CHAPTER NINE

MEETING ALL STUDENTS’ NEEDS: TRANSFORMING THE UNJUST NORMATIVITY OF HETEROSEXISM

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PATRICK SLATTERY

"Instead of perpetually listening for conclusions, we might be more focused on the negotiations, the process, and the paradoxical oscillation between the claiming of an identity and the struggle to rework its meaning and effect on our lives."
—Scholl, 2001, p. 158

For years, researchers, sociologists, and social activists have alerted educators to the perils of the persistent failure of public schools to address the needs and concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) students (Harris, 1997; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003; Macgillivray, 2004; Pinar, 1998; Rofes, 1989; Sears, 1991, among others). Yet despite nearly two decades of professional entreaties to transform public schools into nurturing, nonthreatening, nonviolent social spaces, prejudice, harassment, and discrimination continue to pervade the social experience of LGBTIQ students across the country. Neither the liberal, ethical appeals to goodness and fairness (e.g., see Chasnoff & Cohen, 1996) nor the more transgressive calls to queer our pedagogical practices (Britzman, 1995; Luhmann, 1998) have resulted in any large-scale systemic effects on the way public schools approach LGBTIQ issues. As Rofes (1997) stated, “the heteronormativity of schools remains intransigent, resisting reform as schools have long avoided pedagogical innovation” (p. xiv). After nearly seven years—and in light of a rapidly expanding discourse on LGBTIQ issues that becomes more and more difficult to ignore—this statement is as true today as when Rofes wrote it.

Oftentimes, when confronted with the challenge of reforming their own political and pedagogical practices to be more socially inclusive of sexual minorities, even well-intentioned
teachers and aspiring administrators bemoan the lack of programmatic guidance on how to address the needs of this particular group of students. Yet such programs and recommendations have been available for quite some time. In 1989, for example, Rofes discussed in detail two different programs focused on educational opportunities and support for LGBTQ students. And as early as 1983, Sears suggested a list of resources for teachers that could be integrated into the school curriculum to introduce the topic of “homosexuality,” as he then called it. More recently, the Human Rights Watch (2001) has enumerated detailed recommendations to school districts, school boards, teachers, counselors, and staff as well as to the state and federal governments to end the abuse that derives from “the substantial failure of the government at the local, state, and federal level to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students from human rights violations, including harassment, violence, and deprivation of the right to education” (p. 9).

If plans to meet the needs of LGBTQ students have long been available, then our inquiry must rather focus on those forces of resistance in schools and other educational institutions that maintain the heteronormative status quo. Why are teachers and administrators so reluctant to engage in discourse that would allow them to transform public schools into safe, caring environments for LGBTQ students? Why, given that few educators would tolerate openly racist utterances and behaviors (and often sexist, xenophobic, and disability prejudices as well), are so few willing to take a public stand when faced with blatantly heterosexist discrimination and harassment? Why, indeed, when our national discourse demands that no child be left behind do we not do whatever it takes to prevent the high levels of taunting, depression, suicide, and dropout rates of LGBTQ students across the nation (Human Rights Watch, 2001)?

Throughout our years of experience as academics in teacher and administrator preparation programs, we have heard a litany of excuses:

- We hesitate to become more proactive with these issues because we fear the possible negative reactions from parents.
- “Sexuality” has no place in the public school curriculum; it more properly falls within the domain of parental responsibility.
- What can we do? We have to uphold the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the community.
- These are issues that belong in the private sphere; no good will come of making them public.
- What’s the point of all the discussion and programming around issues of sexuality? Straight people don’t constantly make issue of their sexuality. Why do LGBTQ students feel it necessary to force this stuff down everyone’s throat?
- I would like to do something, but I would be harassed and could lose my job if I address this issue.
- The LGBTQ community needs to take the lead on these issues. I do not have the knowledge or power to take this on myself.
- Homosexuality is a sin and an unhealthy lifestyle, and we should be helping our students to reject this lifestyle rather than normalizing it.
- I hesitate to get involved in these issues because of my discomfort and lack of understanding.
I am uncomfortable addressing issues of sexuality and homosexuality. I was raised not to discuss sexuality.

I am sympathetic to gays and lesbians, but if I get involved with LGBTIQ issues then my sexuality and morality will be questioned, and I will be placed in an awkward environment.

