The Triangle Program:
Experiences of Lesbian, Bisexual and Gay Students
in the Classroom

by

Calvin Knight

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT: Toronto has an alternative high school program, the Triangle Program, for students who leave school because of homophobia. Eleven Triangle Program students were asked about the following: why they came to the program; their experiences at other schools; the advantages and disadvantages of the program; and how had it developed their social, emotional and intellectual skills. Four of the Triangle Program staff were asked about the following: the strengths and weaknesses of the program; the needs that it meet; the barriers that it had to overcome; and the ways in which issues of race, gender and bisexuality were integrated into the lesbigay curriculum. The data obtained showed that these lesbigay students, had little support from educators, family and peers and had endured severe homophobic harassment in their former schools. The Triangle team provided the safety and the social, psychological, academic and economic support lesbigay youth needed to continue with their education. However, issues surrounding race, gender, bisexuality and the transition into other schools needed to be addressed.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Judy Shepard collapsed in tears while recalling the murder of her son, Mathew, a gay University of Wyoming student who, after being pistol-whipped, beaten and left tied, crucifixion-style, to a rural fence in freezing temperatures last October.

(Kenna, 1999)

Terror struck at the fast-beating heart of London last night, as a nail bomb planted in a Soho pub at rush hour killed two people and injured 73. . . . The smashed and blackened Admiral Duncan pub on Old Compton St. near Leicester Square was a popular gay hangout. . . . Many had burns and nail wounds, several had lost limbs.

(Ward, 1999)

The death of 21-year-old Mathew and the bombing of a London gay pub are sickening reminders of the severity of homophobia in many countries. Fortunately, deadly homophobic acts such as these are rare. However, homophobia and heterosexism are deeply ingrained in most societies, from institutions to families. Canada is no exception. In 1991, Delwin Vriend, a gay teacher in Alberta, was fired by an Edmonton Christian College. It took seven years, until April 1998, before the Supreme Court of Canada included sexual orientation as a prohibited ground for discrimination under Alberta’s human rights code. Moreover, many rights are not accorded lesbigay people. For example, equal pension benefits are available to lesbian and gay employees only in British Columbia, Nova Scotia and Ontario, and adoption by same-sex couples is allowed only in British Columbia and Ontario.

For lesbigay (lesbian, bisexual, gay) adults in Canada who are “out”, discrimination is a reality. For those who are not “out”, there is the constant fear of being found out and the possibility of discrimination. These difficulties are also experienced by adolescents, but teens are less able to resist discrimination effectively because they do not have the
experience and political power that adults do.

Adolescence is a time when young people are attempting to fit in with other teens while beginning to form their own individual identity. It is a time of confusion, insecurity, and pressure. For many, adolescence is unpleasant and depressing. In fact, suicide is a leading cause of death among adolescents (www.sfsuicide.org, 1999). Furthermore, certain groups must deal with severe discrimination because of their race, religion, class, sex, disabilities or sexual orientation. Of these groups, those who are lesbian, bisexual or gay (lesbigay) endure some of the worst discrimination and receive minimal social support. Many families, communities and institutions in Canada and the United States discriminate against lesbigay people.

One would hope that schools could provide more support for lesbigay youth, but most often, this is not the case. Often, lesbigay issues are, at best, ignored in the curriculum and, at worst, denigrated. As for discrimination against lesbigay people, derogatory remarks by students are often ignored and sometimes reinforced by educators themselves. In the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), there are programs to improve the self-esteem of lesbigay youth and teach educators how to make healthier learning environments for lesbigay youth. However, it is the decision of school administrators and educators whether or not to use these programs and many do not.

Since many educators in Toronto secondary schools do not address lesbigay issues, many lesbigay youth feel unwanted and often unsafe in high school. Some lesbigay youth are able to overcome, and perhaps even challenge the homophobia in their school. Most, however, remain silent and pass as heterosexuals or isolate themselves from their peers to lessen the discrimination. Many begin to skip school and some drop out. Before 1995, most lesbigay dropouts had few lesbigay positive education programs to enter. Then, in
September 1995, the Triangle Program opened specifically for those students who left school because of homophobia. The Triangle Program is an accredited education program that is part of the OASIS Alternative School.

The question to be asked is: what impact does the Triangle Program have on the lesbigay youth who enter the program? Research about lesbigay youth and schooling, as well as interviews with students and members of the Triangle team (the Triangle team includes members of the Triangle Board – including Triangle Program staff, and community representatives) done in 1998 have provided some insights into this question. The issues discussed are: homophobia against youth; understanding the identity of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth; education for lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in secondary schools; the school experiences of the students before entering the Triangle Program; and advantages and disadvantages of the Triangle Program.
Chapter 2

Methodology

The two most important components of the Triangle Program are its students and staff. Their experiences provide insight into how successful the program was during 1997 and 1998, and it is for this reason that I chose to use qualitative research methods which allow their ideas and concerns to be accentuated. It is these people who know the most about the program and who can provide the most meaningful information. I chose interviewing as my method of ascertaining this information. Interviewing helped to uncover the main issues concerning Triangle staff and students, about which further research could be done. The Triangle Program also had only been operating for two years by 1997; therefore, very little quantitative information existed.

Eleven of the twenty students attending the Triangle Program in June 1998 agreed to be interviewed. John Terpstra, the initial full-time Triangle teacher, and Vanessa Russell, the current teacher, were interviewed, as well as two social workers at the program, Krin Zook and Steve Solomon. One teacher at a Toronto District School Board (TDSB) secondary school who will not be named, Tim McCaskell from the Equity Studies Centre, and Kathryn Snider, author and PhD student, were also interviewed (see Appendix A for consent form). Interviewing this assortment of people was done in an attempt to provide a variety of perspectives about the Triangle Program. I am a heterosexual white male from a working-class background.

The students volunteered to be interviewed by signing a list passed around the class. Each student was given a pseudonym to protect their identity (see Appendix B for consent form). Due to the small number of students in the program, it is not possible to
provide information about each student without revealing their identities. However, these are the general characteristics of the students: their ages ranged from 15 to 23; there were six males and five females, two bisexuals, five gay males and four lesbians; there was only one student who was also a member of a visible minority; some were raised in Toronto, others in Southern Ontario cities and towns and some outside of Ontario. The TDSB teacher was a gay male who taught in a Metro Toronto Secondary School for over 31 years. His pseudonym is Greg Pow.

Here is a short description of the other interviewees:

1. John Terpstra taught as a secondary school English teacher before becoming the full-time teacher at the Triangle Program. He was the first full-time teacher. He was the first to develop the Triangle’s lesbigay curriculum. He stayed with the program for three years before retiring.

2. Vanessa Russell is the current full-time teacher at the Triangle Program. As of June 1999, she will have taught for one year at the program.

3. Krin Zook is the part-time street worker at the Triangle Program. Her duties include the following: counselling; helping to attain student assistance (transit tickets or monthly bursaries); doing student welfare progress reports; and providing information about community agencies and other educational programs. She has worked at the program for the four years it has been running.

4. Steve Solomon is the part-time social worker at the Triangle Program and the full-time coordinator of the TDSB Human Sexuality Program. His duties are the same as Zook’s, but he concentrates on providing personal counselling, coordinating the use of Ryerson and University of Toronto Social Work students in the Triangle Program, and being a liaison between the Triangle Program and students and educators in schools in Toronto and
across Canada.

5. Tim McCaskell is the Student Programme Worker at the TDSB's Equity Studies Centre. He deals with equity issues in all TDSB schools but is the primary worker dealing with lesbigay equity.

6. Kathryn Snider is a PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. She is the author of "Race and Sexual Orientation: The (Im)possibility of these Intersections in Educational Policy" (Snider, 1996) in which she critiques the Triangle Program.

My interviewing style involved asking prepared questions while encouraging the interviewees to provide and expand on any information that went beyond the set questions. My interviews with the students were guided by the following questions:

1. What were your experiences at other schools?
2. Why did you decide to come to the Triangle Program?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the Triangle Program?
4. How has the Triangle Program developed your social, emotional and intellectual skills?
5. Has the Triangle Program prepared you for the transition into your next school or into the workplace?
6. Should the Triangle Program become a complete alternative school?

My interviews for the Triangle Staff involved the following questions:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Triangle Program?
2. What needs of the lesbigay students does the Triangle Program meet that public schools do not?
3. What are the greatest barriers that the Triangle Program has to overcome to be successful?
4. What resources are provided to Triangle students to help them develop as gay, lesbian and bisexual students?

5. What sort of students attend the Triangle Program?

6. How does the Triangle Program help with the transition of students into mainstream schools?

7. How are students being academically challenged in the Triangle Program?

8. How has heterosexism and homophobia affected the students you have taught?

9. How are issues of race, gender and bisexuality integrated into the lesbigay curriculum?

   My interview with the TDSB teacher focussed on questions about homophobia in TDSB schools and resources available to lesbigay students. My interview with McCaskell also focussed on these issues as well as how the proposed TDSB equity policy will affect the lesbigay students in TDSB schools and the Triangle Program, and the effectiveness of the Triangle Program. Finally, in my interview with Snider, I asked questions about her article and the responses she received from McCaskell (1998) and Margaret Schneider (1998).

   Prior to the interviews, each participant read and signed a consent form, in which they agreed to be interviewed (two students had parents read and sign). The consent form informed each participant of the nature of the study. The consent forms for the students and TDSB teacher indicated they would be given pseudonyms, while the others agreed to have their names and titles made public. Every form indicated that they could refuse to answer any question and retract their interview at any time (Appendix A). All the interviews were audio taped. Once the taping was complete, the interviews were transcribed. The transcribed results were then coded, based on the topics for discussion. Finally, after coding was complete, patterns and conclusions were developed.
Two documents which provided essential data about the Triangle Program were

1) *The Proposal for the Development of an Alternative School Program for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students Who Have Dropped Out of School* and 2) *The Zeller Program Proposal*. The first proposal provided information about how homophobia in North America and specifically Toronto has created a need for an alternative school for lesbigay youth. It also provided feedback from various Toronto organizations who deal with lesbigay youth. The second proposal was developed after the program was approved. This proposal included information about what the program would involve, such as staffing, intake and program delivery.
Chapter 3

Homophobia against Youth - Violence and Silence

Homophobic violence - verbal and physical - damages the self-esteem of lesbigay people. When one's self-esteem declines, so does one's success, and this leads to the further erosion of one's self-confidence. At an early age, many lesbigay people give up trying to reach their potential. This tendency can be seen in students getting poor grades at school, dropping out, using drugs and, for some, committing suicide. This chapter will review the existing literature on research about homophobia against youth. I will discuss the seriousness and prevalence of homophobic violence, its effect on lesbigay people, and strategies and barriers to creating a healthier learning environment for lesbigay youth.

The United States National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) conducted a study in 1984 on anti-gay violence. Two thousand gay men and lesbians in eight United States cities were surveyed. Of the 2000 surveyed, 94% said they had experienced some form of victimization (Otis & Skinner, 1998). This study did not specifically survey bisexuals, but according to the research, bisexuals are disliked by society as much as gay males and lesbians. A study done by Eliason (1996) of 1130 heterosexual university respondents throughout the United States found that they rated bisexuals as less acceptable than lesbian or gay males. Thirty percent of the respondents stated that bisexuality was either unacceptable or somewhat unacceptable, while 23% and 22% stated the same for gay males and lesbians (p. 318). Bisexuals are often blamed for the spread of HIV into the heterosexual population, and bisexuality is often seen as a transitional stage in coming out as a lesbian or gay, and thus thought to be nothing more than confusion about one's sexual orientation or revulsion with one's same-sex attractions (Travers &
O'Brien, 1997, p. 127). Therefore, NGLTF's findings are probably representative of bisexuals' experiences as well.

However, the absence of issues of bisexuality from much of the literature on lesbians and gay men is a definite weakness and could possibly be attributed to "homosexism" and "biphobia" -- two terms which describe the prejudice that gay males and lesbians have toward bisexuals. Travers and O'Brien (1997) stated, "It is common experience, however, to discover that many lesbians and gay men are misinformed and hold stereotypical, unwelcoming views of bisexuality" (p. 126). It could equally be attributed to the narrow way of seeing sexuality by all people -- seeing people as either heterosexual or lesbian/gay. "Most people are, to a greater or lesser extent, bisexual in their fantasies, desires and/or activities" (Fox, 1996 in Travers & O'Brien, 1997, p. 118). These terms will be discussed in the chapter on "Understanding the Identity of Lesbigay Youth." This chapter will also include a discussion about how homophobia is different for bisexuals. However, for now, I will speak of homophobia in general terms and include bisexuals as one of the three sexual minorities discriminated against -- lesbians and gay males being the other two.

The fact that almost all lesbigay youth are or will be affected by violence is the reason it is being addressed in this thesis. It is important to address because violence of any kind is extremely destructive to the psychological development of any individual. Homophobia and heterosexism permeate most institutions and the ideology of most Canadians. I will concentrate on the various kinds of violence that lesbigay people endure and some of the effects. This chapter will be divided into five sections: common homophobic attitudes and the underlying ideology on which they are based; homophobic violence outside of school; homophobic violence in school; the effects of violence; and strategies for and barriers to creating a healthier learning environment for lesbigay youth.
Homophbic attitudes and ideology

It should be noted that I will be discussing "ideology" as defined by Dorothy Smith as "the ideas, images, and symbols in which our experience is given social form . . . what is actually produced by specialists and by people who are part of the apparatus by which the ruling class maintains its control over the society" (Khayatt, 1992, p. 88). The Gay And Lesbian Educators (GALE) of British Columbia have categorized homophobic attitudes into four levels (Gay and Lesbian Educators, 1993, p. 8). The first level is "tokenism." People with a "tokenism" attitude say things like, "You're not gay to me, you're a person." "What you do in bed is your own business." An attitude such as this implies that there is something to accept and does not want lesbigay people to do anything that makes others aware of their sexual orientation. This attitude ignores the pain caused by being in the closet. The second level is "tolerance" in which being lesbigay is seen as a phase of adolescent development that many people go through and most people "grow out of." Consequently, lesbigay people are viewed as less mature and in need of protection. The third level is "pity" or "heterosexual chauvinism" where heterosexuality is to be preferred. Thus, any possibility for someone to be heterosexual must be reinforced, and those who seem to be "born that way" must be pitied. Finally there is "repulsion", where being lesbigay is seen as a crime against nature, lesbigay people are sick, crazy, etc. and anything said or done to change them is justified. The attitudes at this level are the same used to justify discrimination against Jews, Blacks, women, and immigrants. "As Blacks and Jews were seen by racists to be dangerous to the purity of the race, criminals, or seducers, so too gay people are said to be a danger to the survival of the race" (Socarides, 1975 in Martin, 1982, p. 53). A 1992 Gallop Opinion Poll in the United States revealed that 49% and 54% of respondents believed that homosexuals should not be employed as high school teachers.
and elementary school teachers respectively. This is based primarily on the reasoning that homosexuals are pedophiles and recruit youth to be "new members" (Walters & Hayes, 1998, p. 2). Moreover, hiring lesbigay teachers runs counter to the ideological values of a large part of society. The ideological value is the intended sociological reproduction within the school system (women and men are to be mothers and fathers) (Khayatt, 1992, p. 146). The opinion poll also showed that 57% did not believe being lesbigay should be considered an acceptable lifestyle (Walters & Hayes, 1998, p. 2).

