

“I was afraid he would label me gay if I stood up for gays”:

The Experience of Lesbian and Gay Elementary Education Credential Candidates at a Rural State University

By Eric Rofes

For more than twenty years since I graduated from college, I have lived in urban gay neighborhoods. In Boston, I moved from Beacon Hill to the South End, then lived in Provincetown, an old fishing village and art colony on Cape Cod, now a gay tourist center. I migrated west to California in 1985, first as close as I could afford to live to West Hollywood, then to San Francisco’s Castro district, often considered the nation’s premiere gay ghetto.

Hence many of my gay friends consider it odd, even ironic, that I now inhabit a small cottage deep in the redwoods, outside a small town of 300 residents on the North Coast of California. What can I say? The tenure-track job offer that came my way after I completed my Ph.D., came from a rural state university, 300 miles north of San Francisco, not far from the Oregon border.

I still maintain a foothold in gay community, as I spend several weekends a month and summer vacation in San Francisco, where I maintain a home (and a lover) a few yards from the intersection of 18th and Castro, seen nationally as the crossroads of the gay community. Yet as I enter my second year teaching at Humboldt State University (HSU), I recognize that my appreciation for this part of rural California has deepened, as I become accustomed to the clean air, farm land, huge redwoods, and miles of deserted beaches along the Pacific coast. While the university town of Arcata (population 16,000)

is politically progressive, environmentally pristine, and somewhat yuppified, the nearby city of Eureka (population 24,000) and the surrounding villages, towns, and hamlets, have not shared in the economic boom that much of California enjoys. Humboldt County is sparsely populated, but the people who are here are primarily poor white folk and struggling Native American people, including many former logging families, whose livelihoods have disappeared over the past twenty years, along with the lumber companies that once reigned supreme.

During my first year at HSU, I was one of four full-time professors teaching in the elementary education credential program. About 110 students took the requisite coursework, including my foundations course, “The School and the Student,” and completed their student teaching primarily in rural and small-town schools in the area. I had been hired with a curriculum vitae containing the words “gay” and “lesbian” at least a dozen times, and the department chair, during our one-on-one interview, indicated that my work on gay issues in schools was something they’d welcome in the department. She was aware that teachers in K-12 schools throughout California have to deal with homophobic hallway slurs, the bullying of gender non-conforming children and teens, and the presence of openly gay parents, students, and faculty members in school communities. One of her hopes was that I would serve as a resource for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) credential students who might face the challenge of merging their sexual identities with their new role as teachers.

During my first year on campus, I became aware of the complex challenges these credential candidates faced. At a reception for LGB students and faculty during the first week of classes, I was delighted to see one of my students, Gina, who seemed equally

delighted to see me there. Gina told me that, while she was comfortably out of the closet on campus and in her social life, that she was cautiously discreet in her work as a recreation administrator in a nearby town. I couldn't imagine how, in small-town Humboldt County, Gina was able to keep her identities separate.

A few weeks later, when I casually discussed my own gay identity as I was teaching a lesson on multicultural education, I received an e-mail from Buzz, one of my students, who expressed elation at finally having an openly gay professor and seized the opportunity to come out to me. Yet because Buzz was considering seeking jobs in schools in the local area, he did not want his identity as a gay man to become widely known among HSU faculty or credential students. Again, Buzz was openly gay among his friends and had been a member of the HSU gay student group during his undergraduate years, but the move towards becoming an elementary teacher necessitated a reconsidering of how to manage his sexual identity.

Of the 110 students, only Gina and Buzz came out to me before the very end of the term. After classes had ended, two other women came out privately to me, one as lesbian and one as bisexual. Yet as I went through the year with Gina and Buzz, I began to feel that the lack of formal or informal support mechanisms within our credential program, left LGB students vulnerable to an extra heap of stress on top of an already demanding credential year, and might play a role in some students' decision to drop-out before receiving a credential, or to never apply for jobs in the field. As our year together came to a close, I surveyed Gina and Buzz about the issues that emerged for them during their time in our program.

