

LGBT Teachers: Narratives of Bias and Challenge

A Review of

Queer Voices From the Classroom

by Hidehiro Endo and Paul Chamness Miller (Eds.)

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Although attitudes and practices around lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people have been changing dramatically in recent years (e.g., McCarthy, 2014), one of the contexts in which change has generally been especially slow to come has been school settings. Both psychological and mainstream media outlets have given considerable attention to the status of students in K–12 settings, often pointing out the challenges that LGBT students face at all levels of school systems (e.g., Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009). On the other hand, relatively little attention has been focused on the experiences of LGBT adults who teach in schools.

As the inaugural volume in the book series Research in Queer Studies from Information Age Publishing, Hidehiro Endo and Paul Chamness Miller have edited a book that focuses on LGBT teachers in K–12 settings. *Queer Voices From the Classroom* includes personal–professional narratives from sexual minority teachers who work in all sorts of schools—large and small, public and private, urban and rural, LGBT-friendly and LGBT-oppressive. The book includes an introduction by the editors and 23 chapters written by teacher–authors. The chapters are divided into four sections based on the editors’ division according to what they describe as “the focal point” of each chapter (p. 2). The teacher–authors themselves represent a rather broad variety of demographic positions and pedagogical perspectives. They include LGBT and intersex teachers. There are only a few teachers who specifically identify as transgender. On the other hand, a number of the narratives emphasize the theme of gender nonconformity, usually as a source of problems in the classroom, either in the teachers’ pasts or in their contemporaneous work settings.

The greatest strength of this volume is the opportunity it presents to learn of the experiences of LGBT teachers in their own words. All of the authors responded to the editors’ call for personal narratives about their experiences as LGBT teachers. Each then wrote an essay addressing four separate prompts. The questions guided the teachers to

discuss (a) their identities as queer teachers, (b) how their identities influenced their decision to become teachers, (c) significant moments regarding their lives as teachers, and (d) their hopes as queer teachers.

Hearing the voices of people in formerly silenced groups nearly always represents an important step, liberating for those who are speaking of their experience and for the audience alike. In many cases, the narratives offer insight into painful struggles that could hardly be accessed in third-person descriptions of LGBT teachers. Teachers reading the volume are likely to feel witnessed by virtue of the familiar experiences in these narratives. Readers who are not teachers may well be moved by the emotional reality of so many of these teachers who go to work each day in settings where they feel a need to keep their own lives and loves a secret, where they exist on a kind of knife's edge of secrecy and subterfuge. These narratives convey the emotional costs that often accompany fear of being fired for one's sexual orientation or gender identity (Button, 2004). For readers who are paying close attention, many of the narratives also suggest the costs to students and schools in general that accrue when teachers feel compelled to hide who they are (Badgett, Durso, Kastanis, & Mallory, 2013; Croteau, 1996; Fassinger, 2008).

Given the importance of personal narratives from groups whose experiences have been little heard—not to mention, understood—it may seem unfair to suggest that *Queer Voices From the Classroom* is lacking in some important respects. Nonetheless, reading the book was less than satisfying. The limitations of the volume owe less to the teacher-authors and more to the task they were assigned and how their stories are presented by the editors.

The first limitation is possibly rooted in the nature of the four questions that the editors assigned to the authors. With the exception of the final one, these prompts were framed in such a way that they were likely to elicit negative experiences. For example, the third prompt, which had to do with reports of significant moments as teachers, used as its example bullying. In fairness, the final prompt asked the teachers to describe what they hoped to achieve and become as queer teachers in the future. That sort of prompt would seem to offer the authors an opening to discuss positive strivings related to their work. However, the actual narratives evidenced little in the way of such strivings in particular and little in the way of optimistic moments in general.

It is, of course, quite possible that the teachers who answered the call for narratives tended to have had mostly really negative experiences in their work. There is little doubt that many—perhaps most—LGBT teachers face formidable challenges. It is also the case that, when LGBT people are asked to consider what is positive about their lives specifically as LGBT people, they are typically able to generate some very positive observations (Burdge, 2014; Riggle & Rostosky, 2012). I do not doubt the negative experiences described by the teachers in this volume. I do wonder whether they had other, more positive things that they might have said, had they been prompted more specifically to do so.

My other major concern about this book has to do with the lack of any apparent effort by the editors to contextualize the narratives. In all of the 23 stories by teachers, there is limited critical observation about such areas as what being open or closeted about their identities meant, what was the role of stigma in these teachers' lives, what were the costs of that stigma, and so many other relevant topics. Teachers who are asked to write about their experiences probably should not be expected to offer such perspectives. But editors really are in a better position to offer some perspective. In their introductory chapter, the

editors offer only the slightest context, opting instead to briefly preview each of the narratives. I kept thinking that they would provide a critical summary at the end of the book, but they did not.

The editors could have drawn from extant literature—some about LGBT teachers and much of it about LGBT people in general—as the basis for placing these narratives in a larger context. Doing so would have served readers in understanding not just the narratives but also how they fit together and made sense. Such a perspective might have provided some relief from what ended up being a somewhat relentless exposition of pain with little in the way of suggestions about what might be done about it.

It would have been useful, for example, for the editors to use a summary chapter to inquire about the complexity of LGBT people's decision to disclose or withhold their identities (e.g., Kilmartin, 2007; Moradi, 2009) and how there are reasons for both decisions, depending upon context. In a similar vein, the editors might have discussed what we know about the psychological costs of the decision to withhold information about one's identity, even when there are practical reasons for doing so (Buddel, 2011; Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003; Croteau, Anderson, & VanderWal, 2008; Smart & Wegner, 1999).

As a start of an answer to the awful predicament in which so many of the teachers find themselves, the editors might have suggested some of the factors that can be helpful to LGBT people in situations where their jobs are imperiled. These factors include a perspective that places their personal struggles in a broader historical context (Russell & Richards, 2003), social support (Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011), positive role models (Bird, Kuhns, & Garofalo, 2012), and mentoring programs (Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998).

Queer Voices From the Classroom offers some important information. The narratives are often moving and occasionally inspiring. One wishes that the editors had offered readers a perspective for understanding and making better sense of the voices that the teacher-authors have shared with readers of this volume. LGBT teachers might find the stories a positive mirror for their own lives, and K-12 administrators and trainers of teachers could profit from seeing what LGBT teachers confront as they go about their jobs.

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