

Taking a Stand: The Role of the Early Childhood Teacher in Educating Against Homophobia

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on early childhood educators' readiness to address controversial issues in the classroom related to gender and sexual identity in young children, with a special focus on homosexuality and homophobia. The terms gender, sexual identity, sexual orientation, homosexuality, and homophobia are defined in relation to the part they play in the lives of young children and their families. The role of early childhood teachers and consequently the roles played by individuals who train teachers (teacher trainers) are also presented for discussion.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Homophobia, Teacher Training

I. INTRODUCTION

We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.

—Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963

There is a widespread belief that issues of sexual development pertain predominantly to adolescents and not to young children (Blaise & Andrew, 2005; Grieshaber & Ryan, 2006). However, several studies have illustrated that even young children experience verbal and physical harassment with regard to gender and sexuality (Denver, Sorenson & Broderick, 2005; Renold, 2002). Unfortunately, various personal and social barriers prevent teachers from effectively reacting to and confronting homophobia in their classrooms. Cultural and possibly religious attitudes can also affect a teacher's willingness or ability to face alternatives in sexual development (Haeberle, 2006). In teacher education programs, it is essential that aspiring teachers be encouraged to overcome these boundaries in order to create a safe social and learning environment for all children and their families.

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Teachers of young children need not only to set strong limits to reduce hurtful or even violent behavior towards other children; they equally need to make a clear educational statement on the legitimacy and acceptability of choosing a non-heterosexual identity, or of adopting behavior that is not heterosexually gender typical. This is true with respect to the development of the child's own sexual identity as well as that of his or her parents or legal guardians. In responding to the needs of children whose parents or legal guardians are gay or lesbian, teachers will face further challenges (Robinson, 2002; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008). Many of these challenges can be met by relating openly to families in a way that includes the alternatives that nonconventional families suggest. This may appear to be an obvious and even simple solution, but its complexities will become evident as they are discussed in this paper.

In many cases, teachers (and teacher trainers alike) lack a clear understanding of terms such as *sexual orientation* and *sexual identity*, terms that are often mistaken for one another, and words like *homophobia*, which is often perceived in its simplest form only, such as its expression in violent hate crimes. Imparting concise information regarding the terminology used is of utmost importance (Straut & Sapon-Shevin, 2003), since confusing terminology and ignorance are often at the base of stereotypes that form part of homophobia, and will be the focus of the next section.

II. TERMS DEFINED

Gender is a term used to describe a person's perception of roles that are identified as typically male or female. Masculine behavior versus feminine behavior is defined as such in an attempt to classify a person's gender identity (Cass, 1984). However, the perception of gender has developed and changed within modern society, and although once gender identity was a type of a "social contract," today we can find this term disarmed of its conventional conception, and in its place we will encounter a much wider spectrum of ways to define masculinity or femininity (Arnot & MacGhail, 2006). Nonetheless, seeing that we are dealing with social change, which by nature takes place over time, along the way we will still meet many men and women who continue to embrace conventional perceptions of gender roles and identity, and among these men and women will be quite a few educators—teachers of young children, as well as teacher trainers in colleges and universities.

Sexual identity. Similar to notions regarding gender, ideas about sexual identity are equally influenced by social norms and perceptions, through which the person defines him or herself (Gittins, 1997; Robinson, 2002). A person's sexual identity will describe his or her feelings of belonging to a

social community, one that can be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or transgender. This social identity will be distinguished by the person's self-awareness with regard to personal goals and aims, and the individual's place in society and in the world (Cass, 1984).

Homosexuality: Sexual preference and sexual identity. Sexual preference, or alternatively sexual orientation, defines a person's preference in relation to his or her choice of a sexual partner, and will not always coincide with his or her sexual identity. It is important to be clear regarding the difference between sexual preference and sexual identity, as this will explain how a person with a homosexual orientation may opt to live a heterosexual life style, marry a person of the opposite sex, and live his or her life invested and involved in the heterosexual community (Zucker & Bradley, 1995). In another attempt to stress the difference between the two, Savin-Williams (2001) describes sexual orientation as a form of "biological or psychological truth," whereas sexual identity will be based on the person's social context, culture, and history. In most cases, openly homosexual people will have a corresponding sexual preference and sexual identity, meaning they will identify with the homosexual community and will choose homosexual partners. With this in mind, the widespread correlation between homosexuals and nothing but their sexual lives disregards the larger significance of the social and cultural context in which the person is living.

