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Silence = bullying and death, Conversation = relationships and life

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Lavender Graduates Celebration Keynote Address
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I'd like to thank the Lavender Graduates Celebration planning committee for inviting me to speak today. I am honored to participate because I admire the Lav Grad students we are here to celebrate for their willingness to share themselves openly with the Puget Sound campus community. This celebration is an opportunity for you to reflect on your education and your role in fostering a more inclusive world.

In 1987, after five years of unceasing deaths of gay men from AIDS, and with absolutely no hope on the horizon, six gay activists in New York formed the Silence = Death Project. They distributed posters around the city featuring a pink triangle on a black background with the statement 'SILENCE = DEATH.' This project declared that the "silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, then and now, must be broken as a matter of our survival."[1] A matter of life and death.

In September 2010 five boys between ages 13-18 ended their lives, seeing death as the only way to stop the bullying they were experiencing in school. The bullying epithets are familiar: "Gay," "fag," "queer" and "homo" "Why don't you go home and shoot yourself? No one will miss you." School officials, wary of conservative protests claiming that talking about homosexuality promotes homosexuality, did nothing. These tragic events sparked a debate about bullying and anti-gay harassment and started a conversation centered on the question, What is the role of public schools in preventing bullying and harassment and teaching tolerance and acceptance?[2]

In response to these deaths, and as a part of the ongoing conversation about sameness and difference in America, syndicated columnist and author Dan Savage began the It Gets Better Project. It provides supporters a way to inspire hope by telling LGBTQ youth that, yes, it does indeed get better. This project is now a worldwide ongoing conversation, inspiring over 10,000 user-created videos that have been viewed more than 35 million times.[3]

Anti-gay harassment, and the inability of public schools to act in positive ways, has also been featured on the Fox TV series Glee. In the show, Ohio public high school student Kurt Hummel is bullied. School officials do nothing despite Kurt's efforts to inform teachers and the administration. To find safety he transfers to an elite all male school that has a zero tolerance policy on bullying. At Dalton Academy Kurt finds friendship, acceptance and love, and of course, song. What is interesting to me is that this fictional narrative has been hotly debated on the Internet—revealing the fear that simply seeing two men sing the duet "Baby it's Cold Outside," or kiss, or attend their prom promotes homosexuality and confuses young children.

These media forms, pamphletting, youtube, and television reflect conversations that are bubbling up all the time at dinner tables, in churches, on sports teams, at work, in schools, in interest clubs, and at art museums. As we interact we negotiate relationships again and again. Educational historian, Larry Cuban argues that school reform isn't really about improving schools, but about schools becoming sites for us to have conversations about conflicting values.[4] And conversations are the corner stone of society. French sociologist and philosopher Emile Durkheim noted that the structure of society is formed by the constant face-to-face interactions of its citizens.[5] That means that we build society as we engage with each other. As an educator, I see schools as institutions that can give us a space to have conversations about very difficult questions: Who am I? Who is us? Who are them?

Silence=Death, It Gets Better, and Glee: Whether or not adults are ready for these conversations, children and youth are. To put the ongoing societal conversations into a local perspective, by local I mean occurring in Tacoma Public Schools, I'm going to share three conversations about gender expression and same sex marriage that I've experienced with elementary school children in the past six months.

Conversation 1
This past October, my undergraduate students were working in a 5th grade classroom to help students set up an experiment to test the impact of differing salt concentrations on brine shrimp hatching. I moved from table to table, posing questions about experimental variables. As I approached one table a 5th grader asked me a question.

Girl: You are a girl?

Me: Yes I am.

Girl: You're wearing a suit.

Me: Yes I am.

Girl: Girls can wear suits?

Me: Yes they can.

Girl: I did not know that. That's neat!

Conversation 2
In March, my undergraduate students and I were helping 2nd graders use laptops to research animals in Africa. I sat at a table assisting two students—a boy researching black rhinos and a girl researching zebras.

Girl: (the girl leaned toward her table partner, another girl, and said) I don't know if my partner is a boy or a girl.

Me: What do you think I am?

Girl: I think you are a girl, but I don't know why.

Boy: (the boy chimed in) She is a girl! Her name is Amy.

Girl: (the girl repeated) Her name is Amy.

Me: Does that make me a girl?

Girl: I'm not sure.

Conversation 3
Also in March, a student teacher taught a writing lesson to kindergarten students. A
kindergartener approached him, as he reviewed her writing she asked him a question.

Girl: Can two boys be married?

