



Educational Considerations

Volume 4 | Number 2

Article 8

9-1-1976

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Recommended Citation

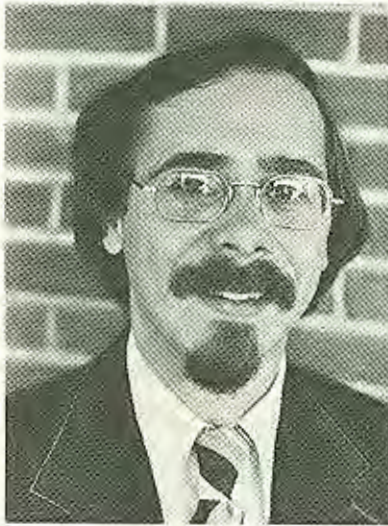
Mathews, Walter M. (1977) "Homosexuality: out of the educational closet," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 4: No. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2044>

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This article confronts the issue of homosexuality as it relates to the school. The treatment that educators have generally given to homosexuality reflects an unfortunate potpourri of prejudice and misinformation that is shared by a great portion of the public. This article provides basic information to educators who have not been in a position to objectively consider the issue of homosexuality and the school, and attempts to nudge educators toward further fact-finding and consideration of the problems so that they may foster change in their schools and communities.

Homosexuality: out of the educational closet

by Walter M. Mathews



Walter Mathews, associate professor of educational administration at the University of Mississippi, teaches quantitatively-oriented courses in the graduate school of education. He has taught for several years in his home town of Philadelphia in addition to teaching in Turkey and Sri Lanka on Fulbright grants. In 1971 he received the Ph.D. in the research training program at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. He is active in regional and national activities in the areas of computers, research and measurement and was the founder of the Mid-South Educational Research Association. He is also the director of the HEW-funded Women's Educational Equity Project at the University of Mississippi.

Of all the activities of human beings, those connected with sex have been subject to the most intense efforts at regulation. Various societies have had varying attitudes towards sex, ranging from almost unlimited permissiveness to absolute prohibition. Our Western Christian civilization, based on Judaic morality, has clearly tended to be repressive in this area (Linder, 1963, 57)*

Our schools reflect society and enforce and transmit this repression. During the years of bodily growth and sexual maturation, shame and guilt are frequently attached to various forms of erotic play, while illogical and mythical fears, anxieties and punishments are too often brought to bear on sex-related activity.

The teacher's impulsive response to children's sex-play is in many cases modified by the "acceptability" of the activity. A young boy showing affection to a girl might be smilingly accepted as being "cute," but a boy showing affection to another boy too often would be treated as exhibiting an unnatural latent tendency that must be stamped out—for the good of society as well as participants.

The school's reaction to homosexuality generally has been one of disgust, anger, hostility and sometimes pity. Shame and embarrassment are the school's commonly used tools in the repair of homosexual tendencies in students. But, what is the school's reaction when homosexuality is a trait of a teacher?

Homosexuality in the Teaching Ranks

Joseph Acanfora was graduated from Pennsylvania State University in June of 1972. He accepted a position to teach earth science to eighth graders in Rockville, Maryland. While he was a senior, he brought suit against

*Even so, many well-known people have "come out of the closet," a few of the women are the Greek poet, Sappho; Queen Christina of Sweden and writers: Emily Dickinson, Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf. Some men include the Greek philosophers: Zeno, Socrates, and Aristotle; great leaders: Alexander the Great, Emperor Hadrian, Richard the Lion-Hearted, Richard II, King James I, Frederick the Great, King Gustav III, T.E. Lawrence (of Arabia), Dag Hammarskjöld; others include: Sophocles, Leonardo da Vinci, Christopher Marlowe, John Milton, Lord Byron, Hans Christian Andersen, Walt Whitman, Samuel Butler, Peter Tchaikovsky, Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, E.M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, Jean Cocteau, W.H. Auden, Jean Genet, Tennessee Williams and Brandon Behan. (Wallechinsky and Wallace, 1975, 1006.)

the University seeking equal rights for homosexuals. Soon after his legal dispute was publicized, he was transferred from his classroom to the central office of the school system. In May of 1974 he lost his legal appeal to be reassigned to the classroom. (See *The New York Times*, 1972).

