

THE PRIDE GAME: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE TO TRANSFORM LEARNING

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ABSTRACT: The apprehension that some adults have regarding the discussion of "sensitive" topics can lead to silence as opposed to constructive dialogue. This article discusses employing a creative and experiential means of exploring Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, Two-Spirited, and Queer history and contemporary contexts. Specifically, the author reflects on using "The Pride Game" to break down stereotypes and to promote acceptance and celebration of all sexual and gender orientations.

Key words: queer, teaching tool, advocacy, Child and Youth Care, gay/lesbian studies

INTRODUCTION

When I first began exploring anti-homophobia pedagogy with students, I was passionate about communicating the urgent challenges and risks Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, Two-Spirited, and Queer (GLBT-TQ) face. I wanted to instill this same passion in future teachers, counsellors, and community members. I thought that the best way would be to highlight statistics and cases covered in the media that were specific to the British Columbia context and that included the very preventable risks GLBTQ face, such as suicide, alcohol and drug misuse, dropping out of school, and homophobic abuse (verbal, physical, and sexual). Despite the shocking statistics, it took only a few sessions to realize that the methods of disseminating my advocacy were too dry to ignite students and too grim for myself to feel hopeful at the end of the day. I looked hard at how I facilitated learning in adults, and consistent feedback told me that experiential learning was the most engaging and, hence, effective. How could I "create a festive atmosphere around it" (Gantz, 1978, as quoted in Evans, Avery, & Velde Pederson, 1999, p.299) and concurrently be confident that participants would leave with a better understanding of the structural and personal implications of homophobia? Most importantly, how could I be confident that the atmosphere Gantz speaks about would be a catalyst for change? In 2000/2001, I created the Pride Game with the dual goal of (a) fulfilling the requirements of my community development practicum placement and (b) creating a teaching tool that could be adapted to work across developmental levels and professional contexts (including high schools, university classrooms, and community agencies). The Pride Game experienced great success and this inspired me to present it to colleagues

and peers at the 7th International Child and Youth Care Conference in Victoria, 2003. I would like to share with readers the purpose and process of the game and highlight how controversial issues can be discussed in a non-confrontational, but equally transformative, manner.

What Exactly Is Controversial?

As child and youth care practitioners, we are not strangers to advocacy work, and such advocacy spans the socio-political spectrum. Many of us have found ourselves in positions that require us to rally around socially sensitive issues. Although what constitutes "sensitive" may differ across geographical and cultural locations, it strikes me that, as practitioners, we are consistently working with issues that communities see as pressing issues for youth. Adolescent pregnancy and/or parenting, street entrenchment, sexual exploitation, abuse, neglect, and poverty are some such issues. GLBTTQ youth issues and, indeed, the youth themselves, are still very much on the margins and silenced in many of the contexts in which they participate: family, school, faith environments, youth groups, and recreation. Equally, GLBTTQ realities remain on the periphery of many agencies' and practitioners' awareness. It is much easier to advocate for youth who present a need or challenge with which society at large sympathizes. It is altogether more difficult to advocate for those whom some would frame as a "controversial" population. Sexual minority etiology has been theorized and debated, same-sex marriage has been championed and condemned and, in British Columbia, Canada, one school board has spent thousands of dollars banning children's literature that features positive representation of same-sex parents/families. Discussion of GLBTTQ scenarios (real or fictional) is certainly in turmoil at the present, but heavily focused on morality as opposed to social justice. This creates a challenge for child and youth care practitioners who are invested in fostering communities that are anti-homophobic. When our advocacy work is perceived as the promotion of "moral depravity", as sex rather than as sexual orientation, and as being void of respect for traditional family structures, it is exhausting to argue consistently that this advocacy is about social justice, about loving *all* children, and about caring for their well-being. GLBTTQ practitioners are often held to the myth of recruitment, and our heterosexual allies are often assumed to be GLBTTQ and, as a result, subsequently endure homophobia/transphobia directly. The work, then, is always on two levels: in the communities, speaking up; and in ourselves, examining internalized homophobia and personal bias, and seeking support.

