



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

OPINION PIECE

Homophobic bullying affects everyone, regardless of orientation

Gerald Walton

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Have you ever been called a sissy, fag, dyke, lez, 'mo or queer? Have you ever called someone a sissy, fag, dyke, lez, 'mo or queer?

Used as weapons, these are mean and violent words that are commonly used to demean, diminish and humiliate others. Adults use such epithets as a way of exacting power over others both in real life and in popular culture such as music, movies and television shows. Similarly, kids employ such slurs during schoolyard bullying.

"That's so gay" has become an expression of anything deemed undesirable, and "Don't be a homo" serves to caution youth not to be seen as anything other than heterosexual.

These are expressions of homophobia. In general, homophobia is a prejudicial attitude against gays and lesbians, expressed as discrimination or verbal and physical violence.

The most vicious form of homophobia is gay-bashing. In 2001, Aaron Webster was clubbed, kicked and stomped to death by a group of four young men in Stanley Park. In 1998 in Wyoming, 22-year-old student Matthew Shepard was tortured and beaten to death by two young men. They were both targeted and murdered because they were gay. Scores of others worldwide have met similar, horrible deaths. Families and loved ones are left in the wake of grief to grapple with the impact of this homicidal form of homophobia.

Homophobic bullying is a routine form of violence in schools. Still, few school trustees and administrators have the courage to name it and implement policies and programs to curb it. Research from Canada, the United States, Britain, Australia, Israel and other countries has demonstrated concretely that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth feel unsafe in their schools. For many LGBT youth, self-worth and academic achievement suffer. LGBT youth tend to have higher rates of isolation, depression, and suicidal ideation than do other students.

Though violence against LGBT people is real and pervasive, homophobic violence is not directed only towards LGBT people. Heterosexuals also become targets. Azmi Jubran, a straight man, as a high school student in North Vancouver suffered the effects of unchecked and escalated homophobic violence. Instead of dropping out of school, Jubran filed a human rights complaint against the North Vancouver school district for failing to provide protection from this form of violence. The case went through the court system and the Supreme Court of Canada (ruling against the school district) finally affirmed that school districts are obligated to provide safe learning environments free of harassment. If the district had taken a leadership role in this respect, perhaps this violence and exorbitant legal costs could have been avoided.

8888 University Drive
Burnaby BC V5A 1S6
Canada

T: 604.291.3395

www.educ.sfu.ca



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Sadly, Hamed Nastoh cannot provide an account of his own similar story. Nastoh was also identified as straight, but in 2000 he jumped off the Pattullo Bridge as a result of the unrelenting torments he faced at school. Since then, Nastoh's mother has become an advocate of anti bullying initiatives in schools, including anti-homophobia.

In addition to motivating violence, homophobia strongly influences how we act, communicate and function in the world. Consider how males are taught from boyhood to suppress feelings, to "tough it up." Appearing masculine is equated with being straight. Boys generally learn to posture themselves as tough and masculine so they are not perceived to be gay. People tend to perceive feminine characteristics in boys as a problem to be corrected. For boys and men, homophobia is a powerful agent of social control.

Similarly, consider how females are taught to be "proper" girls and women. Girls are generally taught to behave in ways that are both feminine and submissive; it is generally unacceptable for girls or women to act aggressively, except perhaps in sports.

Otherwise, aggressive girls and women are often perceived to be tomboys and lesbians. Masculine women, regardless of sexual orientation, are assumed to be lesbians. For girls and women, homophobia is a powerful agent of social control that imposes social expectations of femininity and submission.

Homophobia adversely influences the lives of all of us, regardless of our sexual orientation. That is why May 17, International Day Against Homophobia (www.homophobiaday.org), matters to everyone.

Gerald Walton teaches in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University.
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