Homophobia. Among the many attempts to define homophobia, Robinson and Diaz's (2006) definition gives a clear picture of its meaning:

Homophobia is the prejudice, discrimination, harassment or acts of violence against sexual minorities, such as gays and lesbians, or those perceived by others to be gay or lesbian, based on the non-conformist ways in which they act as boys and girls, men and women. (p. 182)

Despite living in an age of enlightenment, the unfortunate truth is that homophobic behavior of adults toward young children still occurs and is most commonly seen in situations where children fail to act within the conventional framework of gender-typical behavior. For example, when a child takes on roles that are typically associated with the opposite sex, such as a boy showing special sensitivity and empathy toward another, eyebrows may rise in judgment and apprehension that this boy is acting gay (Haeberle, 2006). In this case, the child may experience being judged and possibly rejected for his behavior, thus encountering one of the more socially accepted forms of homophobia. Sullivan (2003) describes this behavior of hatred or aversion to homosexuality, noting that it will usually be accompanied by stereotypes and cultural or personal prejudice against homosexuals. Gilligan (1996) points to this social attitude as forming the primary and

ultimate source for violence, violence directed at others as well as that directed at the child himself.

Homophobic behavior finds its expression through three main phenomena: The first is discrimination in the *public domain*, for example in creating work relationships or being accepted for a job, finding rental opportunities, and lack of legal recognition of single-sex marriages and gay or lesbian parenthood. A second phenomenon is seen in aggressive behavior on an *interpersonal* basis, this being verbal or even physical violence toward gays and lesbians (Herek, 1991), as we have witnessed in brutal hate crimes all around the world to this very day. And finally, the third phenomenon is the most concealed but also the most common one: *silence*, where homophobic behavior is ignored or simply not confronted. This last type of homophobic behavior is possibly the most insidious, and the kind that we most often meet within our education system, in particular in early childhood education. This is often the case when there are no sanctions put upon those who use the terms “faggot” or “homo” as a way to curse another, or when children are not reprimanded clearly for ridiculing a child who may not be acting in line with conventional and traditional gender-typical behavior. Instead of recognizing this behavior as abusive and violent, educators will quickly conclude that these children are too young to know what they are doing or saying and that this behavior is best ignored. This silence will be legitimized by the claim that it is developmentally inappropriate to discuss notions regarding sexuality with young children. By making it so difficult to address the subject of homosexuality with young children, we are encouraging the silence and thus making room, possibly inadvertently, for homophobia to develop (Robinson, 2005; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008). Such reactions can lead to serious fears among children, and may even cause long-term damage to the child’s self-image and sense of safety (Kissen, 2003). A school survey conducted in 2005 in the United States reported that 64% of the participating students claimed they felt threatened in their schools with regard to their sexual identity or that of their parents (Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008). Almost one-third of adolescents who turn to alcohol or drug abuse, or even to suicide, are reacting to experiences of homophobic cruelty (Bochenek & Brown, 2001).

III. THE EFFECTS OF HOMOPHOBIA ON YOUNG CHILDREN’S SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Most theories in developmental psychology stress the central influence the adult caretaker has on the child’s social emotional development (such as theories by Erikson, Bion, & Winnicott). Baker (2002) uses Erikson’s

psychosocial stage theory as a basis to illustrate how homophobic behavior of a young child's parent or caretaker can harm the child's emotional development throughout all of Erikson's stages. This next section examines the first three stages, which are relevant specifically to very young children.

