

# ~~QUEER FAG~~

## SEX education

# AND THE GAY ISSUE

## WHAT ARE THEY TEACHING ABOUT US IN THE SCHOOLS?

BY PETER FREIBERG

**O**n a hot day at the end of June, Joyce Hunter sat in a steamy classroom at Northeast Bronx High School and fielded questions thrown at her by students from three classes:

"How did you know you were gay?" "Who takes the man's role and who takes the woman's?" "Why do gay kids come on to other kids?" "Are you afraid of getting AIDS?" "Do you hate men?" "Do gay people get beat up a lot?" "Would you be straight if you could?" "Do you think being a lesbian is a disease?" "Do you believe it's sinful?"

Hunter, director of social services at the Hetrick-Martin Institute, a New York City social services organization for lesbian and gay youth, had been invited to speak to the students by two straight teachers, Gail

Lemelbaum and Elizabeth Watson, who teach a course called "Relationships." Asked why they sought a gay speaker, Lemelbaum explained, "This sounds trite, but some of my best friends are homosexual. It scared me that some of the kids were so ignorant and so angry. I wanted them to have more knowledge and soften up. I heard the names they call each other. . . ." Watson added, "To see an adult [like Hunter] who they can respect, who holds a certain set of views, is certainly going to influence them. For how long depends on the kids."

Hunter is an ideal person to dispel stereotypes about gay people: 48 years old, black, a mother and a grandmother, a social worker as well as an activist, she embodies the diversity of the gay community. And she takes every opportunity to speak to young people about what it means to be gay.

Hunter observes that young people, in-

cluding straight kids who hold all the negative stereotypes about gays, "are very curious about gay people." But few teachers, she laments, are able or willing "to sit and deal with this stuff in the classroom."

Eighteen years after Stonewall, the vast majority of young Americans in public schools are still learning virtually nothing about gay people (and even less in parochial schools). Most of what they do pick up is from street talk, virtually all of it based in ignorance and stereotypes about "faggots" and "queers." What little is taught in the classrooms is usually superficial, and frequently negative. Books containing factual discussions about being gay are rarely found in school libraries.

Teachers and administrators, often ignorant and prejudiced themselves, avoid talking about gay-related issues, and many who would like to do so fear negative reactions from parents or school boards. As in past decades, many gay youngsters today who are seeking to identify and come to terms with their awakening sexuality must look surreptitiously in book indexes under the category "Homosexuality" to get some information about their sexuality.

In 1984, William Thompson, a school superintendent in the Waukegan, Illinois, area, told a local paper, "I've never seen sex education material that addressed gay or lesbian relationships. Kids spend a third of their day in school, so in that sense it's a place where the topic could be addressed. But if it was, it would probably create a community furor."

Even in supposedly liberal New York City, notes Hunter, most students are learning little or nothing about gay people. "Homosexuality, bisexuality, heterosexuality are all part of the human spectrum," she says. "But the problem is when they teach it in school, they discuss only. . . heterosexuality. Homosexuality is always seen as this special piece out there that's kept separate and apart from the rest of the course. That's a major problem for a lot of kids, especially if they're concerned about their sexual orientation."

**T**he lack of information offered in the schools about gay people has far-reaching implications. Most gay-bashing incidents are committed by young men in their teens and 20s whose schooling has

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done little or nothing to eliminate their hatred of gay people. The attitudes that schools help inculcate in young people will determine how they will react as parents when a daughter or son turns out to be gay. For some young gays, homophobic attitudes held by their classmates, teachers and family can be literally a matter of life and death: Some studies indicate the rate of attempted suicide is much higher among gay youth than among straight young people, with feelings of isolation and rejection presumably playing a major role.

For some gays, school life is so oppressive that they simply drop out. This was a major reason why the Hetrick-Martin Institute founded the well-publicized Harvey Milk School in New York City, for teenagers who are unable to function in the regular public schools.

Recently, another life-and-death matter, AIDS, has raised the issue of how homosexuality is discussed in the classroom. Although most of the nation's estimated 15,350 school systems have not yet begun AIDS education, the number of schools that do address the issue is likely to increase sharply as more states and cities mandate such instruction. U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop has strongly urged AIDS programs in schools and has stressed that they should include all aspects of prevention, including explicit instructions on the use of condoms.

But given the avoidance of frank talk about sex—gay or straight—in health education courses, and considering the homophobia already prevalent, new approaches will be required if homosexuality is to be dealt with fairly and if factual information about safe sex is to be given to students. Pressure is being exerted from many sides, including the Catholic Church, for an emphasis on abstinence, which most AIDS educators say is unrealistic.

