

## "If These Were Racial Slurs, Teachers Would Be Stopping Them" ... Three Activists Object

by Beth Reis, Mona Mendoza and Frieda Takamura ~ July 2000

Race and racism and racial harassment ... how do we discuss them when we are working to end homophobia in schools?

The authors know what we **don't** want people to say in the name of ending homophobia: "If these were racial slurs, teachers would be stopping them."

Why do we find that approach so offensive? Well first, because it's a lie. At least it is a major exaggeration. And second because it alienates some of our own and some of our allies, making them choose between two wrongs to right.

### **First, how is it a lie or, at best, an exaggeration?**

Racial harassment is still a major problem in schools. According to a 1995 study (Seattle's Teen Health Risk Survey of 8,000+ youth) 43% of students have been the target of "offensive racial comments" or attacks at school or on the way to or from school. That's nearly half the students in an urban, racially diverse district!

Perhaps you say, "But our district is not as racially diverse, so it can't be as big of a problem here." Maybe it isn't as bad for European-American (White) children, but it may be even worse to be a youth of color in your mostly-European-American school. A 1997 study of the whole state of Wisconsin (Youth Risk Behavior Survey) found that 9% of students been "threatened or hurt because of [their] race or color," with ethnic groups reporting varying rates of harassment, from 6% among European-American students to 50% among Asian/Pacific Islander students. There's that pesky "half" again.

Is it happening in front of teachers and other adults? Maybe less often than thirty years ago. Do adults respond when they are made aware of it? Probably more often than they once did, but if they *always* treated these incidents with the

gravity they deserve, racial harassment in schools would have slowed to a trickle by now. It is not a trickle!

### **Why does it alienate people of color, GLBT and straight alike, when GLBT activists make this argument? And why does it anger some White educators?**

The implication of the statement is that racism is solved and it is time to move on to homophobia. As long as children with Spanish accents and Asian faces are told to go back where they came from ... as long as African-American kindergartners hear, "you can't play with us; you're Black" (Beth's granddaughter heard it in 1997) ... as long as American Indian & Native Alaskan young people hear, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" (the daughter of a colleague heard it in 1999) ... and, yes, as long as European-American students are told you can't wear that/play with us/sit here because you are White ... we will need to work on racial prejudice in schools.

### **We mustn't choose which wrong to right. Fairness and safety aren't finite commodities we have to divide up.**

One child doesn't have to get less fairness for another child to get more. One child doesn't have to be less safe for another to be more. It's our responsibility to ensure that everybody is made welcome and safe at school.

Everybody.

**Well, can we *never* bring up one form of oppression or one civil rights movement in helping to explain another? Sure, as long as it's done without comparing hurts.**

In fact, we *should* bring up all forms of oppression, but with careful thought. We can say first,

*"We are indebted to the heroes of previous generations ... to Mohandas Ghandi and Harriet Tubman and Susan B. Anthony and Bayard Rustin and Cesar Chavez and Malcolm X and all the others who taught us about dignity and fought for human rights."*

When someone says, "Why do you have to be so visible?" we can say,

*"Remember when women were invisible in the curriculum? Remember how we figured out that we were cheating girls AND boys by denying them women as role models?"*

This doesn't imply that girls are no longer being made to feel less capable by teachers' unconscious expectations. But it points to one step we took as a culture to begin to right the wrong.

When someone says, "Why do you need to be listed explicitly in a policy, when all harassment is wrong?" we can say,

*"For the same reason we needed to list race and religion and disability: because listing a specific form of discrimination declares that even the heretofore acceptable, commonplace forms are wrong."*

*"Besides, policies can make invisible people visible. Some people don't even realize there **are** GLBT people in their schools."*

When someone asks, "Why are we focusing just on anti-gay harassment?" instead of asserting that teachers always intervene in racial harassment, we can say,

*"Teachers and other school staff have more experience and training in how to address racial and general sexual harassment than in how to address anti-gay harassment. That's why we are focusing on anti-gay harassment here. Not because racial and religious and disability-based harassment isn't terrible. Not even because adults always intervene in it. Simply because the time has come to talk about one more form of hurt, which hasn't been spoken about much in the past."*

When we feel frustrated, instead of asserting that homophobia is the "*last socially acceptable form of bigotry in schools,*" we can just say,

*"Homophobia is rampant in schools. Too often, students and staff alike aren't remotely aware of the pain caused by such **blatant** slurs as 'sissy' and 'punk' and, especially, the ever-present insult, 'That's so gay!'"*

When a child blurts out the word "faggot!" we can say,

*"Whoa, stop it right there. That is mean and you can't do it here! If you want to discuss it, we can, but use respectful language and don't use it as a put-down."*

**You really do *not* have to use the weapon of a racial or religious slur to make your point.**

And jabbing at the child with a counter-slur is like hitting a child to make him or her stop being violent: it doesn't work. If we must use examples, let's use ones that apply to ourselves ... Catholic slurs if you are Catholic, fat slurs if you are fat, slurs about your parents not being married if yours weren't.