Lesbigay people being a threat to others, for example preying on heterosexual adults and children for sexual gratification, or recruiting heterosexuals, to become lesbigay is one of seven commonly held notions (Schneider, 1988, p. 42). The other six notions about lesbigay people are: lesbigay people are fundamentally different from heterosexuals; they hate and fear the opposite sex; they are excessively sexual; they act like the opposite sex, and they want to be the opposite sex; they are failures and turn to the same sex because they cannot find or maintain relationships with the opposite sex; and they are neurotic and unstable, as are their relationships (Schneider, 1988, p. 42). Schneider states that the fear of gender-role deviance is the most compelling factor explaining homophobia (p. 43). Schneider’s cites research that indicates that rigid gender-role stereotyping is the one constant among homophobic individuals (Henley & Pincus, 1978; McDonald & Games, 1974; Minnigerode, 1976; p. 43). The fear is that the family will be undermined and society undone if men and women meld their roles.

Views such as these have given strength to organizations attempting to transform lesbigay people into heterosexuals. In two United States national polls done by Newsweek, 56% of the heterosexual public and 11% of lesbians and gay people say that gay men and lesbians can change their sexual orientation through therapy, will power or religious
conviction (Leland and Miller, 1998, p. 48). One such organization is the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality in the United States, a small band of psychologists that maintains that homosexuality is a disorder that can and should be treated. Another organization which is gaining momentum in the United States is the Transformation Ministries of Exodus International. These ministries are nondenominational Christian fellowships dedicated to helping homosexuals change their orientation (Leland & Miller, 1998, p. 47-49). One result of these ideologies is homophobic violence.

**Homophobic violence outside of school**

I define violence as any action taken toward a lesbigay person which inflicts immediate pain and suffering such as physical and verbal assaults, isolation and discrimination. In this section of the paper, I will only provide a brief account of violence that lesbigay people endure.

With respect to physical violence, there are some startling statistics. According to a recent survey conducted by the Hetrick-Martin Institute in New York, of the 500 gay and lesbian adolescents who sought support from the agency and were surveyed, 40% reported experiencing some form of physical assault. Of those assaulted, 46% said that the violence they had experienced was related to their sexual orientation, with 61% of those cases occurring within the family (Rivers, 1997, p. 39). Hunter (1990) found that nearly half the youth in her survey had experienced a violent assault because of their sexual orientation and 61% occurred in the family (Rivers, 1997, p. 39). In the United States, the number of anti-gay bias crimes rose seven percent while overall crime dropped four percent. In Canada, hate crimes against gay and lesbian people is up 19% (Mix 99.9, 1998) and represents seven percent of all hate crimes in Toronto (Sarick, 1998, A17).

It was during this past year that one of the more horrific examples of gay-bashing
and homophobia occurred against a youth. On October 7, 1998, Mathew Shepard, a freshman at the University of Wyoming, was savagely beaten and tied to a ranch fence where one passer-by mistook him for a scarecrow. Three days later, a University of Wyoming homecoming parade passed a few blocks from his hospital bed, and propped on a fraternity float was a scarecrow labelled “I’m gay” (“‘Gay’ scarecrow highlights hostilities,” 1998, A17). Not long before this incident, Michael LaRoche from North York was attacked by a youth who yelled, “Die faggot,” as he stabbed Michael with a knife into his stomach (Prendergast, 1998, p. 11).

Though physical violence is the most dramatic type of violence, the most prevalent type of victimization of lesbigay people is non-physical: verbal abuse or theft/vandalism. Fifty percent of gay men and lesbians in surveys have experienced verbal abuse or theft/vandalism. Gerald Unks (1995) states, “homosexuals are the most hated group of people in the United States . . . . few in public would use words like nigger, kike, but faggot, fairy, homo are common” (p. 3). Unfortunately, society at large is either indifferent to or unaware of the discrimination that lesbigay people endure. Ignorance of homophobic discrimination is exemplified in the national polls done by Newsweek (1998). Thirty-three percent of the American “general public” (the label they used for public that defines themselves as heterosexual; lesbigay people are of course part of the “general public”) said there is a lot of discrimination against gay and lesbian people today, while 60% of homosexuals said the same. Furthermore, 54% of the “general public” believes homosexuality is a “sin” (Peyser, 1998, p. 51).

It is also important to note that gay men have experienced higher levels of verbal and physical abuse than lesbians (Philadelphia Lesbian Gay Task Force, 1985, 1988 in Otis & Skinner, 1996, p. 95). The heterosexual population tends to have a stronger negative
reaction to gay men than lesbians because being gay and male is seen as a greater violation of gender-role expectations (Britton, 1990 in Otis & Skinner, 1996, p. 112). Moreover, Comstock (1989) found that, in the United States, lesbians and gay men of colour were more likely to experience being chased or followed, hit with objects, and physically assaulted than whites (Otis & Skinner, 1996, p. 96). One possible explanation for non-white lesbigay people being targeted more often is that non-white people's fear and/or dislike for homosexuality is heightened by racism. Keith Boykin (1996) states in One More River to Cross that homophobic Black intellectuals view homosexuality in the Black community as either an outgrowth of white racism or a breakdown in the Black family. In the first view, the Black intellectuals embrace the stereotype that homosexuality is only part of the white society, which is responsible for their oppression.

In some traditional cultures, sexuality is not even a topic for discussion. Peirol (1997) stated that this makes for "a qualitative difference in the experience of homosexuals seeking acceptance in those communities" (A12). In some cultures, there is no word for "homosexuality", at least not one that is not pejorative. Didi Khayatt said, "To ask if there is a homosexual movement in Egypt [or other countries] is culturally nonsensical because the term is not recognized" (Peirol, 1997, A12).

The second view is also based on racism. Wesley Chrichlow, a Black gay professor at the University of Toronto, said, "The Black nationalist movement hasn't accepted gays in its midst." (Peirol, 1997, A12). Part of the reason Blacks cannot accept lesbigay people is racism. According to this view, homosexuals are unable to produce offspring, and thus cause the breakdown of the Black family and consequently the Black community. With the breakdown of the Black community, racism can more easily undermine the culture. Conjoining with this theory is the belief by many Black men that being lesbigay affects Black
Manhood. Manhood is revered by many in their community, as it is in most patriarchal communities. Many in the white and non-white populations view Black men as strong and lesbigay people as weak. Many in the Black community embrace this ideology, and thus fear that having lesbigay people within their "ranks" would weaken society's perception of Black people overall (Boykin, 1996, p. 170-71). Therefore, their anger toward racism might further fuel their homophobia.

Brian Riggs, a 25-year-old gay male from York University (Toronto), spoke about the homophobia he faced. He was asked to sit on York's Caribbean Student Association as an openly gay male at one of their information sessions. Most of the audience was Black and Riggs said that one of the guys stood up and threatened, "If I ever see you here in the Jane-Finch area, I'm going to kick your ass." He also said that another Black person stood at the back of the room and pretended to spray bullets at him (Peirol, 1997, A12). This homophobia and violence that permeate all cultures have the gravest impact on youth, and as youth spend much of their time in school, it permeates the school culture as well.

**Homophobic violence in schools**

Unks (1995) stated that American data suggests that adolescents suffer more than their adult counterparts for two main reasons: youth's political, economic and social expression is restricted, and they do not have the cultural support that is established for other subcultures. Unks' second reason, lack of cultural support, is based on the fact that lesbigay youth are children in a minority that society regards as adult only. The most apparent part of the lesbigay culture (bars and social clubs) is adult-centred and there are legal, social, financial and political barriers preventing any legitimate adolescent participation (p. 4). This situation is true of Toronto's lesbigay community. In fact, in 1998, Central Toronto Youth Services recognized this situation and approached the Trillium
Foundation for funding to establish the Supporting Our Youth (SOY) foundation. The mandate of this foundation is to help lesbigay youth establish a place in the Toronto lesbigay community which is both their own and interconnected to lesbigay adults. A service such as this is particularly valuable when much of a lesbigay adolescent’s daily life is marked by hostility toward his or her sexual identity.

In 1997, 22% of gay respondents, in a survey of almost 4000 Massachusetts students from 58 high schools, said they had skipped school in the previous month because they felt unsafe at school, and 31% said they had been threatened or injured at school in the past year. These percentages were about five times greater than for heterosexual respondents ("Gay scarecrow highlights hostilities," 1998, A17). A student group in Des Moines, Iowa, called ‘Concerned Students’ recorded hallway and classroom conversations at Des Moines high schools on one day and estimated that the average Des Moines high school student hears about 25 anti-gay remarks every day ("Gay scarecrow highlights hostilities," 1998, A17). Fifty-three percent of students in the United States report hearing homophobic comments made by school staff (Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993).

It is important, though, to make these statistics personal. Therefore, I have provided three real situations and comments. Brent, a high school teen who was interviewed by Linnea Due, stated, "[B]y the ninth grade, I would be happy if I came home from a day in school and hadn’t been called faggot or cocksucker once. That’s a really sad standard for what makes you happy." (Due, 1995, p. 221). In one Metropolitan Toronto school at which I volunteered, the teacher told two male students who were play-fighting, "Stop it, guys, you look like a couple of homos." Rogers (1994) tells of Diane, a lesbian youth she interviewed, who was asked by her teacher not to speak about her sexuality in front of other girls.
because it was upsetting some of them. Diane said in the interview, "I had to put up with them going on about their boyfriends all day and no one asked me if I found it offensive" (Rogers; 1994; p. 35). Of course, this violence in and out of school exacts a terrible toll on lesbigay students.

The effects of homophobic violence on adolescents

First, since a large portion of the violence is done by family members, many lesbigay youth leave or are forced out of their homes. Twenty-six percent of adolescent gay males in the United States report having to leave home as a result of conflicts with their family over their sexual orientation (Remafedi, 1987) and 42% of American homeless youth self-identify as gay/lesbian (Victim Services/Traveler's Aid, 1991). Many of these youth go to the city in search of support but often do not find it and may end up homeless and/or selling their bodies.

This is exactly what happened to a boy who was taught by one lesbian teacher in Toronto. The teacher told the members of a Faculty of Education workshop that she saw the boy prostituting himself, and when she spoke with him, he expressed his hatred for the homophobia he encountered at the high school. She asked him why he did not come to her. He said that he knew she was a lesbian, but if she was not going to be open about her own sexuality, she could not be helpful. This demonstrates three results of the violence endured by lesbigay people: the female teacher was afraid of coming out; the boy endured homophobic harassment which led to dropping out of school; and his dropping out was also encouraged through silence of those who should be vocal: school staff. This boy's feelings were no different from a boy who was interviewed by Eric Robes (1995), who declared, "The abuse I suffered in American public schools, from kindergarten to my senior year of high school, created deep psychic scars with which I have struggled throughout my lifetime"
Psychic scars such as these can result in suicide attempts. In the United States, gay and lesbian youth represent 30% of all completed teen suicides, three times higher than their heterosexual counterparts (www.glstn.org). A Canadian survey found that lesbigay youth are 13.9 times more at risk for a suicide attempt than heterosexual youth (Bailey & Tremula, 1997 in Travers & Schneider, 1997, p. 53). Sharon Bergman, a lesbian from Mysticetus, looked through her diary and said, "Eighteen separate occasions have brought me to hold a shining razor against my wrists, or to empty a hundred aspirin and count them over and over trying to think of a reason not to swallow them!" (Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1992 in Bloomenfeld, 1995, p. 218). Paul Gibson (1989) wrote in the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide that "[t]he root of the problem of gay youth suicide is a society that discriminates and stigmatizes homosexuals while failing to recognize that a substantial number of its youth has a gay or lesbian orientation" (Due, 1995, p. xvii). Moreover, there is a direct connection between violence and suicide. In a study done in the U.K., 53% of those experiencing school-based harassment contemplated suicide and 40% attempted it (Rivers, 1997, p. 40-41).

Aside from the concrete results of violence such as homelessness and suicide there are other equally damaging consequences. For example, 80% of gay and lesbian youth report severe social isolation (Hetrack & Martin, 1987). More generally, Otis and Skinner (1996) state that victimization shatters at least three major assumptions held by people: 1) the 'self-perception of invulnerability' which protects us from the anxiety associated with the perceived threat of misfortune; 2) the basic belief that the world is meaningful, comprehensible and orderly which, if shattered, can perpetuate the feeling that one has lost
control of one's life; 3) the positive self-perception which, if shattered, can cause people to view themselves as weak and even deviant (p. 97). Martin (1982) states that homophobia is similar to other prejudices, and thus, lesbigay people are part of a minority group. He goes on to state that lesbian and gay males show similar traits found in other minority groups including: obsessive concern with their stigma, denial of membership within the hated group, withdrawal, passivity, and aggression against their own group (p. 52).

This breakdown in self-perception often leads to an increase in the use of drugs. For example, 31% of lesbigay students have used cocaine as opposed to 7% of non-lesbigay students and 62% smoke as opposed to 35% of non-lesbigay students (The Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1995). The connection of the drug use to a breakdown in self-perception, which was likely the result of direct or indirect homophobic violence, exemplifies how society's beliefs can affect how lesbigay youth view themselves. That is to say, society's belief system affects lesbigay youths' identity.

Creating a healthier learning environment for lesbigay youth

There are barriers and requirements when creating a healthier learning environment. I have categorized these barriers and requirements into either reasons why educators need to consider lesbigay youth as a special group, or programs and policies.

First, educators must consider lesbigay youth as a special group because they often do not get support from parents, peers and their community. This lack of support results in isolation which often intensifies as these betrayed adolescents feel that the people around them cannot be approached, regardless of the situation. Consequently, educators who support being lesbigay could potentially be trusted to help with their concerns. Currently, this is not the case. In Mercier and Berger's (1989) United States study, teachers and school counsellors were not viewed by lesbian and gay adolescents as helpful in
assisting them with personal concerns. The lesbigay youth surveyed said that when it came to lesbigay issues, 30% of their teachers were helpful and 27% unhelpful. Counsellors were seen as 15% helpful and 43% unhelpful (p. 90).