I am very empathetic because I am homosexual (bisexual, intersex, questioning, etc.), but I am in the closet, and I do not want to draw attention to myself.

Homosexuals flaunt their sexuality and deserve any negative reactions they provoke.

These are the excuses we hear when we present LGBTIQ curriculum and leadership models and practices to our undergraduate and graduate students. We also hear some of the same rhetoric from colleagues. Despite the advancements in the American, British, Canadian, and global community in recent years—same-sex marriage, ordinations, U.S. Supreme Court decisions, political elections, organizations, and so on.¹ (see Table 9.1)—the oppressive atmosphere for LGBTIQ students in K–12 schooling must be addressed forthrightly. The antagonism between the challenges to the heteronormative order in the broader community and the oftentimes brutal environments that LGBTIQ students face in schools create an untenable conflict for many young people. On the one hand, the societal changes that challenge the hegemony² of heteronormativity encourage these youths to be honest about their lack of conformance to the expectations of the dominant order; on the other hand, the cultures in most public schools have not yet become the safe environments they should when nonheteronormative students make themselves seen and heard. In this chapter, we will reflect not only on the visibility of heteronormativity in K–12 schooling but also challenge educators to move beyond the prejudices and fears reflected in the excuses for avoiding LGBTIQ issues.

Certainly, we do not mean to paint a picture of gloom and doom. Many administrators, teachers, and students regularly promote issues of social justice in their daily practices. For instance, it is not uncommon to hear comments of the following sort:

I am appalled at the level of teasing, harassment, and ridicule of LGBTIQ students, so I intend to say something to stop the language every time I hear it. And I also add positive words of encouragement for all minority students.

I mention positive role models of LGBTIQ persons at every appropriate opportunity in my classroom and in the curriculum.

I invert heterosexism in subtle ways whenever possible. I use phrases like “domestic partner,” “significant other,” “partner,” and “lover” instead of “husband,” “wife,” or “spouse” for straight and gay couples. And I never assume that when someone refers to a “date” that the person is of the opposite gender.

I include books in my library, on my bulletin board, and on my Web page about gay and lesbian persons and issues along with all of my other multicultural literature.

I speak positively about my LGBTIQ friends and family members and never try to hide my love and support for them.

In addition to these individual acts and utterances that promote a greater sense of social justice, many courageous young people are blazing a trail for social consciousness
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>SOCIAL EFFECT</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex marriage</td>
<td>State Supreme Court of California rules it unconstitutional to withhold</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>As of this writing, the effects of Proposition 8 are being challenged</td>
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<td>“marriage” from same-sex couples; however, with Proposition 8 the</td>
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<td>citizens of California voted to change the state constitution, thereby</td>
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<td>nullifying the Supreme Court decision</td>
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<td>The Supreme Court of Connecticut rules that the 2005 decision to allow</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>With this ruling, Connecticut became the second state in the United States to</td>
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<td>civil unions rather than same-sex marriage is unconstitutional</td>
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<td>provide for same-sex marriage</td>
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<td>Civil unions legalized in Mexico City for same-sex and different-sex</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<td></td>
<td>couples</td>
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<td>Same-gender marriage and adoption legalized</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>The redefinition of marriage to include same-sex partners represents a shift</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts recognizes same-sex marriage</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>of historic proportion in the heteronormative paradigm</td>
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<td>Supreme Court of Canada upholds Ontario Court of Appeals decision</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>2003</td>
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<td>to change common-law definition of marriage</td>
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<td>Religious</td>
<td>Presbyterians reinstate ordination of Cabetz, a gay man</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Presbytery agreed by overwhelming vote that the vows of celibacy applied to</td>
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<td>ordination</td>
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<td>gay men and lesbians in the church were incompatible with the principles of</td>
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<td>the Reformation</td>
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<td>Episcopal House of Bishops consecrates Canon Gene Robinson</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>The consecration of an openly gay bishop to the high leadership of the</td>
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<td>Anglican church challenges the fundamental heteronormativity of religious</td>
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<td>doctrines</td>
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<td>Court decisions</td>
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<td>privacy</td>
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<td><em>Romer v. Evans</em>, 517 U.S. 620 (1996)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>U.S. Supreme Court overturns Colorado state legislation that would have</td>
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<td>discriminated on the basis of sexual orientation</td>
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(continued)
TABLE 9.1  Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political elections</th>
<th>In the United States, Elaine Noble was the first openly gay elected official; in 2008 there are more than 350</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>1974 to present</th>
<th>Public recognition and acceptance of openly gay elected officials helps to break down the barriers of stereotypes and bigotry</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Klaus Wowereit</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>First leading gay German politician wins landslide victory in public elections</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizations</td>
<td>GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Activities promote safe school environments for all children</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stonewall</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Professional lobbying organization works on policy development to promote equal rights</td>
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<td>Educational leadership</td>
<td>Number of Gay–Straight Alliances in the United States registered with GLSEN passes 3,500</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Represents an indication across the nation of a change in school climate to be more tolerant of differences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Board of Education of Cincinnati Public Schools revises nondiscrimination policy to include sexual orientation as a protected category</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Discriminatory practices are held to be unconscionable at the highest level of local educational leadership</td>
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<td></td>
<td>National Education Association forms the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Caucus</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>The caucus works to educate national and state education associations on issues of discrimination and sexual orientation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and political activism. We think there of Brandon Fitzgerald, a high school senior who formed a Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) in his high school in Cleveland, Ohio, in 2001. Brandon, like so many other LGBTIQ and their straight allies, took the lead in educating administrators, teachers, and parents about the needs and contributions of gay youth. The GSA movement in high schools is proliferating, providing education and hope for thousands of young people. Brandon did not form the GSA without struggles. It was only one year earlier that he came out to his classmates and teachers in a very dramatic way. Brandon asked for permission to read a poem at a school assembly during his junior year, along with other students who were planning skits, poetry, and narratives for this assembly. Brandon was given permission by the moderator to read this poem:

Locked away minds of rainbow flags . . .
Faces hidden beneath paper bags . . .
Confused kids rolled away in body bags,
'Tcause everyone else always called them fags.
They are the few, and they are often the crazed.
They are mere mortals of life’s twisted maze.  
They are fish in black water.  
They are the victims of history’s ongoing slaughter.  
Years upon years  
My face drowns in tears.  
I shouldn’t have to hide in fear  
Or fade into the shadows and disappear.  
For me each day is a rainy day,  
In a world where being different is somehow not okay.  
Don’t try to make me go away,  
’Cause I am who I am and that includes being gay.  

Brandon’s maturity and courage inspire us. But as he states in his poem, life is not easy for those who are different from the cultural stereotyped norms. Others are not so fortunate, because hate can kill. Reread Brandon’s poem while listening to lesbian musician and entertainer Melissa Etheridge’s song “Scarecrow,” a poignant tribute to Matthew Shepard, the University of Wyoming gay student who was beaten mercilessly and left to die tied to an isolated ranch fence post (see p. 163). Matthew’s only offense was being gay; his murderer’s only excuse was homophobia and hatred. Unfortunately, Matthew’s story is not an isolated event.

HETEROSEXISM/HOMOPHOBIA IN SCHOOLING

Schools can either be part of the solution or a part of the problem in addressing heterosexism and bigotry against LGBTIQ students, staff, and parents. As we know from many highly publicized incidents, such as the gay-bashing murder of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming, heterosexism can escalate beyond exclusion and taunting to violence and murder. Why does this happen, and how can educators be at the forefront of ending the violence?

Professor John Aston has studied gay bashing and murders and reports that the typical high school student hears antigay slurs 22.5 times a day. Furthermore, 69 percent of youths perceived to be either gay or lesbian experience some form of harassment or violence in school, with over half of these experiencing it daily, and over one-third of youth reported hearing homophobic remarks from faculty or school staff (Aston, 2001b). Additionally, Aston cited a 1993 Massachusetts Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth study that reported that 85 percent of teachers oppose integrating gay/lesbian/bisexual studies within their curriculum (Aston, 2001a). Psychologist Karen Franklin’s

* * * * *

“We must arouse educators—if they are silent on the matter—to examine their complicity and silence on gay bashing, teasing, and violence against minorities and those perceived as different in schools and society. The constant harassment and marginalization that until recently were sanctioned by law and practices outside of schools produce the kind of psychic/psychological death . . . .”
landmark study found thrill-seeking, peer dynamics, and societal permission and encouragement to be the primary motivations for antigay assailants (Franklin, 1997). If societal permission seems to be overstated, consider the response in Dallas by The Constitution Party of Texas (CPT) that led a protest of the Texas State Legislature’s consideration of bills to protect gay men and lesbians. The Texas Triangle (2001) reported:

The men protesting, one who brought his five-year-old son to the event, believe homosexuality should be illegal, and ultimately punishable by death. They base their beliefs on the book of Leviticus in the Bible.

