesbian friends who spend their lives teaching children. The idea that a student in my class would link child abuse to homosexuals upset me. I fear my reaction was a bit knee-jerk, as I quickly explained (from my own knowledge and research) that there was no link between homosexuality and child abuse. Later that day as I discussed these events with a colleague, I was saddened to think what children may believe and fear in today's world.

In the beginning, it was hard for me to take a step back and let the discussions progress as I would with many other topics. I have learned that my goal cannot be to change everyone's attitude. It can be my ideal, but not my goal. My goal is to educate and to expect respect in and outside of my classroom. At times, this has been hard. As a supporter of legalizing gay mar-

riage, I had to take a deep breath and allow for meaningful arguments against it. I knew that most of the arguments are based in religion, and with students from different faiths and with varying degrees of orthodoxy, I needed to respect all points of view. This was my personal challenge.

My students know how to respond to questions about sexual identity in a sensitive and politically correct manner. However, at other times, it is difficult to hold them accountable for their words and actions. For even though they speak eloquently about equal rights and including each other, there are many examples each year of how hard it is to make change happen. Every year, certain children are not included at the inevitable “cool table”; girls protest that the boys don’t let them play on the football or basketball teams; and homophobic comments can be overheard in classrooms and hallways.

This past year, well into the curriculum, we reviewed the statistics on the numbers of gays and lesbians in America. After discussing the inadvisability of making assumptions about people’s sexuality, one child interjected, “...but there are no gay teachers here [at school], right?”

Although sexual identity is initially a difficult subject for many of my students in post-talk discussions, they frequently note their increased ease with the topic. My own experience motivates me. While I never heard homosexuality discussed in a negative manner, the fact that it was rarely discussed at all was a loud message in and of itself. As a society, we do not give voice to that which we feel is unimportant, or that with which we are not comfortable. I am working to change this. In part, I am committed to discussing sexual identity because I want the gay children in my class to know that they are not alone. More broadly, I am committed to this topic because I want to educate children to “the fullest and most thorough understanding of the world” (Counts, 1932, p.290) and this must include issues of diversity and equality. So forward I will strive, one discussion, one activity, and one curriculum at a time.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gay and lesbian lives continue to receive exposure in both the news and pop culture. Television shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* are becoming mainstream, and same-sex couples appear in the *The New York Times* “Sunday Styles—Weddings” section. In 2003, the New Hampshire Episcopal Church consecrated its first openly gay bishop.

<sup>2</sup> Since my first Gay Talks in 2001, there have been rapid changes regarding same-sex marriage and civil unions. Currently, only two European

nations, Netherlands and Belgium, legally perform same-sex marriages. Two provinces in Canada have also legalized same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriages also exist in the state of Vermont under the title of civil unions, where gay couples are granted the benefits of marriage ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay\\_marriage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay_marriage)). In November 2003, the Massachusetts high court ruled that gay couples have a constitutional right to marry, and gave the state legislature six months to change laws to make this happen. Same-sex marriage and gay rights are controversial, but hot topics in the current 2004 presidential campaign. The social and political changes currently taking place mean that the curriculum needs constant re-examination, and that it continues to unfold and change with current events.

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## **Additional Resources**

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### *Organizations:*

Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers Network (GLSTN)  
122 West 26th Street, Suite 1100  
New York, NY 10001  
Phone: 212.727.0135  
Email: [glstn@glstn.org](mailto:glstn@glstn.org)  
Website: [www.glstn.org](http://www.glstn.org)

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