Rob Birlle, an openly gay teacher who chairs the Bay Area Network of Gay and Lesbian Educators (BANGLE), comments, "My concerns are that the focus in dealing with the epidemic will emphasize the diseases or ill health of a lifestyle, and not focus on the sexual practices that put one at risk. My fear is that the focus will not be on the virus and its transmission, but on 'see how unhealthy homosexuality is.'"

Dr. Michelle Fine, professor of the psychology of education at the University of

Pennsylvania, believes that AIDS education, if done well, "could undo that connection. We could use it to reduce homophobia." But Hunter warns, "It's going to be very, very difficult if there's going to be a backlash... in the schools... One of my kids [who she helps at the institute] was called an 'AIDS factory' in his school. An AIDS factory! At least *that* kid had us to come to."

**A**midst continuing homophobia in the schools, there is also some basis for hope. Although most gay groups have lacked the resources to make education a top priority, a number of organizations and individuals are trying to exert pressure in at least some districts to force changes in curricula and services.

The agenda for these advocates of gay youth is much broader than in the past: They are now seeking more and better discussion of gayness not only in sex education courses but in literature, social studies and throughout the curriculum. And there are growing demands for educators to take steps to counter antigay violence in the schools.

So far, there have been few successes in effecting change, but the efforts continue. Among them are the following:

- New York City's Hetrick-Martin Institute is negotiating with top Board of Education officials over the board's Family Living/Sex Education curriculum, as well as discussing AIDS education programs. Andy Humm, the institute's director of education, charges that "not enough is being done in the schools on AIDS." Recently, following objections from the Catholic Church and conservative groups, the Board of Education ordered that a film it commissioned, *Sex, Drugs and AIDS*, be revised to place more stress on abstinence and shorten the moving ending in which a straight man talks about his gay brother who died of AIDS.

"The reality," says Humm, "is that the kids are having sex. What we have to do is help kids who are sexually active to learn how to negotiate for safe sex. This has to be done right now."

- San Francisco's Gay and Lesbian Youth Advocacy Council—which Hank Wilson, a 39-year-old former teacher, helped found in 1985 as a volunteer group—has seen its program of sending

**EIGHTEEN YEARS AFTER STONEWALL, THE VAST MAJORITY OF YOUNG AMERICANS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE STILL LEARNING VIRTUALLY NOTHING ABOUT GAY PEOPLE. WHAT LITTLE IS TAUGHT IN THE CLASSROOMS IS USUALLY SUPERFICIAL, AND FREQUENTLY NEGATIVE.**

gay speakers into the public schools taken up on a permanent basis by the Community United Against Violence, a funded group. Like many other gay people, Wilson remembers a "psychically painful childhood" exacerbated by school experiences. Referring to today's gay youth, the vast majority of whom are closeted, Wilson comments, "We feel like we're their parents, in that someone's got to speak up for them."

- Since 1984, the Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force (PLGTF) has operated the Education Equity Project to pressure the city school system. Resistance has been great, but some progress has been made—particularly in teacher training programs.

- In Maine, the Committee on Gay and Lesbian Youth was established last year after a Tolerance Day program in rural Madison was canceled because some parents objected to a gay activist participating. David Solmitz, a straight teacher who arranged Tolerance Day and

serves on the committee, believes that individual teachers can make a difference. "We have to learn to talk of significant others, rather than boyfriends and girlfriends," he explains. "Then we won't foster the stereotype of only heterosexual relationships. Another very important thing we can do is to deal with the gay rights movement as another civil rights movement."

- In Los Angeles, Tom Coleman, an openly gay lawyer who served in the administration of former Gov. Jerry Brown, helped set up a nonprofit group, the Spectrum Institute, to deal with, among other things, school homophobia.

- Also in Los Angeles, an openly lesbian teacher, Virginia Uribe, has established an innovative program in Fairfax High School to advise and counsel gay students in the school—the first such project in the country.

A few mainstream groups are also focusing on gay youth and the elimination of school-based homophobia.

The Equity Institute, a nonprofit consultant organization in Amherst, Massachusetts, deals with racism, sexism, homophobia and other institutionalized prejudices in the schools and other institutions. Ten New England school systems have retained the institute to help them eliminate homophobia directed at students and staff.

In New Jersey, the Center for Family Life Education, an arm of Planned Parenthood of Bergen County, holds workshops on homosexuality for teachers, youth workers and parents. "There is no question that some teachers, especially the phys-ed types, feel perfectly comfortable making jokes about homosexuality," notes Peggy Brick, the center's director. "I just think it's the most awful thing for teachers to be permitted to say negative things about gays, for this to be the atmosphere for kids to be in. . . . We're saying [in our workshops], 'Look folks, in fact there are [gay] kids out there who you can't ignore.'"