Furthermore, many lesbigay youth hide their sexual identity (83% of D’Augelli’s (1996) study said they were not “mostly open” about their sexuality). Pretending they are heterosexual drains their emotional energy and can have negative emotional consequences (Monahan, 1997, p. 207). Moreover, lesbigay students are being physically and verbally harassed away from school, an institution where the rights of people need to be celebrated and protected. Therefore, educators need to provide a safe environment for all people. However, schools are often one of the primary settings for physical and verbal violence against lesbigay youth. D’Augelli reported that in response to a questionnaire sent to over 1000 American lesbigay youth over 18, one quarter said that they were “very” or “extremely” fearful of harassment or verbal abuse at school (D’Augelli, 1996 in Monahan, 1997, p. 205).

Apart from not tolerating any sort of verbal or physical violence against lesbigay people, educators must also understand lesbigay youth and assumptions about sexuality and gender. Firstly, there is the assumption that all people are heterosexuals. Therefore, when youth become aware they are lesbigay, they must reevaluate themselves as sexual people and cope with stigmatization and rejection (Schneider, 1997, p. 20). However, as discussed earlier, educators need to understand the diversity among lesbigay youth. Educators must integrate strategies that benefit all lesbigay youth by taking into account individual and group differences. Schneider (1997) provides four tasks for those working with lesbigay youth: create an environment where they feel good about themselves; find other environments where they feel good; help them understand that society is the problem
not them; and build on their strengths with skills to withstand homophobia and heterosexism (p. 21).

These tasks support Reis' (1989) five reasons why teaching about sexual orientation must be active and intentional. First, it is an issue of personal importance to a great number of students. When one considers siblings and possible gay/lesbian parents, about three out of every ten students are either gay themselves or have an immediate family member who is. Secondly, schools have an obligation to support and enhance the self-esteem of all students, and educators cannot express support and respect for lesbigay youth unless they accept the students' sexual orientation. Thirdly, public schools have a responsibility to support and enhance all family relationships. Schools can be a resource to parents by providing accurate information and putting them in touch with self-help groups. Fourthly, schools are obligated to counteract stereotyping and prejudice and to reduce the likelihood of violence against any group (p. 54-55). Harbeck (1995) stated:

Teachers struggle every day to teach students calculus, or English literature, or American history. What, however, is the value of these subjects if your students are wounded by prejudice, suffer from low self-esteem and feelings of isolation and are limited in their life opportunities by ignorance and discrimination based upon whom they choose to love? (p. 133)

Fifthly, schools are the most logical place to provide students with accurate information about homosexuality (Reis, 1989, p. 55). Virginia Uribe, founder of the "Project 10" program, stated this about lesbigay friendly curriculum: "Don't worry that discussing it [lesbigay issues] is promoting it. Homosexuality is everywhere -- T.V., newspapers. Students have the right to seek information about current issues and develop critical skills based on scientific evidence and social justice and not myths" (Uribe, 1995, p. 208).

When creating policies and programs for educating lesbigay youth, Sears (1987)
identifies several steps that responsible educators must take. First, educators must examine their own attitudes toward homosexuality. According to Sears, (1992) 80% of prospective American teachers report negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian people (www.glsen.org, 1998). When teachers become comfortable with their feelings, they can educate themselves about the subject. Human interactions are one of the best methods (ie. attending a meeting of a lesbigay organization). Secondly, educators should educate others about homosexuality. At this stage, it is important to communicate with the school board and community groups for support and ideas. Thirdly, educators must be responsive to the needs of lesbigay youth. One of the core needs is the need for a nonjudgmental atmosphere in which they can process their feelings and come to terms with their sexuality. Fourthly, it is the educator's duty to protect and promote the human rights of all people in their classroom and school. Interrupting homophobia must be mandatory. In the OutProud/Oasis Internet Survey of Queer and Questioning Youth, 85% of high school respondents said that their school either ignored or gave very light reprimands for anti-queer harassment (www.oasis.com, 1998). Fifthly, educators should encourage the hiring of and provision for lesbigay educators. Finally, educators should speak out in favour of gay-rights ordinances and national legislation that bars discrimination against homosexual men and women (Sears, 1987, p. 90-95).

As educators begin to reach the final stages of Sears' guidelines, they should begin to consider what is required in counselling lesbigay youth. In a study done in the United States by Sears (1992), lesbigay students perceived their counsellors as "ill-informed, unconcerned, and uncomfortable when talking with them." Moreover 2/3 of the school counsellors surveyed expressed negative attitudes and feelings about lesbigay people and issues (Sears, 1992 in Reynolds & Koski, 1995, p. 89). Schneider (1997) identifies three
categories in which a sexual minority youth could fall into, each requiring a different counselling strategy. First, there are youth who need help specifically because of their sexual orientation. They are confused and do not want to be gay. These youth need a social context in which to work on their coming-out issues. Secondly, there are youth with problems that are worsened by sexual orientation issues, such as depression. In this situation, the main concern is helping them develop coping mechanisms to deal with their sexual orientation. Finally, there are those that require counselling in which their sexual orientation could play a small but significant role in their decision-making; for example, career or post-secondary decisions (p. 23).

Counselling, then, is an important strategy to use to help lesbigay adolescents. One counselling initiative that has been quite useful in some schools is the formation of lesbigay groups. These groups are initiated by either educators or students, but run with the cooperation of both. The potential benefit of such a group can be great, but when it is a student initiative, the students must find a supportive educator to be responsible for the group. Otherwise, the group cannot be formed. Finding a supportive educator can be difficult, as some educators might be concerned with safety issues, such as physical or verbal abuse or losing job security. Moreover, many lesbigay educators might not want to organize such a group because that might “out” them and affect their safety. If they are “out”, it could worsen situations which are already unsafe. However, such a group can have a tremendous positive impact. Contact with lesbigay peers reduces both social and emotional isolation because they can talk about their sexual feelings and desires with people their own age. Moreover, in these groups, they can gather skills to handle ongoing issues related to their sexual orientation, gather accurate information and dispel myths (Sheridan, 1997, p. 84). In order to expand the benefits of such a group, the school would
need to educate teachers about lesbigay issues.

Comprehensive staff development is essential to creating something equally as important: a curriculum that is lesbigay positive. Training teachers about lesbigay issues and developing curricula that address lesbigay issues were two of the main recommendations of the Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth (Massachusetts) in its report, *Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth: Breaking the Silence in Schools and in Families* (February 25, 1993 in Anderson, 1994, 153). The other recommendations were the following: the establishment of school policies protecting gay and lesbian students from harassment, violence and discrimination; training school staff members about crisis intervention and violence prevention; establishing school-based support groups for gay and heterosexual allies; providing information in school libraries for gay and lesbian adolescents; and developing curricula that involves gay and lesbian issues (Anderson, 1994, p. 153). The Connecticut State Board of Education also provided good suggestions for schools with respect to lesbigay youth. Recommendations include the following: urge educators to pay attention to inclusive language; designate resource people in the school for lesbigay students; support and use lesbigay staff members as role models; refer self-identified lesbigay youth to appropriate services; and refer parents of lesbigay children to organizations such as Parents, Family, Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) (Anderson, 1994, p. 153).

However, there is ample evidence that most schools are not integrating recommendations such as these into their educational frameworks. In the OutProud/Oasis Internet Survey, only six percent said that homosexuality was discussed in a positive manner in their school, 11% said it was discussed in a negative manner and 43% said it was not discussed at all. Seventy-seven percent of American prospective teachers would
not encourage a class discussion on homosexuality (Sears, 1992 in www.glsen.org, 1998).

Schools must also establish policies that combat homophobia and create curricula that includes lesbigay issues. All the Toronto teachers interviewed in Parravano's study (1995) (16 gay and lesbian teachers) felt strongly that curricular implementation could have an impact on homophobia and heterosexism. They also said lesbigay studies must be made a mandatory part of the curriculum, fully supported by a written policy (p. 81). The best place to educate teachers and create inclusive curricula is within the Faculties of Education. There needs to be teacher-education courses that sensitize future teachers to the needs of lesbigay youth.

Finally, lesbigay teachers need policies that give them legal protection against discrimination and dispel myths, such as accusations that lesbigay people are "recruiters" of youth. Then they can come out to their students, thus educating heterosexual teenagers and serving as role models to lesbigay adolescents. In Kissen's (1993) study in the United States, almost all of the respondents wanted adult gay and lesbian role models, in particular their teachers (p. 62). When teachers cannot come out, the lesbigay youth suffer. A student recounts, "I know this guy [English teacher] is gay, he has to be. And he avoids me like the plague for two years. Like he knows I knew and I'm going to turn him in or something. Fuckin' chicken. He could have helped me" (O'Conor, 1995, p. 96).

This experience epitomizes what lesbigay youth endure -- the school environment was so hostile that a gay teacher was scared to talk to the lesbigay student, and the lesbigay student was desperate to talk to anyone who was lesbigay themselves. Developing policies to protect teachers and students from harassment in schools would help combat homophobia. However, the strength and pervasiveness of homophobia in society means there needs to be strong and pervasive anti-homophobic education, so that
schools can be safe havens for lesbigay youth and students can advocate for acceptance of lesbigay people.

**Conclusion**

Homophobia is prevalent in society and Canadian secondary schools. Homophobia in schools occurs both maliciously and through ignorance, but for lesbigay youth, it is all hurtful. The absence of lesbigay issues in school curricula sends a message to students that being lesbigay has little merit, which not only negatively affects their self-esteem but provides additional justification for negativity toward lesbigay people. As a result, the violence increases and the victims have limited resources with which to protect themselves. All educators must challenge homophobia when it occurs and provide gay-positive curricula to build the self-image of lesbigay youth and challenge homophobic ideas which are the impetus for violence.
Chapter 4

Understanding the Identity of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth

Canada, like most western countries, is predominantly homophobic, and as a result, the self-esteem of many lesbigay youth has been damaged. However, in recent years, support for lesbigay people has increased, as has the number of lesbigay organizations. In order to gain an understanding of the students who enter the Triangle Program, as well as the issues and needs the Triangle team has had to address, it is important to understand both the positive and negative factors that affect lesbigay identity formation. In this chapter, I will describe how the identities of many lesbigay people develop, then I will discuss how homophobia affects identity formation by forcing lesbigay people to isolate themselves and to fear coming out. I will then discuss how a supportive lesbigay community can counter these negative effects. Finally, I will discuss how lesbigay people of colour, bisexuals and lesbians have specific identity issues.

Troiden (1988) stated, "[I]Identity is a cognitive construct referring to organized sets of characteristics that an individual perceives as representing the self definitively in relation to a social situation imagined and real" (p. 27). This is the definition on which I will base my analysis of lesbigay youth. This definition is particularly important when considering lesbigay youth because the social situation can have such a negative role in the development of their identities, and yet, in particular situations, it can help them resist against heterosexism and homophobia. My analysis of the identity of lesbigay adolescents is also based on Foucault’s social construction theory which states that categories of identity are entirely a creation of culture. For the creation of identities, society develops labels and social scripts which are largely arbitrary. Certain features of people’s identity are
not innate but assume importance as a result of society's needs. Identity analysis is also important in the discussion of lesbigay youth because, as Troiden theorized, lesbigay identities are infused with trans-situational significance. Troiden (1988) postulated that lesbigay people view their sexual identities as relevant in most social situations (p. 33). Troiden identifies four main factors for there being trans-situational significance for lesbigay people: a social stigma of homosexuality; culturally-defined links between homosexuality and gender-inappropriate behaviours; the assumptions that everyone is heterosexual; and the tendency of dominant groups to "inferiorize" minorities to protect the "hierarchy of access" (Troiden, 1988, p. 33). I will now address the factors that affect lesbigay identity formation in general.

The development of a lesbigay identity

The Gay and Lesbian Educators (GALE) of B.C. identify four stages in the development of a gay identity (Counselling Lesbian and Gay Youth, 1993). Troiden (1979) has a similar model which only considers the positive possibilities to which I will refer as I address GALE's stages). These stages, however, are not prescriptive. Not every lesbigay person develops their gay identity in this fashion. Some may not experience each stage in the same order, or every stage, or perhaps any stage. Discussing the stages only helps to give a general understanding about how the identities of lesbigay youth develop. The first stage is "I'm different" whereby the lesbigay youth thinks that their difference is a) correct and acceptable, b) correct and unacceptable, or c) not correct and not acceptable. In our Canadian heterosexist culture the corresponding feelings to this first stage would be a) loneliness, b) confusion, and c) denial. Troiden calls this the sensitization stage, in which lesbigay people gain an experience that is interpreted as homosexual (usually occurs before puberty).
Stage two is “Coming out/Exploration” and their thoughts are a) correct and acceptable = “I’m lesbian/gay/bisexual but what’s a lesbian/gay/ bisexual person?"; b) correct and unacceptable = “My sexuality is private and individual”; or c) not correct and not acceptable = “I’m in love with a person who happens to be of the same sex.” And the corresponding feelings would likely be a) acknowledgment, b) may identify as a bisexual, and c) denial of same sex partner. Troiden calls this the disassociation and signification stage where the lesbigay youth must try to reject the negative ideologies placed on him/her. The median age at which lesbian and gay youth become aware that their feelings of “difference” are linked to a same-sex sexual orientation is 13 (Sears in http://glsen.org).

The third stage is “Coming out/ Identity/ Pride” and following the above sequence the thoughts could be a) “I’m lesbian/gay/bisexual and I’m okay”; b) “being lesbigay is better than being heterosexual”; or c) “I’m not lesbian/gay/bisexual even though I have an intimate relationship with someone of the same sex.” The feelings likely would be a) pride, b) anger at heterosexist society, and c) denial, respectively. Troiden calls this stage the “Coming Out” stage as well, and it involves the following: self-identification; initial involvement in the lesbigay subculture; and the redefinition of being lesbigay as a positive and viable lifestyle.

The final stage is “Congruence/ Integration.” At this stage, the thinking is “I’m lesbigay/bisexual/gay. I’m proud and I recognize that heterosexuals can and will support me,” and the accompanying feeling is, “being lesbian/gay/bisexual is part of my identity.” Troiden sees this stage as the fusion of sexuality and emotionality (Troiden, 1979 in Martin, 1982, p. 62). For most lesbigay youth, congruence and integration will not occur fully until adulthood, and though more and more lesbigay youth are proud of their sexuality, the majority have negative feelings about themselves due to homophobia.
The effect of homophobia on identity formation

Personal growth and positive self-esteem are imperative to developing a healthy identity for every person. Unfortunately, however, for most lesbigay youth, homophobia makes this difficult. To begin with, many lesbigay youth are forced to leave their families because of their sexual orientation. Twenty-six percent of American adolescent gay males report having to leave home as a result of conflicts with their family (Remafedi, 1987) and 42% of homeless youth in the United States identify themselves as gay or lesbian (Victim Services/Traveler's Aid, 1998). Anna Travers (1998), the Program Director of Toronto's Shout Clinic - an organization which provides services for homeless people, estimates that 30-40% of the Clinic's clientele are lesbigay.