In the first stage of emotional development, which describes the experience of infants and young children to the age of approximately one and a half years, Erikson (1993) describes how infants cope with building trust versus feeling doubt with regard to their primary caretakers. The quality of the relationship between infant and caretaker/parent will reflect the degree to which the child can feel that "all is well" in the world, and although such quality is difficult to measure, Erikson uses criteria such as empathy, consistency in reactivity to the child's needs, eye contact, and reciprocity. The trust relationship of the child is apt to be damaged if the caretaker/parent exhibits a negative approach toward him or her; this harmful approach might be caused by homophobic feelings. For instance, if the male infant cries frequently and clings a lot to his mother, the parent might feel and show some disappointment over his or her little boy's not being strong enough, as would be typically expected from little boys. Another example could be one of a boy who responds fearfully to new situations or things, and this behavior might be interpreted as the child being weak, a "scaredy-cat" or a sissy, thus likening him to the negative stereotype of an effeminate male. In this case, the child receives the message that he is not living up to the parent's expectation and that something is wrong with him.

Baker (2002) emphasizes the importance of having a relationship of trust for the very young child grow out of feelings of acceptance and containment, free of prejudice, recognizing the individuality in each child's temperament and personality. Rigidity in the perception of gender roles regarding children as young as one year of age may very well be an indication of homophobic attitudes.

The second stage described by Erikson discusses the way children until the age of three years (approximately) handle the confrontation between their desire for independence and their feelings of shame. In this stage, it is common for the child to defy parental authority, to seek independence and control over his or her body, and to crave opportunities to make choices and to experience having some degree of influence on the world (Erikson, 1993).

Baker (2002) points out that if during this second stage parents fail to grant their child the independence that he or she so badly needs, they are likely to cause serious harm in terms of the child's development. Such parental discontent and even condemnation may be caused by situations in which the child prefers to play games or chooses toys that are not in line with the conventional gender-typical behavior (for instance a boy wanting

to play with dolls or a girl preferring trucks and action figures), or when the child picks clothes that contradict traditional expectations (for instance a girl refusing to wear dresses or a boy who likes pink clothes or enjoys dressing up with skirts and high heels). A parent's intervention that indicates that the child has made a bad or unacceptable choice will most likely have a negative effect on the child's developing sense of self and self-confidence.

Erikson (1993) relates the third stage to children until approximately six years of age, and this stage is defined by the young child's struggle between taking initiative and having feelings of guilt. During this stage, children seek free experiences of their own making; they develop self-confidence with regard to their capacity to initiate on their own, and to express themselves and their abilities through role-playing, fantasy, and imagination. Should a parent convey homophobic judgment around topics or scenarios that the child is enacting, this is of course very likely to contribute to the increase in the child's feelings of guilt. Baker (2002) draws our attention to the fact that at this stage the child's peer group becomes more influential than before. Children whose play and behavior do not fit gender stereotypes are bound to become victims of ridicule and rejection by their peers, which in turn will become an additional source for the development of guilt feelings. This is the place where the early childhood teacher must take responsibility for his or her role in influencing and guiding young children's social interactions, and take some responsibility for preventing mockery and cruelty toward children who do not act according to stereotypical gender norms.

IV. THE ROLE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS IN EDUCATING AGAINST HOMOPHOBIA

A. *Developmental Appropriateness*

Within the context of educational environments, the early childhood teacher takes on an important role in the lives of the young child, side by side with that of the child's parents. Levin (1995) goes as far as to classify the child's interactions with his or her caretakers and teachers in daycare centers and kindergartens as being extremely influential in all areas of the child's development. This emphasizes once more the significance of the negative impact that homophobic tendencies in early childhood teachers are liable to have on the young children in their care. Teachers who are able to support individuality and make room for diverse gender behavior will contribute to children's sense of trust and faith in the world, their confidence in

themselves, and behavior that is characterized by independence and initiative.

