

International Journal of Education & the Arts

Editors

Tom Barone

Arizona State University, U.S.A

Liora Bresler

University of Illinois at Urbana—Champaign, U.S.A.

<http://ijea.asu.edu>

ISBN 1529-8094

Volume 6 Number 7

August 24, 2005

My Arts-Informed Narrative Inquiry into Homophobia in Elementary Schools as a Supply Teacher

Douglas Gosse
Nipissing University

Citation: Gosse, D. (2005, August 24). My arts-informed narrative inquiry into homophobia in elementary schools as a supply teacher, *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, 6(7). Retrieved [date] from <http://ijea.asu.edu/v6n7/>.

Abstract

Using fiction writing techniques, such as the creation of composite characters and scenarios gathered from data collection and the author's tacit knowledge, this narrative teacher inquiry illustrates how anti-homophobia education might unfold in an elementary school. The art of yarnning or storytelling is explored as an effective tool to confront homophobia with elementary school students and teachers. The author manipulates tone and style to create a bridge between the academy and the public, especially reaching out to teacher candidates and practicing teachers to share his insights and imagined possibilities. This research draws from poststructural sensibilities, challenging binary systems of gay-straight and male-female, exploring how accepted heterosexist and misandrous knowledge and social beliefs are constructed and upheld, and ultimately soliciting questionings so that status quo assumptions may be ruptured. In this supply teacher's fictional narrative, the imagination is celebrated as a provocative mode of artful educational inquiry.

Foreword

Narrative teacher inquiry entails telling stories as an instrument of reflexivity and metaphor for change. This inquiry is grounded in my own teaching experience and expressed in my voice. One reason for conducting educational research is to illuminate silences,

inequities, or discrepancies. I am driven by several premises that meld teacher inquiry (Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003) with arts informed (Gosse, 2005a) and arts based inquiry (Barone & Eisner, in press) :

- 1) Intentionality – I seek to learn about effective instructional strategies for anti-homophobic education in elementary classes. My intellectual and socially responsible purposes are to help students, colleagues, and myself better understand and address homophobia. I hope this teacher inquiry will have transformative potential for participants and myself. I chose to investigate anti-homophobic strategies in elementary classrooms because I had only done such work with university students in the past. I wanted to challenge myself and expand my research. Furthermore, homophobia is particularly virulent among elementary students and is largely ignored in schools and educational research.
- 2) Researcher Presence – My presence is strongly felt in my writing, which has a pronounced reflexive quality. In the fictionalization of this narrative, I assume a tone more naïve than in actuality in light of my research and knowledge on gender and sexuality. This is to create a text that is more readily accessible to audiences beyond academic scholars, specifically teachers and teacher candidates.
- 3) Methodological Commitment – I create composite and fictional characters, settings, and scenarios in imaginative and provocative ways from my tacit knowledge and qualitative data collection. I engaged in several data collection strategies:
 - a. I conducted a literature review on anti-homophobic education in elementary schools in North America;
 - b. I interviewed several teachers on their usage of anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic education (See: Appendix A);
 - c. I taught several grade 4-6 elementary students from different schools anti-homophobia lessons, including an initial lesson and a follow-up lesson;
 - d. I kept reflexive journal entries about my daily classroom experiences with homophobia as a supply teacher during the Fall 2004;
 - e. I critically reflected upon and then incorporated some of my memories of homophobia as a gay teacher and former elementary school student;
 - f. I subsequently conducted anti-homophobic educational seminars in French and English with teachers and teacher candidates to share my results and stories (Gosse, 2004, 2005b).
- 4) Communicability and Contributions – Particularly, I hope teachers and teacher candidates will engage with my research. One of my main purposes is connecting holistically to the hearts, souls, and minds of interlocutors. No claims will be made that are universal or conclusive. My theory and reflections are integrated throughout and I sometimes use endnotes for this purpose.

The Story

I consult my watch and scurry down the sidewalk. I have an appointment with the vice-principal and principal of a school where I regularly supply teach. It is a public school in Toronto, Ontario, Canada that resembles many others I have visited in North America, France, and England. Classrooms, hallways, and rules are similar. Even the brick of the building. As a supply teacher, I have many schools. My students are in grades 4-6. I dub this composite school Sir Robert Bond Public School. I go to the office early to pick up my assignments for the day. I see signs of culture and philosophy on the walls. In big letters by the office:

At Sir Robert Bond
 We believe that all students
 Should have equal access
 to opportunities in education
 So that they may thrive
 Academically, socially, and
 Emotionally in a safe and
 Secure environment

Staff and parents should act
 Collaboratively to ensure
 Student success
 Our School Plan is built on
 this vision

I share this vision, I feel I am a part of it, and I want to actively contribute to it with my teacher inquiry. There is a copy of the *Canadian Charter of Human Rights* on the wall and a sign declaring, 'Canada, We All Belong!' Another poster says, "Various Races from all over the world come to Canada." There's a definite awareness of diversity here, especially race.

Gay¹ people are as varied as straight people, I think. We also come in all shapes, sizes, backgrounds, ideologies, and, yes, races. I ponder my own identity. For some, 'gay' connotes white, middle-class males. Yet, I'm from a working class background. Family innuendo insinuates possible Native blood in our ancestry – but such things were often historically hidden. I was diagnosed with epilepsy as a child and bone disease as a teenager. I eventually became a teacher. In graduate school, I focused on second language learning and then social justice and cultural studies in education. In the past, as a full-time teacher, I was usually too intimidated to respond to the subtle and not so subtle homophobia or to address its absence in the curriculum, despite teaching literature and social studies where numerous opportunities arose. I used to discuss at length how the Allies had liberated prisoners from Nazi concentration camps but not that they left homosexuals imprisoned. When openly gay Canadian journalist and Senator Laurier LaPierre opened the Canadian Heritage Fair in our

¹ I sometimes use "gay" as an umbrella term for those of us who do not self-identify as heterosexual, or are not identified by others as straight or heterosexual, such as LGBTT people; some prefer the term 'queer'.

school, I introduced him as a catalyst for social change but neglected lauding him as one of few key gay figures in the Canadian political arena. You see, some gays suffer from internalized homophobia and live in fear of being found out (Gosse, Labrie, Grimard, & Roberge, 2000); some like me from rural settings who work in education may hide their sexual orientation under threat of bodily harm and symbolic violence, including silencing, ignoring, not being taken seriously, and taunting – by students, parents, and even colleagues.

