

# Gay, Rural, and Coming Out: A Case Study of One School's Experience

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*This case study details the events surrounding a gay student's "coming out" in a small, rural high school. Through the eyes and experiences of the student, his teachers, classmates, and community, we hear the story of how the school and community dealt with an issue they had never before actively considered. Through qualitative interviews, the former high school principal describes reactions and lessons learned as the student made his sexual orientation known, attended prom, and was awarded one of three Matthew Shepard Scholarships given in the state. The unexpected way in which events unfolded in the school and community were nearly as surprising as the revelation of the student's sexual orientation. The experiences reinforce the importance of school climate, meaningful relationships between students and staff, the sometimes hidden challenges of high school, and provide valuable considerations for all educators.*

If I described the place where I began as a secondary school principal as a "Mayberry kind of place", it would not be an exaggeration. If I did so, my description would come only from affection and appreciation. Having attended and taught in small, rural, midwestern schools, I had a clear picture in mind of the type of school and community I sought to begin my administrative career.

I found a quaint and pleasant midwestern community of approximately 1,500 people. The idyllic picture included a main street, complete with a grocery store, hardware store, and a venerable Carnegie library. The town's residents could choose chicken or carry out pizza from any one of the three convenience stores, or opt for a tenderloin and a beer at one of the three taverns. On Sundays, the five local churches were packed, just like the football bleachers and gymnasium on game night, regardless of the quality of the teams from year to year.

This essay details my experience as a small, rural school principal in relationship to his student's experiences when he revealed his sexual orientation to his family, school, and community. The lessons learned as he made his sexual orientation known touched many who had not before actively considered the issue of homosexuality in general, and certainly not on their sidewalks and in their classrooms. The essay presents a case study in which the student, his school, and community, find themselves face to face with an issue to which they had never given much thought. The experience reveals shocking and intriguing realities not likely anticipated in this school and community.

As principal, I was familiar with the basic challenges of student discipline and harassment and was fortunate to have an excellent guidance counselor. However, information on sexual orientation was completely absent from my preparation for administration. Not knowing where to turn for advice in handling what I felt could be a "brewing storm", I turned to my fellow administrators. My colleagues, however, were sadly honest, noting that they could offer no real suggestions or experience, either. Not only did my

colleagues not have any information for me, neither did the literature.

## **Review of Literature**

While much has been written about developmental issues related to lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender youth (l/g/b/t), literature on sexual orientation in K-12 educational settings is scant. Miceli (1998) noted that sociological examinations of l/g/b/t persons have all been based on adults. Similarly, Miceli found that most inquiries into hegemonic curriculum and diversity have overlooked sexuality and its connection to educational institutions. Furthermore, research into l/g/b/t educational issues in a rural context is nonexistent.

The limited research into educational experiences and settings paints a bleak picture for l/g/b/t students. The 1999 Massachusetts Youth Behavior Survey (MYBRS) reported that 32.8% of l/g/b/t students attempted suicide the previous year, compared to 7.6% of other students. Nearly a quarter of l/g/b/t students reported being threatened or injured with a weapon at school in the past year and 20% reported skipping school in the past month due to feeling unsafe.

The 2001 Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) School Climate Survey found that 84% of l/g/b/t students are verbally harassed, while 82% noted that teachers rarely or never correct or discipline the harassing students. Many students in the GLSEN research reported hearing similar statements from school staff members. Other school climate research by Elia (1993), Human Rights Watch (2001), Telljohann and Price (1993), Walling (1993), and Harris and Bliss (1997) have examined l/g/b/t students' experiences in school. Findings confirm the existence of a toxic atmosphere in schools for l/g/b/t students and a perilous educational experience for many. Elia (1993) compares the school atmosphere to, "an emotional pressure cooker." (p. 181).

Sears (1991) examined educators' attitudes toward

l/g/b/t students, finding eight of ten teachers reported negative feelings toward lesbians and gay men. Additionally, Sears noted that less than one-third of guidance counselors viewed homosexuality as a legitimate topic of discussion with students. Not surprisingly, only 8% of students in Harris and Bliss' (1997) work revealed their sexual orientation to their guidance counselors.

Research, though limited, indicates that many school administrators are uninformed with regard to l/g/b/t issues. Lambda Legal, a national gay civil rights organization added a disturbing piece to the body of school atmosphere research. Lambda cited a Michigan report in which 78% of school administrators indicated they knew of no gay, lesbian, or bisexual students in their school. At the same time, 94% of the same administrators indicated they felt their schools were safe places for their gay and lesbian students.

