

**Who Gets Called Queer in School?
Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual
Teenagers, Homophobia and
High School**

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**Preface: Writing About Gay, Lesbian and
Bisexual Teenagers**

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, "I think everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents."¹ I am no different. When the 1989 Health and Human Services report on teen suicide was released, I was struck with despair at the statistics. Gay and lesbian youth comprise approximately 30 percent of all teen suicides. One in three have reported committing at least one self-destructive act. Nearly half repeatedly attempt suicide. Gay and lesbian youth make up approximately one quarter of all homeless youth in the U.S.²

In my mind, this makes gay and lesbian teenagers one of the most significant "at-risk" groups in our high schools today. And it puts a new twist on the term itself. At risk of failure, underachieving, yes. But these teenagers also face a higher risk of harassment, violence, and suicide than other teens. As a recent news article reported,

"Adolescence is hard for everyone, but agony if you're gay. You're on your own to learn who you are, to find others like you, to search for acceptance."³

Writing about homophobia, heterosexism and high schools is a potentially volatile combination for formal research. Not only do researchers face difficulties with access, parental consent and confidentiality, but we become, to borrow a phrase from John Irving's book, *The World According to Garp*, "sexual suspects."⁴ Karen Harbeck writes:

All too often, both the scholars who might have undertaken such studies

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Queer and Now." essay in *Wild Orchids and Trotsky*. Penguin Press. (New York). 1993, Mark Edmundson, Editor.

Gibson, Paul. "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide." *US Dept. of Health and Human Services Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide*. vol. 3. pp. 110-142.

"Growing Up Gay." *Star Tribune*, Minneapolis MN, Sunday, December 6, 1992, pp. 1-14S.

Irving, J. *The World According to Garp*. E. P. Dutton Pub., (New York), 1978.

and the potential participants in that research have been dissuaded by threats to their tenure, promotion, reputation and personal safety Even these [heterosexual] scholars spoke of the hardships they had endured once this research had been published, including one's threatened loss of custody of her children during a bitter divorce.⁵

Most gay, lesbian and bisexual educators and researchers choose to study and write about issues other than sexuality and homosexuality, at least until they are tenured. Rarely does an educational researcher publish work in this area. As Sedgwick says, "I look at my adult friends and colleagues doing lesbian and gay work, and I feel that the survival of each one is a miracle."⁶

Gay and lesbian theorists, like gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers, live in a world that is hostile to our sexualities. We live in a world that tries to silence and ignore us. We live with gay bashing, oppressive legislation, and legalized discrimination. We live with the epithet, "die queer" ringing in our ears. We live with the sinking feeling that the religious right is hunting us down.

Gay and lesbian theory requires courage. To tread in an arena that combines schools and sexuality, kids and queerness, to bring in and bring out our own sexuality is risky indeed. For us, visibility often breeds contempt. Yet silence can truly equal death, especially for gay teens. Death by invisibility—the Catch 22 of our tribe.

⁵ Harbeck, Karen. *Coming Out of the Classroom Closet*. Harrington Park Press. (New York) 1992. p. 2.

⁶ Sedgwick. *ibid.*, p. 239.

⁷ Sears, Jim. *Growing Up Gay in the South: Race Gender and Journeys of the Spirit*. Harrington Park Press. (New York) 1984.

⁸ Allison, Dorothy. Panel Discussion Presented at the University of Colorado Gay and Lesbian Studies Conference, Boulder, Colorado, April 4, 1993.

⁹ Harbeck, book title, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Keed, Donald. (Washington State University). "High School Gay Youth: Invisible Diversity." Paper Presented at the 1993 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, Georgia, April 12-16, 1993.

Jim Sears calls gay and lesbian teenagers, "sexual rebels." Dorothy Allison calls gay and lesbian writers "outlaws."⁸ While we might not think of ourselves as rebels or outlaws, the topic places us both on the margins of academia and the center of the firestorm of debate about teenagers, sexuality and schooling.

In my work studying gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers, I too have been haunted by the persistent specter of adolescent suicide. In the youth group I studied last year, several teenagers had wrists scarred from previous suicide attempts. Many spoke of their persistent self-destructive behavior. The statistics were often in evidence in the room.

At times, I am worried for them. I am also inspired by their courage and persistence, their humor and originality. In this article, I hope to bring out some of the unique problems of gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers, to give voice to their experiences. I hope hearing these voices will provoke and inspire educators, administrators, students, and other readers of *The High School Journal* to delve more deeply into this important and controversial topic.