“I’m totally frightened about coming out in my first job”

Gina entered our credential program as a 38-year-old woman who had been in Humboldt County for six years. She had worked for a number of years as an administrator for parks and recreation for a small rural town. Prior to coming to the area, Gina had lived in San Francisco—in the same neighborhood in which my partner and I live. Originally from the Los Angeles Area, at the time I met Gina, she seemed strong and secure in her lesbian identity, and was an articulate advocate for social justice issues.

In the survey, Gina noted that her experience in the credential program “simply mirrored real life, where I feel somewhat like an outsider.” She went on to write, “Most of my classmates were very supportive and gracious, however, some were taken aback.” Gina came out to her mentor teacher during the fall semester, and, on the survey, indicated that she did so, “because I knew he was cool.” At the same time, she insisted, “I will not come out to my spring master teacher, as she seems a little more conservative. I didn’t come out to any students and don’t plan on doing so.”

Gina felt the credential program could have been strengthened for her by allowing “more discussion on the issue of gay teachers in public schools” She explained:

The only courses that dealt with gay issues were your class and also multicultural education. We read a clip on gay issues in schools in that course and watched *It’s Elementary* and had a good discussion afterward. It wasn’t necessarily helpful but it turned out to be very emotional for me. The video was hard to watch. I felt condemned and abnormal.

She noted, “I would have liked to know more about where people stand on this issue, and what the Humboldt County climate is like on gay issues.” At the same time, she felt supported by my presence as an openly gay instructor, and wrote, “It felt most helpful to have you as a really strong, confident gay instructor. I thought it was great how comfortable you were discussing issues and coming out to the class. It made me feel less alone, less different.”

When asked about suggestions to improve our credential program’s support for LGB students, Gina wrote,

I envision all classes addressing the issue openly and embracing all student teacher candidates. They should make a point of welcoming gay/straight/bisexual students from the very beginning. All classes should address the issue in one way or another. They should acknowledge how scary a teaching job can be for LGB people in this society.

Another question on the survey asked “Can you relate one story of an incident where you felt your sexual identity had an impact on your work with kids this year?,” and Gina responded,

There was one incident where an eighth-grade boy called someone a “fag” and I really wanted to reprimand him but I chickened out because I was too afraid that he would label me gay if I stood up for gays. I felt lousy afterward for not voicing my opinion and not feeling strong enough to do it.

Gina's fears about reprimanding the boy surface again when she discussed feelings about her potential teaching career. "I'm totally frightened about coming out in my first teaching job," Gina wrote. I fear retribution from parents mostly. I will probably keep it quiet and only tell people that I know I can trust..."

After graduating from our credential program, Gina did not seek full-time teaching jobs in the area. Instead, she spent her first year working in local recreation programs and serving as a substitute teacher in local schools. When I checked in with her one year after completing the program, and inquired about whether she was applying for full-time teaching positions, Gina told me, "Teaching is less of a focus now. I think I have finally decided not to teach but to continue to substitute to earn extra money. I don't feel that teaching will allow me to fully be myself, and that is very important to me." She went on to explain, "I don't want to hide who I am and I know that I will have to, to some extent...I don't want to have to hide my true sexuality."

"I did not want someone to find out who could hinder my progress in the program"

Buzz is younger than Gina, entering our credential program directly from his undergraduate years, at age 22. He grew up in a small town near Sacramento, and began to take on a gay identity during his college years. While a member of HSU's gay student group during that time, Buzz does not see himself as an activist or a political person. His greatest interest, on arriving in the program, was to find a job as a first grade teacher.

When Buzz responded to the survey, he had been in the credential program for about eight months and lamented, "I know only one other person [in the program] who is

gay besides myself. This has been challenging because I am afraid of what people might think of a gay person becoming a teacher. I think a lot of my fears of being out in the program stem from stereotypes that I have heard, such as all gay people being child molesters. I was very careful about who I shared my sexuality with because I did not want someone to find out who could hinder my progress in the program.”

