

Homophobia in the Schools: A Personal Approach

By Diane Labelle

When lesbian couples decide to have children, it is not a quick an easy decision to be made.

The process itself is not only time consuming, but also emotionally demanding. Part of the process is confronting society's homophobia, and forcefully taking our rightful places as women and parents. In addition to that, having children means having to face our own homophobia, our fear of openly being ourselves, of being public, of outing ourselves every time.

When Suzy and I decided to have children, we had first thought of adopting. But when we considered that we would have to hide our relationship during the home visit, we felt that this was not the route for us. We didn't want to start our children's lives with a lie. The cost of hiding, we knew from experience, was too high. Since disclosure of our relationship removed the possibility of adopting, we chose alternative insemination.

Though we didn't lie about our choice, we also did not offer the information voluntarily. To our friends, we were at ease to tell them of our choice, and kept them abreast of the developments. But to family members and work-mates, we stayed silent. The main reason was to avoid the unpleasantness of their reactions. Even when our attempts at pregnancy failed over a three year period, we did not share the pain with others, and did not get any comfort or support. The fear of telling them was still greater than the pain we felt. This, we know, was our own homophobia at play.

During our attempts to impregnate me, I was put into a position of outing myself at work. This was a great risk for two main reasons. I work as an elementary teacher in a Catholic school, and prior to this job, I had been fired because of my sexual orientation. Despite this, I made an appearance on the Claire Lamarche show dealing with same sex couples wanting children.

The show aired two months or so after we had taped it, and truthfully, I had forgotten about it. I became aware of it the morning following the airing, when some of my students came into the classroom shouting "I saw you on Claire Lamarche last night. Is that why you left early yesterday?" My response? Internal panic, and then I responded only to the last part of the statement and told them I had left early because I had gone to the dentist. I didn't lie, but I wasn't truthful either.

At first recess, I knew I had to speak to my administrator before all hell broke loose. So I closed the door and told her that I had appeared on Claire Lamarche, and that the students had seen the episode when it aired the night before, which meant that they knew, and probably their parents knew of my sexual orientation. She looked at me solemnly, then asked, "Our students watch French t.v.?" And that was it. She said she had no issue with my sexual orientation, and knew that it had no bearing on my teaching abilities. She also said that she would field all possible calls, and that I shouldn't worry. Her only concern

was my teaching Sex Education, since some parents might feel edgy about that. Feeling relieved that I had gotten off easy, I accepted.

Funny how we do that to ourselves. We don't see how we contribute to the overall problem in society in respect to homosexuality. It's like we grab at morsels of understanding and consider ourselves lucky to get anything. I was concerned about maintaining my job in this school, and thought that I was somehow choosing a better option for the students, that it would be better that my orientation be kept completely out of the classroom, and that the risk of my being removed from the classroom be kept to a minimum.

A few days later, when I finally got back to myself and had some time to think about it, I went back to my administrator, and told her that I felt it was wrong for me not to teach sex ed. since I had been doing it all along, and that we should just go on as usual. She was a little reluctant to agree, but after some thought, said that it was best for me to assume my responsibilities. I warned her that I would not hide from questions about homosexuality, and she agreed that I shouldn't. And so it went.

For the first time in twelve years of teaching sex ed., I have to admit it was one of the better discussions to take place. According to the curriculum, the topic of homosexuality is not included. However, one of the issues to discuss is physical and sexual attraction to others. It does not specify the opposite sex, and so I felt this was the window of opportunity. When we came upon this statement, I emphasized the use of the word other. A student questioned it, asking shouldn't it be the opposite sex? And I responded by saying, not always. From there we engaged in discussion about homosexuality.

I was pleased with the discussion, but I have to admit, some of the statements being made were difficult to take. The positive element was that their ideas about homosexuality were being challenged. They loved and respected me, and somehow that did not fit with their preconceived notions of homosexuals. Because of this, we then focused on how our ideas about things are formed, and we looked at all forms of discrimination in our world. The end result was that they were better informed, they still loved and respected me, and we all worked hard at identifying and naming prejudicial statements and behaviours.

After three years of failed pregnancies, we decided that Suzy would carry our children. She became pregnant on the first try, and we were overjoyed. At work, I had made an effort to be more open about my life, and people were slowly coming around. So when I announced that Suzy was pregnant, it was interesting to see their reactions. They could not openly show their shock or dismay, and at the same time had to say something. So I got many congratulations, but most of them forced. Over the next 7 months of school, I kept the topic fresh by constantly talking about the pregnancy and Suzy's trials. Eventually, they began to ask questions, and I knew then that they were beginning to open.