Speaking out is risky, both for academic writers and gay teens. Yet, as Audre Lorde wrote, "If we wait until we are not afraid to speak, we will be speaking from our graves." Regardless of which side of the debate you are on, it is critical to address this topic. The voices of gay adolescents may have been silenced, but these youths are screaming out in other ways to be heard, notably through suicide. It is a situation that cannot be tolerated, and it is time to open the door to the "classroom closet"⁹ and begin the debate in earnest.

Breaking the Silence: Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth Voices

Discussions of heterosexism, homophobia and the lives of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth have been noticeably absent in the educational literature. As Reed states, "Not only does the group remain invisible, the existence of and problems associated with gay youth are largely denied by public school educators, particularly school administrators."¹⁰

In 1992, I spent several months observing and interviewing a group of gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers in a support group setting. The group met at the local gay and lesbian community center, and about 20-40 teenagers attended each week. Attendance fluctuated a great deal, and while I got to know the core group of youths fairly well, I actually observed over a hundred different teens. Many sought me out to tell their stories; many told their stories to the entire group. Part of my goal in conducting this research project was to give voice to these teenagers. However, having your story printed and published can be very risky for gay teens, many of whom had not disclosed their sexual identity to their parents, friends or peers.

In order to give voice to these teenagers and protect their identities, I constructed a composite narrative. In the narrative, only two voices are portrayed—one male, one female, named fictitiously “Christi” and “Tommy.” Though their names are fictitious, their experiences are not. Each word they utter in the narrative is taken verbatim from my notes or from interviews. Christi and Tommy represent a wide range of teenagers, from ages 14 to 20, black, white, Asian, Latino/a, working and middle class. Their conversation reflects some of the most common and important experiences of these teenagers, regardless of race, class and gender. Christi and Tommy’s conversation touches on a variety of important themes— isolation, alienation, rejection by gay adults, hostility by parents, and problems with homophobia in and out of school. It also portrays some of their humor and heart, their courage and compassion for each other.

A Conversation with Christi and Tommy

We sit having coffee at a downtown coffee shop, a fast food place on the main drag in the city. It’s filled with business people, street people, waitresses in tired brown uniforms.

Tommy takes a drag off his cigarette; “I don’t know which was worse,” he says, “home or school.” He fingers the ragged scars at his wrists. “My mom, has, um . . . a drinking problem. After I came out to her, she got drunk

and told me I was a faggot and she didn’t want no queer in her house. My brother, he called me a sick fag. So I figured it was either stay and take their shit or leave. So here I am.” He stops talking and looks out the window again.

“School was a definite hell hole.” says Christi. “H-E-L-L hole. No lie. Like, you sit in class, right, and all these girls are talking about which boys they like and all that crap. And you make stuff up, like ‘oh, yeah, he’s really cute. Yeah, Tom Selleck, wow.’ You don’t know how many times I wanted to lean over and say, ‘Hey, what about Julia Roberts? Some fox, huh . . .’ And class was such a joke. Teachers were such a joke. This one English teacher, all these girls have such a big crush on him. I *know* this guy is gay, he has to be. And he avoids me like the plague for two years. Like he KNOWS I KNOW and I’m going to turn him in or something. Fucking chicken. He could have helped me. He could have talked to me. But nooo . . .”

Tommy: “When I was about, I don’t know, 15 I guess, people at school decided I was gay. I didn’t even know what they were talking about at first. They just started calling me ‘faggot’ this and ‘fag’ that, and all of a sudden I didn’t have any friends anymore, I was kind of a jock, you know. I had girlfriends and stuff in junior high. But I always knew I was different. I liked my girlfriends, they were fun, but I wasn’t in love or anything.”

“Anyway, so people started calling me faggot and queer and stuff, and I thought, Yeah, I’m gay. That’s what I am. I saw what happened to other kids who got called queer at school. I dropped out. I got a job. My mom thought that was cool. I didn’t tell her until later, and that’s when things got sort of bad.”

Christi turns to me. “I used to call guys faggots in school. We thought it was real funny. ‘You fag, you faggot.’ We used to call guys gay, if they were skinny or nerdy. ‘You sissy, you queer.’ We’d hit them, punch them in the halls and stuff. I’d get in trouble and they’d call my mom. Poor mom. She was so clueless. She’d sit me down and say, ‘We are ladies, you and I.’ I’d say yeah, yeah. And I’d try to be more

ladylike. I mean, I wear makeup and stuff. When I came out to my mom she said, 'But you're so pretty!' Like I had to be ugly to be a lesbian!"