Buzz cited only one course during the credential year that addressed gay issues, the multicultural foundations class. (Apparently he was absent from my class during our discussions of gay issues.) Buzz expressed concern that gay issues were “one of the last things we talked about in class, and it was only given one class period.” At the time, Buzz recalls being “upset,” because the students were working on group projects at the time and the professor limited student discussion of their projects in order to show a video on gay issues and then lead a discussion. Still, Buzz was “very glad that at least one person covered the topic.”

Buzz recalled the class:

I feel the professor dealt with the topic in a very respectful manner. The video we watched gave us many examples of schools educating their students about homophobia and families other than the traditional family. The professor gave us phone numbers and addresses of places, which could provide us with the information we might need as future teachers to get materials on gay issues. We also talked in class about what advice you would give to a student teacher wanting to come out to a panel who was interviewing for a position. The discussion gave

me a lot of insight about how future teachers felt about homosexuality. I did not hear one negative comment the whole time, which made me feel good.

In Buzz's fall placement in a first-grade classroom at a middle-class school, he quickly developed friendly relationships with many of the staff. As Buzz explained on the survey,

One particular day the school secretary asked me if I had a girlfriend. I told her that I did not, but I did not feel it was necessary to tell her why I did not have a girlfriend. She immediately tried to hook me up with the other secretary's daughter. From that day on, every time I saw her, she asked me if I had given this person a call yet. The secretary would say things such as "she is really pretty" and "she has a good job." I told her that I did not have time for a girlfriend because the program keeps me so busy. As much as I wanted to tell her I was gay to get her off my back, I was afraid that it would be a problem with me working at the school and that it could cause me to be asked to leave.

Buzz's spring placement was in a fifth/sixth-grade class in a working class neighborhood of Eureka, the closest thing to an urban center in the county. One day, while he was working with a small group of students, a girl told Buzz that a boy in the class—Bobby—had been saying things about Buzz. Buzz noted, "As soon as she said this, I knew what he was saying." He prodded the girl a bit and she told him that Bobby was telling other students that Buzz was gay. Buzz explains,

I told my master teacher that this child was saying things about me and the three of us were soon in the hall having a discussion. The teacher told Bobby that we had heard some rumors being spread about me. When I told him what I heard, he denied it and said that he meant that I was gay as in “happy.” The teacher told him that she did not buy it. She talked to him about why he was saying this and how he would feel if someone were saying it about him. Then she looked at Bobby and said, “he is NOT gay.” At this point I cringed, because I am gay, and I felt like I had indirectly lied to him. My reasoning behind telling her was to get the rumor to stop. Though I feel this boy just happened to be a good guesser, or maybe he picked up on some of my nurturing qualities, which make anyone a candidate for being gay, I don’t think this was backed with any knowledge of my sexuality. I worried that this rumor would get home to a parent and that I would find myself in the principal’s office discussing it. At this point in my life I feel that I would not deny the fact that I am gay if I were asked point blank.

Clearly this incident produced a great deal of stress for Buzz. Not only did he have to deal with being the focus of a highly charged rumor circulating among his students, but he faced an ethical dilemma about whether or not to tell his mentor teacher that she was incorrect in asserting that Buzz is not gay. Buzz had to weigh his supportive relationship with the teacher against the fact that her written recommendation would be key to his job application process in the coming months.

In his responses to the survey, Buzz reflected on the impact of his gay identity on his teaching career:

I feel that being gay might affect my teaching career in many ways. One thing I think of is having to not tell the truth about my personal life, such as having to lie about what I did on the weekend, or to just not tell the whole story. I wonder how many years I will have to teach before I could bring someone I was dating to a staff party or other extra-curricular event without fear of losing my job. I wonder how I will know if it is safe or not to tell certain members of the staff about my sexuality. I wonder what the reaction would be if I were ever found out by a parent and how they would feel about their child having a gay teacher. I wonder what the children would think if I ever came out to the class.