The case is another instance of the growing visibility and militancy of homosexuals, challenging the long-standing educational response of dismissing acknowledged homosexuals. Most state laws permit the removal of teachers—even if they have tenure—if they engage in “immoral or unprofessional conduct.”

Several American cities have anti-discrimination laws protecting homosexuals. Washington, D.C. has perhaps the most comprehensive law, but at least some employment is protected by law for homosexuals in Minneapolis, Detroit, Ann Arbor and San Francisco. Other cities that have banned some form of discrimination against homosexuals include Columbus, Ohio; Seattle, East Lansing and Berkeley. Chicago, Philadelphia and New York City are considering laws. (Johnson & Herron, 1974).

Recent court decisions have held that homosexuality in and by itself is not cause for disqualifying a teacher, and that is the official policy of the New York City Board of Education. In 1969 the California Supreme Court in the case of *Morrison v. State Board of Education* (82 cal. rptr. 175, sup. ct. 1969) held that the State Board of Education cannot abstractly characterize homosexual conduct as immoral unless that conduct indicates that the person is unfit to teach. The court added that the power of the state to regulate professions and conditions of government employment must not arbitrarily impair the right of the individual to live his private life, apart from his job, as he deems fit. Teachers' unions and educational and legal groups have frequently supported accused homosexuals. The United Federation of Teachers in New York City generally defends the right of homosexual teachers to teach, and the National Education Association financed the *Acanfora* litigation.

Still, employment in education is not easy for acknowledged homosexuals. Because we make it difficult for homosexuals to be happy, many are not.

Some Thought for Educators

Traditionally, principals and school boards have not had too much difficulty in detecting homosexuals when they applied for teaching positions. Teachers, too, seem to be able to spot the homosexual—for that matter, many of us pride ourselves on our ability to pick the “queer” out of crowd.

I do not mean to say that *all* male homosexuals walk with a sway and have a limp wrist or verbal lisp, but they are usually “arty” or “feminine” or at least non-athletic—*aren't they?* When I was in high school, it was easy: they all wore either yellow or orange on Thursdays.

It is a common misconception that men who appear physically effeminate, with extra fat deposits, wide hips, feminine hair distribution, etc. are more likely than others to be homosexuals. This assumption was tested at the military induction center in Detroit, and the finding was that homosexuals were no different physically from individuals who have a heterosexual orientation (Ruben, 1965, 8-9).

The truth is that homosexuals who are obviously ef-

feminate males or mannish females constitute only a small fraction of the homosexual population. Most cannot be identified simply on the basis of appearance or behavior. An estimate by the Institute of Sex Research of Indiana University at Bloomington is that perhaps 15 per cent of male homosexuals and five per cent of female homosexuals are easily recognizable. A recently published study of 2,437 homosexual men in the United States, the Netherlands and Denmark who were not psychiatric patients reported that most of its respondents—68 per cent in the United States, for example—still attempted to conceal their homosexuality from heterosexuals (Weinberg and Williams, 1974). Forty-five per cent said they would not want to give up homosexuality even if they could, as opposed to 28 per cent who would wish to do so, with 27 per cent “not sure.”

Hooker's studies (1963, 141-61) of well-adjusted homosexuals in the community indicated that, on careful and objective psychological testing, they could not be differentiated from a control group of adjusted heterosexuals in their communities. These findings have been confirmed by other investigators of the homosexual community.

The military services expend considerable effort to exclude homosexuals from their ranks, yet Gebhard (1972) found that 47 per cent of his sample of homosexuals had military records, and of these, 75 per cent had received honorable discharges. Williams and Weinberg (1971) found that almost all homosexuals in the military served with honor.

Freedman (1971) summarized more than a dozen of the many recent studies which show that when homosexual subjects are compared with heterosexual control groups, except for sexual preference, there is no significant difference between them. Simon and Gagnon (1967) pointed out that when the mental health of homosexuals and heterosexuals is judged by the same standard, homosexuals are found to function quite well.