Yet, it is not the work that I think prevents child and youth care workers from tackling GLBTTQ advocacy. I believe that the historical categorizations of GLBTTQ experiences as taboo creates an impasse that practitioners are unsure about how to negotiate. Evans, Avery, and Velde Petersen (2000) reflect: "Taboo topics are those topics that [in this context, education] social studies teachers may choose to avoid or de-emphasize because of their *perceptions* [italics added] or beliefs regarding the sensitivity of the

topic" (p. 295). Child and youth care students have shared with me their anxiety about "promoting homosexuality" and "treading on the toes of parents". They have articulated struggles with their own values that exclude acceptance of sexual minorities and have questioned the relevance of GLBTTQ discussion in their particular work environment (a common example is early childhood education--are there no GLBTTQ parents or siblings?). As well, there appears to be collective anxiety about offending others by discussing topics that are left out of standard curriculum or residential/educational programming. I am pleased that child and youth care practitioners are mindful of their language and programming, as I believe this reflects positively on the profession. It demonstrates that we are respectful workers, well intentioned and skilled in recognizing the subjective positioning of our children, youth, and families. The fear of offence, however, is an invisible force field that many of our clients cannot break through. When we are immobilized by silence, and our conversations are rooted in fear, children, youth, and families will hear this louder than any politically correct, blanket statement about diversity. My favourite example comes from "It's Elementary" (1996), a documentary focusing on the discussion of GLBTTQ families in primary grades. The classroom discussions are often humorous but decidedly poignant as it is the children who cannot grasp "what the big whoop is" about a topic that has adults embroiled in debate. It proves over and over that we learn from our children and youth, and their lack of fear of offending is maybe something we could all emulate.

How the Game Addresses the Gulf Created by Taboos

It isn't only personal values and fear of offending that restricts discussion. Especially in regard to GLBTTQ issues, there is a lack of knowledge, terminology, and accurate history. That is why I, like Bohan (1997), preface each game session with a brainstorm about language and identity qualifiers. I start with the binary terms most youth and adults recognize: heterosexual and homosexual. I often break these down with the group, listing common language associated with, or on, a continuum between these binaries, including bisexual, gay, lesbian, straight, two-spirited, queer, and so forth. In one session, a youth challenged me on my continual usage of the term *straight* when speaking of heterosexuals, so we took some time to discuss word origin, metaphors for straight, and the limitations of terminology. In the conference session, a two-spirited youth challenged me for my lack of contemporary knowledge regarding the diversity of two-spirit status across First Nations communities, as my definition was one rooted in a pre-colonial context. I am honoured when youth share their personal association with, or disassociation from, language, and am equally humbled on many other occasions. I then move on to "related and often poorly understood terms" (Bohan, 1997, p.29) such as *transgender* and *transsexual*. These two terms are often the most confusing for people to grasp, whereas *queer* often elicits memories of

playground slurs. The word *queer* also elicits physical reactions; people are literally taken aback, so strong are the connotations the word triggers. I spend some time discussing the reclamation of language and the impact this has on individuals. Other terms that we cover include: homophobia/transphobia, heterosexism, and allies. I am also adamant that there is no perfect language usage; as long as participants are sincere in their questioning, I will enter into a dialogue. For example, I asked a group of grade 9 and grade 10 students what *bi-sexual* meant. One student waved her hand urgently and, when called upon, earnestly told me that such a term was meant for people who engaged in sexual acts with people and with animals. Clearly, basic language is still an applicable preface to sessions.

Since "controversial issues and topics receive little attention in schools because in the culture of schooling, and the culture of society, many controversial topics and issues are taboo" (Evans et al., 2000, p.295), many GLBTTQ and heterosexual students miss out on the richness of the Queer Rights movement and significant, related historical events. Part of the game includes trivia questions to highlight the strengths of GLBTTQ milestones. These are integral for child and youth care practitioners working from a strengths-based perspective as they provide affirmations they can share when a youth comes out or when a youth is exhausted by a barrage of homophobia and heterosexism. Trivia can include historical events (such as the Stonewall Riot), legal triumphs (such as decriminalizing homosexuality in Canada), and events that held great social and personal implications (such as removing homosexuality as a DSM mental illness). Youth especially love the idea that it was African- American and Latino drag queens who lead the Stonewall Riot, but are often shocked to know that being queer in the 50s, 60s, and 70s meant that you could be arrested, institutionalized, or worse. These historical events are so unfathomable that I often elicit analogies from the group to whom I am presenting. This works especially well with adolescents, who have an articulate understanding of teen stereotypes and how those stereotypes impact their life and their relationship to society. I will ask, "Imagine if every time youth gathered together, they would have to worry about being arrested? Imagine if youth who were hanging around other youth similar to them had to worry that their parents would subject them to electric shock therapy because of these friends, or because of the people they dated? Imagine if all teenagers were depicted as sick and inferior in literature?" Of course, some teens have joked that this is indeed their reality. But, joking aside, when youth draw analogies, they are better able to empathize with the social justice brought to light through the trivia questions. Trivia questions also focus on contemporary media (for example, name a positive film that has a GLBTTQ protagonist) and practical ways to resist homophobia (for example, name three ways you can make your school/agency/residential home more welcoming to GLBTTQ individuals). The energy often rises when I point out that, despite the gains made for GLBTTQ individuals, we still cannot legally marry in the majority of provinces in Canada. This