### **Method**

My research began by talking with Pete (a pseudonym) about his coming out experiences during his senior year. It was however, difficult to know which members of the school or community I should seek to interview. I found that, while the entire school and community had been aware of Pete's coming out, it was difficult to determine who should be interviewed. Bogdan and Bicklin (2003) provided guidance for the use of network, or snowball, sampling. I thus asked Pete to identify other individuals with whom I should conduct in-depth interviews. Pete identified several members of the senior class who had taken a physics class together during their senior year. In turn, Pete's classmates suggested others to interview, including the science teacher, guidance counselor, Pete's mother, and a clergy person. All told, I conducted in-depth interviews with ten individuals. Where feasible, research was conducted using face-to-face interviews, and a number of guided questions. I had initially planned to tape record the interviews, but felt it necessary to make subjects feel as comfortable as possible. I was concerned with this issue as I had previously been the students' principal and the teachers' supervisor. The fact that I had since left the school for a university position and the students had graduated helped minimize subjects' potential feelings of awkwardness or discomfort. I felt a recorder might inhibit some subjects and might seem too formal or intimidating.

Thus, I again applied suggestions from Bogdan and Bicklin (2003) for field notes and the structure of the interviews. I used a number of general questions designed to encourage subjects to explain their experiences and feelings, as well as probing, in-depth questions to provide clarification. I took short notes during interviews and then wrote more extensive notes immediately following. As several of Pete's former classmates had left the area for college, some interviews took place over the telephone.

As I reviewed the transcripts, I decided not to engage in formal coding, but to employ a narrative analysis, following the method described by Silverman (2000) who advocates narrative analysis as a means for understanding participants' categories. As I had been involved in the events I was

studying, I took additional guidance from work by Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Adler and Adler (1987), who offer extensive guidance on autoethnography and complete-member research.

### **Background**

Pete was a third generation member of a local family. He had attended the school, which had enrollment at the time of around 525 students K-12, since kindergarten. Though a natural athlete, computers and technology drew his attention more than athletics or music. Pete was a personable, articulate young man, who was neither a troublemaker nor a teacher's pet. He was, in many ways, an average small town high school student, if there is such a thing.

In the fall of 1999, Pete began to "come out," or reveal his sexual orientation, to a small group of friends. At his request, they kept the circle of people in the know very small and very quiet. During the same time, Pete was utilizing his computer skills to communicate with the guidance counselor about his feelings. In the frequent and numerous exchanges, their communication consisted of Pete's gradual process of moving toward a point where he revealed his sexual orientation to the guidance counselor. As principal, I was at this time "aware" of these exchanges, since the counselor and I worked closely with many of the same students on a daily basis, dealing with academics, behavior problems, family difficulties, attendance, and the conundrum of other duties that intertwine counselors and principals, particularly in a small rural school.

As the fall and winter gave way to spring, rumors that Pete might bring his partner to the junior-senior Prom began circulating. Over the years, many people had laughed, remarking that Pete would one day have to find a way to top his father's exit from the high school. His father, according to one of the more memorable school legends, had ridden a motorbike down the hall on the last day of his senior year.

On a delightfully warm April day in my office, the counselor and I were talking when she told me that Pete had informed her that he indeed planned to invite his partner to the prom. My knee jerk response was that she would, obviously, have to talk him out of it. My fear and frustration centered on my looming concerns about the potential uproar and emotional response that might result. After reflecting on the events that followed, as well as thorough research with players in the series of events, I am now keenly aware of the selfish nature of my initial reaction.

My overriding desire for the counselor to talk him out of inviting his partner to the prom came not from a personal, religious, or moral view of sexual orientation. Rather, its origin was purely managerial and administrative. I simply did not think our school and community were ready to handle the issue. I felt certain it could derail the last few weeks of the school year and create a distracted, uncomfortable, if not dangerous and chaotic environment.

The prom at the school, like many others, is not a merely school event. It is a community event. Parents, grandparents, friends, and the curious turn out on the sidewalk to see the usually t-shirt clad students transformed by tuxedos and sequined dresses. The students are, in true promenade

fashion, announced as they enter the building where the parent-prepared meal and dance are held.

As administrators and sponsors of the event, we found ourselves in that familiar but unpleasant place in which our formal preparation in education seems of little value. Although my initial wish had been for the counselor to dissuade Pete from attending the prom with his partner, disallowing his attendance was never considered, suggested, or discussed among our administrative team. We had, however, wrangled with curious but crucial details, such as how to introduce Pete and his group, which consisted of his partner and another boy and girl. As it occurred, we simply announced the names of the four attendees and they entered the building without incident or insult.

The evening passed without the horrible visions of insults, threats, or violence that I had nervously pictured. Aside from a few inappropriate notes that were passed during dinner, we experienced no problems. Different as they were, Pete and his partner danced, embraced, kissed, and attended the prom in basically the same fashion as their counterparts, although they certainly attracted more attention in doing so.