The widespread claim that issues of sexual identity are to be entrusted to those educating adolescents, and that these issues are not developmentally appropriate or are simply irrelevant in regard to young children, will further support early childhood educators in avoiding and ignoring homophobic behavior (Blaise & Andrew, 2005; Grieshaber & Ryan, 2006). However, not only are young children indeed sexual beings, who should be recognized as such (Blaise & Andrew, 2005), but by the age of six, boys in particular have been found to already have a set and rather intolerant notion regarding what they consider behaviors that do not fit existing sexual stereotypes (Honig, 2000). Although most literature dealing with sexual assault and homophobia focuses on adolescents, some research shows evidence that preschool-aged children already experience verbal and physical abuse relating to sexual identity (Denver, Sorenson & Broderick, 2005; Renold, 2002).

Research has been conducted showing that in situations in which children are engaging in behavior that is not heterosexually gender typical, their teachers tend to invest their energy in questioning the child's developing sexual identity, instead of devoting themselves to breaking down heterosexual stereotypes. It is important that these teachers understand and keep in mind that young children have a more flexible perception with regard to gender, and are inclined to be less rigid as they test a variety of behaviors (Lipkin, 2003). Popular beliefs regarding common behavior of young children will surely also have an influence on these teachers; this reality, together with cultural or religious customs and mindset, means that many educators are faced with great difficulty in dealing with sexuality or alternatives in sexual identity development (Haeberle, 2006). Nonetheless, the role of early childhood teachers is one that demands they confront homophobia: When facing homophobic behavior such as ridicule or verbal or physical assault, teachers must take a stand that goes beyond limiting these behaviors as such, and vocally make clear educational statements acknowledging and legitimizing differences in sexual identity and gender roles.

V. A TIME FOR SILENCE, A TIME TO SPEAK UP

Although teachers of young children are being called upon to take a stand and to speak up in defense of diversity, they also need to be sensitive to when it is necessary to keep quiet. Children will choose to keep their silence in protecting secrets or their own privacy, and this silence needs to be respected by their teachers (Van Mannen & Levering, 1996). A distinction must be made between the type of silence that children keep to protect

their own, inner quiet place, where reflection and learning about one's self takes place (Silin, 2005), and the silence that stems from dreading the reactions from the surroundings. The latter silence is an expression of shame and fear in the process of forming one's sexual identity. This pattern of silent behavior is typical in children who grow up in surroundings that are intolerant and possibly even hostile toward non-stereotypical gender behavior (Brod & Kaufman, 1994), as well as in children who are dealing with issues concerning homosexuality in their early childhood years, as would be the case with families with gay or lesbian parents. The children's silence in those cases is usually something they have learned from their parents, who themselves are fearful of rejection or hostility from their social environment and lack any sense of security or safety within the educational setting, and therefore will promote an attitude of silence and secrecy in relation to their sexual identity (Robinson, 2002). Tolerating the silence in this situation would be promoting a sense of secrecy based on fear. This is where the teacher/educator needs to take a stand, in order to create a safe environment for the child (and his or her parents).

VI. CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

In most cases, gay or lesbian parents prefer to send their children to settings that proclaim openly their stance on social pluralism, as well as their commitment to fighting all forms of discrimination based on religion, race, gender, or sexual identity. In such settings for young children there are ample opportunities for the teachers to put forth such assertions in the privacy of parent-teacher meetings and in the forum of the entire class (with parents present), as well as in the form of declarations regarding the topics that will be taught throughout the school year. When teachers make a clear statement regarding their dedication to educating children toward mutual respect of one another and acceptance of differences and social diversity, parents are most likely to feel comfortable and safe enough to open up to the teachers in kind (Robinson, 2002; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008).

It is important to keep in mind that most gay or lesbian parents have experienced both open and latent homophobia during their lives, including dealing with people's ignorance and rejection, as well as with outright hatred and violence. They will do all that is in their power to protect their children from such experiences, and therefore need to know with complete certainty that their children are being left in the hands of teachers who are committed to treating the topic of homosexuality appropriately, and who are concerned with their children's safety, their emotional growth, and their social development.

The responsibility rests on the shoulders of teachers to help families feel safe enough to present themselves openly. Children with gay or lesbian parents need to feel that their families are as legitimate as all other families; it is not enough to take note of their existence on Mother's Day or Father's Day—family life is a daily experience, and finds its expression in young children's dramatic play, in creative activities, and in their conversations with their peers and teachers.