For the first time in my life, I dare to explore anti-homophobia education with elementary students. I am apprehensive. However, I feel that as an educator and academic, I must address even the most difficult subject matters. I feel compelled to combat discrimination wherever it is found. Acknowledging its presence and my fear surrounding it is the first step. This is my obligation. Getting out of the realm of comfort. Challenging the status quo. Asking troubling questions. Dwelling in uncertainties.

Shakin' it up!

As a reflexive practitioner, part of my role is examining my own teaching and school culture(s); schools play a critical role is the promotion and subordination of what is accepted and endorsed as 'normal' and 'good.'

This teacher inquiry² is imperative for homophobia in schools remains virulent despite laws and policies against such violence. When name calling is anti-gay, teachers and school librarians tend to confront it only 3% of the time (Bott, 2000). The average elementary student hears homophobic slurs 25 times daily, or five times an hour, so children get the message "gay is bad" (Woog, 2000). I am driven by burning questions: How might I conduct anti-homophobic education in an elementary school? Which strategies might I employ to this end? To what degree will I find support or opposition in this school?

I enter the principal's office and explain my teacher inquiry plan on homophobia but linking race, gender, and class, too. They think it's a great idea and suggest a teacher versed in anti-discrimination who might be willing to help me coordinate. They will approach him on my behalf and get back to me soon.

They want me to do it!

It's Friday, mid-morning. I'm in a mixed-grade three/four class supply teaching. I observed the following scenario. Marie is from South America. She speaks Spanish and English and is in grade four. I am reviewing alphabetical order with them, using ten cards with words written on them for each. When talking to a boy next to her at their language arts table, she refers to him as she/her.

"Stop that!" he admonishes. "Mr. Doug, she's calling me a girl."

"Why are you doing that, Marie?" I asked. She smiles mischievously but has no answer. I tell her, "You know, if you say something that hurts another, that's not very nice."

I was somewhat at a loss of what to say beyond that. We were beginning the work and I didn't want to dwell on the teasing. Still, confronting the exchange was a start, since most teachers do not respond when insults have homophobic overtones, such as this one which ties in with gender roles (Bott, 2000).

A few days later, I am entering the same school. There are about eight girls surrounding a young boy. Several are bigger than him. He is shouting for help. I intervene, and one of the girls says to me, "Jessica is upset."

² With teacher inquiry, Fox & Fleischer (2001) affirm that we must be prepared to ask ourselves and others difficult questions, including about our roles as educators; they affirm the value of collaboration, critical thinking, and reconsideration of our institutions in powerful ways.

“Who’s Jessica?” I ask.

“Her.” She points towards the boy.

“You mean Jesse.” I’ve known him for two years. A gentle boy. Polite and industrious.

“Yeah, her,” she says.

“Why are you calling him ‘her?’”

“I dunno.”

I break up the preteens and Jesse runs off. I ask them to stop teasing him. I catch up with Jesse who tells me he’s okay.

A week later, I’m in another class. Grade 6. I overhear Tanisha telling Malcolm, “You look so gay with that pen!”

She laughs. Malcolm is using a purple pen. He looks alarmed.

“Tanisha, why is it wrong to say that to someone?” I ask. She has been in my class before when we discussed racism and sexism.

“It may hurt someone’s feelings?” she says sheepishly.

“Yes.” I continue helping the student at my desk.

I consider that girls and boys (and males and females of all ages in general) both participate in enforcing strict gender roles, despite a societal belief that seems to create a popular dualism of women/girls-as-victims and males/boys-as-aggressors. While research on girl bullying is growing (Honey, 2002), few have yet to tackle the difficult issues of boys AND girls who bully using homophobia. In this way, heterosexuality remains entrenched as “normal”.

Ignore the phenomenon and it doesn’t exist.

Yet, people continue to be victimized and ‘othered’.

Another afternoon that week, I am one of two teachers with a teaching assistant and a teacher candidate in a kindergarten class. We are doing Halloween themes. The main teacher is gifted in her enthusiastic engagement with the students and use of song as a classroom management and learning tool. Then, after we are about to gut out a pumpkin, traditional gender expectations and indoctrination become apparent.³

“I need someone with big, strong hands!” she announces.

Several boys raise their arms up high, but just one girl. At four years of age or so, how have these youngsters learned to associate these qualities as masculine?

Once a small, finely boned boy had risen to the occasion and reached his tiny hand into the pumpkin’s gaping orifice, she added, “Now, I want the boys and girls to line up here! Who will be the Boys’ Team Captain? Who will be the Girls’ Team Captain?”

And so on.

When lunchtime came around the boys and girls were again segregated into separate line-ups. Why not separate according to race? Why not according to eye colour or height? Socio-economic status?

That would be considered outrageous but gender apartheid is condoned with nary a blink!