Having your family reject you would have a tremendous negative affect on your self-image. In fact, many lesbigay youth come to believe that they are less valued than their heterosexual peers because of homophobia. Renee (interviewed by Due (1995)) stated, "Straight people are different. They're better" (p. 91). Low self-esteem, and consequently poor identity development are the main reasons suicide attempts by lesbigay youth are so common. A recent Canadian survey found that gay and bisexual male youth are 13.9 times more at risk for a suicide attempt than their heterosexual counterparts (Bagley & Tremblay, 1997 in Travers and Schneider, 1997, p. 53).

Moreover, this sense of inferiority and low self-confidence are major reasons for lesbigay youth being at a high risk for substance abuse, clinical depression, prostitution, AIDS, truancy, academic difficulties and dropping out of school (O'Connor, 1992 in Reynolds & Koski, 1995, p. 86). One seventeen-year-old lesbian at the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth (1993) summarized much of what lesbigay youth integrate into their identity because of homophobia:
There is one difference that sets sexual minorities apart from other minorities - we can be invisible, and are assumed to be a part of the heterosexual majority until we declare otherwise. I tried that for a while, going so far as to use a guy to prove to myself that I could be straight if I tried hard enough. But instead of being accepted into the mainstream, I lost my self-respect. I felt completely isolated from my friends and family. It appeared that I was the only one who ever had these 'queer' feelings. I couldn't come out to anyone, because surely they wouldn't want to be friends with anyone as sick and deranged as I. This initiated a downward spiral of self-hatred and anger motivated by homophobia. I hated myself for seeming to be everyone's worst nightmare - a homosexual.

(www.glsen.org, 1998)

However, growing up gay is experienced differently by each person, and thus their identities develop differently. One of Due's interviewees (1995) declared, "Having to fight against a world that didn't like me, first for other people and then for myself, made me stronger, and made me love myself. It's made me more creative" (p. 255). However, the former account is more representative of what lesbigay people experience and this is why many make attempts to hide their sexual identity.

Staying in the "closet" or "coming out"

Moses and Hawkins (1982) described the process of coming out as "one of the most difficult and potentially traumatic experiences a gay person undertakes" (Mercier & Berger, 1989, p. 77). Coming out as a lesbigay involves social and psychological risk-taking. Fear of the unknown is the initial hazard. Lesbigay adolescents hear a tremendous amount of negativity about homosexuality. Moreover, they are ridiculed and teased, not only because they are gay, but also because they are different. Herdt (1989) states that many gay people have a disinterest in sports (I expect he is referring to males) and heterosexual dating, which are two aspects of adolescent peer grouping (p. 6). They also witness the myths propagated by family, authority figures, and media. As a result, they are discouraged from
exploring their sexuality at a time when it has started to become an important part of their identity. This affects many aspects of their relationships with others, as they are unable to disclose a part of who they are.

In addition, they must assume an identity that is not theirs - a heterosexual identity, which often leads to social isolation and reinforces negative beliefs about themselves. Troiden would call this the "role." The role is a subjective and expected pattern of behaviour associated with social status or position in the social structure. The subjective process of "role-taking" involves a person's perceptions, conceptions, communications and actions in regard to her or himself which grow out of interactions with significant others (Troiden, 1988, p. 24). Moses and Hawkins (1982) also point out that a major part of the problem of adolescents coming out, and hence a major reason they do not, is that they are minors. As minors, they have no mobility, limited access to information, no rights in the matters of sexual preference, are surrounded by peers who are struggling with their own sexuality and who are conformists, and they cannot access adult gay support organizations (Mercier & Berger, 1989, p. 78).

Moses and Hawkins also point out that coming out for an adolescent does not rid him or her of negative information about homosexuality (Mercier & Berger, 1989, p. 79). In fact, of the 49 lesbian and gay youth in the United States that responded to Mercier's and Berger's questionnaire about their general concerns and problems, only two reported that they had no problems in the last year. The most common problem they faced -- as identified by 61% of the respondents -- was telling others they were gay or lesbian (Mercier & Berger, 1989, p. 85). The survey also revealed that friends were the most approachable when it came to advice. Ninety percent of the respondents turned to their friends for advice, whereas only 45% turned to their parents and 20% consulted with their teachers
Many of these gay and lesbian youth probably hesitated to ask their parents for advice because of the negative reactions they received when they came out. The reactions of their parents, shaped largely by society, are feelings of shame, anger and blame of themselves or of their child for the "situation." Although acceptance usually happens over time, it may change their parents’ relationship with their child. The parents may monitor their child’s behaviour and social activities, change curfews and/or deny permission to attend support groups (Travers & Monahan, 1997, p. 191). Religious beliefs may spur parents on in trying to transform their children into heterosexuals. In some situations, the youth may have no choice but to leave their home. This may seriously affect their physical and emotional well-being. However, how each adolescent deals with these and other situations is completely different. The way s/he deals with the situation depends on things such as available resources, problems-solving abilities and coping skills. Therefore, some move through the coming-out process relatively smoothly, while others are horrified by their sexuality (Schneider, 1988, p. 50).

Unfortunately, most lesbigay youth spend most of their adolescence in Troiden’s second stage -- disassociation and signification -- where the lesbigay youth must try to reject the negative ideologies placed on him/her by the heterosexist/homophobic demons of Canadian/American society. These demons are born out of society’s insistence that people conform to heterosexual gender roles. These demons have created many damning myths and opinions which much of society has accepted or, at least, condoned. Myths, such as: gay males are paedophiles; lesbigay people recruit youth to be lesbigay; homosexuality is a sin; and lesbigay people are confused, sex maniacs, perverts or sexual inverted, lead to homophobia. Lesbigay youth suffer physical, mental and emotional
harassment. Their culture is ignored in schools. Many teachers ignore homophobic comments, withdraw from discussions of sexuality issues and avoid supporting lesbigay students. They are misrepresented in the media, and they are discriminated against in provincial laws, some of which allow them to be fired because of their sexuality and will not allow them to adopt children.

Consequently, most youth remain at the second stage of identity development recognizing that they are lesbigay but, in most cases, not wanting to make it public knowledge. Anderson (1995) stated that the problems lesbigay people face are a result of four main factors: 1) there is a stigma because of individual and institutional homophobia; 2) there are few resources to get information about homosexuality; 3) information is censored, inaccurate or homophobic; and 4) there is an absence of role models. As a result of this situation, lesbigay teens make one of three choices in dealing with their new feelings: 1) try to change the feelings; 2) continue to hide them; or 3) accept them (Anderson, 1995, p. 21). Lesbigay youth who do not try to change their feelings most often choose to try to hide them.

Isolation

In a survey done by OutProud over the Internet (1998), 28% of high school students said they had told one or two close friends they were queer, 25% said they told no one and only 30% said several to most students knew (www.oasismag.com). As a heterosexual, it is almost impossible to imagine what it would be like to have to hide my sexuality. In addition to physically and emotionally withdrawing themselves from family and friends, they also begin to self-monitor, whereby unconscious and automatic behaviours are brought to the forefront of conscious attention. The way one walks, stands and talks becomes possible sources of disclosure. Monitoring what is unconscious and automatic for most
heterosexuals serves to reinforce the belief of lesbigay people that their differences are wrong and they are inferior.

Martin and Hetrick (1989) identify three aspects of isolation for lesbigay adolescents: cognitive, social and emotional (p. 165-171). First, cognitive isolation begins from a lack of accurate information being available to lesbigay adolescents about their sexual orientation. Cognitive isolation is then intensified by the fact that lesbigay people are an invisible minority. Therefore, they do not have the chance to develop a "we versus they" situation, which other visible and oppressed minorities can create. This is the very essence of group identity. For example, heterosexual parents do not communicate to their child what it is like to be gay as a Black parent would about being Black. From this base situation, the isolation begins.

Social isolation develops from this denial of accurate information and leads to a negative view of the self which will have intra-psychic and social effects. Goffman (1963) stated that "a social identity as a homosexual is so stigmatized, however, that it can lead to a denial of all other social roles for which the adolescent has been socialized" (Martin & Hetrick, 1988, p. 168). That is to say, a person cannot (according to society) be religious/a teacher/a patriotic citizen and lesbigay. Therefore, sexual orientation becomes a threat to everything he or she has been socialized to think, do and deem valuable. This would explain some of the findings in the September 1988 Report on High schools by Lesbian and Gay Youth Ottawa-Hull. They found that 1/3 of the young lesbian and gay people interviewed in Ottawa-Hull admitted they dated the opposite sex to conceal their homosexual identities; all reported they knew more about heterosexual sex than lesbigay sex; and media images of 'effeminate' gay men and 'macho' lesbians shaped their perceptions of what it meant to be lesbian and gay (Lenskyj, 1990, p. 225). Schneider
(1997) stated that if anything distinguishes different sexual orientations, it is the emotional component of sexual attractions. Therefore, when lesbigay people are prevented from openly celebrating their sexual orientation, they are stopped from enjoying the emotional richness in relationships that heterosexuals enjoy (p. 16).

Finally, emotional isolation is the feeling of being alone. Ninety-five percent of the youth surveyed by the United States Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth (IPLGY) (Robinson & Martin, 1983) stated they had feelings of being the only one who felt the way they did and had no one with whom to share their feelings (Martin & Hetrick, 1988, p. 171).

In summary, for lesbigay youth the stresses of adolescent development can be quite traumatic because, like their heterosexual peers, they deal with peer pressure, academic pressure, parental authority and sexuality. However, they deal with these issues in a hostile world where, if they come out, they are ridiculed and if they hide their identity, they live in fear of being found out. Moreover, researchers have found that the sooner a child realizes he or she is gay or lesbian, the more difficult life becomes as they are forced to assume a "spoiled" identity (Due, 1995, xxiii). This is particularly important because with each year's delay in self-labelling, the odds of suicide attempt decline by 80% (Due, 1995, xi). John, a gay youth interviewed by Due, stated that, "[being gay] will mean a lot more secrecy about life. Not being able to show my affection, having to lie to a lot of people, my friends not knowing as much about me as I think they should" (Due, 1995, p. 74). Similarly a girl, age 13, was equally unhappy with coming to terms with being a lesbian:

At the end of grade 10, after I had come to the realisation [that I was a lesbian], I would spend a lot of time in the Chapel praying. That's what I thought I should do. I got to the point where I was so depressed with it and feeling so incredibly guilty about it. I was causing this evil, because I had just been
nominated ‘Catholic Student of the Year’ for Ontario, and I just couldn’t deal with these two [realisations] kind of together. So I tried to kill myself in the chapel we had in school.

(Khayatt, 1994, p. 47)

The lesbigay community

In order to counter the isolation many lesbigay adolescents suffer, many lesbigay youth turn to the lesbigay community. The gay community is a place where lesbigay youth can practice “deviance disavowal.” Troiden defined (1988) “deviance disavowal” as redefining socially condemned behaviour as normal and mainstream society’s disapproval as invalid. Troiden (1988) also stated that deviant subcultures (i.e. gay community) assist in deviance disavowal by providing verbal justifications and specialized knowledge and skills which allow individuals to maintain self-esteem in face of public opprobrium (p. 71-72). Schneider (1988) stated that lesbigay communities serve two essential functions for lesbigay youth (p. 30-33). First, they provide a safe place for lesbigay people to socialize without fear of attracting attention or reprisals. Secondly, community activities provide a casual, informal opportunity to meet new lesbians or gay friends and provide each other with mutual support. These two functions are integral to the coming-out process in that they promote the development of self-esteem, and they help lesbigay youth to develop a network of lesbigay friends with whom they can interact away from the community.

One Triangle Program student said that he found out about the Triangle Program by attending the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Program at CTYS and befriending one of the youth. Schneider (1988) stated, “access to a [gay] community is essential to the well-being of gay and lesbian adolescents” (p. 32). Bill, a gay youth, spoke about the importance of the lesbigay community. “I had to reject a lot of negative heterosexual and religious programming that made me feel lousy about myself as a gay person. I began to
like myself by meeting other gay people and going to gay support groups. After that I was content with myself” (McConnell-Celi, 1993, p. 66). Young people find information about the lesbigay community by meeting peers at school, searching the phone book, reading fliers, going to bookstores, and contacting lesbigay-positive educational programs such as the Human Sexuality Program. Then they integrate themselves into the community by joining organizations, going to bars and, for some young gay men, cruising certain areas, hoping to be picked up.

Unfortunately, however, there are many barriers to accessing these organizations. Mercier and Berger (1989) found that 20% of their study sample in the United States did not have transportation, 20% were afraid of being seen entering/leaving lesbigay functions, 20% did not know where lesbigay groups were, and 18% were afraid their family members would find out where they went (p. 88). Moreover, there are few niches for youths in lesbigay communities as the communities are primarily adult organized and focused. The most visible niche in the gay community is the bar, which is inaccessible to most adolescents and yet an important social institution. Schneider (1989) interviewed Beth who stated that “In the straight world you don’t have to go to a bar to meet people. In the gay world, you sort of have to” (p. 125). Those that can pass for legal do consider themselves lucky. However, Schneider states that they do not necessarily gain access to the adult world as adults are reluctant to associate with adolescents for fear of being accused of recruiting. Moreover, for an adolescent, going to lesbigay bars is like living a double life whereby s/he is a youth during weekdays and an adult on the weekends. This double life influences the development of the identity of lesbigay youth. First, it creates a situation where most youth must constantly lie about their social activities. This would reinforce feelings that what they do and who they are is wrong. Secondly, it could create confusion
during this crucial stage of identity development. They would be experiencing two completely different cultures. When these experiences are internalized, interpreted and amalgamated into their identity, they would clash with each other. Finally, as an adolescent in an adult world, they must deal with ideas, language and situations which most teens are not prepared to understand.

In Toronto, this inaccessibility to the adult-oriented gay community has lead to the creation of the Supporting our Youth Program (SOY) within Central Toronto Youth Services. SOY is a community development initiative designed to improve the quality of life for lesbigay youth by providing these youth with programs and positive involvement in the adult lesbigay community. It began in April 1998 and is being funded by the Trillium Foundation with a grant of $180,000 until December 2000. Its goals and initiatives can be categorized into three areas. The first area is increasing youth participation in arts, cultural and recreational groups. Included in this area are two groups: the film, theatre, music and art group, and the sports, outdoor and after-school groups. The second area is linking youth to supportive employment, education and housing opportunities. Included in this area are three factions: employment and co-op placements with gay-positive businesses; education bursary programs; and supportive housing options. The final area is increasing access to adult mentoring by having adult role mentoring (lesbigay adults mentoring lesbigay youth) and support programs.

