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BOOK REVIEW

LESBIAN AND TRANSGENDER ISSUES IN EDUCATION: PROGRAMS, POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Edited By James T. Sears, Ph.D . Publisher (2005). ISBN # 978-1-56023-524-8

Reviewed by Justin K. Teres*

“*Queer and faggot* were common taunts back in the 1960s – just as they often are today. If one wore green to school on Thursdays, then one was surely queer and everyone mercilessly harassed the person. I avoided green on Thursdays,”¹ recounts Rani Sonno, Director of the University of California at Los Angeles LGBT Campus Resource Center.

For members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersexed (LGBTI) community, who grew up as sexual and gender minorities, memories like this are an unfortunately common experience. In *Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Issues in Education: Programs, Policies and Practices*, an anthology of scholarly articles edited by James T. Sears, PhD, authors examine policies affecting LGBTI youths within academic communities. They reflect upon their own experiences as youths in the LGBTI community and address areas of law and society that impacted whether or not they had comfortable environments in which to learn. Authors also contend that children should be exposed to controversial topics, such as a societal construct of gender and the normality of homosexuality, as early as elementary school.

The anthology makes clear that many members of the LGBTI community confront similar experiences involving negative sentiment from classmates in insensitive and

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homophobic environments. However, the articles also convey that segments of the LGBTI community encounter differing struggles. For instance, some articles explain that transgendered students have shown a higher level of attempted and actual suicide at the high school level than other LGBTI students.² Another piece recognizes the distinct challenges faced by

transgendered college students and offers suggestions for promoting inclusion, such as training of university administrators on transgender topics, the use of trans-inclusive language in university documents, and the addition of “gender identity” to university non-discrimination policies.³

Sears makes clear that LGBTI students run into similar educational problems on a global scale, without a regard to cultural or political boundaries. This is demonstrated through a series of letters from Japanese LGBTI high school students, who felt a sense of isolation, expressed embarrassment in their sexuality and/or gender identity, and found solace only in Japanese LGBTI magazines such as *Buddy* and

Fabulous, which indicate to them that there are others out there who feel the same. Sears also includes the memoirs of three lesbians from, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, who reflect on their common educational experiences, which included hiding their true identities but feeling a strong independence from feminist stereotypes.

Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Issues in Education also addresses legal aspects of problems in LGBTI education. Examining efforts made to curtail homophobic and anti-transgendered behavior within schools, Sears investigates the issue of bullying when manifested as homophobia. Through the lens of a Canadian experience, Gerald Walton states that some school districts have modified mission statements to be inclusive of all students’ safety by criminalizing bullying against those under the age of eighteen.⁴ However, bullying that targets LGBTI students in particular remains largely un-addressed by the law and school officials, as does the societal question of why homophobia becomes a source of bullying in the first place.

The book also covers the area of school-sponsored programs addressing issues such as gay-straight alliance groups and LGBTI-inclusive educational materials. Articles identified school-sanctioned gay-straight alliances as influential in creating LGBTI awareness and in developing supportive ‘safe spaces’ for LGBTI students, but to be successful, such groups require a significant level of support from school administrators, which is harmfully lacking. Discussing other roadblocks, Patti Capel Schwartz describes her experience with an educational program

entitled *It's Elementary*, which advocates the teaching of same-sex relationships, the normality of LGBTI individuals, and other relevant issues within classroom educational aids.⁵ Unfortunately, when integrating these controversial standpoints into lesson plans, schools encounter difficulties such as hesitancy of teachers and the necessity of permission slips from parents, both of which signify a sense that the material is objectionable.

Overall, *Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Issues in Education* provides a broad picture of the state of LGBTI education policy, not only in the United States, but around the world. Sears' article selection also attempts to encompass these issues from every

education level, from elementary school through the completion of graduate programs. The compilation of articles unifies a vast array of issues, but the broad scope of articles can be overwhelming at times. However, the content demonstrates an important LGBTI theme: every segment of the community, whether gay men, lesbians, or a transgendered individual, who faces a world that refuses to acknowledge their most

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basic identity, faces unique problems in their own right. These differences add to the complexity of LGBTI education policy. This complexity, intertwined with a heterosexist majority in most schools, leaves LGBTI students with many challenges left to face.

ENDNOTES

* Justin Teres is a second-year law student at American University Washington College of Law, where he serves as Executive Director of the Lambda Law Society, WCL's affinity group of LGBTI students and allies.

¹ James T. Sears, Ph.D., ed. *Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Issues in Education: Programs, Policies and Practices*, New York: Harrington Park Press, 2005, p. 21.

² P. Jayne Bopp, *A School-Based Program to Improve Life Skills and to Prevent HIV Infection in Multicultural Transgendered Youth in Hawaii*, in *GAY, LESBIAN AND TRANSGENDER ISSUES IN EDUCATION: PROGRAMS, POLICIES AND PRACTICES* 147, 155 (James T. Sears, Ph.D ed., 2005)

³ Brett Beemyn, *Serving the Needs of Transgender College Students*, in *GAY, LESBIAN AND TRANSGENDER ISSUES IN EDUCATION: PROGRAMS, POLICIES AND PRACTICES* 105, 115-119 (James T. Sears, Ph.D ed., 2005).

⁴ Gerald Walton, *Bullying and Homophobia in Canadian Schools: The Politics of Policies, Programs, and Educational Leadership*, in *GAY, LESBIAN AND*

TRANSGENDER ISSUES IN EDUCATION: PROGRAMS, POLICIES AND PRACTICES 89, 90 (James T. Sears, Ph.D ed., 2005).

⁵ Patti Capel Swartz, *It's Elementary in Appalachia: Helping Prospective Teachers and Their Students Understand Sexuality and Gender*, in *GAY, LESBIAN AND TRANSGENDER ISSUES IN EDUCATION: PROGRAMS, POLICIES AND PRACTICES* 125, 126 (James T. Sears, Ph.D ed., 2005).