

Ian K. Macgillivray (www.IanMacgillivray.com) is Assistant Professor of Foundations and Curriculum at James Madison University. He is the author of *Gay–Straight Alliances: A Handbook for Students, Educators, and Parents* (2007, *Haworth Press*) and *Sexual Orientation and School Policy: A Practical Guide for Teachers, Administrators, and Community Activists* (2004, Rowman & Littlefield). He sits on the board of editors for *The Journal of LGBT Youth: The Interdisciplinary Quarterly of Practice, Research, Policy, and Theory*. *E-mail*: macgilik@jmu.edu.

We Are the Development We Are Looking For: Queer People and Schooling

WILLIAM DEJEAN

Charles Sturt University

Years ago a colleague confided in me that her scholarly research was really a search to understand herself, and in her view, most people were in search of themselves. She concluded that the work of researchers was often personal. Those thoughts have resonated with me over time. In many ways it is impossible to separate the personal from the professional. It seems only human that we want to know about the world, but more specifically, we want to know about our world.

—Wolfe and Pryor (2002, p. 153)

I have decided that what we experienced as queer people in school has the power to inform us of what we are supposed to provide to the world. Maybe that is why so many queer people become caregivers, teachers, counselors, and social workers (De La Huerta, 1999). For me, those days as a closeted high school teenager, with no role models or support, and with little vision for my life, informed me of the need to create spaces in schooling where all students can develop and find their way. This is why I became a teacher. This became my pedagogy.

I didn't always realize this. I now see that I have spent much of my professional career trying to make sense of my experiences of being a gay man inside our educational systems. For instance, as a high school teacher, when

colleagues would ask me why I *needed* to come out to my students, I struggled to find words to truly articulate this. This question came from colleagues with whom I had discussed the challenges I faced both personally and professionally as a gay man teaching in a large public high school. Ironically, teachers asking this question were the same ones who wore their wedding rings to work, who had pictures of their spouse and children displayed throughout their classrooms, or who continued teaching throughout their pregnancy.

My students often told me they felt safe inside of our classroom, and at times referred to our class as their second family. Looking at it now, that doesn't seem surprising because it has been said that only "a teacher in search of his or her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own" (Greene, 1988, p. 14). Yet, the awards, recognition, and praise from students and parents didn't always protect me. For example, the year I was awarded Outstanding First-Year Teacher of Southern California by the Education Placement Association was the same year *faggot* and *queer* were painted in large letters across my classroom windows. The year I was named San Diego County teacher of the year was the same year "DeJean is a fag" was carved in my classroom door. After each incident I turned to administrators who didn't know how to support me, or to the few queer teachers on campus who often seemed nervous to interact with me. Because of this, I searched for role models and resources through conferences and gay and lesbian associations. Early on these mentors came via the books I read about queer matters in education (Harbeck, 1991; Jennings, 1994, 1998; Kissen, 1996; Rofes, 2000).

Even after I came out, I found that I was still negotiating my identity within my classroom. When a parent tried pulling her daughter from my class because of my sexual orientation, or when a parent accused me of using "inappropriate" materials, I continued searching for answers and support.

My doctoral research, focusing on gay and lesbian K-12 teachers who were out inside their classrooms (DeJean, 2004, 2007), became the path to my own liberation. Working on this research required me to reexamine many of my own memories and experiences as a gay man in the K-12 school system. For instance, researching and writing the literature review brought me back to my own days as a closeted gay male high school student and helped me better understand how my experiences fit within a larger political, social, and cultural context. Listening to the teachers in the study allowed me to understand the fear I felt when I initially entered into the profession and helped me find clarity regarding my own reasons for finally coming out within my own classroom. I began the study because I simply had questions I had always wanted answered. Yet, the participants of the study became the mentors I had always been looking for.

