

The Fourth 'R' in Education

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When I attended my local community public schools many, many years ago, my teachers focused on 'Reading, wRiting, aRithmetic', the three 'R's of education. While I'm not sure this phrase is used very often today, I know the focus is still on the basics of education and making sure that students have the skills needed to be successful, contributing members of society when they graduate. There was a fourth 'R' I remember from those early school years, which was not part of any stated curriculum but always seemed to be present in most classrooms. That 'R' was Respect (for all). I grew up in a small, rural community that was not very diverse. While that community was "in a galaxy far, far away" from the modern, urban community I live in today, I still believe that 'R' is just as important today and contributes as much to the success of students both in and out of school as the other three 'R's.

For two years in a row, I attended the public hearings on the Anti-Bullying Bill (HB 1444) in Olympia and listened as student after student talked about the different types of harassment they faced in school. I think that was when I started to reflect back on the fourth 'R' and to realize what an impact it has on today's students. That was also when I started to develop a safe schools awareness program about the harassment faced by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (glbt) students. HB 1444 was passed by a large majority in both the House and Senate and signed into law on March 27, 2002, with full implementation to be effective in the 2003/2004 school year. Since the bill was passed, I have had the opportunity to work with staff in several school districts to help them understand the particular issues facing glbt students. Many of these students are very likely to be bullied and are least likely to report bullying because of negative attitudes, perceived or real, in the school environment.

When I speak with staff and administrators, I remind them that in a school population of 500 students, there could be as many as 25 to 30 students, statistically, who will identify as glbt at some point in their lives. There could also be another 25 to 30 who might have a glbt relative (parent, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, or cousin). Staff and administrators will probably never know this fact about most of these students because, for reasons of safety or the need for acceptance by peers, they will choose to keep it secret. Rather than jeopardize a wide audience learning about them or their relative, these students find creative ways to keep this aspect of their lives hidden. Many, hearing homophobic comments from fellow students or teaching staff, will choose to downplay the actual impact such comments have on them.

To illustrate, an athletic director in a Massachusetts school shared the following story:

"Around fifteen years ago, I was teaching, and I'm not proud of it, but I remember saying to a student, 'Why are you wearing that? What are you, a fag or a queer?' I don't remember exactly what I said, but in the next couple of weeks, the student became withdrawn and quiet in class. I had completely forgotten what I said until I went to speak to the guidance counselor to find out what was wrong with this student. The guidance counselor told me: 'His brother recently came out as gay, and his parents are having a hard time with it. He's close to his brother, and ever since you made that comment he hasn't felt comfortable in your classroom.'" (from When the Drama Club Is Not Enough by Perrotti and Westheimer, page 93).

When students see staff take immediate action when certain racial epithets are used in school but ignore taunts of "fag", "queer", "dyke" in hallways, lunchrooms or locker rooms, those students learn very quickly that a different standard applies to them. Most will attempt to deal with it on their own, sensing that reporting it will not make a difference.

The results from a December 2003 National School Climate Survey conducted by GLSEN (Gay and Lesbian Straight Education Network) reveal why the fourth 'R' is as important to glbt students as the other three, especially when it comes to succeeding in school. The survey concluded:

- Students who feel safe, accepted, and valued do better in school than those who are harassed, marginalized, and made to feel as if they don't belong (my note: as I learned from the hearings in Olympia, this is true for all students who face harassment, not just glbt students)
- Students who reported only rare or less frequent verbal harassment had GPAs 14% higher than their peers who reported frequent verbal harassment (3.3 versus 2.0 respectively)
- Students who could identify supportive faculty or staff at their school had GPAs more than 10% higher than those of their peers who were not as fortunate (3.1 versus 2.8 respectively)
- Students with supportive faculty and staff are more than twice as likely to plan to attend college than those who don't (24.1% versus 10% respectively)

For the past several years there has been a great deal of focus on WASL scores and the federal "No Child Left Behind" policy as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The results of the GLSEN survey point out the impact that the fourth 'R' can have on those scores and on student success after graduation from high school. When glbt students have a safe school environment free from daily ridicule or harassment, they are more focused on their studies and less focused on survival skills. A case in point, less than a year ago a student contacted me through the Rainbow Center, asking how he might transfer to another school where he wouldn't have to face the daily taunts by students in his classroom. When I asked him to describe the nature of the taunts, he said, "Oh, they don't say 'faggot' out loud anymore. I have reported that and the principal made them stop. Now they sit behind me in class and say 'please pass the Ben-GAY' over and over to each other, so they won't get in trouble." He couldn't focus on his studies in class while facing these daily encounters, so he saw transferring to a more tolerant school as his only option. Some students find skipping school one or more days a month as a temporary escape from a hostile environment. Whether it is suffering in silence, skipping school, or turning to other means to lessen the pain, students find ways to cope, but their primary focus is no longer on academics.