During the evening, I was struck by the extent to which Pete and his out of school guest seemed to be welcomed by a number of students. I did not really observe the others openly greeting or welcoming his partner in an overt way. Instead, they seemed to communicate both curiosity and hospitality by simply smiling or watching. Subtle and tacit, I thought.

While this took place, others present whom I thought were potentially hostile, seemed taken aback. To be sure, they did not approve of what they saw and were uncomfortable. For whatever reason, however, there would be no cat calling, intimidation, threats, or violence, as I had feared there might be.

The spring wore on and shortly after the prom, we received notification that Pete had been selected as one of three statewide recipients of a Matthew Shepard Scholarship. The award is a privately funded full scholarship to a state institution in honor and memory of the college student in Wyoming who was the victim of an anti-gay hate murder.

Again, we found ourselves struggling with seemingly simple but potentially explosive issues like where in the program to place the award, and what exactly, is the presenter from the state capital going to say. We were also very concerned that an infamous preacher and religious protest group would be protesting the award, as they were protesting at another school's awards assembly not far away. Our concerns were magnified by the fact that law enforcement in our community was provided by the county sheriff, some 19 miles away. Thankfully, the ceremony proceeded without a hitch, insult, or protest, although the presentation of Pete's full-ride scholarship attracted the wide-eyed attention of some audience members who had tuned out some of the other awards.

Graduation day found Pete and his 37 classmates marching across the stage and onto the school lawn for the traditional reception line, just as they always did. Again, no insults, intimidation, or trouble. Pete would later recount, however,

that he was denied a few handshakes in the

reception line that formed every year on the school lawn after the ceremony. Having traversed through a tense, uncertain, and unknown issue for several months, the sense of relief for me was measurable, to say the least.

Following Pete's graduation, I accepted a university faculty position in teacher education. After several months of reflection, I could not fully reconcile why my fears and predictions about what would result were so inaccurate. As principal, I had tried to emphasize really knowing the community and all of our students. The issue had come and gone without the dreadful incidents that, just a few months earlier, had caused me to hope that the counselor could dissuade Pete from coming out. I needed an explanation and invited Pete to speak to my Human Relations class. Following Pete's fascinating discussion with my students, I knew there was more to the story, and thus began my research.

### **Our Story**

My description of the Mayberry-like community was probably not an exaggeration. It is also not an exaggeration to say I was amazed by what I found. Virtually every participant interviewed said, like me, that they would have predicted a very difficult situation as a result of Pete's coming out, attendance at prom, and scholarship. From threats, to vandalism, to violence, to complete disruption of the educational environment, the subjects' consensus was, like mine, that the school and community would not be ready for this.

In working to determine why predictions were so inaccurate, respondents offered a number of possibilities. Some indicated that, since they had known Pete for such a long time, his coming out really did not change things. "Brent," Pete's friend, athletic classmate and a member of the football team noted that some were suddenly focused on how different Pete must be, but that, "he's still my buddy." Brent also suspected that the situation went much more smoothly than anticipated because Pete "wasn't in anyone's face about it," and was a longtime member of the community. He suspected that a newcomer or more flamboyantly gay student might not have been as well received.

"Melinda," an athletic, straight-A student agreed that reactions might have been more hostile if Pete had been more flamboyantly gay. She and her classmates, however, agreed that students who were hostile toward Pete were "afraid of getting in trouble at school." She credits many teachers whom she believes would have, contrary to much research, not allowed harassing comments or name calling. "Lucy" recalled an informal message that said that anyone wanting to harass would have to do so in a socially risky environment. For example, she described how some students at the prom communicated support, acceptance, tolerance, or curiosity in a largely non-verbal manner, gathering around Pete and his boyfriend to talk, or stand back and listen. She also noted how, at the awards assembly, some adults did not clap when Pete's name was announced,

but they were not “openly hostile, either.” Others recalled how students, many of them female, still sat with Pete at lunch and talked with him in the hallway. Pete suspected the girls in question have more social capital than they might ever imagine, laughing that, “Nobody wanted to face the wrath of the girls.”

While the actions, both overt and subtle, of the class are telling, the high school guidance counselor, “Jeri,” argues that Pete’s status within the class was also a key. “Think about it,” she says, “Pete’s not in sports, or music and doesn’t have great grades, so he’s not gonna take anyone’s piece of the pie. They’ve got less reason to hate him.” Had he been in a position to take away their prized roles in athletics, arts, or music, he might have been received very differently, she suspected.

The most revealing finding of the research, however, resembles an iceberg. Just as we learn in elementary science, most of the iceberg is below the surface and is invisible. The extent to which other issues streamed below the surface of this issue was no less than astounding, even to a principal who thought he was *especially* in tune and aware of his high school of only 130 students.