Nonetheless, parents and children have the right to keep their private lives private, and to choose to keep silent regarding the makeup of their families. Teachers, however, do not share that luxury. They must be held accountable with regard to the social climate they build, and must be concerned with creating an educational environment that is safe for all children and their families. It is their task to discern that a family's silence is taken on by choice for privacy, and not out of fear of homophobic reactions. Among the skills that need to be taught throughout a teacher's training program are knowing how to create such an atmosphere of acceptance and respect for all existing identities in our diverse society, and knowing how to respond to and intervene in situations of intolerance, ridicule, and aggression toward others (Rubin, 1995; Straut & Sapon-Shevin, 2003).

VII. PREPARING FUTURE TEACHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN: CHALLENGES

Despite the changes in the makeup of today's society, teacher education programs contain minimal curricula focusing on homosexuality or homophobia (Lipkin, 2003). Teachers (heterosexual and homosexual alike) are often not aware of their own perceptions or stereotypes or homophobic feelings until they meet a child who is either struggling with his or her sexuality, or living in a family with gay or lesbian parents. Very few will seek help or advice from peers or supervisors in dealing with issues of this nature that arise (Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008), which makes it even more important that the topic of homosexuality and homophobia be uncompromisingly confronted in teacher education programs.

Just as teachers of young children in the field will need to overcome their personal barriers of ignorance and homophobia, as well as their cultural or religious preconceptions, the university- or college-employed teacher trainers face the same challenges. Lecturers with a heterosexual orientation or identity might fear being associated with or mistaken for homosexuals when openly addressing issues of homophobia and homosexuality. On the other hand, their lesbian or gay counterparts might fear being accused of putting forth their personal agenda instead of focusing on general course material (Robinson, 2005). In addition, both groups of lecturers

will have to deal with the claim that the topic of sexual identity is irrelevant to the field of early childhood education.

In tackling homophobia in the classroom, Straut & Sapon-Shevin (2003) highlight three essential steps of teacher education preparation:

1. Deliver concise information regarding terminology and demography on sexual orientation, gender, and homophobia;
2. Raise consciousness and understanding that homophobia must be confronted within the context of early childhood education; and
3. Teach active listening skills and how to facilitate discussions that models respectful and tolerant behavior towards individual differences for children to follow.

Although it would appear most appropriate to discuss issues of homosexuality or homophobia in the context of college courses dealing with sexual and social development, it is my belief that many more courses can and should integrate this topic into the course content. Courses on classroom management, for instance, ought to prepare teachers for dealing with situations of verbal or physical violence stemming from homophobic beliefs; courses on social and emotional development should expand their course matter to the development of sexual identity in young children; courses that discuss relations between the professional staff and the school community or the children's parents might emphasize the special care that needs to be taken in making their school environment a welcoming and safe place for all families, with specific mention with regard to the sensitivity that should be shown toward lesbian and gay families.

VIII. THE NEW FAMILY: AN EXAMPLE

In Israeli society today, a society with strong moral codes and religious traditions, more individuals are openly choosing to live their lives in accordance with their sexual orientation. More impressive is the ever-increasing growth of single-sex families. According to Israel's family survey conducted in 2007, there are 18,000 families headed by gay or lesbian parents (Rosenblum & Peleg, 2007). The evolution of a more multifaceted Israeli community has led to the need for and consequent development of a semester-long course entitled "The New Family." This course was designed and is currently being taught by the author of this paper, an openly gay parent and educator; it has been taught for the past four years at David Yellin Teacher's College of Education in Jerusalem, Israel. By analyzing the

course content, an application of the three main points stressed in the section above can be illustrated:

1. *Deliver concise information regarding terminology and demography.*

The course introduces a variety of family structures, while taking particular care to clearly define each of these families. The focus is on the experiences of children growing up in families that do not fit the conventional mainstream, such as single-parent families, divorced families, families with gay or lesbian parents, adoptive families, families with children with special needs, or new immigrant families.