I recalled a book my partner has spoken to me about at length. In *The Apartheid of Sex* (1995), Rothblatt, a transgendered lawyer and civil rights activist in the United States,

³ As a former primary and daycare teacher, I have observed similar gender enforcement multiple times in various Canada provinces, in Africa, and in Europe. I draw upon these experiences and observations to create fictional yet plausible scenarios for this teacher inquiry.

claims that categorizing people according to their perceived genitalia is outdated; for instance, one cannot perceive the several genetic codes of DNA, rather than the commonly held two, that people hold as accountable for gender differences. It is time to confront archaic, damaging concepts of gender and gender expectations.

Schools have a long way to go, I reasoned.

Before I left for the day, the principal greeted me at the door to my classroom, “Doug, how are you? Mr. Chant, our guidance counsellor, agreed to help coordinate your teacher inquiry. He wants to meet you on Tuesday in the library when you fill in again. He’s looking forward to helping you and has some resources and suggestions.”

My spirits soared!

That evening, after a couple of hours reading related educational articles from my school board’s website, I made a cup of tea and took my puppy Sebbi for a walk. I pondered what I’d read in my literature review of the gender/sexuality phenomenon in schools.

Deviations from commonly held male or female traits, roles, and taste often precede homophobia. Gender appropriate behaviours may be rigidly enforced at an early age, even pre-birth, with the tentative purchase of certain toys and paints for the nursery. Homophobic/heterosexist name calling, such as 'fag' or 'lessie', results from gender bending within and between members of the same or different sexes, and has been reported for decades by educational researchers (Chodorow, 1971). Schools enforce adherence to gender roles by setting different standards and roles for boys and girls (Clarriotes, 1980). Boys and girls are often kept apart, and conformity maintained via sanctions and verbal abuse, evident in the separate line-ups, lockers, and toilets for boys and girls, I realized

“Oh my, what a cute puppy! Is it a boy or a girl?” said a well-dressed woman on the sidewalk.

I vowed to find out more.

My academic curiosity was fired up! I spent the entire weekend researching articles on masculinities and name-calling. Misogyny and homophobia are closely linked, I learned. Calling a boy a girl can be taken as the worst insult for it may denote weakness, softness and inferiority (Ghaill, 2000). Jesse was perhaps being bullied because he was quiet and intellectual. Children who deviated from the norm in small ways ran a greater risk of being bullied, even those who wore glasses! And boys in particular who were bookish or otherwise differing from the masculine stereotype of being stoic, tough, and disinterested in school were particularly susceptible (Shakeshaft, 1995).

It was outrageous! I thought of all the alarming statistics. Males occupied the majority of placements in remedial classes and their attrition rates from high school were generally much higher than females, especially if they were ethnic minorities and from a low socio-economic background (Gosse & Desaulniers, 2002). Why was there so much silence around this troubling, widespread phenomenon? We need more research on males, homophobic policing of behaviors in schools, and socio-educational implications!

According to Kalinowski (2002), bullying among boys tends to be more direct and physical, while among girls it may be more indirect, such as ignoring a peer or gossiping about her. Children prone to bullying tend to show poor impulse control, aggression, and lack of empathy. Certainly, the ringleader to whom I spoke about Jesse seemed to show little if any remorse for having made her classmate uncomfortable. But she had always seemed like a “good” kid to me . . . Caution is warranted in using any binary construction, such as

male-female, gay-straight, or good-bad student! Simplistic dualisms simply obscure too much. Many girls were both psychological and physical bullies and many boys were, too.

Student Emmet Fralick of Nova Scotia shot himself in his room after prolonged harassment by a female bully that was both psychological and physical (Cox, 2002). Likewise for student Dawn-Marie Wesley, aged thirteen, of British Columbia (Girard, 2002). Girls are made of sugar and spice, and boys of . . . snakes?!

That Tuesday, I met with Mr. Chant, the cooperating teacher with whom I would conduct my teacher inquiry on anti-homophobic education linking race, class, and other factors of marginality. I explained my aims and the incidents of recent days. He pointed me toward a table that he had set up in the hallway outside his office for the October theme of 'Diversity'. There were books on racism, a few on Jewish holiday and culture, and, lo and behold, a couple on homophobia!

The first I held was *Too Far Away to Touch* (Newman & Stock, 1995). The back cover had a provocative plot synopsis:

Stock's (Tap-Tap) soft-focus watercolors provide a delicate foil for this exceptionally thoughtful story of a girl whose uncle has AIDS. Zoe treasures her visits with Uncle Leonard, but on this particular outing-to the planetarium-he seems different. He tires easily, and his once-abundant hair is now sparse, hidden beneath a beret. At a cafe, he tells her that he is sick, and answers questions honestly ("Are you going to get better soon?" "I don't know, Zoe"). His surprise for her-glow-in-the-dark stars for her bedroom ceiling-reminds her of something he said at the museum, that the stars are "too far away to touch, but close enough to see." This comforting message is repeated on a later trip to the beach, where the two watch for shooting stars and discuss the possibility of his death. Newman's (Fat Chance; Heather Has Two Mommies) treatment of her subject is singularly sensitive, carefully tuned to a young audience. Uncle Leonard's partner, for instance, is mentioned matter-of-factly, though the relationship itself is left unexplored. Despite the somber theme, the story ends on an uplifting note, and it's hard to imagine a more appropriate book for young readers that deals so gently and insightfully with such an important topic.

- Publishers Weekly, starred review

I sat down and read all thirty-two pages. It was a beautiful volume but I felt it was more appropriate for discussing coping with death. I also did not want to reinforce the stereotype of being gay with AIDS since anyone can contract HIV. The demographics went beyond sexual orientation of males, to teenagers, women, indigents, drug users, and some Hispanic, Black and Native communities who were being hit particularly hard. Anyone who had unprotected sex was susceptible.

"Mr. Chant, can you recommend another one?"

