

Redesigning Multiculturalism to Address Sexual Orientation

By Chuck Stewart

Ambiguity reigns over what constitutes multicultural education. Much of the confusion stems from the way multiple cultures have been into K-12 education over the years.

Most schools pursue either education of the culturally different or education that is multicultural, using a simplified “everyone is beautiful “ approach.

Originally viewed as an add-on program, multiculturalism now is addressed holistically. This means educators consider ethnicity and culture when diagnosing students’ needs or assessing their performance. However, the issue of including lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in the multicultural curriculum often leads to community conflict and a reassessment of what constitutes multicultural education.

Five models aptly describe current attempts at multicultural education: (1) ethnic studies (which treats multiculturalism as a separate subject); (2) human relations (aimed at preventing conflict between members of different ethnic groups); (3) education of the culturally different (which attempts to increase home/school cultural compatibility but unavoidably classifies the home culture as “the other”); (4) education that is multicultural (which teaches students to value cultural differences and accept others’ right to be different); and (5) social reconstructionism (which instructs students to analyze critically why some groups are oppressed and to take an active role in restructuring unequal relationships).

Invisible Minority

Multicultural education in K-12 schools rarely distinguishes between the unique needs of different groups. Racism usually is treated the same as sexism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and heterosexism. However, each bigotry has unique characteristics, emerges from historical developments, and is locally situated.

For example, while the American gay and lesbian rights movement is following a similar political path to that of the civil rights movement for African Americans, unique differences exist. Gays and lesbians are not a “visible” minority in the same sense that racial minorities are. Gays and lesbians have experiences similar to those of persecuted religious minorities. But even this analogy is incomplete.

Whereas the religious minority family will provide emotional support to their child, homosexual children discover they are not the same as their parents or siblings and learn that their core sexual identity is something to be shunned and never to be discussed. Many gays and lesbians grow from their up in a total emotional isolation, even from their family members. Gays and lesbians also challenge traditional gender roles. These and other differences require multicultural education to distinguish between the oppression of gays and lesbians and other groups.

The primary form of oppression against gays is “heterosexism,” in which heterosexuality is the assumed societal norm. High schools host homecoming dances where it is assumed that the elected king will be male, the queen will be female, and all

participants will dance as heterosexual couples. Anyone who is not heterosexual is excluded.

Heterosexism stigmatizes lesbians and gays and forces them to struggle constantly against their own invisibility, which makes social integration (and maintaining a positive sexual identity) much more difficult. Heterosexism masks the rampant homophobia and anti-gay attitudes in our schools and larger society

Traditional Norms

By conserving cultural and legal norms, public schools overtly discriminate against gays and lesbians. While changes in political power for gays and lesbians has led to somewhat less prejudice, schools are caught between their role as conservator of anti-gay norms-overlooking constant anti-gay epithets from students and teachers-and their legal responsibility to protect all children.

Gays and lesbians are at an historical juncture. The inclusion of sexual orientation in multicultural education challenges the simplified “difference” criteria traditionally used in developing curricula about specific groups. An analysis of gay oppression suggests that selection of inclusive groups is better related to power and how groups are stigmatized and their political status.

From this perspective, multicultural education and curriculum development in K-12 schools should shift from the more benign “isn’t everyone beautiful/difference-acceptance” model-one in which the educational experience is designed to change attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors about accepting gays and lesbians as people equal to heterosexuals.