usually results in remarks from youth such as "That's stupid" and "People should be able to love whom they want", and more candid remarks such as "Why would anyone want to get married anyway?" The anticipated result of the trivia questions is that participants will leave with a deeper understanding of what has been left out of their social studies texts (and for child and youth care students, their family theory texts) and what legal, social, and political work still needs to be accomplished.

The other section of the game focuses on *chance* scenarios. These are used to highlight both obvious and subtle forms of homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. Other chance cards highlight advocacy examples or how to be an ally, and these move participants ahead in the game. For students and youth, the context of chance examples is often school; for adults, the scenarios focus on the workplace. I remind participants that many of these examples are taken from real life scenarios such as landlords refusing to rent to a gay couple, lesbians being harassed on the street for holding hands, transgendered people being refused access to appropriate washroom facilities, and so forth. Some youth have pointed out, "But that's not legal" and, thus, I am invited into a dialogue focusing on what is policy and what is reality and how we can bridge the two. The chance section also includes commonly verbalized sentiments that deny GLBTTQ individuals a legitimate identity: "It's just a phase", "I don't know anyone who's gay", and "I don't mind homosexuals, but why do they flaunt it?" Chance scenarios are not presented as win-lose points in the game; rather, they serve as pockets of discussion. For example, participants will say, "I wouldn't do that in real life!" so I ask, "Why not? Where did you learn about this? Why do we still condone homophobic jokes and comments if we know they offend us? What examples can you share about this?" This brings GLBTTQ relatives, the media, and personal experiences into the room, making the discussion personal as opposed to abstract, vapid, and theoretical.

The game also serves as the main catalyst for discussion, despite its team format and competitive nature. Beyond asking questions out loud, participants (of all ages) are given the opportunity to ask questions anonymously. Common questions from youth include: Why are people GLBTTQ? How do you know if you are GLBTTQ? How many GLBTTQ people are there in the world? There is a clear emphasis on the *why* and *how* in most presentations. I often sit back and wonder if youth want to know what "makes" someone GLBTTQ so that they can avoid being one. Or are they asking so that they can be confident of their self-identity? Common questions from adults include: "Should adults come out to youth?" and "How do I find appropriate resources?" One of the most candid and honest questions I received was: "If GLBTTQ youth only make up 10% of the population, does this kind of discussion impose values on the other 90%?" My response echoes Uribe (1996) who said, "We are talking about life and death issues. If we lose these children, we lose them to death or to the streets" (p.159). What is the fear that we erect in ourselves

that prevents us from being the best practitioner we can be? How can we justify not standing up for GLBTTQ youth and still convince ourselves that we are practising ethically? Finally, a question I received at almost every presentation is a variation of: "Why are you doing this work?" It is my personal and professional responsibility to educate myself about issues that are deemed controversial by the elusive "they" and to challenge myself in my practice. This stance is not limited to my work with GLBTTQ youth; it spans the spectrum of marginalized youth. I also do this work because my "self" in knowledge, skills, and self-model (KSS) has experienced homophobia first hand; I have seen the pain of transphobia in my community and I want to contribute to ensuring that child and youth care practitioners are not unwittingly participating in this injustice. Most importantly, I do this work in the company of a young woman who is constantly in my memory. She attended the first community "Queer Camp" in Victoria, B.C.¹ and told me that a child and youth care worker had saved her life when she was living on the street. She wanted to become a child and youth care worker because this man had showed compassion, respect, and intentional care, regardless of her sexual orientation.