SOY has the potential to create a positive union between adolescent and adult lesbigay people which could redefine Toronto’s gay community. However, one issue that lesbigay youth organizations such as SOY need to consider is how they will attract non-white lesbigay youth, and then meet their different needs. Much of the research shows that organizers and facilitators of lesbigay youth organizations often fail to recognize that various
ethnic minorities have different needs. Moreover, those chosen as staff or encouraged to volunteer are not ethnically diverse, and thus not credible in the eyes of some of the non-white clients.

Lesbigay people of colour in the gay community

Toronto's lesbigay community in 1998 is clearly still focussed toward white middle-class gay males, and is thus not inviting to visible minorities. Just as racism is prevalent in Canada in general, so is it prevalent in Toronto's lesbigay community. Non-white lesbigay people are often either absent from the commercial aspects of the lesbigay community or they are sexualized. This is certainly the case in Toronto's lesbigay community. Robb Travers, former coordinator of the lesbigay youth program at Toronto Youth Services, said that gay minorities are often portrayed in the lesbigay community in stereotypical, eroticised forms. South Asians are portrayed as "passive and effeminate," and Blacks as "super-sexualized studs" (Peirol, 1997, A12). Brian Riggs, a 25-year-old Black, gay, male York University student, said, "What I have come to realize is that the gay community is really very white." He said, "The prevailing gay esthetic [in Toronto gay magazines] is to be white and big and buffed and hairless. I am not that" (Peirol, 1997, A12). According to Riggs, the result of not being represented in the lesbigay community is that non-white lesbigay people assume they are "not what people want, not sought after. We don't find ourselves beautiful, so we don't find each other beautiful." (Peirol, 1997, A12). Rahim Chunara, another York student, said he took his mother to a PFLAG meeting so they could gain support. However, he found the members to "WASPy and middle class" and they felt that their issues as Africans and Muslims could not be addressed there.

One respondent in Newman and Muzzonigro's (1993) American study stated, "Sometimes I feel alienated from the gay community because it is geared toward the white
middle class. I take priority in being Asian more than in being gay because the color of my skin is most obvious" (p. 220).

Boykin (1996) gives support to Douglas’ beliefs stating, “Many Blacks who are openly lesbian or gay still find more comfort among straight Blacks than among white lesbians and gays” (p. 88). The reason for this, according to Boykin, is Black lesbigay people are more disadvantaged than whites, and white lesbigay people do not understand this (p. 88). Boykin states that the most common complaint of Black gay males is that they are excluded, exploited or patronized by the dominant white lesbigay community (p. 214). Moreover, for most white lesbigay people (especially men), sexual orientation is the only thing that distinguishes them from the white heterosexual population, and therefore orientation is of greater importance to them than to non-white lesbigay people. Being lesbigay for non-whites is another instance of otherness, and therefore might have less significance to their identity. This is not a pronouncement of how important being lesbigay is to non-white lesbigay youth. However, just as homophobia/heterosexism conditions heterosexual people to regard the sexuality of a lesbigay person as their identity, and thus for lesbigay people their sexuality becomes trans-situational, the same is so of racism. Racism causes whites to judge people by the colour of their skin. Therefore, the colour of one’s skin becomes trans-situational; non-whites likely view their racial identity as relevant in most social situations. Hence, for non-white lesbigay individuals, being gay and non-white becomes two parts of their identity which they are aware of in every situation. However, their ethnic community usually does not think it is possible to integrate being lesbigay and non-white into one’s identity. They instead expect an allegiance to one or the other. The same is true of the gay community.

Identity issues for lesbigay youth of colour
Racism is one of the main forces that makes the identity development of non-white lesbigay youth different from white lesbigay youth. The amount of information about Black culture and history is still lacking in the curricula of many high schools and Blacks are sometimes portrayed as second-class citizens. Boateng (1990) stated that this causes "deculturization" -- "a process by which individuals are deprived of their culture and then conditioned to other cultural values" (Maddux, 1997, 65). Ananke (1994) (a Black lesbian) provides a reason why deculturization according to race might be viewed as having greater significance than the deculturization according to sexuality by some Black lesbigay people. She explained, "Our colour is our most obvious feature, not our sexual preference." Therefore their concerns are focussed more on anti-racism. She went on to say, "It cannot be assumed, therefore, that by virtue of being part of a minority group [sexual minority], there will be a congruence [between Black and white lesbigay people] which will inevitably break down the negative stereotypes that many white [gay] people have about other groups in society", and "Whites [lesbigay people] cannot escape the benefits of being white in a racist society" (p. 102). One interviewee of Kizinger's American study (1987) summarizes the non-white lesbigay's perspective and the decision many make:

I need, as a Black lesbian, to speak for myself and in my own voice, which is not the voice of the white [gay] world. I do not want my Black experience filtered through your white academic language, the rage and passion edited out, explained away. I do not doubt your good intentions; I do doubt your ability to comprehend or accurately represent my lesbianism, which cannot be taken out of the context of my Blackness.

(Eliaison, 1996, p. 53)

However, there is little literature about non-white lesbigay issues. This was apparent in my own investigations, and in the literature, many non-white lesbigay people spoke about the lack of information. This is especially true for non-white lesbigay youth. Brian Riggs,
said, "I looked up every book [as a youth] on gay culture, and I also looked up every book on Black culture" and typically he did not find anything about the Black gay experience (Peirol, 1997, A12).

Another element to consider is the non-white communities. Boykin (1996) states that Black heterosexuals see being lesbigay as a white issue, and therefore Black lesbigay people have no connection to Black communities. Therefore, when Black communities are facing many challenges in their effort to save their youth, since they view Black lesbigay people as not involved, they view being lesbigay as having a negative impact on the Black community (p. 102). In the Black community, the rigidity of the gender roles is particularly important to keep perceived stability, and thus a united front against racism. Moreover, in our patriarchal society, masculinity is particularly important. Sewell (1995) stated that masculinity and phallocentricism were used to contrast the racism and powerlessness experienced in Black communities (p. 27). In such a situation, gay males, who represent a lack of heterosexual masculinity, are seen as a weakness in the community.

However, not participating in the gay community can lessen their contact with, and knowledge of, lesbigay people. Consequently, they may have to figure out what it means to be Jamaican/ Philippino/ Indian (non-white) and lesbigay primarily on their own. This is particularly true for those that do not come out to their families and have fewer opportunities to discuss an important part of their identity. According to an American study done by Edwards (1996), the majority of Black lesbigay people do not come out to their parents. Moreover, the lack of images of Black lesbigay people in the media also means a further lack of exposure to homosexuality in a Black context. Consequently, if most Black lesbigay people do not come out to their family, are not involved in the gay community and do not see themselves in the media, there is a reduction in the number of opportunities to discuss
and understand their sexuality. One Black lesbian interviewed by Bellos (1995) stated, "When I realized that the feelings I had for another woman were sexual, I had difficulty recognizing them. I knew the word 'lesbian' but I thought it only related to white women" (p. 55). A lack of exposure to other lesbigay people and opportunities to discuss their sexuality could also explain Mays and Cochran's (1988) study in the United States which found that African American lesbians were more likely to have had heterosexual experiences and have had prior heterosexual marriages and children than Anglo lesbians (p. 12). This also supports Price-Spratlen's (1996) theory that one of the key elements in building identity is striving to understand that gay males and lesbians are many things at once and some of those things seemingly contradict other parts of their identity. Therefore, acting as if being African American and gay are not simultaneously important is to "fall victim to the socially constructed antagonism between them" (p. 217).

The importance of considering the ethnicity of different lesbigay populations is also exemplified within the accounts of lesbigay people in other non-white communities. Kellie Fong, a member of Gay Asians of Toronto, cited racism as an impediment to coming out when interviewed for Xtra magazine. Fong said that for many Asian gay males and lesbians born in Canada, she had to come to terms with racism and what it meant to be Asian. Fong stated that racism had hindered their growth by not allowing them enough time to think about being gay. She also points out that often lesbigay Asians wonder if they have to give up their culture and heritage to become lesbian, gay or bisexual (Wazana, 1998, p. 12). On the other hand, Fong also points out that her own community makes developing a gay identity difficult. She states that generational differences, familial expectations and cultural traditions are factors that keep gay Asians from coming out to their parents. Her community feels that being gay or lesbian is to "show no face" (Wazana, 1998, p. 12).
Of the 11 students I interviewed, only one was a member of a visible minority. He was a Native Canadian. Many lesbigay Indigenous Americans use the term “two-spirited” to describe themselves. In their culture, the experience of sexuality and culture and community is inseparable. Wilson (1996) stated that the “[t]wo-spirited identity affirms the interrelatedness of all aspects of identity, including sexuality, gender, culture, community and spirituality” and that in some Native cultures, two-spirited people were thought to be born “in balance”: a balance of male and female qualities and spirits (p. 304-05). As a result, the determination of one’s identity on the basis of sexual behaviour makes no conceptual sense to many American Natives (Wilson, 1996, p. 310). Furthermore, one common ideological principle that connects the Native nations in Canada and the United States is the deep interdependency between humans and nature (Wilson, 1996, p. 305). Therefore, many Indigenous lesbigay people construct their sexual and racial identities differently than other lesbigay populations.

James’ (1991) study exemplifies how social class can influence the non-white lesbigay population. James found that class was a factor in how being lesbigay in the Black population was “accepted”: none of the middle-class males had come out while all the working class males had. James suggested that middle-class Black families monitored their social standing more than working-class families, and thus they were more concerned about the negative implications associated with having a lesbigay son or daughter (Sears, 1995, p. 145). Therefore, though I have attempted to show how race affects the development of a lesbigay youth’s identity, this example shows that other factors are also influential.

Identity issues for bisexual youth

Bisexuals are another group of people who often do not feel welcome in the gay community. Some bisexuals must deal with homosexuality from lesbians and gay people.
Homosexism is discrimination by heterosexuals and lesbians and gay people toward bisexuals. Homosexism, according to Came (1996), is maintained as a reaction against heterosexism which is discrimination that makes it imperative to create safe, secure places for lesbians and gay males. Allowing bisexuals who still retain some links with the heterosexual world to share these same places is seen as jeopardising these places altogether (Came, 1996, p. 28). Some evidence of homosexism in the lesbian and gay community is the lack of community organizations and advocacy groups for bisexuals, and the lack of recognizable symbols comparable to the rainbow flag or the pink triangle that include bisexuality. A lack of recognizable symbols is an indication that the lesbian and gay community considers bisexuality less important. A lack of bisexual organizations is another indication of homosexism, and the result of three factors. First, those creating lesbian and gay support groups may not have wanted to establish separate organizations to address issues specific to bisexuals. Secondly, bisexuals may have been discouraged from creating “bisexual” organizations by gay males and lesbians who advocated solidarity among all sexual minorities. Finally, bisexuals may feel uncomfortable being in the lesbian and gay community because of homosexism, and therefore, there are fewer people advocating for bisexual organizations.

Bisexuals are also often ignored by gay and lesbian researchers. Many researchers/authors speak about lesbian and gay issues without mentioning bisexuals and the amount of literature about bisexual youth is almost non-existent. As a result, bisexuals feel isolated as they feel they must censor themselves, hide their feelings, ignore desires, and consequently are confused about how to manage their sexuality. One way they try to cope is by creating two distinct personas - one heterosexual and one homosexual (essentially being closeted in both ‘communities’). This inevitably results in shame and
disempowerment because they never legitimize who they are, and if they come out as bisexual, they have to defend their sexual orientation (Travers & O'Brien, 1997, p. 129-130).

Homosexism appears to be based on the myth that bisexuals are either homosexuals who have not accepted themselves or heterosexuals who are sexually curious. Despite Kinsey's studies and conceptualization of a sexual continuum, many believe that there is either only one sexuality, heterosexuality, or two sexualities, heterosexuality and homosexuality. Loftus (1996) stated that for the subject, bisexuality, to emerge, "contradictions along the rigid and naturalized sex/gender/sexuality axes must be rendered invisible" (Loftus, 1996, p. 209).

Some gay males and lesbians may also accept the other myths that are propagated against bisexuals. These myths include: they are promiscuous, are not monogamous, spread AIDS to heterosexuals and lesbians, are morally bankrupt, traitors to lesbian/gay liberation, pass as heterosexual to maintain heterosexual privilege, and/or are unhappy as they are always seeking a peace they cannot find. Eliasen (1996) surveyed 1130 heterosexual American university students and found that they rated bisexuality less acceptable than lesbianism or being gay. Moreover, 39% agreed that bisexuals are more confused by their sexuality than heterosexuals (35% disagreed) and 31% agreed that bisexuals spread AIDS to heterosexuals (33% disagreed) (p. 322). Bisexuals must also endure the same homophobia gay males and lesbians do as they too have intimate relations with people of the same sex - the action which homophobics denounce and detest. In relation to compulsory heterosexuality, bisexuals are more like gay males and lesbians than heterosexuals:

Because heterosexuals lump them (lesbigay people) all
together, bisexuals encounter the same kinds of harassment and discrimination as gay, lesbian and transgendered people. Bisexuals lose their jobs, homes, lose their children and are discharged from the military when they are honest about their sexual orientation.

(Glaad, 1998)

In such an environment of homosexisrn and heterosexism, developing a secure, healthy identity is difficult. Eadie (1996) states that he refers to himself as a gay-identified bisexual man as his way of dealing with heterosexism’s rejection of homosexuality, the rejection of the gay community by bisexual friends, and rejection of himself by sections of the lesbian and gay movement. Udis-Kessler states, “Coming out for bisexuals puts them in a position where the different social settings of gay and straight worlds must be negotiated regularly” (Udis-Kessler, 1996, p. 50). Stonequist (1937/1967) stated:

We develop an idea of ourselves through imagining how we appear to other persons, and imagining their judgement of that appearance. . . . In the case of the marginal man [sic] [bisexual], it is as if he were placed simultaneously between two looking-glasses, each presenting a sharply different image of himself. The clash in the images gives rise to a mental conflict as well as to a dual self-consciousness and identification.