For these and other groups and individuals, there are many obstacles to overcome. Although polls indicate that most Americans favor sex education in the schools, a vocal minority strongly opposes such courses—and those favoring them disagree over what should be taught; one poll commissioned by *Time* last year found 56% of adults believed sex education courses should tell students that homosexuality is immoral.

"Homosexuality, masturbation, family planning and abortion are without question the most controversial topics when it comes to sex education," reports Ann

Welbourne-Moglia, executive director of the Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS). "The reality is that what's taught in the schools is very much dependent on the political and cultural climate of that school."

What is taught varies greatly, but Welbourne-Moglia estimates that very few schools offer "comprehensive sex education." At the same time, she notes, AIDS has stimulated interest in sex education courses and legitimized discussions about homosexuality.

Where sex education is taught, the materials used usually deal inadequately or negatively with gay people. One survey of a number of popular sex education books was undertaken in 1983 by Katherine Whitlock and Elena DiLapi, who published their findings in a special issue on homophobia in the *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*. The authors noted that one book, *Masculinity and Femininity*, published in 1971 but still used by some public schools in Philadelphia in 1983 (it has since been removed), contained an illustration of a man in a trenchcoat watching students leave school. The caption read: "A male homosexual may wait patiently around a high school day after day, until he thinks he can safely approach and befriend a student."

"For those who think such homophobic portrayals disappeared with the advent of a strong gay movement," Whitlock and DiLapi wrote, "the news is mixed. Yes, some of the more vitriolic antigay bias is not appearing in newer books. But no, all the extreme, antigay diatribes are not out of circulation. And yes, sex education materials are getting better in their treatment of homosexuality. But alas, no, the homophobia is not gone from even the more recent works."

Most books reviewed in the study included some information about homosexuality, but generally it was "ghettoized," restricted to a single section where gay relationships are disparaged as shallow or transitory. Many used a conversational "you" voice, but switched to a "they" when discussing homosexuals. "The switch in voice," assert the authors, "is a clear signal to the reader—'We don't want you to be one of them.'"

Despite the negative portrayals turned up by the authors, they found there were more books taking a "lesbian/gay-supportive stance." But these were clearly the minority, and DiLapi, interviewed four years after the 1983 survey, says, "I would guess that things haven't changed a whole lot."

## FOR MORE INFORMATION . . .

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Community United Against Violence (CUAV)  
Gay and Lesbian Speakers Bureau  
514 Castro St.  
San Francisco, CA 94114  
(415) 864-3112

Equity Institute, Inc.  
Box 458  
Amherst, MA 01004  
(413) 256-6902

Fairfax High School Project 10  
Virginia Uribe, Director  
7850 Melrose Ave.  
Los Angeles, CA 90046

Gay and Lesbian Youth Advocacy Council  
2268 Market St.  
San Francisco, CA 94114

Hetrick-Martin Institute  
110 E. 23rd St., 10th Floor  
New York, NY 10010  
(212) 473-1113

Illinois Gay and Lesbian Task Force  
615 W. Wellington  
Chicago, IL 60657  
(312) 975-0707

Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force  
1501 Cherry St.  
Philadelphia, PA 19102  
(215) 563-9584

Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S.  
32 Washington Pl.  
New York, NY 10003  
(212) 673-3850

Spectrum Institute  
P.O. Box 65756  
Los Angeles, CA 90065

school board approved a plan to designate a gay-sensitive staff member in each high school whom gay students can turn to as a resource person; this fall, the policy is finally scheduled to be implemented. "I think they'll be able to help us in terms of name-calling, scapegoating, teasing," says Wilson.

Joan Haskin, the school system's liaison to the gay community, also moved recently to enforce revised student-handbook guidelines barring classroom slurs based on sexual orientation. She has asked members of BANGLE, the gay educators group, to speak to teachers about combatting homophobic remarks.

In BANGLE chairman Rob Birle's view, "One of the reasons the district has finally made some moves in San Francisco is that they have a responsible group of educators to deal with. I think they're much more likely to respond to a gay and lesbian teachers group than to an outside activist organization."

Birle and others are also exerting pressure on the state Board of Education to encourage local districts to make changes. Recently, a months-long controversy erupted over sex education guidelines developed by California School Superintendent Bill Honig. Honig proposed that the Board of Education, whose guidelines for local districts are purely advisory, suggest that local schools promote full discussion of homosexuality that "neither encourages nor condemns" it.