He held up another book called *My Two Uncles* (Vigna, 1995). "This is the one for you. It'd be great for junior children." I entered this new world of gay children's fiction. Fiction is powerful in its ambiguity and imaginative ability to draw me into another world.

As a writer and educational researcher who uses fiction writing as a powerfully provocative medium to pose troubling educational questions, I am convinced this storybook

will be the tool to help my student relate. The representation of a story or stories has potential to provide insight into the human condition and for the development of new theoretical or practical approaches to qualitative teacher inquiry (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Furthermore, the peeling back of silence in our lives through storytelling allows us to initiate the process of understanding ourselves as students, teacher candidates, teachers, and graduate students (hooks, 1989). I could share some personal anecdotes with my students.

“This is a good choice,” I told Mr. Chant ten minutes later. “So, do I need special permission slips or anything like that?”

He appeared shocked “No, you don’t. In fact, look here.” He entered his office, dug around on a shelf, and quickly handed me a school board document (*Equity and Human Rights Policy In-Service Training*, 2004). He pointed to the bottom of page 3:

Q: Should schools send notes of permission slips home before starting any classroom work around gays and lesbians?

A: No. If a school treats the topic of sexual orientation or anti-homophobic work differently from the range of other curriculum topics this could be construed as discriminatory practice. The board's policies say that each school has a responsibility to educate about and reflect the diversity of their students. Singling out one group or topic area as too controversial and depending upon parental discretion shifts the responsibility from the school to the parents and fosters a poisoned environment contrary to the Board's human rights policies and procedures.

“That’s very progressive,” I said.⁴

“Well, some schools are religious and object to anti-homophobic education on those grounds but our board is secular.” He scrunched up his brow. “Toronto is also one of the most diverse cities in the world. But in any case, teaching about the dietary laws of different groups doesn’t mean you expect the students to stop the dietary habits of their families. Besides, sexual orientation can’t be changed. The medical establishment has proven that. Teaching about the diversity of our community, all of our communities, is one of the board’s primary goals. Canada is multicultural, after all. I have some other stuff for you.”

I thanked him and returned home. I could not wait to examine the several sources with which he had provided me. But first I had to walk the dog and get dinner on the table before my spouse returned home. It was my turn. Finally, with the dog lounging comfortably at my side and a pork chop casserole in the oven, I took out the books and documents. I learned that the Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) *Equity Foundation Statement and Commitments to Equity Policy Implementation, Human Rights Policy, Safe Schools Policy*, and the *Ontario Human Rights Code* all support creating safe environments for students and staff free from homophobia! Such work was not only considered sound pedagogical practice but also mandated through TDSB policy and Ontario legislation. Would my teacher inquiry be as successful as these policies and documents seemed to promise?

“Hey, Doug, I’m home!”

Sebbi, my puppy, ran to the door to greet my partner of five years, Jose.

I’d have to find out!

⁴ While I creatively incorporate some of the Toronto District School Board’s progressive policies and documents, scenarios and characters are fictional. Visit: <http://www.tdsb.on.ca/>

Thursday morning, on my way to school, I was struck by something Mr. Chant had said. He explained that at his old school, even though it was in an area heavily populated by gay people, there was only one out gay staff member who ended up transferring. He described his former principal as homophobic but our current one as the opposite. She was a minority Asian woman herself and I had once overheard her say she had many gay friends.

“She’d give ‘em hell if they were teasing a teacher or student,” he claimed.

I thought of the interviews I’d conducted with elementary teachers in Toronto. None, other than Mr. Chant, were aware of board documents relating to homophobia. Yet all engaged in anti-sexism and anti-racism work to some degree. Homophobia was still the lesser cousin of discrimination. When I interviewed a teacher from my home province of Newfoundland over the phone, he conveyed a similar story. He had just attended a seminar on aboriginal rights and had participated in several on sexism over the years.

“And did any of these seminars address how males may be disadvantaged in schools?” I asked him.

“Now that you mention it . . . not much. The aboriginal seminar did give a lot of stats on Native males, drug abuse, and prison, so I guess they did discuss Native males as at risks for becoming criminals! But the sexism in-servicing all focussed on the plight of females. Feminist perspectives, I guess.”

“Any mention of homophobia or sexual orientation in any of them?”

Silence. “Can’t say that topic has ever come up. I guess you’re more on the ball on the Mainland,” he said.

I wasn’t convinced.

I recalled a newspaper article I had clipped and dug it out of my files (Costello, 2002). Vanessa Russell, an instructional leader at the Equity Department of the TDSB, said teachers at her board could not opt out of anti-homophobic training; however, they used to have 8 people on staff but now have only 5 in an amalgamated board 6 times the size!

So even though the TDSB had progressive policies on homophobia, and officially mandated all teachers engage in anti-homophobic training and education in their classrooms, the reality was cutbacks. The word was not effectively getting out.

Teachers or students perceived as gay or lesbian may encounter subtle teasing, such as giggling, or other things you can not put your finger on (Parravano, 1995). There is an assumption that everyone is heterosexual.⁵ I wondered how my anti-homophobia education would affect my status as a “cool” and “likeable” supply teacher in the school? Would any of the students treat me differently? Would there be any snickering during or after the presentation? Would someone ask me if I am gay? I had been reading like crazy on the topic of homophobia in preparation and not all news was cheery.

There is a clear history of teacher dismissal, license revocation, and restriction of free speech for gays (Conley & Colabucci, 2001). Homophobia is an institutionalized form of discrimination from grade school to graduate school. Schools are generally hostile to gay and lesbian children, parents, and educators, failing to provide critical support to families coping with issues of homosexuality, but I feel empowered through my school’s initial support.

Onward!