The iceberg theme centered on the senior physics class. In stereotypical rural school fashion, six high achieving students signed up for physics, taught by a veteran staff member who was a student favorite, though thought by many to be “out of touch”. One by one, the students in the physics class who Pete had suggested I interview, revealed amazing and unexpected things about their senior spring. To my amazement, Pete was not the big story.

Each student in the class was, obviously very academically capable. They represented the top few spots in the class, each maintaining a four point average, or very near. In addition, the students represented some of the best and brightest extra-curricular talent. These students were some of the most gifted artists, athletes, musicians, and student leaders. Despite the appearance that each had the “world by the tail”, each was struggling with very difficult challenges of growing up and moving on from the school and community that most had known all their lives. Pete’s situation provided the impetus and the physics class provided a tiny forum for communication and revelation of the individual, secret struggles each student faced—struggles that previously had been hidden behind a façade of high school successes. Each found him/herself supporting and relating to Pete as they wrestled with their own obstacles: obstacles that ran the gamut from relationships, to parent expectations, to peer pressure, to suicidal ideation.

One by one, students revealed how they “didn’t do much physics,” but found support from one another during physics laboratories. Brent related the difficulties of, amid many questions, remaining true to a friend. Melinda related how she felt ostracized for choosing not to attend beer parties. Lucy recalled dealing with anti-Semitism when, after losing her parents, came from a western state to be raised by her parents’ best friends. Kirsten explained the perils of not identifying with the mainstream clique.

While each student revealed some previously hidden issues, one student’s struggles took center stage. “Jim” was the son of a teacher, and, in a word, brilliant. His brilliant

intellect, however, was coupled with social difficulties that were alarming; the class and teacher were increasingly concerned about Jim and his potential for suicide.

The teacher and students were, on a daily basis, expressing their concerns to the guidance counselor, who in turn, worked closely with Jim and his family. In interviews, the students and teachers described how, before the physics class, they had not really known each other well, despite their tiny senior class of 38. As Jim related the potential life and death issues with which he struggled, each student found that he/she could relate, in a way.

Not surprisingly, the veteran teacher was more in tune to the situation in his class than any of the students knew. Recognizing that this spring was not a normal semester, he felt the operation of his classroom had to be adjusted. The veteran teacher acknowledged that physics took a back seat to the issues each of the students faced, noting that before, he had been “unaware of the depths of the emotions. Outwardly, they appeared to be rolling along.” As a result, the teacher stayed in close contact with the guidance counselor and gave the students a good deal of freedom and space to discuss and work in lab groups.

After establishing that events in our school did not match anyone’s predictions for what might have occurred, I explored factors that might have made the situation different. The ideas, like the other revelations from the study, are thought provoking for teachers and administrators.

Some subjects hypothesized that the situation might have matched their predictions more closely if Pete had not been a long-time member of the school and stereotypically close-knit community. Others agreed with Melinda and Brent, hypothesizing that things might have been different if he “acted more gay.” Some felt that events might have been different if the school had different student leadership or “last year’s senior class.” Some wondered, wisely, I think, about reactions if Pete’s partner been a student in this school, rather than in another district.

## Conclusions and Implications

The conclusions and implications from this experience and research are numerous and far reaching. The findings underscore the urgency for teachers, administrators, and all involved with school children to know students on a deeper level. Surprisingly, these successful, high achieving, seemingly well-adjusted students revealed that they are not as sanguine as their appearance and achievement suggests. This research demonstrates that, despite small numbers and an experienced, thoughtful staff, even the most perceptive professionals may overlook issues that are of paramount importance to the well being of students.

Second, it underscores the importance of teacher and administrator preparation programs evolving to adequately prepare future educators to be attune to key elements in their classrooms, which includes much more than standards and benchmarks. The perilous waters through which many students must travel should not be minimized. Nor should they be overlooked because of pressure for high test scores, budget shortfalls, and paperwork. Sometimes physics,

fractions, and the War of 1812 take a back seat to other issues. Sometimes they should. Sometimes they must. Teachers and administrators must constantly be aware of their students' beliefs, biases, interests, and tendencies. From master schedules to seating charts, we need to know where to find times and places in which there might be trouble.

Next, it reminds us of the responsibility of developing and implementing mission and vision statements that we can and will live by, especially when faced with a difficult, controversial, and unanticipated issue. We must not suddenly adopt and implement anti-harassment policies because our school now has a minority or unique student. We must live it, all the time.

The revelations also remind us of the essential challenge of guarding against personal biases. Our task is to educate everyone who comes through the door, not to focus selfishly on what might make our jobs as teachers or administrators easiest. The students in the physics class proved that, while they represent a portrait of success on the outside, none found it particularly easy to achieve, maintain, or embody.

Finally, the findings call attention to an alarming, though not all together surprising lack of research, especially in the rural setting. To begin the journey toward an understanding of this issue, its setting, and all the inherent complexities, further inquiry is urgently needed.

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