I was out at work, yet not really. We spoke about Sue's pregnancy in the staff-room, but it didn't go beyond those walls. But that had to change, and it was Jamie's birth that did it.

The first battle ensued was as a result of the school board's refusal to grant me a parental leave. Eventually, I was given a paid leave, but it was not classified as a parental leave. We could have fought it, but we were tired of fighting after our experience with my illegal dismissal from my last job.

The second confrontation involved telling my students that I had been absent because of the birth of my son. As it would be, the night I took Suzy to the hospital to have Jamie, behind us was one of my students accompanying her mother who was about to deliver her little brother. Her brother was born the same day as Jamie, and in the room next door. So any attempt to dilute the truth would be futile.

I had a lengthy discussion with my administrator about my return to work. I explained clearly that I had no intentions of hiding. I was proud of my son and of our family, and did not want to feel that I had to hide such a wonderful experience. She agreed, and offered again to field any calls, should there be a reaction on the part of the parents.

I was frightened and very nervous about having this discussion with my students. I explained that the reason I was away was because of the birth of my son, and that he had two moms. That went well, and then a student asked " But that doesn't mean that you are a , a.... lesbian?" I swallowed hard, and answered "Yes it does." Then I cringed as I saw her face register horror, then disgust. I looked around the room, wondering if others felt the same. There was whispering, and some giggles, and my heart sank. Then a wonderful young man put up his hand, and when given permission to speak, said "Then what you are saying is that you were away because you became a parent." "Yes, that's what I am saying", I responded with a sigh. He nodded, smiled, openly congratulated me, and then began to applaud. Soon, the whole class was applauding, and they were asking to see pictures.

There were no negative phone calls to field. The calls that came through were positive, thanking me and the school for being honest, for showing respect to their children for discussing the topic openly with them. I received cards of congratulations from parents, and gifts for Jamie. In addition, the parent's committee, through their president, made a statement that they would back me, no matter what.

Since then, I have been open about my life at school. Pictures of Suzy, Jamie and Sage are proudly displayed on and around my desk. Jamie and Sage are often in the school with me, and always welcomed. I do not hide who I am, and make sure that my family is present in this community. This, however, does not mean that there is no more homophobia in our school.

I am constantly in the process of outing myself at work. This is because of the turnover in staff and students. Each year, since Jamie's birth, there have been situations where I have had to address questions about my orientation with students who are not aware that I am a lesbian. And I watch the response, some positive, and some still very negative.

Though I am open about my life, it is difficult for adults and students to make the connection between me and the negative statements and behaviours they engage in or witness. The biggest insult children throw at each other is that they are gay, queer, a lesbo, etc... If they want to express disapproval of something they say "That's so gay." And generally, these statements are rarely addressed for what they are - prejudicial comments about people who are different.

Two years ago, I had the unfortunate experience of having to deal with a teacher's homophobic behaviour. I was asked to substitute in her classroom one day. As I was walking around the class, I spotted a handwritten composition on the computer table. The handwriting was that of the teacher. The composition was entitled "My Gay Teacher Goes to Queerland". I discovered that it was also posted on the wall outside the class. I reported it to the principal, who took immediate action, by removing the composition, and also reprimanding the teacher. I also made the request to address the issue directly with the class, which I did right after recess. In our discussion, I emphasized their negative use of the words gay and queer. For some, they made the connection, and for others, well at least they will have something to think about.

Teachers, on the whole, though they have adjusted, and to varying degrees, have come to accept me and my lifestyle, still remain uncomfortable in openly dealing with homophobia. The problem is not only discomfort, but the inability to identify what is homophobia. For example, just a month or so ago, I came outside to do my school yard supervision. As I entered the yard, I spotted a young boy running around calling another boy gay. "You're gay, you're gay..." His mother, who is a daycare worker at the school, spotted me and felt uncomfortable. She called her son over and told him that gay meant happy. I cringed. The child responded predictably, and continued his chant around the yard. After all, he just got permission to do it. The mother, distressed, called him over again and told him to stop saying gay, just say happy. And I cringed again. He stopped saying gay, but the source of the problem was not addressed.