Male Student Teacher: In some places they can.

Girl: But they can't have babies!

Male Student Teacher: Maybe they don't have babies, but they just might love each other.

Girl: Can two girls be married?

Male Student Teacher: In some places they can.

Girl: So I could marry Eunice?

Male Student Teacher: I think you and Eunice are good friends.

Girl: You're right. We have the same boy friend, Ernesto, and people make fun of us for it.

As I reflect on these conversations I debate the pros and cons of giving children honest and
authentic answers, like, "Yes, I am" or "In some places they can" to validate and normalize a
range of gender expression and homosexuality, versus posing questions, like, "What do you
think?" to learn about how children and young adults view gender and sexual orientation
categories. Martha Minow writes, "Organizing perceptions along some lines is essential, but
which lines will we use—and come to use unthinkingly? Human beings use labels to describe
and sort their perceptions of the world. The particular labels chosen can carry social and moral
consequences. Labels point to conclusions about where an item or an individual belongs without
opening for debate the purposes for which the label will be used."[6] My conversations with
elementary students are evidence that young children actively work to sort individuals into the
category systems they have been taught, such as the limiting binary framing of boy or girl and

straight or gay. Some argue that we need and LGBTQ curriculum, however, a curriculum expectation is absolutely no substitute for listening to what children and youth say.

I've realized that children's spontaneous questions and remarks, "if [we] do not shut them down by shushing or lecturing,"[7] are opportunities for us to learn more about how they view the categories we use to describe human behavior. I'm still learning how to foster dialogue about gender expression and sexual orientation with young children. "What I can do is keep reminding myself to ask questions and to listen, as openly as possible, to what the children say."[8]

Keeping the questions open is less comfortable and less easy,[9] but we must charge education with the important task of crafting a more generous and open language to account for the infinite ways people live in their bodies and in relation to others.[10] I am not always sure that I know what a more generous and open language would look and sound like. And I am not always sure that it gets better. I am aware that if I really engage the multiple conflicting perspectives in this ongoing conversation about sameness and difference that I will hear and experience things that are hurtful. But, I also know that if we don't keep talking, keep trying, keep working to negotiate and build relationships across difference, we will never develop the language, tolerance, and acceptance we so desperately need. Silence equals bullying and death. Conversation equals relationships and survival. Some critics call this the political correctness agenda; I believe we must focus on what is humanely correct—"to promote respect, dignity, and validation for human life."[11]

Commencement is both an end and a beginning—you have a role to play in raising questions about the world in which we live. I congratulate you on your accomplishments and your commitment to intellectual and civic engagement, I wish you well in future endeavors, and I invite you to become important participants in this ongoing conversation about sameness and difference. In closing, I offer four questions for you to consider as you move ahead. Who are you? Who is us? Who are them? What is your role in continuing the conversation?

[1] No Author. (April 7, 2003). Silence = Death. Retrieved May 2, 2011 from Social Design Notes website http://backspace.com/notes/2003/04/silence-death.php.

[2] David, J. (September 10, 2010). How many teens have to die before Focus on the Family gives a damn? Retrieved May 2, 2011 from Huffington Post website http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-david/how-many-teens-have-to-di_b_716990.html.

[3] No Author. (not dated). What is the It Gets Better Project? Retrieved May 2, 2011 from It Gets Better Project website http://www.itgetsbetter.org/pages/about-it-gets-better-project/.

[4] Cuban, L. (1990). Reforming, again, again, and again. Educational Researcher, 19(1), 3-13.

[5] Collins, R. (1994). Four sociological traditions. New York: Oxford University Press.

[6] Minow, M. (1990). *Making all the difference: Inclusion, exclusion, and American law*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

[7] Chang, K, & Conrad, R. (2008). Following children's leads in conversations about race. In *Everyday antiracism: Getting real about race in school*. (pp. 34-38). New York: The New Press.

[8] Katch, H., & Katch, J. (2010). When boys won't be boys: Discussing gender with young children. *Harvard Educational Review, 80* (3), 379-390.

[9] Pelo, A. (2005). Playing with gender. Retrieved March 29, 2011 from the Rethinking Schools website www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/20-01/gend201.shtml.

[10] Gilbert, J. (2006). Imagining sex. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy, 3* (2), 38-42.

[10] Tucker, J. (April 12, 2011). CA bill would mandate LGBT presence in curriculum. Retrieved April 17, 2011 from SFGate.com website http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/04/12/MNSU1IS7K8.DTL