

# What Happens When the Kids Grow Up?

## Perceived Long-Term Effects of an Openly Gay Teacher on U.S. Middle School Students (10-13 yrs)

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- *Education and Urban Society*, 32 (3), May 2000, 399-412
- *Queering Elementary Education: Advancing the Dialogue about Sexualities and Schooling*, edited by William Letts IV and James Sears, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 83-93

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## Presentation Overview

- ***Context:*** Political Debates About Openly LGBT Educators in the U.S.
- ***Background:*** Researcher as Openly Gay Middle School Teacher, 1978-1984
- ***Research Questions:***
  - In what ways do young adults (age 29-34) recall their experiences with an openly gay teacher during their middle school years? How do they think about the experience almost twenty years hence?
  - What long-term impact do these young adults believe an openly gay teacher may have had on their lives?
- ***Methods:*** Identifying, Locating, Surveying, and Interviewing Former Students
- ***Data for this Presentation:*** 13 Surveys of Former Students
- This is exploratory research. There are major limitations to generalizing from this data.

## **Findings**

- **How do they think about the experience almost twenty years hence?**

- 1. More than half of the students recalled wondering about why having an openly gay teacher was such a big deal.**
- 2. Any relationship with a sexual component seemed a bit abstract and removed from several of the students.**
- 3. Many of the students surveyed reported extensive conversations with other students of which the teacher was unaware.**

- What long-term impact do these young adults believe an openly gay teacher may have had on their lives?**

**1. All students surveyed report feeling altered in some way by the experience of having an openly gay teacher.**

**2. A majority of the respondents report that they believe they are less homophobic because of an early experience with a gay teacher.**

**“Having a gay teacher made me believe that there is nothing wrong with being gay.”**

**--Max, 29 years old**

**“It made me not homophobic, or even not the type of homophobia where Cambridge-liverals-who-see-having-a gay-friend-as-a-status-symbol type**

**of homophobic. It more has affected family members, friends, and co-workers (close and acquaintances) who are gay, because they have one less person being weird about their sexuality around them: me. That's important.**

**“It's like that butterfly effect theory. Through just me, Eric slightly helped a handful of strangers two decades later. I can just be friends with gay people (if they're nice). I don't need to go through a 'training period.' They don't need to explain themselves. That's a relief. I am a mini-vacation in a heterosexual world.”**

**--Laura, 33 years old**

**“Introduced to a real live gay person at this age, I think it has always just seemed normal to me that some people you meet will be gay and some won't.”**

**--Nick, 29 years old**

**“I never really thought about how having a gay teacher in the eighth grade affected me until I received this survey. In looking back on the years since Eric was my teacher, I have probably been much more accepting of people who were gay,**

**albeit not consciously. I put my newborn son in the care of a gay man for the first 1 1/2 years of his life. Some people questioned that decision, but he received better care from that man than any day-care center could have ever provided. I never once worried about any misconduct or about my son being gay because of the care provider he had. I don't know if that was partly due to the experience I had with Eric, or if it is totally unrelated, but it didn't hurt my ability to accept difference in people's lifestyle choices."**

**--Heather, 33 years old**

**3. Most respondents report that having an openly gay teacher at a young age made them more open to the full range of human diversity.**

**"I also think that I'm probably more open to other kinds of people in general as a result of having a middle-school teacher who was gay."**

**--Hannah, 33 years old**

**"I think it did help. I feel I have an easy time dealing with pretty much anyone. Their sexual identity doesn't make me uncomfortable..."**

**Schools should teach our children what exists in the world around them. This world has gay people in it. It has black people too. And Chinese. And pianists...”**

**--Nick, 29 years old**

**4. Several students reported that their views about political activism and anti-discrimination efforts might have been affected by having a gay teacher involved in social movements.**

**“I’d had other gay teachers, but I suppose in Eric’s case he offered an example of a gay man who seemed very responsible and active in politics, and I think it was this side of the experience that was remarkable.”**

**--Brian, 33 years old**

**5. Several students report that their understanding and experience of their own sexuality was affected by having an openly gay teacher during the middle school years.**

**“I didn’t think that ‘gayness’ could be transmitted. I was not interested in exploring my sexuality (in so far as wondering about orientation) in 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade. In high school I wondered if I would ever have a girlfriend, and sometimes wondered if I was gay when I didn’t, but I never linked the questioning to my gay teachers.”**

**--Caleb, 29 years old**

**“[Due to this early experience with a gay teacher,] I was more comfortable with my entire sexuality probably...Twelve-year olds are squeamish and easily embarrassed (at least I was). I also respected [Eric]. This is all-important because it all, coupled with his seeming security in his sexuality and self-respect, was a definite influence in my shaping opinion of the entire spectrum of sexuality.”**

**--Laura, 32 years old**

## **Analysis, Interpretation, & Reflections**

- **An educator's sexual or gender identity may be more meaningful to adults than children.**
- **LGBT organizers and anti-gay activists may both be mischaracterizing the influence LGBT teachers might have on students.**
- **While the central U.S. debate on LGBT teachers focuses on the influence on a child's sexual development, the influence on a child's moral and political development may be more central.**
- **This study provides evidence suggesting that an openly gay teacher is not likely to "turn children gay."**
- **What does it mean that no respondents identify as LGBT?**