Buzz landed a teaching position a month or so after filling out this survey and before completing the credential program. He is now teaching in a fourth-grade classroom in a suburban district outside of San Francisco. I checked in with Buzz after winter vacation to get an update on how his first year of teaching was going and how he was doing with issues related to identity management. I learned that Buzz had a class of 25 students and that he was feeling most successful with classroom management and lesson planning. He said he was working to improve in the areas of developing students' critical thinking and promoting fairness and respect, especially related to racism and stereotypes.

When I asked him whether he had come out to anyone at the school, whether the school dealt with gay issues at all, and whether he had found himself in any identity management predicaments with students, parents, fellow teachers, or the principal, he told me:

When I first started at this school I did not think I would have the courage to come out to anyone. It seemed like a place where people kept to themselves and didn't speak much of family or outside interests. As the time went on I was feeling the pressure of keeping my private life out of the picture completely. I told one of the teachers at my grade level that I was gay, and she seemed to take it alright. She had confided in me about certain aspects of her life which she did not want to make public, so I considered it a fair trade. We have worked closely together since then and I feel my honesty has helped our friendship.

Buzz also made a pleasant discovery after being on the job for just a little while. He explained, "I also found out that one of the teachers I work with is also gay, but it took me a few months to approach the subject. He introduced me to his partner and we have been out a few times. It is a wonderful feeling to know that I am not the only person who is gay at the school, and also great to have some support from someone who has been in my shoes."

When I contacted Buzz at the end of his first year as a teacher, he remained committed to the profession and told me, "I have had a rather difficult year, having been put in charge of numerous problem students. Even with this, I still love my job and could

see myself doing this for the rest of my life.” Part of Buzz’s contentment with teaching involves his decision to seek employment in the San Francisco Bay Area. He reflected, “I wanted to live in a place where gay people were generally more accepted than in other locations. To this day, I know I made the right decision. Many of the people with whom I work that I told my secret to, are very accepting.”

Creating Teacher Preparation Programs That Truly Support LGB Candidates

Gina and Buzz had two distinct experiences in our program, but together, they served as catalysts for my re-thinking of both my role as an openly gay professor in a teacher preparation program, and my perspectives about the obligations teacher education programs have towards their LGB students. Through my work with Gina and Buzz, first as their professor and then as the university supervisor for their spring field placements, I came to believe that credential programs must do more to support the success of their LGB students than simply hire an openly gay professor. Regardless of whether or not gay professors are on their faculty, credential programs need to offer formal support services, bring about policy changes in local districts, and conduct anti-homophobia education with all faculty and staff members within the university, along with superintendents, principals, faculty members, and parents in the local district schools.

Gina and Buzz’s survey responses did not only trigger my pragmatic, activist impulses—they brought out a powerful emotional response. Confronting the contradictions and distresses of my students inspired similar feelings in me. How can I be an openly gay professor and allow such conditions to continue? Don’t I have a responsibility to ensure that students preparing to become teachers face neither

interpersonal discrimination nor barriers to employment based on sexual orientation?

Ultimately, I felt disheartened by the huge work still ahead; after 25 years as a gay activist I was confronting mountains that still needed to be moved. Part of my frustration involved the realization that even as an openly gay professor who feels that his own identity struggle has reached a place of peace, there are continuing complications, confusions, and contradictions. When I hear my own LGB students' anxieties and fears, I see myself a quarter century ago. When will this struggle end?

Once I became fully aware of the conflicts facing LGB candidates, I organized a special support evening aimed at bringing these folks together (they were isolated from one another and most were unaware of other LGB candidates), and introduced them to local LGB educators. Organizing this event in April, with barely a month left in the program, proved to be a challenge. Not only was this an especially busy time for the students, but most students had determined months ago that they were best off keeping their identities quiet. If coaxing students to the meeting was difficult, the greater challenge was identifying and contacting local LGB educators and convincing them to meet with the LGB credential students. I did my best to network widely to find out where the local gay educators worked, but, because most of them are closeted, I could only convince three lesbian educators to meet with the candidates.