⁵ Queer theory in education brings to light knowledge that is dismissed, or that one can not bear to know (Britzman, 1995). For example, a queer theoretical approach may illuminate that there are gay and lesbian teachers, administrators, students, and parents in schools, and that homophobia remains widespread and often ignored.

The Lesson

When the bell rang, I told Mr. Chant I was a bit nervous. He said not to worry. When the kids entered the classroom, I was greeted by a flurry of warm ‘Hellos’. I had taught most of these children last year and had used storytelling techniques to capture their imagination and establish a good rapport. Storytelling, or telling yarns, is a fixture of Newfoundland culture (Tucker, 1985). I’ve found this a superb tool for classroom management as a supply teacher who daily enters unknown territory. I have a repertoire of several stories, especially about Little Eddy who survived drowning, a snowstorm, a gigantic potato, and was rescued from a well by his faithful Newfoundland dog. The children referred to several of these as they sat down.

“Hey, you’re the guy who told us about the big spud story, right?”

“Mr. Doug, ya gotta another story!?”

I felt better. Narrative was surely the right route for me to capture the imagination and empathic understanding of these students about homophobia.

I reminded the students of my two rules: only one person speaks at a time except during group work, and everyone remains mutually respectful. I asked them for a few examples, and they came up with no punching or kicking, no name-calling, and no chewing gum! I told the kids that I had a story to tell them. They applauded. I said that we would have time for questions and discussions and added that we’d also watch a video. They appeared thrilled.

To introduce the topic, I began with the personal (Bishop, 1992, Fall), relating that I had a new addition to my family.

“I have a new...?”

“Child!”

“Baby!”

“Puppy?” said Kishawna, hitting the nail on the head.

I passed around several photos of my new puppy.

“You know, when I’m walking Sebbi, people often shout from their cars and trucks, or stop and ask a couple of questions in particular.

‘What kind of dog is he?’ some say.

‘Is it a boy or a girl?’

‘Is he a pure bred?’

“This led me to think about a few issues. Why should it matter so much if he’s a boy or a girl? So what if he’s pure bred or a mutt? I’m a mutt. Part French, Irish, and English, and possibly Native, too, like many Québécois and Newfoundlanders.” I pause. “It got me to thinking about families. What kind of families are you familiar with? Some people have a mother, a child, and a grandparent,” I say. “Sebbi is part of my family.”

“Two parents and two children.”

“A mother and two children and a grandmother.”

“Stepfather and mother.”

“Some people have two fathers or two mothers,” said Kishawna in her very mature voice.

“Yes,” I said, “Some people do have two fathers or two mothers. What do we call two men or women who live together and form a family?”

“Two men are gay and two women lesbian,” a child said.

Jenny looked puzzled. “What does gay mean, Mr. Doug?”

I realized the definitions I had studied in the board document (*Anti-Homophobia Education Resource Guide*, 2004) were inadequate, unsophisticated, simplistic, and excluded all sorts of people and situations but these were young children and some of the intricacies of discourse could wait for a more mature audience!

“Gay means a man who is in love with or sexually interested in another man, and a lesbian is a woman who is in love with or sexually interested in another woman,” I said. “However, a man may have a relationship with another man, or a woman with another woman, and then perhaps live with someone of the opposite sex. We sometimes call these people bisexual.”

Mr. Chant became animated. “You know, some women feel their role in life is to marry a man and have children, and some men feel they’re raised to marry a woman and provide for a family. So some men or women may not realize they want to be with someone of the same sex until later in life. They may be afraid of admitting it because of homophobia, or being excluded or called names.”

I thought of all the people I had met at my church – The Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto – who used to be married to members of the ‘opposite’ sex. Our pastor, the Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, was the first in Canada to marry two same-sex couples in 2001.⁶ I was there. I remembered the joy and excitement and, unfortunately, also the fear. The crowd outside included several people dressed as devils and holding posters claiming Brent was the devil. I remembered anticipating a bomb might go off at any point as I watched the ceremony from the gallery. I remembered that Brent had to wear a bulletproof vest for days afterwards, even on his way to the grocery store, because the death threats were numerous.

I was there.

But I said nothing about that. Maybe another time. Instead, I asked if there were any more questions and then Mr. Chant chimed in.

“You know, my wife and I are really proud to be Canadians. We’re really proud to be in the first province in Canada, Ontario, to legalize gay marriage. Why shouldn’t gay people have the right to marry just like my wife and I did?” he asked. “We were both immigrants to Canada and in our home country, my wife was often harassed for being Arab.”

A child raised his arm. “Why are some people gay?”

“There’s a whole spectrum of sexuality.” I drew a line on the board, referring to the well-known Kinsey Continuum (Kinsey, 1953). Being gay or straight is more fluid and ambiguous than many people thought. “Homosexuality is found across cultures in the world and in the animal kingdom, too.” I pointed at one end of the line. “Some people consider themselves completely straight,” I pointed to the other end, “or completely gay. Many others are somewhere in between. We’re just born that way. No one can make you ‘turn gay’ anymore than anyone can make you ‘turn straight’ or be attracted to someone of the opposite sex.”

The children were still rather quiet so I decided to begin the storybook. We moved to the carpeted area. I read *My Two Uncles* (Vigna, 1995) and they listened, enraptured. In this picture storybook, Elly and her family are excited about her grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary celebration. She helps her Uncle Ned and his partner Phil build a diorama. Later, Elly discovers that her Grampy doesn’t want his son, Ned, to bring Phil along. Her father explains that some people do not think it is “right” for two men or two women to be a

⁶ Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes and the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto are real and leaders in human rights in Canada. Visit: http://www.mcctoronto.com/WhoWeAre/who_we_are.htm

couple. When Grandpy opens the gift, he regrets having rejected his son. The ending shows a developing understanding between Grampy, Ned, and Phil that is temperate and realistic.