2. *Provide consciousness-raising and understanding that it is in fact necessary that these topics be confronted within the context of early childhood education.*

Within the context of the course, a great deal of time is spent on detecting and verbalizing existing stereotypes and preconceived notions that cause society to relate to such families in the way that it does. Guest speakers visit the class at different points during the course, telling their own and their family's life stories, thereby bringing the students closer to a tangible reality and breaking down stereotypes. Students participating in the course are invited to share their family stories as well; the assumption is that upon making the acquaintance of people living in different types of families, one's consciousness and awareness regarding prejudice and stereotypes will be heightened.

In considering that the topic of homosexuality is barely addressed in any of the courses specified for training teachers of young children (Lipkin, 2003), this course gives special attention to families with gay and lesbian parents. In following the example of Johnson (2009), a professor of social psychology who introduces herself as a non-biological lesbian mother, the author also presents herself as the guest speaker on the topic of single-sex families. According to Johnson, the personal disclosure allows for the recognition of differences and the confrontation of prejudice. In her opinion, which I share, the personal story often has a much more meaningful pedagogical impact than can be evoked by a theoretical and hypothetical discussion. Such disclosure can serve as a strong example for an educator who is dedicated to creating a safe environment for all, and consequently has found that this has made room for her students to speak freely and courageously.

3. *Teach active listening skills as well as proficiency in facilitating discussions that model respectful and tolerant behavior toward individual differences for children to follow.*

The main project demanded of the students in this course is to prepare creative educational tools for work with young children, aimed at dealing with the topic of families. Examples of such projects have been original storybooks, interactive posters whose content can be manipulated and changed when necessary, games (such as lotto, memory games, board games), a compilation of video clips, and songs. Some students have brought in their own guest speakers and have interviewed them in class as their project presentation; others have videotaped people telling their life stories. As the students present their projects in class, they receive feedback from their classmates regarding the content and style of their presentation; they participate in the discussion of how to deal with questions and behaviors that may arise in the classroom when actually using the tool they have created. This process of presenting and being the audience for the presentation of others, participating in giving feedback in a respectful and serious manner, and experiencing the facilitation of the discussion regarding their presentation, all serve to prepare the students for similar work in the classroom.

IX. CONCLUSION

Teaching children about social justice and tolerance has an important place in early childhood education. Although multicultural education and tolerance for religious differences are already being dealt with in most teacher education programs (in Israel), the topics of diversity in sexual identity, homosexuality, and homophobia need to be given equal attention in preparing future teachers for their work with young children. Considering that as society is changing, teachers of young children will be encountering more and more families with gay and lesbian parents as well as children experimenting with gender roles and sexual identity, they need to be prepared to address issues of homophobia and homosexuality in early childhood education. If these issues are dealt with during early childhood, we stand a better chance of preventing intolerance and homophobia in later years, in children and their parents alike, as with the educational staff. Children will feel secure and free enough to be open to themselves and to their peers, and if they choose to keep their private lives silent, this will truly be a choice and not the result of shame and fear. Alternatively, avoidance and silencing of the topic of sexual identity will promote the message that we

are dealing with something that is not legitimate, or at the very least, surely not desired. Such silence is just one more form of homophobia, and the harm it can cause in the developing child is not to be disregarded.

Lecturers involved in training future teachers play a crucial role in creating a model for discussing the topic of homosexuality and confronting issues concerning homophobia. Personal and social awareness are the conditions for creating such change in the behavior of educators across the board (Bedford, 2003). Teachers and lecturers in early childhood education have to be prepared to confront their own prejudice and preconceived notions. They have to be open to establishing an understanding regarding the cultural and religious influences in their lives, which may have presented them with only one “right way” to develop sexual identity and to compose a family. This is where the notion of “having the courage to confront the topic” arises, as noted by Straut and Sapon-Shevin (2003), when future teachers are given the opportunity to experience and copy a model of courage and responsibility shown by their own university and college professors.

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