

The Necessity of LGBT-Inclusive Curriculum

By Mark Pino, GLSEN Central NJ Student Leadership Coordinator, GLSEN Student Ambassador

Words and phrases like “fag” and “that’s so gay” get dropped by middle school, high school, and college kids daily, but when asked what they truly mean, those students say “I was joking” or “I didn’t really mean it.” So why are youth today accustomed to using derogatory slurs in their daily vocabulary? Some people say, “it’s just the way kids speak.” Others say, “they just aren’t thinking about what their words really mean.”

But to get to the root of the problem and eradicate homophobic language in everyday jargon, we need to create a link between the word “gay” and the real faces of the LGBT community. Students need to be taught about the accomplishments of LGBT men, women, and gender nonconformists of the past and present, as well as the historical oppression that the LGBT community has faced for decades. This way, the negative stigma of the word “gay” will be mitigated and everyday people will be able to identify with LGBT individuals and understand what their words really mean.

In my AP U.S. History class, we were discussing the multiple choice question: “Which civil rights group led the Stonewall Riots?” It astonished me that I was the only person in the class of 20 that knew the answer. That later brought me to the conclusion that my fellow classmates could not possibly know nor understand the atrocities committed against the LGBT community. How could they possibly know that the word “fag,” which they say nonchalantly in the hallways, was hurled at anyone perceived as being gay for decades, and that LGBT people were forced to suppress their emotions or face incarceration and sometimes violent consequences?

Today, people have dehumanized the LGBT community to something they don’t understand nor recognize. Had students known the suffering that the LGBT community had endured, they would be far less likely to make unknowingly homophobic comments and victimize other students with the slurs of the past.

As well as including LGBT history, incorporating LGBT individuals who have made positive contributions to society into school curriculum would help assuage the negative stigma of the word gay. When I surveyed kids in all of my classes if they knew any successful LGBT people, almost everybody came up blank. After asking nearly 100 students and teachers, the only answers I got were Michael Sam and Elton John. How could my classmates possibly associate anything positive with the word “gay” if they don’t even know any successful LGBT individuals?

Everyone I talked to was shocked when I told them Alexander the Great was gay, as well as, Alan Turing, Walt Whitman, Sally Ride, Leonardo da Vinci, Tim Cook, the list goes on and on. By introducing successful famous LGBT individuals who have contributed to society, people in my school began to associate the word “gay” with the great leaders, artists, writers and mathematicians of the past. Every person I talked to said hearing about the positive accomplishments of LGBT individuals gave them a positive impression of the LGBT community.

I believe this is the way to systematically tackle homophobia and ignorance in our schools. In fact, [GLSEN's research](#) shows that LGBT students experience safer and more positive school environments when they are taught positive representations of LGBT people, history and events in school curriculum; they hear homophobic and transphobic remarks less frequently, they feel safer, and they report less severe victimization.

By seeing the great accomplishments of past LGBT people, students are able to associate a positive image of the LGBT community and would become more aware of the homophobic slurs that are ingrained in their vocabulary. The LGBT community has been dehumanized for far too long, and this is the way to rehumanize them. Being gay or lesbian or trans wouldn't be seen as something lesser and bullying as a whole could be mollified. Schools would be safer for not just LGBT students, but for anyone who could be perceived as LGBT, and school would become a positive affirming environment that optimizes learning potential.

In addition to stopping bullying, the inclusion of LGBT history and individuals who have contributed to society would better prepare all students for the diverse world beyond the walls of high school. The demographic makeup of the United States is rapidly shifting, and students need to learn how to work with people of all backgrounds. The United States Common Core Curriculum requires the teaching of a multicultural and diverse education. The state of New Jersey, and many others, require the teaching of the African American civil rights movement, the treatment of Native Americans, and the Holocaust in social studies curriculum. LGBT history and the positive contributions of LGBT people to society need to be included. This way, students would learn about the harsh oppression that LGBT people have faced, and would be able to identify LGBT people who have done positive things.

As a GLSEN Student Ambassador and GLSEN Central NJ Student Leader I'm working to make this a reality. In NJ, our GLSEN Central NJ chapter's public policy committee is working with Assemblyman Reed Gusciora who introduced bill A3380 into the State legislature. The bill would require boards of education to include instruction, and adopt instructional materials, that accurately portray political, economic, and social contributions of persons with disabilities and LGBT people into New Jersey's required multicultural curriculum. It is based off of California's Fair Education Act. We are working with state assembly-persons and senators, as well as teachers, organizations, and students, to build a coalition. If you would like to find out more or get involved, please visit cni@njglsen.org.

Education is the best way to dispel ignorance and create a safe and affirming school environment where all students, no matter their sexual orientation or gender identity, can prosper and achieve their full potential.

About GLSEN

GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, is the leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe and affirming schools for all students. Established in 1990, GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. GLSEN seeks to develop school climates where difference is valued for the positive contribution it makes to creating a more vibrant and diverse community. For information on GLSEN's research, educational resources, public policy advocacy, student organizing programs and educator training initiatives, visit www.glsen.org. To reach GLSEN Central New Jersey, please contact cni@njglsen.org.