As I read the story, a boy in the middle made a face and said, “Yeerk!” a couple of time when I narrated parts about the two uncles being partners. I decided to wait to respond, as he seemed to grow increasingly interested as the story progressed.

Once done, I asked, “So who can tell me a lesson or message about this story, please?”

A boy wearing glasses in the back said, “Family is very important, and we should love all our family members.”

The same boy who had expressed his disgust during the story was dying to give his answer.

“Yes, you.” I nodded to him.

“We shouldn’t judge people. We’re all different, but we shouldn’t judge.”

From the mouths of babes . . .

I knew this storybook fell into the category of social realism (Egoff & Saltman, 1990), which tries to emulate real life in some ways, providing perspectives into human behavior. Readers often empathize with the characters and I could see that *My Two Uncles* was quite effective in this respect!

I smiled. “Very good, now any more questions?”

“Yeah,” a child gushed, “I watch TV and I saw ‘Will and Grace’ and Jack is really funny and Karen makes me laugh!”

Several of the kids shared anecdotes about this popular show.

“Has anyone seen anymore TV shows with gay people?” I said.

“I watch ‘Queer Eye for the Straight Guy’ and these gay guys make over men who are slobs and make them better for their girlfriends,” responded a child.

“I love ‘Ellen’” said another. “She’s so funny! She’s a lesbian, right? My sister said so.”

“True. I’ve watched those shows, too. So I have something to ask you; are all gay people white and middle class?”

The class looked mystified.

“No,” I said. “I know gay people who are Black and from Africa and Jamaica. I know gay people who are from China, Korea and Japan. I know Indians and Native people who are gay.”

“From Jamaica?!” asked one child. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yes, gay people come in all shapes sizes, colors, and occupations, too. Some are teachers, principals, janitors, bank workers, dental hygienists, construction workers, and every other job you can think of.”

I was mindful of the time. Fifty minutes meant I had to condense a lot of information and pick and choose, and I really wanted to address name-calling.

“Would you like to watch a seventeen minute film?” I asked. I paraphrased the back of the videocassette (Padjett, 2001), “With today’s diversity of families, more kids are being raised by same-sex parents. *Sticks and Stones* features children aged eight to twelve talking about their experiences with name-calling and bullying in the schoolyard, and there’s a brilliant piece on putdowns. This video is designed to help create a safer and healthier environment in our schools, for everyone. And it’s shot in Toronto, so you may recognize some things! Sound good?”

We hurried over to the chairs in a flurry of anticipation.

Afterwards, we discussed the different types of families we saw in the video and in everyday life. We discussed how the children in the video felt when called names or teased. We discussed gender roles and some girls talked about wanting to play basketball and how some of the boys wouldn't let them. A boy confided that girls sometimes wouldn't let him play their games because he was a boy. A boy shared that when someone was teased on the playground, he'd speak up.

"Bravo!" I said. Several more added they would also will speak up in the future." I believed them. The bell rang, and off we went!!⁷

A month later, I did follow-up classes with the same elementary classes. This time, I used a video called *Apples and Oranges* (Fernie & Kosterski, 1996). I considered the web site description of *Apples & Oranges* (see Appendix B)⁸

We began with an overview of terminology. I asked them how they'd define *homophobia*, *gay*, *lesbian*, and *heterosexual* or *straight*. Several students enthusiastically raised their arms to respond and I saw they'd given our last lesson some thought. We filled out webs on the board. After watching the 24-minute film, an animated discussion ensued.

There were more stories than questions. One girl had a friend who was teased because she liked to play soccer. "Some people say only boys should play soccer," she complained. "That's wrong!"

One boy's friend wanted to wear a really 'cool' wristband until "...he saw these gay guys on Church Street wearing it. Then he didn't want to anymore."

Another boy related how a neighbor boy on his street was teased because he liked to play with dolls. "They call him a sissy ...and a gay boy,' he tentatively confided.

With the teacher whose homeroom I was teaching, we took turns commenting on these stories. We referred back to both videos, to films and shows we'd seen on TV, and to personal experience, and to the larger context of bullying. I asked students to paint a picture, write a story, or a song about standing up to a bully. Afterwards, we shared our work.

It appeared that the most popular strategies were to break the silences. To bravely speak up when bullying occurred, and to tell an adult or teacher when one was present.

It was a start!

Concluding Considerations

I have no final conclusions but I do have observations, on-going questions, and some suggestions other than the ones I have narratively explored here. I realize that as an educator, I have frequently ignored issues of sexuality, particularly of homophobia. Yet this is contrary to my beliefs in equity. Similar to Kerl (2002), I know that whatever the age,

⁷ Nov. 17, 2004, on the local Toronto news, some parents of Muslim students pulled their children out of school because of talks surrounding this same video, citing religious beliefs. At a meeting, representatives from the TDSB informed them that the video was about children who had same-sex parents and their experiences, not about sex, and affirmed the board's position on equity and homophobia. As educators in anti-oppressive education, we must become familiar with school board policies and relevant government legislation. I wondered: how many local educators might be reluctant to show the video for fear of incurring a similar media stir? Would more be bolstered by the support?

⁸ Visit the National Film Board of Canada:

<http://www.nfb.ca/trouverunfilm/fichefilm.php?lg=en&id=51090&v=h>

heightening students' or faculties' awareness of power dynamics can be dangerous. They may react with confusion, defensiveness, and guilt.