Right-wing state legislators and fundamentalists strongly objected to Honig's proposal. After months of debate, the state board recommended that courses allow "a factual, substantiated discussion of homosexuality," but eliminated the phrase that homosexuality should be neither encouraged nor condemned. The board stated that "family values and monogamous heterosexual relationships are affirmed throughout the program, as well as the dignity of all individuals."

It was difficult even getting the state board to recommend that the "dignity of all individuals" be respected. The board first insisted on removing Honig's wording that courses should affirm "respect and tolerance for the individual regardless of sexual preference," and was then ready to cut even the "dignity of all individuals" phrase.

The phrase was retained only after Honig angrily told the board, "You are trying to promulgate family values, but you want children to be hostile to 10% of the population. . . . If you adopt this, I will issue my own guidelines."

Wilson said that while part of the guidelines were "offensive," they were better than nothing because "they say homosexuality should be dealt with in an objective way." He and others are continuing to press the state board to include gay material in model curricula it sends to local districts.

One of the people most active on the California state and local front is Los Angeles attorney Thomas Coleman. Coleman, together with allies, has urged the state to include historical references to gays in its Model Curriculum on Human Rights and Genocide; an original draft of the curriculum did not discuss Nazi persecution of homosexuals.

Similarly, Coleman and other activists asked the state to include gay youth in a model curriculum for suicide prevention; the draft did not refer to gay youth at all. And when curriculum guidelines for history and social science left out any mention of the gay rights movement, activists again demanded inclusion. The model curricula have not yet been released, but Coleman and Wilson are optimistic that at least some changes will be made.

In Los Angeles, Coleman believes, the school district is willing to institute gay-sensitive policies, but he says that "there's a real crunch financially" that keeps the district from hiring staff, revising curricula and training personnel. "The issue is more money than policy," Coleman maintains.

But the Los Angeles district did institute one project that is unique in the nation. Devised and directed by Virginia Uribe, Fairfax High School's Project 10 (so named because of the estimated 10% of the population that is gay) provides support, information and counseling to gay students to prevent drug and alcohol abuse, suicide attempts and dropping out of school. Uribe was recently given permission to reduce her classroom duties to half-time, in order to devote more time to the project. She is now planning to extend the project to other Los Angeles schools.

A major impetus for starting Project 10 was the antigay name-calling that is common in virtually all schools. "Even if teachers want to deal with these incidents, most don't know how or are afraid," notes Carole Johnson, director of program development for the Massachusetts-based Equity Institute. "When they do intervene, the kids often turn on them and say, 'What are you?' They get rattled and don't really know what to do."

Although Equity Institute makes clear in all its programs that all forms of discrimination are linked, two programs specifically focus on homophobia. In one, called Appreciating Diversity, the institute provides teachers and administrators in 10 public school districts with training about homophobia and facilitates discussions about how to deal with name-calling.

"We ask what they say when they hear a racial slur in the classroom," Johnson says. "A teacher will answer, 'It's a discipline issue, I don't allow it.' We say this [antigay slur] is the same thing, that you must intervene, you can't let it go. We might ask teachers to do an exercise about stereotypes [with students]. We try to get kids not only to tolerate diversity but to appreciate it. I know that sounds idealistic, but it does work."

The institute's other specifically gay-related program, called Project Empowerment, brings together gay educators in an effort to provide them with a support system and give them the skills to survive.

Despite such efforts, homophobia clearly remains rampant across the country. Last year, an article published in the *Yale Law and Policy Review* proposed that advocates for gay youth file suits in state courts against districts that violate gay teenagers' educational opportunities. So far, no such lawsuits have been filed, and if they are, the likelihood of success is far from certain. But there is no question that, especially as AIDS education programs multiply, activists will be paying more attention to school issues, utilizing a variety of tactics: negotiations, political pressure, media publicity and, possibly, litigation.

In at least two cities, gay people have run for local school boards, and more candidates will certainly seek office. Efforts to eliminate school-based homophobia must receive high priority from local and national gay organizations, and not solely because today's gay youth will benefit. Rather, the changes the gay movement seeks throughout society *require* success at the school level; the straight adults who oppress gays today had their antigay values instilled, or at least reinforced, in the schools they attended as youngsters.

The importance of focusing on education was underscored by Coleman. "The religious right is trying to dominate the educational scene," he comments, "and if we don't get in there and make our voices heard, the next generation could be very homophobic. . . . I think our future as a people to a large measure depends upon significant involvement in educating youths. It's a way of preserving our rights."