Parker (1972, 695) asserted that as the study of homosexuality shifts from the medical-psychiatric to the sociological field, researchers are coming to look at homosexuals as a minority group distinguished by their sexual nonconformity and characterized by needs and attitudes similar to those of other minorities. In the vocabulary of the social sciences, Parker concluded, homosexuals are not sick, sinful or criminal; they are deviants. The American Psychiatric Association decided in April of 1974 to stop describing “homosexuality per se” as a mental illness. Instead it voted to define problem cases as those “who are bothered by, in conflict with or wish to change their sexual orientations” (Kihss, 1974).

In 1935, Freud wrote in his famous letter to a distressed American mother: “Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced by certain arrest of sexual development.” (see *SIECUS*, 1970, 5)

In the majority of human societies studied homosexual behavior has been condoned or even encouraged for at least some members of the population. It should be noted that this majority does not include the complex modern societies and that the meaning or significance of a given sexual practice varies widely from culture to culture (Ruben, 1965, 8). Weinberg and Williams (1974) described the United States as one of the most anti-

homosexual of modern Western societies in terms of laws and popular opinions.

The Institute for Sex Research prefers to speak in terms of homosexual behavior rather than of homosexuality, and to classify persons according to their position on a 7-point scale that ranges from exclusive heterosexual behavior to exclusive homosexual behavior. The Institute estimated that one out of about 25 white males in our society is exclusively homosexual all of his life. For females, the estimated incidence of homosexual behavior is about half of that of males.

Now four out of 100 is a small ratio, but when we consider the hundreds or thousands of students in any one of our schools, we begin to see the sizable minority involved. And, recall, these estimates are for the extreme position on the 7-point scale, i.e., exclusive homosexual behavior.

The Last Hope: A Sensitive Educator

Traditionally as teachers we have avoided any discussion of homosexuality while supervising student behavior—particularly in dormitories and washrooms—and even when confronting some we suspected. Weinberg and Williams (1974) concluded from their international study of homosexuals, that probably their most salient finding pertains to the beneficial effects of a *supportive* environment for homosexuals, which included social relations with other homosexuals, their institutions and publications.

For reasons of tradition, societal pressure and ignorance, the school usually provides the opposite environment. It is not expected that schools will now sponsor gay-student groups, however. (Although that may not be a bad idea.) The first step toward change in a school usually happens in a nervous conversation in the counselor's office or with a trusted teacher after class.

Homosexuals are individuals, and aside from their sexual activity, little can be said about them as a group except possibly for their paranoia with respect to "straight" society. They have the same wants, needs and fears as all people—including the needs to be recognized, liked, accepted and understood.

Assuming a counselor attempts to meet these needs for *all* students, he or she could take another step for homosexuals by becoming familiar with the local and national organizations of, for and about homosexuals—from NIMH to community gay-lib groups—and by having copies of some representative literature from these groups for distribution or circulation to students, parents and colleagues.

According to Hooker (1961) efforts should center around three things: (1) creating a climate that allows homosexuality to be openly and sensibly discussed and objectively handled; (2) providing for adequate sex education of both parents and children, so that the homosexual can understand himself better and the community can free itself of its punitive attitudes toward all sexuality; and (3) increasing efforts to provide family coun-

sel and child-guidance services designed not only to promote healthy family life but also to provide specific help for parents whose children show early signs of developmental difficulties. A sensitive teacher or counselor is frequently in the best position in a school to help mold a climate that allows the issue of homosexuality to be sensibly discussed and handled in an objective way. It starts with one student contact and extends to and through all the other contacts that he or she has, and these must include other sensitive administrators and teachers.

Gay is not beautiful to all of us, but it is a way of life for a significant minority of our students. Shall we continue to treat them with disgust, anger, and hostility or merely choose to inflict our damage by failing to be knowledgeable about the realities of homosexuality and by ignoring the existence of homosexuals in our schools?

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