I cannot remember if it came from a novel or a film...but I remember a drag queen saying, "Ya gotta be tough to be a fag!" From whispered innuendos to heterosexist staff room chitchat and unfair hiring practices, being a gay teacher presents its challenges. On the positive side, I believe it has heightened my understanding of the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, ablebodiedness, geographical location, and language and culture, which I can strive to more actively integrate throughout curricula. All educators should get involved in anti-homophobia training and education and not just as special lessons or units, as I have been forced to do as a supply teacher. As Parsons & Brown (2001) indicate, I would like to see more anti-homophobia education in teacher-education programs and a more rigorous diversity emphasis. A problem with this and teacher seminars is that some educators may not want to challenge a belief system that seems to privilege them and is entrenched in our educational and social history. Beliefs and behaviors based on misandry⁹ and homophobia abound, jointly operating within a rigid social policing of gender and heterosexuality that is paradoxically frail and thus must be continuously reinstated due to their persistent unraveling.

On a more pragmatic and positive note, my experiences in this arts-informed narrative teacher inquiry have taught me several significant strategies:

- a. the importance and efficiency of storytelling in combating homophobia with younger children;
- b. the importance of building upon better known forms of oppression, and vocabularies, such as anti-racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-sexist endeavors, to which children seem more exposed;
- c. the value of networking with gay and straight allies in the school to make anti-homophobia/anti-oppression curricula more widespread;
- d. the use of videos can be a provocative springboard for anti-homophobia education; and
- e. checking with the school and school board to determine documents and policies regarding homophobia before beginning instruction, as well as relevant government legislation.

⁹ Misandry is a fear, distrust, and hatred of males, or what are commonly held as 'male' qualities or behaviours. This is a relatively unknown term and concept for many. Consult *Spreading Misandry, The Teaching of Contempt for Men in Popular Culture* (Nathanson & Young, 2001).

While I have presented a somewhat idealized and fictionalized version of what anti-homophobia education might resemble, much promise and direction in education lies in the imagination. Inquiring into silences and invisibilities and then re-imagining better pedagogy and safer environments may be the first step in creating them.

References

- Anti-Homophobia Education Resource Guide*. (2004). Toronto District School Board - Equity Department.
- Barone, T., & Eisner, E. (in press). Arts-Based educational research. In J. Green, G. Camilli & P. Elmore (Eds.), (3rd ed., pp. 73-116). Washington, DC: AERA
- Bishop, W. (1992, Fall). I-Witnessing in composition: Turning ethnographic data into narratives. *Rhetoric Review*, 11(1), 147-158.
- Bott, C. J. (2000). Fighting the silence: How to support your gay and straight students. *Voice of Youth Advocate*, 23(1), pp. 22, 24, 26.
- Britzman, D. (1995). Is there a queer pedagogy? Or stop reading straight. *Educational Theory*, 45(2), 151-165.
- Chodorow, N. (1971). Being and doing: A cross cultural examination of the socialization of males and females. In V. Garnick & B. Moran (Eds.), *Women in sexist society* (pp. 259-291). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Clarriotes, K. (1980). The importance of being Ernest . . . Emma . . . Tom . . . Jane . . . The perception and categorization of gender conformity and gender deviation in primary schools. In R. Deem (Ed.), *Schooling for women's work*. London, UK: RKP.
- Cole, A. L., & Knowles, J. G. (2001). Qualities of inquiry: Process, form, and 'goodness'. In L. Neilsen, A. L. Cole & G. K. J. (Eds.), *The art of writing inquiry* (pg. 321). Halifax, NS: Backalong Books.
- Conley, M., & Colabucci, L. (2001, April 10-14). *None of the above: Silence and invisibility in the lives of two gay educators*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.
- Costello, R. (2002, September 5). Schoolyard bullies, Even in a progressive school, kids aren't always nice. *XTR4!*, 24.
- Cox, K. (2002, April 11). Rumours boy was bullied swirl at school, Halifax police checking allegations of abuse by gang of girls at junior high. *The Globe and Mail*, p. A12.
- Dana, N. F., & Yendol-Silva, D. (2003). *The reflective educator's guide to classroom research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Egoff, S., & Saltman, J. (1990). Realistic Fiction. In S. Egoff & J. Saltman (Eds.), *The new republic of childhood: A critical guide to Canadian children's literature in English* (pp. 20-87). Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.

Equity and Human Rights Policy In-Service Training. (2004). Toronto District School Board.

Fernie, L., & Kusterski, L. (Writer), & L. Fernie (Director) (1996). Apples and Oranges [videocassette]. In T. Lynch & D. Varrall (Producer). Toronto: National Film Board of Canada.

Fox, D. L., & Fleischer, C. (2001). The power of teacher inquiry: Toward meaningful professional development and educational reform. *English Education*, 33(3), 187-190.

Ghaill, M. M. A. (2000). The cultural production of English masculinities in late modernity. *Revue canadienne de l'éducation/Canadian Journal of Education*, 25(2), 88-101.

Girard, D. (2002, Wednesday, May 15). Teen bully finds justice, healing and the courage to apologize, Sentencing circle requested by mother of suicide victim. *The Toronto Star*, p. A7.

Gosse, D. (2004, November 13). *Rompres le silence: des stratégies contre l'homophobie à l'intention du personnel enseignant et des élèves à risque, une perspective francophone.* Paper presented at the STARS and Beyond, Students and Staff at Risk Conference, Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, Toronto, ON.

Gosse, D. (2005a). *Breaking Silences, an inquiry into identity and the creative research process.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Ontario Institute of Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Toronto.

Gosse, D. (2005b, April 30). *From berdache & two-spirited towards anti-oppressive education.* Paper presented at the Checkmark 2005 Conference on 'Students at Risk', Faculty of Education, Nipissing University, Ontario, CA.

Gosse, D., & Desaulniers, R. (2002). *Garçons canadiens francophones, marginalité à l'école et ailleurs / French Canadian Boys, Marginality In and Out of School.* Sudbury, Ontario: Radio Canada.