Most often, teachers do not know how to deal with these statements, and try to make them go away. The fear is their association with the topic of homosexuality, and that it is not their place to talk about this. They fear parental disapproval, and want to stay far away from the issue. I have intervened at times, when students make these comments, and address the topic of prejudicial opinions. Yet I have been cautioned not to go too far.

Rare are the times that I hear that homophobic statements or behaviours are dealt with properly, but it does happen. Last year, a student in a grade four class asked her teacher if she could go to the office to speak to the principal. When the teacher asked why, the child said that she was upset with rumors the students were spreading about Ms. Labelle. The teacher asked what the children were saying, and the child said that they claimed that Ms. Labelle is a lesbian. The teacher's response was "Oh dearie, that isn't a rumor, it's the truth."

I applauded the teacher for her response, and made arrangements to go into the classroom and have an open discussion with the students about homosexuality. It went fairly well,

though there were still some students who went on about how it was gross and sick. There was worry on the part of the principal, yet I forced my hand, saying I had a right to address something that interfered with my freedom to work in a safe environment.

This is the argument I am presently using in proposing a workshop on homophobia for teachers and other adults working with children in our school. My concern is threefold. First, I can no longer tolerate the ignorance of people in respect to homosexuality, which leads to such situations as telling children that gay means happy. Second, I remember what it's like growing up as a gay person in a homophobic environment. After the coming out when Jamie was born, a parent approached me because of her suspicions that her son was gay. We had a long talk, and then I gave her some resources. She was very grateful, and hopefully this young man will have an easier time dealing with the issue than most do. The statistics on homosexuality and suicide are too frightening. For those students who will discover their same sex orientation, and for those who have homosexual parents or relatives, it is crucial that we deal with the issue head on.

Then finally, there is the most important reason of all - my children. Jamie started school this year, and already he has had to deal with children who tease him because of his differences. Regardless of where our children will go to school, they will be faced with homophobic statements and behaviours. If Suzy and I stay silent about it, then we are no better than the people who ignore the issue or try to make it go away by labeling it other than what it is - intolerance and ignorance of differences.

I am an educator, and my goal is the education of the whole child, not just the academics. My responsibility to the children I deal with on a daily basis, it to help them become the best that they can be. That means helping them to look at the world, and with the presentation of accurate information, allow them to make up their own ideas about things. This is my approach with my children, why not other children.

I have begun the process of attacking homophobia within my own school. I expect opposition and delays, but I have made a commitment to see it through. I owe it to my children, to all children who attend our school, and to myself as well. I also plan to carry it out beyond the walls of our school, so that we stop being silent about who we are, and take our rightful places in society.

I know it isn't going to be easy, but when it gets difficult, I know I can fall back on experiences over the last few years to guide me along. My coming out, despite the few negative incidences, has generally been accepted. My lifestyle, because it is present and there, is a non issue. I am just Ms. Labelle. And my presence, and unwillingness to hide, helps people to make a connection between real people and the abstract notion of homosexuality. It allows them the opportunity to question their views, and that is a lot.

This point was brought home to me by a past student of mine, who called me a few weeks ago to do an interview. Five years ago, when she was in my class, she had just arrived from the Bahamas, recently adopted into a new family. She struggled a great deal

that year, and I spent a lot of time with her, helping her to adjust and deal with the stresses of the changes in her life.

The next year, when Jamie was born and I came out, she was in high school. I met her and her mother at the mall one day. The mother came up to me and said that she admired my courage. That it must have been difficult to be honest and face hostility. I thanked her for her comments, and was grateful that her daughter agreed with her mother's statements.

When this young girl came to me a few weeks ago, she explained that the reason she chose me for this paper she was writing, was that she admired me as a person, and was grateful to me for helping her and her mother confront their homophobia. When I had come out publicly, they first wrestled with the idea of something they felt was wrong. But they could not let it go because of their personal feelings about me. She said it led to many discussions, and that they even went to talks, and sought out information through literature and research on gay and lesbian families. They were grateful for the opportunity to look deeper into the topic, and to come to terms with how their ideas had been influenced by ignorance.

Ignorance is the problem, not homophobia. As an teacher, ignorance is something I can address. After all, that is my job. But we must not forget that we are all teachers. It takes a whole village to educate a child, and unless we are hermits, it is our responsibility to take part in the education of all children, not just our own. And the best way to do this, is to just be ourselves, openly, to be present, so that they can see how normal we really are.