From Isolation to Collectiveness

Soon I will start my 4th year as a teacher educator. My work has shifted from teaching high school and preservice teachers in Southern California, to teaching courses in literacy, English methodology, and topics of social justice to preservice teachers in regional Australia. Yet, regardless of subjects I teach or where they are taught, my experiences have informed me of the importance of having preservice teachers feel the impact that a safe learning environment, combined with multicultural resources, and an authentic instructor can have on the entire learning community. Philosophically I believe that if preservice teachers experience these kinds of teaching and learning locations, they will best be able to pass them on to their future students.

However, challenges for me remain. Like their counterparts in the United States, the majority of my students are White, female, and heterosexual (Howard, 1999, 2004; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001). When asked, many of my students report positive memories of their schooling experiences and struggle to conceptualize inequalities within school settings. This might explain why whenever I come out in class, address queer matters in education, or decide to run a class session addressing power and privilege, I can expect to get "William has a gay agenda" on a few student evaluations. "DeJean is a fag" has been replaced with a few lowered evaluations. Yet, in contrast to my early career, when these challenges occur, I am networked internationally with lesbian and gay educational leaders who I can contact for support.

My research opportunities are expanding as well. Whereas as a doctoral student, I was told that focusing my dissertation on queer matters in education might limit the professional opportunities available to me, today, as an early career researcher, I am surrounded by abundance. Over the last few years I have been sought after to copresent workshops, to collaborate in research projects, and to present at international conferences focused on queer matters in education.

As I become more settled within my new professional role, I continue to wonder what it is like for today's queer teachers who are just entering our profession. I have had these discussions with a lesbian preservice teacher who has shared fears with me about being a lesbian within the Australian educational system. In addition, I recently heard from a former preservice teacher that he decided to leave our profession because of the harassment he was facing as a gay man. The e-mail read like a page from my own biography. He had decided that in addition to negotiating his first years of teaching, having to find the time to find some support to counter the harassment he was facing was simply more than he was willing to do. And

though today, the students I work with are all White, I wonder how well queer preservice teachers of color are navigating the intersections of race and sexuality within educational settings (Kumashiro, 2001). These experiences and questions remind me of the need for systematic mentoring, research, and networks to support all queer preservice teachers entering our profession, so that they can find new levels of success early into their careers.

Final Thoughts

Recently I saw a picture of myself taken as a freshman in high school. I am smiling in the picture, so it must have been hard for people to realize the fear and pain I was feeling. The isolation I experienced during that time feels far away now. Strangely, I now see that time as a gift that continues to be opened. The search out of the pain and isolation led me to a professional and personal life filled with possibility and connection. Many of the mentors I searched for early in my career are now colleagues working in educational institutions throughout Australia and North America. When I am asked to discuss the recent developments in queer matters in educational settings, I have had to turn to my past to understand the present. From this vantage point, although there is much work to be done, I can now say that we are the development we have been looking for.

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William DeJean (www.williamdejean.com) is a current lecturer in middle school education at Charles Sturt University. He has taught at both the high school and university level, and continues to collaborate with AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) teachers throughout the United States. E-mail: wdejean@csu.edu.au.

A Broader Agenda

ADAM HOWARD

Hanover College

Depending on where we stand, how we identify ourselves, and to what communities we belong, one aspect of our lives regularly outshine others (Raffo, 1997). From where I stand, social class has consistently been a primary focus of my scholarly inquiry. My experiences growing up in extreme poverty have left their mark. Social class has become my "diving board" into explorations of and conversations about issues of difference and identity. Although I follow the current trend to acknowledge and complicate the intersections of different categories of identity, my allegiance to class issues is clear. Social class remains the central category of my analysis.

I do realize, though, that there are some serious limitations in being stuck in a narrow theoretical orientation to understand issues relating to identity, as it precludes the critical understanding that factors such as race, gender, sexuality, social class, nationality, and religion collectively influence who we are, our understandings of others, our taken-for-granted assumptions about the world around us, and our place in that world (see Mayo, 2007). Attempting to overcome these limitations, I have increasingly ex-

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