Gosse, D., Labrie, N., Grimard, M., & Roberge, B. (2000, September). *Violence in discourse of gay and lesbian Francophones.* Paper presented at the Lavender Conference, Washington, DC.

Honey, K. (2002, March 30). Everyday war zone. *The Globe and Mail*, pp. F1, F3.

hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black.* Boston, MA: South End Press.

Kalinowski, T. (2002, April 12). *Violent media breeds bullies, conference told, Early intervention by adults key to halting escalating tragedy.* Retrieved July 26, 2005, from <http://www.tri-vision.ca/documents/thestar12april2002.pdf>

Kerl, S. B. (2002). Using narrative approaches to teach multicultural counseling. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 30(2), 135-143.

- Money, J. (1988). *Gay, straight and in-between: The sexology of sexual orientation*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Nathanson, P., & Young, K. (Eds.). (2001). *Spreading misandry, The teaching of contempt for men in popular culture*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Newman, L., & Stock, C. (1995). *Too far away to touch*. New York, NY: Clarion Books.
- Padjett, J. (Writer), & J. Padjett (Director) (2001). *Sticks & Stones* [videocassette]. In G. Johnson (Producer), *Celebrating diversity, Resources for responding to homophobia*. National Film Board of Canada Videos.
- Parravano, S. (1995). *Homophobia and heterosexism: Experiences of gay and lesbian teachers in the classroom and in the school*. Unpublished master's thesis, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
- Parsons, C., & Brown, P. (2001). Educating for diversity: An invitation to empathy and action. *Action in Teacher Education*, 23(3), 1-4.
- Rothblatt, M. (1995). *The apartheid of sex: A manifesto on the freedom of gender*. New York, NY: Holt, Rhinehart, Winston.
- Shakeshaft, C. E. A. (1995). Peer harassment in schools. *Journal for a Just and Caring Education*, 1(1), 30-44.
- Tucker, O. (1985). *A yaffle of yarns : Five Newfoundland writers*. St. John's, NL: H. Cuff.
- Vigna, J. (1995). *My two uncles*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.
- Woog, D. (2000). Friends, families, and the importance of straight allies. *Voice of Youth Advocate*, 23(1), 23, 25, 26.

About the Author

Douglas Gosse is Assistant Professor in Education at Nipissing University, North Bay, ON, Canada. Jesperson Publishing is the publisher of his arts-based educational novel, *Jackytar*, a resource for senior high school students and university students on anti-oppressive education and queer theory. For information on *Jackytar*, visit: <http://www.jespersonpublishing.nf.net/background.htm> or e-mail: info@jespersonpublishing.nf.net

Appendix A

Teacher Inquiry Interview

1. Please describe your past and current positions in education.
2. Have you engaged in anti-racist or anti-sexist education? Please describe.
3. What about anti-homophobic education? Can you describe this please?
4. Are you familiar with your board policies regarding anti-homophobic education? Please describe them if so.
5. What challenges may a teacher face who engages in anti-homophobic education?
6. Do you have any advice for a teacher who wants to include anti-homophobia in curricula?
7. Do you have any concluding remarks?

Appendix B

NFB - Apples and Oranges

“It’s Not Cool to be Cruel” is the theme song in Apples and Oranges, a new film that addresses name-calling, homophobia and stereotyping. Designed for Grades 4-8, Apples and Oranges is an ideal discussion-starter to teach children about the negative effects of certain words and bullying behaviour. In this fun and thought-provoking video, children's paintings magically transform into two animated adventures of Anta, Habib and Jeroux as they deal with homophobia and bullying at school.

Artfully woven into these short animated stories are film clips of an actual class discussion between an equity educator and elementary school students. In a lively talk about why names are bad and hurtful, stereotypes about gays and lesbians are dismantled and new views are put into place by the children themselves. Apples and Oranges challenges young viewers to think about their responses to people and families.

Apples and Oranges, designed to generate a safer, more peaceful school environment that embraces diversity, is intended for use in elementary schools, libraries and children’s groups and is part of the NFB **Celebrating Diversity** collection.

For Grades K – 3

The full documentary is not intended for this age group, but the animated segments will be useful in addressing issues of bullying and homophobia.

For Grades 4 – 8

Shown in its entirety, this video will provide children with knowledge and skills to contribute ideas; listen and respond constructively to a range of ideas and opinions; explain how people's actions can affect others; make judgments and draw conclusions.

Apples & Oranges can be used in a variety of curriculum areas:

- Drama, Visual Arts, Computer Animation & Media Studies · Family Studies
- Personal & Social Development
- Health & Physical Education · Social Studies
- English/Language Arts

International Journal of Education & the Arts

Editors

Tom Barone
Arizona State University, U.S.A

Liora Bresler
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.

Executive Editor

Gene V Glass
Arizona State University, U.S.A.

Associate Editors

Laurel Campbell
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.

Jason Helfer
Millikin University, U.S.A.

Regina Murphy (2002-2004)
St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University, Ireland
)

Tracie Costantino (2000-2004)
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.

Alyson Whyte (2002-2004)
Auburn University, U.S.A.

Editorial Board

Peter F. Abbs	University of Sussex, U.K.
Eunice Boardman	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.
Norman Denzin	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.
Kieran Egan	Simon Fraser University, Canada
Elliot Eisner	Stanford University, U.S.A.
Magne Espeland	Stord/Haugesund University College, Norway
Gary McPherson	University of New South Wales, Australia
Robert Stake	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, U.S.A.
Susan Stinson	University of North Carolina—Greensboro , U.S.A.
Christine Thompson	Pennsylvania State University, U.S.A.
Peter Webster	Northwestern University, U.S.A.