(Paul, 1984, p. 56)

The instability that bisexual individuals must bear because of the rejection by the lesbigay and heterosexual worlds has created a society where many bisexuals feel extremely marginalised. Consequently, for many of them, their self-esteem is damaged. In order for bisexuals to form stable bisexual organizations, services and communities, its members need to establish firm identities. Some researchers do not believe this is happening. Paul (1984) maintains that to understand bisexuality, one must understand the concept of marginality, which refers to the set of circumstances faced by people who have not found, or cannot accept, a clear group-membership role (p. 53). This situation is
partially the result of an inability to bring together a concept of bisexuality that only recently has gained serious recognition and partially due to bisexuals being uncertain about what constitutes their identity. Sara Murray, a reporter for *The Sentinel*, a San Francisco weekly serving the lesbigay community, stated, “What holds a movement together is an idea. What holds a community together is a common body of symbols and folklore - a culture. Right now, the bisexuality movement has an idea, bisexuality, and no culture of its own” (Murray in Weise, 1996, p.303).

Without a culture, bisexual youth is apt to be more confused about their identity than gay and lesbian youth. The gay and lesbian movements are much more established, which engenders more organizations, establishments and information available to gay and lesbian youth than to bisexual youth. However, although the gay and lesbian movements have their own “idea” and “culture”, one cannot assume that gay men and lesbians have a unified culture within the gay community.

**Identity issues for lesbian youth**

The gay community is seen as having a unified culture, which is true in comparison to the bisexual community, but internally, there are strong divisions between even white lesbians and white gay males. It was mentioned before that one of the main social places where identity formation occurs is in the bars. In 1998, in Toronto, there are only two lesbian bars and the rest are geared primarily toward gay males. It is acknowledged by most that the gay community directs much of its commercialized culture (advertising, bars, dances, events) toward gay males. This provides fewer social avenues for lesbians. Moreover, it sends a message that lesbians are not as valued as gay males, which is equally detrimental to the development of their identity.

Lesbians need separate venues from gay men because they have different
ideologies and issues they want to emphasize. Research indicates that lesbians have more in common with their heterosexual counterparts than with gay men in matters that include: expectations within relationships, equality, and the development of sexual awareness (Dailey, 1979 and Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978 in Schneider, 1989, p. 111). If this situation is true, it may be a result of two factors. First, since lesbians are women, they have may have more in common with females in general. Secondly, gay men often enjoy the power of controlling many aspects of the lesbigay culture, and therefore may not be interested in surrendering their power in order to create bonds between gay males and lesbians.

Therefore, gay and heterosexual men may have one pronounced commonality - their inherent power within a patriarchal society. Hence, unlike a gay male, the lesbian's struggle and independence is part of being a strong and independent female. They need to prepare themselves to live without the income of a male provider (women earn approximately 76% of what men earn) (Schneider, 1989, p. 124). Schneider (1988) also points out that parents are stricter regarding the comings and goings of female children, which lessens the opportunity for lesbian youth to meet other lesbians (Travers, 1994, p.16-17). Khayatt (1992) stated that "historically, socially, and materially, lesbians are stigmatized more because of their rejection of patriarchal prescriptions . . . than because of the "deviance" of their sexuality" (p. 7). A lesbian is denying males their assumed claim to her body, and thus denies the fundamental premise of patriarchy - the right to define a woman's sphere (p. 30). As a result, lesbians are not seen as women. Khayatt (1994) interviewed 12 high school lesbian students in Toronto and found that their profound sense of isolation came from being marginalised and never being able to speak freely of their sexuality. Consequently, they felt that an essential part of their identity was being deleted (p. 55).
The consanguinity that exists between lesbians and heterosexual women is also true when considering the other categories: relationships and sexual awareness. A woman’s sense of self “is organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliation and relationships” (Miller, 1976, cited in Schneider, 1997, p. 98). Due (1995) stated that this ideology about a “woman’s sense of self” and the fact that males have a wider range of success indicators (sports, rebellion, academics) are the reasons that lesbians are more likely to engage in heterosexual relationships long past the time they have come out to themselves (p. xviii). It is also a reason for serial monogamy being typical for young lesbians.

With respect to sexual awareness, Rogers (1994) stated, “[F]or girls in schools there is no celebration of female sexuality per se; it is seen only as a mere counterpart to male sexuality, and then invariably in a heterosexual setting” (p. 37). On the other hand, the male sense of self is not centred around relationships but rather on work, sports or academic accomplishments. Nevertheless, they are encouraged to express their sexual desires. Troiden (1988) and Warren (1974) suggested that gay males are more likely than lesbians to arrive at homosexual self-definition in sexual contexts (Edwards, 1996, p.338). Therefore, sex with little emotion is common for males and perhaps even more common among gay men (if they share the same ideas about sex). Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that monogamy was less important to American gay men than to heterosexuals and lesbians (Schneider, 1988, p. 39). Cronin (1974) found that the majority of American lesbians interviewed defined themselves in contexts related to meaningful emotional involvement with others (Troiden, 1988, p. 50). This would explain why Troiden (1988) found that gay males acted on sexual feelings at the average age of 15 and lesbians at the average age of 20 (p. 46).
Conclusion

In order to help lesbigay youth, one must understand what is common to most of their identities. Homophobia, is one factor that has influenced, usually negatively, the identity of all lesbigay people. However, those working with lesbigay youth must also realize that the grouping "lesbigay youth" involves other sub-groupings such as male, female, bisexuals and lesbigay people of colour. The people in each of these sub-groupings have their own commonalities and different factors that have influenced the development of their identity. Therefore, one cannot generalize about lesbigay youth. Understanding how the identities of lesbigay people differ; for example how a black lesbian differs from a Chinese gay male, will allow educators to shape their curriculum to meet the needs of all lesbigay people. Unfortunately, however, not only are the differences between lesbigay youth usually ignored in Canadian schools, so are all the other needs and issues affecting lesbigay people.
Chapter 5

Education for Lesbigay people in Canadian and American Secondary Schools

In every class in every school throughout our country there are students who are not being given an equal education. . . . I am referring to a hidden minority: the boys and girls who are gay or lesbian. We do little - in most cases nothing - to prepare them or to support them in a school environment in which they are called faggots and dykes.

(Anderson, 1994, p. 151)

For many lesbigay students in Toronto (1998), homophobia is an everyday experience both inside and outside of school. The majority of the Triangle students have left or have been chronically absent from school because of the homophobia they endured there. For these students, the Triangle Program is the only way they can consider attending school regularly, and thus attain credits toward their Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

In this section, I will discuss three main areas: silence in high schools about lesbigay issues; how educators are involved in the experiences of lesbigay students; and how race and gender affect the experience of being a lesbigay youth. First, I would like to stress the physical and verbal violence that occurs against lesbigay youth, which has a major impact on their identities. Herek (1989) stated that American gay males and lesbians are the most frequent victims of hate crimes, and the school is the primary setting for this type of violence. Remafedi (1987) estimated that 30% of American lesbigay youth are victims of physical assaults - half of which occur on school property. In a response to a questionnaire sent to more than 1000 American lesbigay youth over 18, 1/4 said that they were "very" or "extremely" fearful of harassment or verbal abuse at school (Monahan, 1997, p. 204).

Physical and verbal violence not only leaves its victims in pain but also ashamed of
their sexuality. This fear will hinder their academic, social and emotional abilities as they will be unable to concentrate fully on academics and social relationships when they are concerned for their safety. Kissen's (1993) survey of lesbian and gay support groups in the United States found that 18 of 44 respondents either said they had no good memories of school or left it blank in the survey. Moreover, most of those who said they had a “best memory” of school wrote of experiences outside of school (p. 60).

Silence in high schools about homosexuality

Another reason that few of the lesbigay students surveyed could think of a “best memory” is that their culture is not usually addressed in the curricula, as school environments alienate lesbigay youth. Epstein (1994) stated that, “Schools provide a site for practising heterosexuality within the context of developing conventional gender roles” (p. 5). High schools both promote and expect heterosexual liaisons to be part of school life - proms, dances, and student council’s Valentine gift selling. In school, as in most areas of society, heterosexuality is assumed and sometimes demanded.

However, most people are in close contact with lesbigay people. If one takes the recognized statistic that 10% of people are lesbigay, then in Canada, with a population of approximately 30 million, three million are lesbigay. Then, if these three million told their parents, six million would know, a sibling - three million, and a friend - three million. Therefore, almost half of our population is related to, or is a good friend with someone who is lesbigay. Nonetheless, most educators and students in Canadian and American schools still ignore lesbigay culture. In fact, Epstein and Johnson (1994) stated that, though the sexual culture of students was resistant to schooling, it often was conservative and policed gender boundaries more effectively than government decrees or school rules (p. 223). Helen, interviewed by Rogers (1994), stated, “The worst aspect of my school days was the
complete and utter absence of any mention - at school, at home, in literature, in the media - of lesbians and gay men" (p. 38). Anderson (1994) stated, "By our continuing silence we condemn our gay and lesbian students to years as psychosocial cripples [sic]. Our schools foster the furtiveness of their hidden lives. They are deprived of the opportunities to develop self-esteem and the social skills that became second nature for our heterosexual students" (p. 152).

This "utter absence" of lesbigay acknowledgement in the school culture stems from the curricula in the schools. In Rogers' (1994) U.K. study, all her respondents found that any mention of homosexuality within the formal curriculum was minimal and almost invariably negative (p. 39-40). Even in sex education, sex remains a biological event and is rarely about sexual cultures. "If [heterosexual] sex is difficult to talk about seriously and pleasurably at the same time, such discussion about lesbian and gay sex will be even more unapproachable and unspeakable given the heterosexual presumption of the general culture" (Epstein & Johnston, 1994, p. 223). Telljohann, Price, Poureslami, & Easton (1995) reported that less than half of their sample of American high school teachers included lesbigay issues in their course curricula on health/sexuality education. One in four felt competent to teach about lesbigay issues (Walters & Hayes, 1998, p. 13). This invisibility of the lesbigay culture would explain the frustration that many lesbigay people feel in school. This would be particularly true for those who come out or do not try to mould themselves into what is expected of their gender. Mary, another Rogers' interviewee, said that she decided to leave school because she felt alienated, and once she did, she said, "I started feeling more positive towards myself" (Rogers, 1994, p. 42).

Educators' Responsibilities

In Ontario, part of the blame for the exclusive curricula falls on Ontario's Ministry of
Education. However, some of the guidelines set by the Ministry allow for the introduction of lesbigay curricula, yet the personal ideologies of parents, administrators and teachers prevent its introduction. Presently, many educators ignore homophobic comments and actions, and some even perpetuate myths and use discriminatory comments. France Kunreuther, the director of the Hetrick Martin Institute in New York in the early 1990's, said, “I can't emphasize enough how one accepting voice can change a youngster's life. [Lesbigay students] just need to know there's someone they can talk to” (Stover, 1992, p. 31).

In one American study, less than one percent of the respondents found that lesbigay issues were talked about at schools in ways that were helpful (Plummer, 1989 in Dowler-Coltman, 1995, p. 13). In Kissen's American (1993) study, 28 of the 44 respondents said lesbigay issues were never mentioned in their high school classes. Of the 19 that said it had been mentioned, few said the comments were positive. One lesbian's health instructor told the class that homosexuality was a form of mental illness (p. 59). Another student in a Toronto high school said,

The stuff [harassment] that happened in the school got really bad. At one point, this guy came up to me between classes while I was at my locker and started to scream at me. He was saying things like, 'You people make me sick, you should all be killed,' and the teachers who were monitoring the hallways just told him to be quiet.

(Fowler; 1998, p. 23)

In this situation, the teachers may not have reacted because of their own homophobia. Sears (1992) found that teachers, student teachers and school counsellors in South Carolina reported very high levels of homophobia. Moreover, few of them intended to expand their knowledge about lesbigay issues or their experience with gay and lesbian students (Walters & Hayes, 1998, p. 4). Kunreuther said, “Our biggest enemy is ignorance.
A lot of teachers and counsellors have never met a gay person. Nobody teaches them to work with these young people" (Stover, 1992, p. 31). This is particularly problematic since studies have shown that homophobia is worse among people who have never knowingly met a homosexual (Anderson, 1994, p. 152). In fact, in a study done by James Sears, a quarter of the prospective American teachers surveyed believed they would be unable to deal fairly with a lesbigay student (Due, 1995, p. 260).

Administrators are equally responsible as they have the power to make changes or to allow heterosexism to continue. They can call for the inclusion of a lesbigay curriculum. They can demand that teachers take action against homophobia, or conversely, they can stifle positive endeavours by teachers. In 1992, Anthony Costa, a professor at Fairfield University in Connecticut, sent out a questionnaire to teachers and administrators throughout the state asking about their schools' responses to the needs of gay and lesbian students and staff members. The teachers said that their schools were not promoting a climate of tolerance and acceptance. The administrators were confident that their school was doing fine (Anderson, 1994, 152). In the study done by Telljohann, Price, Poureaslami and Easton (1995), half of their sample of American high school teachers indicated that gay and lesbian support groups would not be supported by their school administrations (Walters & Hayes, 1998, p. 13). A recent study by Rienzo, Button and Wald (1996) pulled together data from 126 communities in the United States with legal protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and 129 without such legislation. They examined the sexual orientation content of school district programs. The study showed that most school districts were not implementing recommended programs to address sexual orientation (Walters & Hayes, 1998, p. 12). Part of the reason is that many administrators are not convinced lesbigay students require any special assistance. Del Stover (1992) stated that,
“Failure to treat gay students as a unique population means school personnel aren’t trained to counsel these students” (p. 30). In some cases, administrators will not hire teachers if they know they are lesbigay, and in some cases they will fire them. At one conference I spoke at, I encouraged pre-service education teachers to come out if they were gay to benefit the youth. A Faculty of Education professor at the conference discouraged this because it could jeopardize their careers.

One gay man, Joseph Stellpflug, lay chaplain and religion teacher at St. Elizabeth Catholic High School in York Region was fired after seven years at his job without incident. A letter sent by Bishop John Knight, vicar for education with the archdiocese, stated that he had observed that Stellpflug was allegedly involved in a “non-celibate homosexual relationship,” which was not tolerable (DiManno, 1997, B1). Stellpflug agreed to give up his chaplaincy and to discontinue teaching religion but asked to be reassigned as a math teacher. Instead, he was given seven days to provide the archdiocese with a “full confessional” in which he was to confirm or deny the allegations. Stellpflug would neither affirm nor deny that he had a sexual relationship with his partner, and subsequently was fired. A board spokesperson, Chris Cable explained, “There’s no question he [Stellpflug] is a skilled teacher. He was very influential with his students. That’s why (it was determined) that his continued presence might lead students to conclude the board condones his behaviour” (DiManno, 1997, B1).

A incident such as this perpetuates the myth that homosexuals are not good citizens, and thus not good teachers. It also perpetuates stereotypes by prohibiting interaction between heterosexual teachers and their lesbigay colleagues. Finally, it keeps lesbigay teachers closeted. This removes the opportunity for lesbigay teenagers to have role models and access to adults who may be able to help them understand their feelings. In
a recent study by Robinson and Martin, it was found that 61% of Canadian guidance counsellors and teachers were afraid that they would endanger their jobs if they addressed the needs of gay and lesbian youth (Dowler-Coltman, 1995, p. 16).