**Finally, it is inappropriate to compare degrees of hurt. Every form of bias is uniquely hurtful, even as all bias has some things in common.**

**You say, “*But homophobia is worse because people don’t even try to hide it.*”**

Sure, racism has become somewhat less overt over the years. And the majority are increasingly appalled by the use of racist symbols like a burning cross. And people try, at least, to hide their dislike of people of other races when the company is mixed.

But hidden bigotry isn’t a whole lot less wearing on the hated than open bigotry. Sometimes it takes an even greater toll. You can’t prove it and if you try to explain it you are accused of being over-sensitive. Even others who were there might not have noticed that the teacher called on you less often than on European-American classmates or that your peers assumed your answers are wrong.

**You say, “*But racism is worse because you can’t hide your race; you can’t ever rest.*”**

Well, some people of color who get frequently mistaken for European-American might disagree about “resting.” Similarly, many gay and lesbian people who are assumed to be straight hate the assumption. If you feel tired and you let the assumption ride, you feel guilty for “passing.” And if you speak up you risk being labeled as flaunting or as having a chip on your shoulder.

Still, it is true that never being able to rest can be truly tiring for those whose race is very visible. You rarely can know when good things happen, if they’re happening because you deserved them or just because someone is bending over backwards for you. And you rarely can know when *bad* things happen whether the person was just in a foul mood or if it was about your race.

Some heterosexuals may not realize that there are sexual minorities, too, who never get to rest. They never chose to walk or talk or stand or sit

differently. They were born gender-different. Some spent years trying their damndest to “act straight,” forcing themselves into painful masks. To hide your genuine gender-role is to live in shame. Nobody should have to live a lie or pretend to be someone they are not.

**You say, “*But homophobia is worse because you don’t even have your family to confide in.*”**

Well, sometimes children of color protect their parent or guardian from knowing how bad the harassment is, too.

But it is true that many GLBT youths are afraid to confide in their families, sometimes for good reason, and that the cost of that isolation is very high. That’s why schools need to help children who are different to feel less isolation. We need to offer them role models and support systems, whether the “difference” is their learning disability, their race, their minority religion, or their sexual orientation.

**You say, “*But racism is worse because you don’t choose your race.*”**

Well, most sexual minority people will tell you that they didn’t choose their sexual orientation or gender identity either ... although they may be very happy being who they are now. A growing body of scientific evidence is pointing toward biological contributions to people’s orientations and gender identities.

Besides, racial identity *is* chosen in some ways. Many people of mixed ancestry identify with a particular culture, rather than all their cultural roots.

But even if people *have* chosen to think of themselves as Latina or Lesbian, for example, they have a right to be safe at school. Our laws protect people from discrimination based on biological differences (such as sex) and **also** from discrimination based on chosen differences (such as religion). Children who are not safe at school due to bias-based harassment are being denied a public education based on their identities, whether they chose those identities or not. Denying them an education is wrong.

**Bottom line: racial *and* homophobic harassment and discrimination make school hell for too many children and youth.**

**Some of you are afraid** that, if we acknowledge how much work is still needed in terms of racial or general sexual harassment, schools will put less energy into ending orientation-based harassment. Or that, in order to make palatable their work on homophobia, they will give it a one-sentence nod in curriculum and training that is mostly about other forms of harassment.

We can say a vigorous “no” to that approach. There’s ample evidence that orientation-based harassment and discrimination are extremely grave problems, linked to students’ missing school due to fear and even to physical and sexual assaults and suicide attempts. And few people would argue that staff and students alike understand very little about gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people. Sexual diversity clearly deserves its own place at the table and we must never accept less.

**Some people are equally concerned** that, if we acknowledge the problem of anti-gay harassment, schools will put less energy into conquering racism. Or that the small gains we’ve made against racial discrimination in schools will even be lost in the shuffle.

We can say a vigorous “no” to that approach as well. There is a clear body of evidence, from test scores to discipline rates, that racial discrimination is alive and well in schools. Even when controlling for poverty, children of color fare less well in school than European-American children. That is unacceptable and schools must continue to root out the reasons and put resources into solutions.

**Besides, don’t forget, some children are *both* GLBT and of color. They deserve not to be carved up in response to adults’ fears.**

Addressing one way in which they get hurt at school, and at the same time under-estimating the other, is worse than useless. The goal ought to be education and social justice for **all!** “Social justice for some” is an oxymoron. The movements to end racism and homophobia and all the other forms of oppression do not have to compete. We can all acknowledge their interconnectedness.

**And, even if many of us make one or the other the *focus* of our energies, we can refuse to minimize its evil accomplices.**