“Well, we know punishing homosexuals by death would be extremely hard in today’s society,” said Larry S. Kilgore, the Dallas/Fort Worth chairman of the Constitution Party.

“But we hope that we can help to drive it under ground so in about twenty or thirty years, the punishment can fit the crime.”

This attitude of permission to hurt and even kill not only gay men and lesbians, but also Jews, Blacks, immigrants, and other minorities, is promoted in several conservative political groups, churches, and websites today. A glance at www.americannaziparty.com or www.godhatesflags.com almost inevitably produces chills because of the hate rhetoric.

We show several films to our students to impress upon them the seriousness of this ethical nightmare: the dramatic fictional account of teenagers in Los Angeles in the film titled American History X, a must see for all educators concerned about hate crimes, Licensed to Kill, a documentary that interviews men in prison who killed gay men and lesbians, and Jim in Bold, the poignant story of Jim Wheeler, who was harassed in high school because he was gay and eventually killed himself (see www.jiminbold.com).

One of the most frightening aspects of these films that must give pause to critical educators, indeed, to any educator, is that the permission to kill is rooted in invidious biblical interpretations, social conventions, church sermons, and hate-filled rhetoric learned in educational settings. Our convictions must direct us to counter hate speech in all of its manifestations. Whereas ignorance of the pervasiveness of this problem might be countered through education to produce an empathetic leadership, intentional silence in the face of hate crimes or hate speech is a moral failure of educators and citizens that amounts to complicity in the crime.

John Aston followed up on Karen Franklin’s research with a case study of one young man from Houston who perpetrated violence on gay men in Houston, Texas, titled “Deconstructing Heterosexism and Homophobia in Schools.” Aston (2001b) writes:

This investigation focuses on the internal and external factors that led to Jon Buice’s murderous assault along with nine of his adolescent peers on a gay man, Paul Broussard, in Houston on the night of July 4, 1991. The study examines the societal sense of permission (Franklin, 1997) to harass and assault those who violate gender norms, with a particular focus on the role of schools as passively and sometimes actively contributing to a sense of permission. . . . This case study shows that Jon was more typical than atypical of young male adolescents in our highly gendered and patriarchal society. He was driven by thrill-seeking and peer dynamics to attack societally-permitted targets rather than by any knowingly antigay ideology. The members of Jon’s school and community may make convenient scapegoats of Jon and his companions, but this study indicates that we are all implicit in such acts, and ends with suggestions about ways to end our schools’ complicity in such grim oppression. (pp. iii–iv)
For those unfamiliar with Etheridge’s song, the lyrics are reproduced here.

SCARECROW
Showers of your crimson blood
Seep into a nation calling up a flood
Of narrow minds who legislate
Thinly veiled intolerance
Bigotry and hate
But they tortured and burned you
They beat you and they tied you
They left you cold and breathing
For love they crucified you
I can’t forget hard as I try
This silhouette against the sky
Scarecrow crying
Waiting to die wondering why
Scarecrow trying
Angels will hold carry your soul away
This was our brother
This was our son
This shepherd young and mild
This unassuming one
We all gasp this can’t happen here
We’re all much too civilized
Where can these monsters hide
But they are knocking on our front door
They’re rocking in our cradles
They’re preaching in our churches
And eating at our tables
I search my soul
My heart and in my mind
To try and find forgiveness
This is someone’s child
With pain unreconciled
Filled up with father’s hate
Mother’s neglect
I can forgive
But I will not forget
Scarecrow crying
Waiting to die wondering why
Scarecrow trying
Rising above all in the name of love

Source: “Scarecrow,” written by Melissa Etheridge. Copyright © 1999 MFE Music (ASCAP). All rights reserved. Used by permission.
This quote could be humorous if not so tragic:

In a New England college where I taught, the presence of a few lesbians threw the more conservative heterosexual students and faculty into a panic. The two lesbian students and we two lesbian instructors met with them to discuss their fears. One of the students said, “I thought homophobia meant fear of going home after a residency.” And I thought, how apt. Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. (Anzaldua, 1987, pp. 19-20)