However, many of the decisions made by administrators are influenced by the community. Administrators in schools and school boards are swayed by community members who accuse schools of condoning homosexuality. In Milwaukee, a citizens' group sought to recall four school board members and fire the superintendent following a school board decision to train district staff so they could address gay students' problems (Stover, 1992, p. 30). The same also occurs in Canada. In March 1997, teachers representing over 42,000 of their colleagues passed a motion to have the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) create a program to eliminate homophobia and heterosexism. By April, headlines in small-town newspapers read: "Pro-homosexual Teaching Feared"; "Teachers Should Not Teach Kids Morality"; and "Teachers Don't Belong in Students' Bedrooms."

"Pro-family values" organizations such as the Citizens' Research Institute (CRI) spoke loudly against the proposal. Kari Simpson, a CRI representative stated, "this [the proposal] is a political agenda and we the good people of this province will not stand for it. . . . We have used the word tolerance with regard to the lifestyle [being lesbigay] and promotion within our public education system of a lifestyle will not be tolerated" (Mackinnon, 1997, p. 88-91). The federation withstood the pressure. However, the Surrey Board of School Trustees (a board in B.C.) banned three children's books that same year which showed same-sex families. Other community members are currently (1997) fighting to have the books reinstated.

It is stated in "The Other Side of the Closet - Study Guide" (1998) that “[a]ll students, regardless of their sexual orientation, learn mythology and hatred at school. We can
educate actively, replacing mythology with knowledge, hatred with respect, or we can educate passively as we always have. Those are the only two alternatives. Either way, we communicate" (p. 2). Unfortunately for lesbigay students, most educators in Canada and the United States choose to remain silent. As a consequence, most lesbigay students find high school to be an unpleasant place, which hinders their academic, social and emotional growth. Brent Calderwood, 16 years old, stated:

Last week I just wanted to lash out at the straight world for doing this to me. For someone like me to be failing . . . I realize I've made choices, but when I first started cutting [classes] I felt I was making the only choice. It was for simple survival. I wasn't choosing to fuck up, I was choosing to not kill myself.

(Due, 1995, p. 222-223)

In fact, the Toronto lesbigay organization, Parents, Family, Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), along with a group of concerned students and educators, are documenting incidents of homophobic harassment in the public school system. They have consulted a lawyer to see what legal steps might be taken against school boards if they neglect to protect students from homophobic violence. Both Ontario's Human Rights Code and the Federal Charter of Rights and Freedoms prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation (Fowler, 1998, p. 23).

Effects of race and gender

The consequences of discrimination and silence also need to be considered in light of other factors such as race and gender. In Toronto, the discrimination against African-Canadian youth in high schools and the poor representation of Black culture in the curricula led to the implementation of an alternative high school program for African-Canadian youth called Naghana. Justification for this program likely came from studies such as Larter et al (1982). Larter et al. surveyed grade eight students in Toronto and found that Black and
Caribbean students were the only groups who rated education as the most important activity to them. However, these two groups of students had the largest percentage in Special Education classes (Brathwaite & James, 1996, p. 17). Moreover, in a 1991 high school survey by one Board of Education in Toronto, it was shown that 36% of Black students were 'at risk' of dropping out. The percentage for whites was 26% and 18% for Asians (Dei, 1996, p. 33).

School can be equally unfair and daunting for girls. Larkin studied girls in four Canadian high schools and found that sexual harassment was so pervasive that most girls had come to accept it as part of school life (Larkin, 1994, in Eder, 1997, p. 94). From these examples, it can be inferred that being of a certain race or being female would increase the amount of discrimination, and thus stress, a non-white lesbigay or lesbian would experience.

However, it is important to point out that some studies show an improvement for lesbigay youth in school. In an American study by Woog (1995), many lesbigay high school students reported that coming out did not result in negative repercussions. It was sometimes seen as a mark of individuality, a rare badge of honour (p. 23). Woog gave the example of Corey Canant, a student at Hall High School in West Hartford, Connecticut, who declared "the more out he became . . . the more he realized it was no big deal. 'It's how you present yourself. . . . If you present yourself as secure, it makes a big impact on other people'" (p. 35-36). Corey said that coming out had, in fact, increased his self-confidence, even though he still dealt with avoidance, name-calling, and harassing phone calls (p. 36-37).

Woog (1995), however, also tells of Myk Simpson. He was a one-time honour role student who was "harassed unmercifully" at Tuloso-Midway High School in Corpus Christi.
As a result of the harassment, he tried to commit suicide. He was then disowned by his parents, moved in with his grandparents, and moved to his third school. At this school, he came out for the first time and was harassed. He then went to another school, came out again and was harassed again. When he told his guidance counsellor of the harassment, the counsellor said, “You chose that lifestyle. This is what happens.” In the end, he dropped out of school (p. 116-119).

These two drastically different accounts of being a lesbigay student depict how factors such as personal attitudes, school environment, educators and family create different experiences. However, most of the literature I reviewed indicates that being lesbigay in high school is a negative experience. Many educators and youth workers recommend not coming out in school in order to avoid being harassed and/or alienated.

Conclusion

I once taught at a secondary school once where I heard the words fag, dyke and homo used as insults so much that I had to be wary not to become desensitized to the words. In schools such as this, silence about lesbigay issues can be devastating to lesbigay students, and unfortunately, these school environments are common in Toronto. Furthermore, though homophobia is pervasive in most Toronto secondary schools, teachers, administrators and other educators are doing very little to challenge homophobia or to provide gay positive curricula. Strategies need to be developed and improved in order to make Toronto high schools healthier for lesbigay students.
Chapter 6

Education Policies and Programs

In this chapter, I will discuss the policies and the programs that existed in the Toronto Board of Education (TBE) before the implementation of the Triangle Program: Bill 7, the curriculum guidelines for Physical and Health Education, the Human Sexuality Program, *Sexuality Orientation: Focus on Homosexuality, Lesbianism, and Homophobia. A Resource Guide For Teachers of Health Education in Secondary Schools* (1992), *Sexual Harassment Policy. Know Your Rights. Homophobic Harassment* (1993), and the organization called Teens Educating and Confronting Homophobia (TEACH). This chapter will examine the Toronto context for lesbigay youth and educators before the Triangle Program was established.

There is empirical evidence to show that Canada's secondary school system often failed to meet the needs of lesbigay youth (Rivers, 1997; Parravano, 1995; Monahan, 1997; Gambini, 1992), and though the TBE has some of the most progressive support and education programs for lesbigay people, it too has some shortcomings. The fact that many Toronto high schools are poor learning environments for lesbigay people is one reason that the Triangle Program was developed. However, those who supported and developed the Triangle Program also helped to develop lesbigay programs in mainstream schools and hope that the high schools improve enough to make the Triangle Program either unnecessary or an education option of interest. Therefore, to understand why the Triangle Program is necessary, it is important to understand what is required when developing healthy learning environments for lesbigay people and what programs exist in Toronto schools for lesbigay youth.
In June 1985, Kenneth Zeller, a gay secondary school librarian, was killed by four Toronto high school students. This was the catalyst for major policy, program and curriculum change in the TBE. In 1986, Olivia Chow, a Ward 6 trustee, began to investigate homophobia in Toronto schools. She found a number of problems in the system. First there was very little material on sexual orientation in the sex education curricula. Secondly, board policies at the time required that sexual orientation only be discussed by Physical and Health Educators (PHE). Finally, many students spoke of teachers witnessing homophobia and doing nothing (Lenskyj, 1994, 283).

From this investigation came the discussion and implementation of a number of policies to introduce and protect lesbigay rights in Education. In April 1986, the TBE policy was redesigned. It called for a curriculum guide on homophobia and sexual orientation. It stated that discrimination, harassment and violence should not be tolerated in school environments, and programs should be developed to sensitize students and staff with respect to human rights (Lenskyj, 1994, p. 283-284).

In 1986, Ontario’s Provincial Parliament passed Bill 7 which added sexual orientation to the list of differences protected from discrimination by the Human Rights Code of Ontario. In 1988, the Ministry of Education curriculum guidelines for Physical and Health Education, intermediate and senior divisions, included sexual orientation among the topics for discussion within human sexuality. The first draft of the curriculum on sexual orientation for Toronto high schools was released in January 1990. The curriculum emphasized a disease model and a clinical perspective. Toronto’s lesbigay community criticized the clinical approach and the lack of lesbigay representation.

One program established in the TBE in 1989 was the Human Sexuality Program, which is administered by Steve Solomon (1999). This program has been providing services
to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered students, teachers, parents and their families for a decade. It provides information, counselling, workshops, and presentations about all types of sexualities to primary, intermediate and secondary school students. The program also provides counselling and support to the students of the Triangle Program.

Another existing TBE policy is the Sexual Orientation: Focus on Homosexuality, Lesbianism, and Homophobia (1992). It provides directions for implementing discussion of lesbigay issues and homophobia into high school curricula. It is geared primarily to Physical Education teachers in the senior level of Physical Education (PE) classes. However, it details resources available for teachers teaching in other classes. Parravano (1995) provides two main criticisms of this policy. First, many lesbigay people might only take PE at the non-senior levels when it is mandatory. Many lesbigay people dislike PE for a number of reasons. The first reason is harassment, which is based on their classmates presuming or knowing the lesbigay's sexual orientation. Secondly, many lesbigay people are concerned about the physical interaction and nudity that are part of PE, since it involves the gender to whom they are attracted. Finally, they may have no interest in this course.

Secondly, the policy was created primarily by heterosexual people. One lesbian community member helped prepare the second draft and some lesbigay TBE staff provided some advice but all were left out of the final editing process (Parvanno, 1995, p. 92-95). However, it is one of the few curriculum policies specifically tackling heterosexism and homophobia in Canadian high schools.

Since 1993, the TBE has had a policy to protect lesbigay teachers and students. Schools in Metropolitan Toronto continued to follow Toronto's Equity Policy until September, 1999 (time of writing). It stated:

The Toronto Board of Education condemns and will not tolerate
discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, creed, colour, nationality, ancestry, place of origin, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, age (between 18 to 65), in any form by its trustees, students, or employees. Sexuality orientation as contained herein means male or female heterosexuality, homosexuality, or bisexuality between consenting adults.

(Sexual Harassment Policy, 1993)

This policy covers all persons who have an ongoing relationship with the Toronto Board of Education - students and staff. However, Bill 7 and the Board’s policy do not mean that more teachers are coming out. One Ontario lesbian teacher interviewed by Khayatt (1992) explained, “a sexual protection clause . . . would not shelter one from their (colleagues’, students’) prejudices, from their antagonism, from their unwillingness to cooperate with a teacher who would declare herself publically as lesbian” (Khayatt, 1992, p. 207). Greg Pow said that a gay friend who was a high school teacher with the Roman Catholic Separate School Board was constantly called “faggot” by students. Pow said, “It really bothers him. It really upsets him. He seems to be more stressed by it than angry.” Pow, a gay teacher in a Metro Toronto Secondary School, said that he was warned not to tell a certain teacher in his department he was gay because this man was extremely homophobic. Pow said, “I find that very scary because I feel if he knows . . . if I did something to displease him I think he could use it against me and it would be all unknown to me what rumours he was spreading.”

Teens Educating and Confronting Homophobia (TEACH) is a service connected to the Human Sexuality Program. The members of TEACH first met in spring of 1993. TEACH has lesbigay students go to high school classes to give presentations and answer questions about being lesbigay. Another presentation which has been used to educate students about issues about being lesbigay is “The Other Side of the Closet.” It is a play
and educational package which first played at the Young Peoples Theatre in Toronto in 1997. It is a play which engenders discussion and challenges myths about lesbigay people. At the end of the performance, Solomon and a couple of the Triangle students engage in a conversation with the student audience. This play was useful to me as it dramatized some of the homophobic experiences which were spoken of by the students interviewed. Others in the audience seemed equally impressed.

In conclusion, the Toronto District School Board continues to try to protect lesbigay students and staff. However, the progress since Chow first investigated homophobia in Toronto schools has been slow, largely because of the pervasive homophobia in society and in the board itself. Lesbigay students and staff are still harassed and fearful in schools, and this situation makes the Triangle Program necessary.
Chapter 7

Special School Programs for Lesbigay Youth

This chapter discusses three examples of special programs: the two most widely recognized school programs for lesbigay high school students in North America, PROJECT 10 and the Harvey Milk School; the initial guidelines for the Triangle Program; and the Triangle Program itself. The Triangle Program is one of the few programs in Canada and the United States which were established to help lesbigay people in high school. The purpose of this chapter is to document educators’ efforts on behalf of lesbigay youth in other school boards and to examine the Triangle Program in light of these United States initiatives.

The founder of PROJECT 10 is Dr. Virginia Uribe, a teacher and counsellor for the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) at the Fairfax High school. Project 10 began in 1984 as a response to suicide, alcohol/substance abuse and the risk of AIDS among lesbigay youth. Its focuses are educating, reducing verbal and physical harassment, and integrating itself with other dropout prevention programs. Many other school districts have since replicated and used the Project 10 model (www.project10.org/Biogina.html, Nov. 28, 1998).

PROJECT 10 attempts to improve self-esteem among lesbigay youth by providing accurate information and non-judgmental counselling on issues of sexual orientation. It is also dedicated to exposing the non-gay population to issues of sexual orientation, and thus teaching students how to live peacefully in an increasingly diverse society. Administrators of Project 10 do not like it to be labelled as a lesbigay program. Instead, they feel that it is best described as a dropout prevention program. The only difference is that the target group is lesbigay youth. PROJECT 10 provides workshops and training sessions for school
administrators and staff personnel. They have informal drop-in counselling for students at Fairfax and other school sites (the program is now (1999) based in Hamilton High in Los Angeles). They provide outreach to parents and significant others, and liaisons with peer counselling, substance abuse and suicide prevention programs. They also coordinate with Health Education programs that encourage sexual responsibility and risk-reduction behaviour among lesbigay youth (www.project10.org/ Backrond.html, Nov. 28, 1998).

PROJECT 10 has a Bill of Rights for lesbigay students: lesbigay students have the right to attend schools free of verbal and physical harassment; the right to attend schools where respect is standard; the right to have access to accurate information about themselves; the right to positive role models; the right to be included in all support programs that exist to help teenagers deal with the difficulties of adolescence; the right to legislators who guarantee their constitutional freedoms; and finally, the right to their own heritage, free of self-hate and unchallenged discrimination (www.project10.org/Blorites.html, Nov. 28, 1998).