So, for many glbt students, school is often an unfriendly, if not actually hostile, environment. Eighty percent of glbt youth (most of whom you probably are not aware identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender) may experience social isolation (having no one to talk with), emotional isolation (feeling distanced from family and peers) and cognitive isolation (resulting from lack of accurate information about sexual orientation). Unlike other students who face harassment based on race, ethnicity, religious belief or physical disability, gay students often do not have a supportive family or group to turn to when dealing with harassment because of the social stigma attached to identifying as, or being perceived as, gay.

The glbt student will oftentimes turn to a teacher or counselor to help deal with an adverse climate. As an individual, you can assist the student in a number of ways. You can:

- educate yourself about the challenges facing these students (Hatred in the Hallways, a study by the Human Rights Watch, is a good starting point)
- recognize and begin to understand your own views on homophobia
- address homophobic language and behavior when you encounter it in your classroom or other school settings
- develop an awareness of bias in the language you use (don't assume all students are heterosexual)
- integrate your curriculum (many gay people have made major contributions to society: Bayard Rustin in the civil rights movement, Alan Turing in mathematics, Barney Franks in politics, etc.; glbt students need positive role models).

Within the text of HB 1444 is the statement, "Furthermore, the legislature finds that students learn by example. The legislature commends school administrators, faculty, staff, and volunteers for demonstrating appropriate behavior, treating others with civility and respect, and refusing to tolerate harassment, intimidation, or bullying." This statement speaks to the need in all schools for an environment where students learn to appreciate or, at least acknowledge, different points of view while respecting the rights of others to disagree. While the primary focus of education is on the three

'R's, we shouldn't forget that schools are a microcosm of the world into which students will graduate. A teacher in one of my presentations commented, "I'm a math teacher, not a social studies teacher. Why do I need to be concerned with this?" I responded by saying that a student who is dealing with taunts is not in a frame of mind where he/she can absorb the math lesson you are trying to teach. The purpose of schools should be more than teaching "subjects". Each teacher needs to be actively involved in expanding the minds and hearts of her/his students, even when that falls outside the subject matter. Certainly someone who works in a bank needs math skills, but he/she also will be interacting with customers and co-workers with different points of view.

So, what role does the fourth 'R' play in schools? When students understand that they don't have to agree with another person's views of race, religion or sexual orientation to respect that person's right to those views, then we remove some of the hostility that may play itself out in classrooms, hallways, locker rooms or on the playground. When students can have open, non-threatening discussions about differing views in a respectful setting, then they have a better understanding of why an individual embraces a particular belief or identity. When students know that the administration and staff are serious about the harassment policies in their student handbooks and don't ignore some types of harassment, then they feel safe in standing up for themselves or their fellow students.

'Reading, wRiting, aRithmetic' are essential skills students need to become contributing members of society. Those are skills that we can measure on a WASL test and document in a report or publish in the newspaper. 'Respect', on the other hand, is just as essential a skill but not as easily measured. Unfortunately, its measure is often painfully displayed on our television screens or in the newspaper. Usually it is in the form of school violence (actions such as occurred at Columbine High School), brutal slayings (death of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming) or suicide (a student who sees this as his/her only option to escape the pain). What the TV stations and newspapers do not report are stories such as this:

One teacher in a large urban school didn't know the impact she had had on a student until she saw a copy of his college application essay.

"It wasn't too long ago when I was a freshman in high school. It was hard because at fourteen years old I was already known as the gay kid. I was open about my feelings, and because of that I paid a price. I was harassed and made fun of. Words cannot describe how lonely, afraid and confused I was.

"It wasn't until my junior year of high school that my 'awakening' took place. The light inside of me began to overcome the darkness that I once knew and accepted in my life, but none of this would have occurred if I hadn't met my English teacher, Mrs. Davies. When I first met Mrs. Davies, she knew that I was troubled, and she asked me to come after school to talk to her. She told me that if I ever needed anyone to talk to that she would help me. I would frequently spend my study block and after-school time with her. She was the first person who truly understood me, all of my hopes, fears, compassion, and feelings.

"Mrs. Davies helped foster confidence, motivation, and self-esteem at a time when I had none, and because of that, I began to grow. For the first time in my life I had goals and ambitions. I had confidence, too. I wanted to better myself intellectually, emotionally, and artistically. I could see a future for myself and I knew that I could succeed and I have!! As you have read from my story, I was fortunate that I had a teacher who was worthy of the name 'teacher' and all that the definition of a teacher should be. I want to be a teacher, to encourage, educate, and care for young people as Mrs. Davies did for me." (from When the Drama Club Is Not Enough by Perrotti and Westheimer, page 177).