We must arouse educators—if they are silent on the matter—to examine their complicity and silence on gay bashing, teasing, and violence against minorities and those perceived as different in schools and society. The constant harassment and marginalization that until recently were sanctioned by law and practices outside of schools produce the kind of psychic/psychological death that Brandon expresses and struggles against in his poem. Others, like Jim Wheeler, do not struggle successfully. As educators, we must stop making young people struggle to overcome and stave off psychological—and possibly actual—death. Aston’s recommendations must become an integral part of teacher education workshops, administrative policy, and classroom practices. Aston (2001b) recommends the following:

Establish and maintain gay-straight alliances, where students and staff, whether gay or straight, could get together for mutual support and understanding without being branded or labeled as one or the other. Include [GLBT] issues in the curriculum. Sadly, such [curricular materials and] alliances, I found, are frequently against school and/or district policy. Indeed any mention of homosexuality, whether in sex ed., health, history, or any other subject, is frequently not allowed. Stop the antigay language, even when kids say “that’s so gay” . . . I would never again let another bit of such “language” go unchallenged, so help me God. I would speak up and out, and add my voice to all those who seek full civil rights and liberty for the GLBT community. Finally, I would no longer remain silent, or in any way equivocate. (p. 71)

Can all educators take such a positive ethical stance as professors Aston and Franklin? We hope so!

INSTITUTIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO HETERONORMATIVE OPPRESSION

There are many ways in which schools (often unintentionally) allow heteronormative oppression to create a climate of fear, hate, and violence and contribute to Aston and Franklin’s “societal sense of permission” to marginalize, abuse, or assault gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals—or the children of LGBTI+Q parents. For example, by selectively choosing not to intervene when students or others verbally express homophobia, such as “that’s so gay” or “you faggot,” teachers and administrators become tacitly complicit in endorsing a climate of intolerance. Similarly, a climate of fear, hate, and
violence is reinforced when school leaders fail to intervene to put an end to verbal or physical assault on LGBTIQ students or children of LGBTIQ families. In fact, allowing taunts, ill-intentioned teasing, and bullying of any kind tends to marginalize and abuse young people in the schools. Other ways in which schools contribute to heteronormative oppression include:

1. Ignoring patriarchal, sexist, heterosexist, and homophobic remarks on the part of faculty or staff.
2. Denying that heterosexism and homophobia exist in a school despite clear evidence of the same.
3. Assuming that all students and their parents are heterosexual, as well as all staff, and expressing this assumption in school announcements, documents, and publications.
4. Failing to specifically include heterosexist harassment in faculty/staff training and in-service programs designed to counter sexual harassment.
5. Permitting discrimination against gay men or lesbians in hiring and/or retention policies.
6. Disallowing Gay–Straight Alliances or other programs or activities designed to assure the civil rights and safety of students perceived to be gay, lesbian, or children of the same.
7. Disallowing any mention of or discussion of LGBTIQ topics in the classroom, even in health or social studies classes.
8. Failing to include literature or other media dealing with the topics of gay men and lesbians in the school library, and failing to mention the sexuality of famous authors, scientists, and leaders in the school curriculum, even when such information is directly related to the topic of study, such as references to gay love or romance in poetry or literature by a gay author.
9. Failing to include the contributions of gay men and lesbians to history and culture or to include the LGBTIQ communities in multicultural curricula.