"Mom and dad are pretty cool. I mean, they haven't kicked me out or sent me to a shrink or anything. My Mom's even gone to PFLAG [Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] a couple of times. She goes and cries with other parents. My dad just went, 'uh, huh.' He's clueless. He just, like, reads the newspaper and doesn't say anything. Who knows if they talk about it. I think Mom is really bummed because she like, wanted me to be a Chanel runway model or something."

Tommy gives a sarcastic sigh. "I always wanted to be a Chanel runway model myself." We laugh.

We order more coffee and watch people walk by on the street. A man and a woman walk by, holding hands. "See that?" Christi says. "No way could I do that with my girlfriend on this street. I'd get killed. No lie. It pisses me off, kind of. That Jo and I can't walk down the street like that. Just like everyone else. I mean, people *throw* stuff at you . . . really. It's not that they just yell stuff, but they really get mean."

"Yeah," Tommy sighs. "I don't have a boyfriend right now, but everywhere I go I think, Am I safe here? Is someone waiting to get me? So many people get bashed. I mean, we can't even go to bars unless we sneak in, so there's no gay places to even hang out, but I'm still afraid. I mean, I don't even look gay. I go to the park and I hang out with my friends, and we have to plan an escape route before we even sit down. It's such a drag. Last summer we were in the park and this car full of guys drove through screaming 'FUCKING FAGGOTS' and threw bottles from the car. They drove on the lawn, trying to run guys over and stuff. The cops got there later, way later, and looked at us like we were dirt. 'So no one got hurt,' they said. Yeah, right. No one got hurt."

¹¹ Friend, Richard. "Choices, Not Closets: Heterosexism and Homophobia in Schools," in *Beyond Silenced Voices*, SUNY Press, Albany New York. Lois Weis and Michelle Fine, Editors, (p. 212).

"It's so sad." Christi says. "But I think things are better. I mean, better for us than for people our parents' age. You know, we have this group, we have PFLAG, we have the Center. And there are groups in schools now, in high schools and stuff. We don't have any bars, and that's a drag. And the adult gay community thinks we're babies." "Or jail bait." Tommy laughs. She laughs. "Yeah, or like we don't really know we're gay because we're too young. Like they were never young. Like *they* never went to high school. But really, it's better. Since AIDS, people know that we exist, at least."

Tommy lights another cigarette. "But they still hate us," he says. "Our parents hate us, our teachers hate us, straight kids hate us, adults hate us . . ." His voice falters a little. Christi leans over the table and takes his hand. "But WE don't hate us, dummy. *We* don't hate us."

Christi and Tommy's conversation brings to light many of the problems experienced by gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers in high schools today. Tommy speaks of his problems at home dealing with the hostility of his mother and brother. His brother calls him a "sick fag," his mother calls him "queer" and "faggot." Unlike teenagers from other oppressed minority groups, gay teenagers find little or no support or understanding at home for their societal difference. Most often, family members are the most difficult people to reveal sexual orientation to, and are often the last to know. Considering the consequences, this is often a wise choice. Many teenagers who reveal their sexual orientation (or "come out") to their parents face extreme hostility, violence or sudden homelessness. As one gay youth stated, "growing up gay in my family is like being Jewish in a Nazi home."¹¹

In contrast, Christi states that her parents are "clueless," even though they know she's a lesbian. Though they haven't kicked her out of the house, they don't discuss her lesbianism. Many parents of gay teenagers refuse to acknowledge their son's or daughter's sexual orientation, and even formerly close relationships can be torn apart.

School is also a hostile and dangerous environment for most gay and lesbian teenagers. As Christi says, "a definite hell hole." A recent U.S. Department of Justice report states that gays and lesbians are the most frequent victims of hate crimes, and school is the primary setting for this type of violence.¹² Comstock writes, "Lesbian and gay crime victims report greater frequency of incidents in school settings than do victims of crime in general (25 percent lesbian/gay, 9 percent general)."¹³ People of color and men experience greater incidence of violence in schools than do whites and women.

Silence on the part of teachers and administrators also make schools unsafe places for gay and lesbian teens. While teachers often punish students who make racist remarks, homophobic comments are typically unchallenged, and sometimes even perpetrated by teachers themselves.¹⁴ As Tommy says, "I saw what happened to other kids who got called queer at school."