Questions & Challenges for Practice

A recent development in writing this article came as a surprise to me. A local child and youth care practitioner requested that I present the Pride Game to the youth in her agency. This worker brimmed with energy and passion for "her" kids and "her" agency, but also recognized a gap in services, which was the lack of attention to addressing the diversity of her crew in regard to GLBTTQ experience. She and I met and developed an outline that would meet the needs of her agency--both staff members and youth participants. Unfortunately, there was a serious backlash from her management, and they saw no concrete need to discuss this topic. This practitioner told me she would willingly lose her job over this issue--it was that important to her. Her conviction and strength are an inspiration to me. This scenario, however, is all too real for child and youth care practitioners who want to be advocates but face some challenges, and it poses some questions I would like us all to consider in relation to our own experiences and practices.

First, like my colleague in this example, we are often the only child and youth care practitioner in our multidisciplinary teams. Many of us have examples of how we have had to advocate for both our clients and our profession. Although it is taxing at times, we hold a unique position as child and youth care workers. We have the opportunity to become leaders in promoting health for GLBTTQ clients in a way that is neither pathologically nor superficially politically correct. Second, we are a profession that extols examining the self. How are students in child and youth care/early childhood education training programs challenged to examine their own heterosexism in constructive ways? How are GLBTTQ

¹ Camp Q was an initiative by the YM/YWCA held at Camp Thunderbird (British Columbia) and facilitated by the GLBTTQ youth support group, SEXY.

students and their allies encouraged to develop their self-acceptance and advocacy within the programs, including the practicum? I was recently mandated to attend an anti-homophobia workshop for a practicum placement and this experience opened my eyes to how, paradoxically, we discuss homophobia in heterosexist ways, as the presenter assumed all present to be heterosexual. Furthermore, it made me examine how I, as both a teaching assistant at the university and a community facilitator, have perpetrated the same. The mingling of perceived binaries is a wonderful way to further advocacy. As a promising example, there is currently a group of undergraduate students in the School of Child and Youth Care (University of Victoria) who have dedicated themselves to "responsible, intentional, political practice" (RIPP) and will march in the local Pride Parade this summer, regardless of the sexual/gender orientation of its members. Third, how do we use our communication training to introduce dialogue that may be deemed controversial or taboo? I feel that all the skills provided in undergraduate child and youth care education are applicable to GLBTTQ advocacy. So, what holds practitioners back? When is the last time you wanted to speak out and speak up against homophobia/transphobia and felt unable to do so? What were the internal and external conditions that you felt contributed to this silence, and how can we, collectively, work to change a culture of silence affecting at least 10% of our youth? Fourth, I was approached by a student who had read "Dear Ashley: A letter to a young niece" (Little, 2001), which was an article dedicated to my (then) 13-year-old niece on my partner's side explaining my role in the family and, essentially, publicly coming out to her. The student told me she actually cried when she read it. How do individual dialogues translate to larger, collective initiatives? Fifth, and finally, how can we employ creative means to address the diversity of our clients in ways that do not tokenise or isolate? After all, GLBTTQ youth exist across contexts and many live with double or triple doses of oppression. How do we honour the whole developing person without burying the subjective pieces that contribute to the puzzle? The longer I work as a child and youth care worker the more questions I accumulate. There are no easy answers for practice, as I am sure many may agree. How, then, do we take our questions to the next level--action? As Uribe (1996) succinctly states, "I ask all readers of this article to examine their own commitment to champion unpopular causes and provide leadership in the battleground of equality" (p.159).

CONCLUSION

The Pride Game is not merely a tool, it is an extension of the passion I hold to transform how people think, feel, and talk about GLBTTQ experiences. The game is a means by which I pour myself into my child and youth care practice in a way that is sincere, appropriately humorous, and engaging for participants. Evans et al. (2000) reflect, "Loosening or breaking taboos has the potential for freeing the human mind" (p. 296). I am not so egotistical as to suggest that a single game can free a human

mind, but I do believe that creative means of discussing taboo topics can open doors, foster trust, and provide a learning atmosphere that is neither confrontational nor overwhelming. Given the diverse settings in which child and youth care practitioners are employed, we have the potential to reach many children, youth, and families, not to mention colleagues, in ways that are informed and affirming. Child and youth care cannot, for me, be isolated from the realities of GLBTTQ individuals, whether they be colleagues or clients. The Pride Game is the means by which I have bridged these two, and I am hopeful that these previously separate entities will eventually merge at the personal, policy, and curriculum levels. And, as I tell my game session participants, I honestly hope that I will soon be unemployable as an anti-homophobia educator, and I retain the vision that this taboo topic will someday become a celebrated everyday discussion.

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