



## INTRODUCTION

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*I was thinking about the question, “How can we make our schools safe?” Schools are safe. They are just big buildings with non-skid stairs. We are doing things to make a safe place unsafe. Perhaps phrasing it the way we do absolves us of the responsibility for making the schools unsafe.*

—Sally

As a former high school English teacher, I daily observed the prejudice against gay and lesbian students. Many times throughout the day, I combated the hate language that some of my students endured in the hallway and the cafeteria. The pain and agony that so many GLBT students endure is unacceptable. Schools are supposed to be safe places. They are built to be places where students and teachers can create atmospheres where creativity, thoughts, and intellectual growth take place. Schools are built to be safe. New schools cost millions of dollars and are intended to provide places for inquiry and success. They are places where stairs are covered with “slip resistant strips,” nice fresh paint, and asbestos-free hallways.

The new schools that I have been in recently have state-of-the-art lab equipment meant to provide safety for students doing scientific experiments. Goggles and safety equipment line the lab like fresh wallpaper. They have cameras that “watch” the school parking lot. They have visitor passes and clipboards for “sign-ins and sign-outs.” They have Heimlich posters in the cafeteria to instruct others should someone choke. There are always “caution

signs” when mopping is taking place. There are voices clamoring down the hallways instructing students to not run.

Yet, safe schools have become unsafe places for a number of GLBT students. During an interview that I conducted in 2009 with a group of teachers, a teacher read a recent research brief that stated one-fifth of teachers engaged in homophobic remarks in front of students (GLSEN, 2007). The teacher whom I was interviewing responded, “It’s shameful to accept and tolerate this...aren’t teachers leaders in change?” She went on to describe how horrible she would feel if she knew that she had made a student “go home and cry” after school. After reading the brief, she was completely heartbroken. She had no idea that so much of the pain and torment that many GLBT students face in their “safe schools” was caused by faculty and staff, some perhaps, unintentional.

To add to the troubling nature of this problem, many of the teachers and administrators who want to reclaim a “safe school” do not know how to address the problem. It becomes problematic when teachers, administrators, and staff are ill-equipped in addressing this challenge. That being said, most research suggests that professional development is a viable avenue for preparing educators to address this problem. However, presently, there is no literature exploring how an effective professional development should be structured or the results of such a professional development. There is no model for school administrators to use to construct effective professional development that addresses homophobia.

For this reason, I have decided to write this text. From current research, my own research with this topic, and my own experience as a teacher attempting to create a safe learning environment, I am attempting to provide a way to help pre-service teachers, teachers, administrators, and staff change an “unsafe place” back into the “safe place” it was created to be. Additionally, I write this text for the many GLBT students, who will go to school today and be pushed into a locker, or called a “fag,” or will skip school because of his or her fear. I write this text for the teacher who goes home and cries because she did not know how to address the hatred. I write this text because one more tool in the hands of educators to address this problem is one more step in making “unsafe places safe again.”

In doing so, this text is comprised of seven chapters. Chapter 1 explores the problem of homophobia and how our own naivety concerning homophobia influences educational settings. Chapter 2 gives a voice to GLBT students who have experienced homophobia in their educational journeys. Chapter 3 discusses how one group of teachers defined homophobia and grappled with the issues surrounding it. The chapter also discusses how teachers believe homophobia “plays out in schools.” Chapter 4 explains teachers’ views of

tolerance and masculinity and how those items relate to homophobia. Chapter 5 examines teachers' discussions about changing school environments into safe places for GLBT students. Chapter 6 explores what teachers believe about creating safe places. Chapter 7 discusses final thoughts about making unsafe places safe. Finally, Allyson Linn discusses her journey as a teacher in addressing homophobia in the Afterword.

In each chapter, I provide pre-reading questions, a reflection area, and post-chapter discussion questions. I have provided the reflection piece because research suggests that educators must be reflective in order to create change. Also, I believe that in addressing social problems in our schools, we, as teachers, must examine our own thoughts. We must conceptualize our own actions and beliefs. Thus, I encourage that one engage with the text by reflecting on the questions that are presented. These reflective responses enable one to measure his or her journey through one's engagement with making safe places unsafe. In doing so, I anticipate that a deeper and richer experience can emerge from the reading.