Often in order to survive in school, many gay and lesbian teens have to construct a false, heterosexual self. As Christi says above, "You make stuff up, like, 'Oh yeah, he's really cute.'" Some teenagers have sex with members of the opposite sex to prove they're straight and to avoid being called "queer" or "dyke." Lesbian and gay youth may also engage in anti-gay violence in an attempt to hide their homosexuality. Christi describes beating up boys who were feminine or different. Others participate in name-calling, or join in the laughter at "fag" or "dyke" jokes.

Gay and lesbian teens are also often isolated from gay, lesbian and bisexual adults. Because of societal misconceptions about gay people as "recruiters" of youth, gay, lesbian and bisexual adults (particularly teachers) often avoid interacting with gay and lesbian teenagers. Christi

describes the situation well when she talks about her English teacher. "I know this guy is gay... and he avoids me like the plague for two years. Like he KNOWS I KNOW and I'm going to turn him in or something." Unlike other minority teachers who can serve as role models to minority youth, gay and lesbian teachers must hide their sexual identity and distance themselves from gay and lesbian youth.

Many youths face exclusion from the adult gay and lesbian community. As Christi and Tommy state, "The adult gay community thinks we're babies... like we don't really know we're gay because we're too young." Gay and lesbian youth are excluded from many community activities as well, since they often lack transportation and are too young for gay bars and social events.

Thus, gay, lesbian and bisexual youth often go through the difficult period of adolescence ostracized and isolated from family members, teachers, peer groups, and the adult gay and lesbian community. As Tommy says, "Our parents hate us, our teachers hate us, straight kids hate us, adults hate us." As a result, gay and lesbian teenagers often feel they have no place to go, that there is no room in the world for them to exist. As Tommy says, "Everywhere I go I think, 'Am I safe here? Is someone waiting to get me?'"

Fortunately, as Christi says, "things are better." With the advent of groups like Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG), parents can learn more about their gay, lesbian and bisexual children, and can understand their unique difficulties. Support programs such as Project 10 in Los Angeles and the Harvey Milk School in New York offer safe environments for gay and lesbian youth. In-school support groups are being started in high schools throughout the country, and many gay and lesbian community centers offer support groups specifically for teenagers. These programs offer a critical bridge between gay and lesbian teenagers, their parents, friends, and the adult gay and lesbian community. They provide buffer zones where teenagers can learn who they are in a positive environment, away

¹² G.M. Herek. "Hate Crimes Against Lesbians and Gay Men: Issues for research and Policy," *American Psychologist* 11(1989): 948-55 (quoted in Friend, p. 221).
¹³ G.D. Comstock. *Violence against Lesbians and Gay Men*. (New York: Columbia University Press 1991), p. 52. (quoted in Friend, p. 221.).
¹⁴ Friend, p. 217.

from the dangers of home and school. Support groups and programs both in and out of school provide these teenagers with a critical sense of community and self esteem. They provide an alternative to alienation and suicide, a place to learn, as Christi says, "We don't hate us."

I'd like to close with a quote by Aaron Fricke. As a teenager, Fricke sued his high school and won the right to take a male date to his senior prom. As a result, he became nationally known and soon after wrote a book called *Reflections of a Rock Lobster, A Story About Growing Up Gay*. This book is an invaluable source of information for teachers, students, parents, and educational researchers interested in the lives of gay and lesbian youth. Fricke is standing in the ballroom of his high school, reflecting on what turned out to be a tense but uneventful senior prom:

"I thought of all the people who would have enjoyed going to their proms with the date of their choice but were denied that right; of all the people in the past who wanted to live respectably with the person they loved but could not; of all the men and women who had been hurt or killed because they were gay; of the rich history of lesbians and homosexual men that had so long been ignored. Gradually we were triumphing over ignorance. One day we would be free."¹⁵

That freedom, I hope, can be won by speaking out, and by sharing the stories of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. By refusing to tolerate name calling, gay bashing and other forms of homophobia, and by recognizing gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers as a high school population at risk, teachers, students, parents and administrators can help break the silence and truly "triumph over ignorance." We can help

end homophobia and anti-gay violence, and work toward a day when no one gets called "queer" in school.¹⁶



¹⁵ Fricke, Aaron. *Reflections of a Rock Lobster: a story about growing up gay*. Alyson Publications, Inc., Boston, 1981 (p. 98).

¹⁶ Many thanks to Matthew Goldwasser, Pat McQuillan, and Margaret Eisenhart for their valuable input and help in composing this article. Ongoing appreciation to Cheryl Shwartz of OUTRIGHT, L.B.T., and to Gurumayi.