Schools can resist these institutional contributions to heteronormative oppression by helping to ensure the physical and emotional safety and well-being of all students, including gay or lesbian students or children of the same. They can accomplish these goals through well-defined staff development, policy, student support, and curriculum. For example, in designing staff development activities that would promote the safety and well-being of all students, educational leaders could train faculty and staff to recognize and effectively intervene against heterosexist harassment. In the area of policy, school leaders might permit and foster Gay–Straight Student/Staff Alliances on school campuses. Student support activities might include the establishment of connections with PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network), or similar organizations with outreach programs to families and communities to address the shared issues of heterosexism and homophobia in schools and society. Finally, in the area of curriculum, school leaders might insist that specific moral training be provided in empathy, respect, and inclusion for all school students, beginning in the primary grades. This would include cognitive, affective, and experiential components specifically designed to include LGBTIQ students and families. (See Table 9.2 for a summary of these and other recommendations.)
### TABLE 9.2  Ways in Which Schools Can Resist Heteronormative Oppression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF ACTIVITY</th>
<th>RECOMMENDATIONS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Staff development</td>
<td>• Establish peer intervention and other student/staff training programs on bullying and nonviolent conflict resolution techniques.</td>
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<td>• Train faculty and staff to recognize and effectively intervene against heterosexist harassment. Also, train them in ways to assist students who are</td>
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<td>victims of this type of harassment.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Employ counselors who are trained in awareness of heterosexism and its effects on students. These counselors should be aware of and sensitive to the</td>
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<td>gender identity and developmental issues commonly found among adolescents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>• Permit and foster Gay–Straight Student/Staff Alliances on school campuses.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Establish clearly stated antiheterosexist harassment policies—for both students and staff—with clear penalties and consequences. These policies</td>
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<td></td>
<td>should be consistently enforced and should include specific penalties for failure to intervene on the part of faculty or staff.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student support</td>
<td>• Establish connections with PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network), or similar organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with outreach programs to families and communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>• Offer resources such as library books and films that promote inclusion of gay men, lesbians, and gay and lesbian families.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Include the study of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and intersex and transgender (LGBTIQ) persons and their current and historical roles in society</td>
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<td>in multicultural curricula.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Incorporate into the curriculum specific moral training in empathy, respect, and inclusion for all students, beginning at the primary grades. Focus</td>
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<td>specifically on cognitive, affective, and experiential components that include LGBTIQ students and families.</td>
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### LGBTIQ ACTIVISM AND STRATEGIES FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

Lesbian, gay, and queer movements have, so far, depended on the involvement of individuals as the primary drivers of social action. Yet we know from the experience of past movements for social change (and particularly the experience of labor movements) that individuals need to have structural representation in order to maintain the energy needed for sustained opposition. Individuals working against their oppressors, whether in the workplace or neighborhood, cannot succeed without a mechanism that can play a larger role in incorporating them into communities of resistance where mutual recognition is present (Kirsch, 2000, p. 118).

Recently, one of us was invited to participate in a panel discussion at the Clark Montessori High School in Cincinnati. The event was organized with the specific aim of helping students to become effective agents for social change. Many of them had previously
expressed frustration over the abstract classroom discussions of social injustices that left them with an unclear sense of what they could do.

In light of these expressed desires, the teachers and administrators of Clark Montessori convened a panel of social activists—some heterosexual and some from the LGBTIQ community—to share ideas about how high school students could become involved in helping to correct social inequities. The panelists included a White, gay university professor engaged in educational policy research and LGBTIQ issues; a Latina youth activist and spoken word artist with the local Hispanic ministry center; an African American spoken word artist on the board of a local community council; and a White criminal justice activist who also coordinates the Hip Hop Youth Arts Center in Cincinnati.

After brief introductions by each panel member to the assembly of approximately 250 students from the ninth through the twelfth grades, the panelists addressed questions generated by the students. These questions included such topics as the following:

- Why do you feel that art is the way to nurture the community?
- What are your beliefs concerning marriage?
- Why are you fighting for gay/lesbian rights?
- What are the biggest problems facing gay/lesbian teenagers in high school?
- What can we do as advocates for gay/lesbian rights?
- Should students be taught about gay/lesbian issues in high schools?
- What is your motivation for becoming a social activist?

Though these questions were ordinarily directed to a particular panelist, several members on the panel often responded to the same question.

After about an hour of the moderated question–answer format, students broke up into smaller groups for follow-up discussions. Each group was facilitated by one of the teachers at Clark Montessori. During this time, the invited panelists were individually shepherded from group to group in order to engage in more informal discussions with smaller numbers of students. The chief aim of these break-out sessions was to discuss general issues of inequality—highlighting those that affect teenagers—and to strategize plans for direct community action.

This event serves as a model of the kinds of activities and experiences that school leaders can facilitate for their students in order to foster among young people a sense of involvement with issues of social justice. By bringing together community activists of different genders, races, ages, and social concerns, students can witness the similarities of the larger issues of gender, racial, and sexual oppression. Collaboration among coalitions of diverse groups can thus strengthen the efforts to create a more just society.

HETERO-NORMATIVITY AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Gay identity constructions reinforce the heteronormativity of the dominant hetero-/homosexual code. If homosexuality and heterosexuality are a coupling in which each presupposes the other, each being present in the invocation of the other, and in which this