In May, I took on the leadership of the elementary education credential program, and acknowledged to myself that I felt a special obligation to LGB students that extended beyond simply being openly gay as a professor. Over the summer, I talked with colleagues in other credential programs, contacted my just-credentialed LGB students, and thought deeply about the way to proceed. This year I have instituted three formal

additions to our department's work with credential students in any of our four credential programs (elementary, secondary, special education, administrative):

First, I planned and organized a meeting for LGBT credential candidates at the start of the semester. This was announced at the opening meetings of our programs and signs were posted throughout the department. Over a dozen students in three of our four credential programs contacted me (there are about 210 credential students in the programs), and eight attended our first meeting. We formed a monthly support group, called the Supper Club, and determined that we'd meet regularly, informally, over dinner to swap stories and lend support.

Second, I organized and will teach an elective course this spring titled "Gay and Lesbian Issues in Schools." While I am unclear whether credential students will have the time or inclination to take an extra course, given their already-intense workloads, I am hoping that the students with the greatest need for work in this area will at least be able to drop in to occasional classes. The course will also be open to undergraduate students—many of whom are considering entering a fifth-year credential program after getting their B.A.'s—as well as Master's students and folks from local schools.

Third, I met with my department chair and strategized about ways to effect policy changes in local districts. We both agreed that we could face a difficult dilemma. While our university does not allow us to discriminate against students on the basis of sexual orientation, many of the local districts do not have parallel policies. What would have happened if Buzz had been asked directly by his fourth-grade student if he was gay and he had answered honestly? What would our department's policy be if a school or a district tried to bar openly LGB student teachers from fieldwork opportunities? Would

we screen candidates on the basis of sexual orientation and send the gay ones to selected sites? Would we refuse to send any additional student teachers to the district?

These seem to be critically important questions during a time when even rural schools are confronting gay issues at an accelerating rate. At an anti-homophobia training I facilitated recently for local educators, a local high school teacher discussed a gay male senior who brought a male date to last year's prom and another situation where he had to break up two girls who were smooching in the hallway and were late for class. An administrator from an isolated rural school discussed her difficulties locating credentialed teachers for her two schools, and her fears of parental concerns if she wooed a local unemployed lesbian teacher to come to work for her district. A basketball coach discussed his handling of a conflict that arose when a star player's cheerleader girlfriend discovered her beau was having an affair with a male soccer player.

As my department chair prepares to raise the matter with local educational leaders, the constraints of being a rural state university become clear. We do not have the luxury of having a surplus of field placements, as most urban districts have. If we eliminated districts that discriminate against LGB student teachers from inclusion on our list of field placements, we might not have enough placements to run our program. Likewise, it is unclear how local LGB citizens would feel about our department championing this matter. Many local closeted teachers seem to prefer for things to remain unstated and unorganized. Urban schools situated in cities with organized gay communities have had to face gay issues head-on when gay political groups screen candidates for school board on a range of gay-related matters.

As the focus of gay rights battles shifts from the urban gay enclaves I've lived in for twenty years, to rural towns like the one in which I am now situated, I am sure the stark contrasts between urban schools and rural schools will create an entire new range of challenges, activist strategies, and, eventually, successes. Rural schools, for the most part, have rarely faced gay activists or others making demands that schools address homophobia and to create anti-discrimination policies. At the same time, there are support programs structured on the gay-straight alliance model, in three of our area high schools. An openly lesbian professor sits on a local school board. Eureka is home to our county's gay community center which sponsors a support group for LGB youth meets weekly. Progress on gay issues in schools has started to take place, even in isolated, rural parts of our nation.

As the focus of gay rights battles shifts from the urban enclaves I've lived in for twenty years, to rural towns like the one in which I am now situated, I am sure the stark contrasts between urban and rural schools will create an entire new range of challenges, activist strategies, and, eventually, successes. Success will come when we fully welcome LGB students into our teacher preparation programs, support their struggles to manage their sexual identity along with their teacher identity, and ensure that employment discrimination is fully ended in our nation. These are daunting but necessary tasks as we look to the future.

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