The Harvey Milk School is an alternative public high school established in 1985 as a result of a collaboration between the Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI) and New York City Public Schools. It is run through the Alternative High Schools and Programs division. The HMI is a non-profit social service and advocacy organization founded in 1979 by Emery S. Hetrick and A. Damien Martin. It is dedicated to meeting the diverse needs of lesbigay youth and to educating society about their lives. The school was established because the staff of HMI recognized that lesbigay youth often experienced violence and intolerance in school and many dropped out. Working with the New York City Public Schools, they implemented a school system that provides for a teacher to be assigned to any social service agency with at least 22 clients who are not attending school. However, it took the
threat of a class-action suit from HMI's staff in order for the board to approve the program. The program started in the Washington Square United Methodist Church (Green, p. 59).

The Harvey Milk School has two teachers in two classrooms. A maximum of thirty youth per year are enrolled and the students range in age from 14 to 21. Currently, eighty percent of the students are African-American and Latino. Individualized programs are developed to enable students to meet graduation requirements. The school day is divided into four periods. Two periods are dedicated to group classes such as Literature, Math for Living, Art, Law and Health, and for the remaining two periods, students study other subjects independently with the assistance of their teachers. In addition, volunteer professionals teach courses on specific topics. Students of the Harvey Milk School have access to HMI's counselling services to help them address emotional concerns as well as academic issues.

Jesse Green explained that the advantages of an open classroom such as Harvey Milk were obvious: "Kids who disappear for a while can pick up where they left off, kids of different grade levels and abilities can pick up where they left off, kids of different grade levels and abilities can work together in one room" (Green, 1991, p. 36). However, Green also said that the disadvantages are equally obvious: "[T]he classroom is often noisy and confusing" (p. 36). Harvey Milk does not have a specific lesbigay curriculum but does integrate gay issues and literature into its courses. The mission of the Harvey Milk School is "to reintegrate [lesbigay] kids into traditional schools or, failing that, into society at large by providing them with a safe haven, free from censure, in which to come to terms with themselves and pursue their diplomas" (Green, p. 36).

However, in 1991, of the 100 students that had been enrolled throughout the six years, only 15 had graduated. One reason is that many were not or are not yet of
graduating age, but Green raises the question of inefficiency. Fred Golhaber (one of the full-time teachers) responded, "We do not measure our success in volume, or even always in grades. Sometimes it's enough of an achievement just to keep kids coming, and safe" (Green, 1991, p. 59). Many of the students have disgusting stories of homophobia endured at other schools. Paul M. was dragged into a bathroom stall by eight boys at school, where they bashed his head against a toilet while calling him faggot, threatened to kill him and burned his arm four times with a lighter. Eddie T.'s teacher informed Eddie's parents that their son was "acting like a faggot." He was kept home for a year - chained to a radiator, beaten, sexually abused, dragged by his father to 42nd Street and made to have sex with men for money (Green, p. 32-33).

The Harvey Milk School has received a lot of criticism from both the political "left" and "right." It was picketed by the Christian fundamentalists who argued that the Judeo-Christian tradition condemned homosexuality as a sin. The "left" critics called it segregationist. One "left" critic, Sandra Feldman of the United Federation of Teachers, argued in 1985 that a gay school was not educationally sound because it did not expose the students to a world to which they would eventually need to adapt (Green, p. 36). However, when that world is like Eddie T.'s, it is understandable why lesbigay youth need to remove themselves from the rest of society for a while. Others, such as Norman Siegel of the New York Civil Liberties Union, said it took the Board of Education off the hook for their larger failure - the failure being rampant homophobia in regular public schools (Green, p. 36). However, without exception, all of the students Green interviewed said that they would be dropouts, if not suicides, had they not found Harvey Milk (p. 59).

Triangle Program

The Triangle Program has a great deal in common with both programs, though it was
not directly modelled after either. It is, however, more similar to the Harvey Milk School. Most of the students have endured extreme homophobia. It is part of the existing alternative school system and also has an independent study unit. The program, as of September 1999, is run from a church that is also home to the Metropolitan Community Church, a lesbigay church with hundreds of congregations in the United States and Canada. While providing a safe educational haven for lesbigay youth is the Triangle team's prime concern, they are also tackling concerns about providing a good educational program, and enduring their share of criticism.

High rates of dropping out and committing suicide among lesbigay youth, like the two other programs, were also two of the main impetuses behind the creation of the Triangle Program, which is, as of September 1999, Canada's only publicly-funded alternative school program for lesbigay and transgendered youth. However, before I discuss the details of the Triangle Program, I will discuss the initial proposals and guidelines thereof.

**Initial proposals:**

The first main proposal was put forward by the Human Sexuality Program on October 29, 1992: "Proposal for the Development of an Alternative School Program for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students Who have Dropped out of School" (Gambini & Solomon, 1992). In this section, I will discuss the most important parts of that initial proposal.

In the proposal, it was acknowledged that the Toronto Board of Education (TBE) had made "progressive moves" in addressing sexual orientation (Gambini & Solomon, 1992, p.3) and that 98% of lesbigay students stay in school. However, they also pointed out that many lesbigay youth deal with problems such as shame, alienation, family break up, physical abuse, prostitution, and/or crime as a result of homophobia. Moreover, two
percent of lesbigay youth in Toronto will drop out of school. The proposal stated that 60% of the clients of the Street Outreach Services (SOS) of Toronto, which deals primarily with street youth, were self-identified as lesbigay. Part of the reason given in the proposal for high levels of homelessness, suicide, and dropouts is that "in every facet of their life . . . lesbian and gay youth have to deal with messages both overt and covert that their very existence . . . is wrong, sick and perverted" (Gambini & Solomon, 1992, p. 6). Gambini and Solomon went on to say:

[I]n light of such an environment it is easy to understand how developing and maintaining a positive self-image can be difficult. Combining this with attempting to obtain an education within an environment that some lesbian and gay youth are terrified of, becomes near impossible.

(p. 6)

Gambini and Solomon consulted with people who worked with lesbigay youth in search of recommendations about lesbigay dropouts. Colin Green, Program Co-ordinator of the 519 Church Street Community Centre, stated that there was a need for a special school for lesbigay dropouts because some of these students would return to school if they had the option of entering a program specifically designed for lesbigay youth. In the proposal, Green stated, "There is a hard to reach lesbian and gay population who are unable to remain even in a regular alternative school" (Gambini & Solomon, 1992, p. 7). Green suggested the development of a life skills and counselling component whereby they could learn skills for dealing with discrimination, harassment and low self-esteem. With this in mind, he also suggested that the program provide positive role models and a sense of history (p. 8).

Charles Marker, chief social worker with C.M. Hincks Treatment Centre, stressed flexibility, considering the fact that many of the students would have had lengthy absences
from school routines. Dr. Miriam Kaufman from the Adolescent Medicine Clinic (Hospital for Sick Children) said that children in school have fewer health problems than those who dropout. She also emphasized that many of those attending the alternative school would have low self-esteem. She said that being in mainstream schools erodes the self-esteem of many lesbian gay youth, and when they drop out, it usually erodes further. Susan Miner (Executive Director of SOS) and Carolyn Sneath (Co-ordinator of Fund Raising and Communications for Anglican Houses) had a number of suggestions including: developing strong ties with community resources (ie. on-site welfare caseworker); networking with community-based agencies with respect to residential and support services; and locating a facility separate from a mainstream school for safety (Gambini & Solomon, 1992, p. 7-12).

After consulting with community groups, seven recommendations were made. Firstly, an alternative school program was necessary and it should be affiliated with an existing alternative school because students might be reluctant to be associated with a "lesbogay school." Secondly, the program must have a strong connection with mainstream schools to facilitate reintegration whenever possible. However, preventing students from dropping out took priority. Thirdly, there should be a direct affiliation with the Human Sexuality Program so that it would be able to provide primary services such as: intake, referrals, counselling and life-skills consultations. Fourthly, the curriculum of the program should be as relevant to the students as possible. For example, English literature should include the works of lesbian gay people. This would address the issue of inclusion, while maintaining the standards set by the Toronto Board of Education and the Ministry of Education. Fifthly, the staff of the program should be positive and visible role models for the students, which would help develop the students' self-esteem. Next, the location should be an independent facility and not in a pre-existing school. Finally, the program should
develop a network with community-based agencies that would help with the provision of support services needed by students, such as housing, welfare and counselling (Gambini and Solomon, 1992, p. 12-14). In conclusion Gambini and Solomon (1992) stated:

> It must be stressed however that the intent of such a program is not to isolate or segregate these students but offer the opportunity to return to school. This program is not envisioned for all bisexual, lesbian and gay youth. When a student has dropped out of school, the result is the ultimate segregation. What is being suggested here is chance to return and receive what is theirs by right - a high school education.

(p. 14-15)

As an initial proposal for the development of the Triangle Program, it would be unrealistic to expect it to address all of the issues relevant to developing a lesbigay alternative program. However, two important groups were excluded from the proposal - bisexuals and non-white lesbigay people. Bisexual youth were referred to infrequently in the introduction and conclusion; they were not named in the recommendations, nor in the “Community Consultation” section. It is possible that bisexuality was viewed as the same as gay or lesbian. Moreover, there is no evidence of consultation with professionals who understood the needs of bisexual youth. The community group representatives did not make a formal distinction between being gay or lesbian and being bisexual.

A discussion of the needs of non-white lesbigay youth was absent from the proposal altogether. No information was given about this distinct group, and no community group or person who could provide insights on non-white lesbigay youth was approached. Finally, there were no recommendations about addressing diversity issues in general, nor the needs of non-white lesbigay youth in particular.

It is important to note, however, that in 1992, the issues of diversity among lesbigay people and bisexuality were discussed far less than they are in 1999. Therefore, the
community people consulted and those developing the proposal were less likely to include these issues. Understandably, since these issues were not getting the attention they deserved, there were fewer community organizations with whom to consult. Nonetheless, those developing the proposal could have commented on the low representation of lesbigay people of colour and bisexuals in the Toronto lesbigay community and attempted to integrate these issues into the proposal.

One group which was discussed and investigated thoroughly was street youth. Six of the seven community organization members consulted encouraged the Triangle team to help lesbigay street youth. Their recommendations included the following: a health component to help those who had contracted S.T.D.'s by virtue of surviving on the streets; help orienting street youth towards a school routine again; support by way of life skills; and housing. It is significant that most of those consulted worked for organizations which helped street youth. The Triangle team knew that most of the students who would choose to come to an alternative school program for lesbigay people would be living away from their parents. The descriptions given by those consulted demonstrated how important it was to meet the basic survival needs of the students before attempting to meet their intellectual and academic needs. The youth were described as: “hard to reach”, with lengthy absences from school routine, more health problems, low self-esteem, and major safety issues. These problems were also typical of many students who attended the Triangle Program, and therefore, other areas such as academic challenges and extra-curricular activities may have received less attention and resources than basic needs like housing and counselling.

Street youth, however, were not mentioned specifically in the seven recommendations. The proposal included a discussion of life skills consultation and liaison
with community-based agencies to deliver services such as housing and welfare counselling, but there is no mention in the first proposals or brochures of how the Triangle Program will accommodate youth who leave home in order to live near the school. Regardless of their families' economic class, when they leave their families, most students will be dealing with financial and housing problems. The absence of this information is an indication that the Triangle team may not have fully realized how much the students' socio-economic and survival concerns would shape the program. In 1997-1998, 17 of the 20 students at the Triangle Program were living on their own.

At the time of the revised proposal, dated January 27, 1995, the Triangle Program team was getting ready for the following September. It had been decided that OASIS Alternative Secondary School would be the school with which the Triangle Program would be associated. In their proposal, the OASIS staff stressed the need for the program to be involved with the lesbigay community. This would ensure that all of the resources (volunteers, funding etc.) not readily available through TBE and OASIS would be accessible. OASIS representatives recommended setting up an advisory board that would involve some or all of the following agencies: OASIS School, The Metropolitan Community Church (where the program was to be housed), The Teen Clinic (Hospital for Sick Children), PFLAG, TBE Guidance, TBE Trustees, TBE Consultative Committee on the Education of Gay and Lesbian Students, Bisexual, Lesbian and Gay Youth of Toronto (BLGYT), Human Sexuality Advisory Committee, Toronto Counselling Centre for Lesbian and Gays, Education Against Homophobia, and Universities/Colleges/ Faculties of Education (Zeller Program¹, 1995, p. 3-4). An important final statement that OASIS made

¹Zeller Program was the proposed name for what is now the Triangle Program. Kenneth Zeller's family did not give permission to use his name in the name of the program.
with regard to the program's advisory board was the following: "In soliciting members for the advisory board, all efforts would be made to strike a balance of males and females, and races and cultures" (Zeller Program, 1995, p. 4). The fact that they are trying to "strike a balance" is an indication that the Triangle team was attempting to meet the needs of their diverse class population.

**Guidelines for the Triangle Program:**

The Triangle Program advisory board emphasized the need for the program to be transitional wherein most students would stay one year depending on their personal situation and their safety in public schools. It was decided that the students would need to attend other schools to complete their diploma and that the accountability for the Triangle staff and students would be through OASIS.

Seven guidelines about admissions into the program were drafted. First, the program is for 'at risk' students who have dropped out, are on the verge of dropping out or have been kicked out of school. Second, the students must be between the ages of 16 and 21. Third, placement within the program is restricted to 25 pupils and placement is based on suitability, and takes into account OASIS' policy on representation. Students who do not get into the program will be referred to other suitable programs or put on a waiting list. Fourth, students must be lesbigay positive (admission open to lesbigay youth, youth who have family members who are lesbigay, and students who are supportive of lesbigay rights). Fifth, the classroom mix will reflect the gender/race/class make-up of the larger community and this may require the use of quotas to encourage certain students, such as visible minorities and/or physically-challenged individuals, to enroll. (This guideline indicates the possibility of increased awareness to the issues of lesbigay youth of colour.) Sixth, OASIS strives for a blend of students with regards to experience, ability, maturity and need, and
admission decisions must take these factors into account. Seventh, Program Teachers and Student Support Workers are responsible for determining the process whereby students move from a waiting list into the program as well as a policy concerning re-entry into the program (Zeller Program Advisory Board minutes, February 7, 1995).

The Triangle Program's current mission statement is four-fold (OASIS Alternative Secondary School Triangle Program Orientation Package, 1998-1999). First, the Triangle Program is a safe place, free from homophobia, where lesbigay and transgendered youth and those victimized by homophobia can express themselves, be respected, and work in a supportive space to develop the necessary skills to re-enter the regular school system. Second, it is a place where all individuals are respected regardless of age, gender, race, social class, ethnic or religious background, or sexual orientation. Racist, sexist or homophobic behaviour and/or symbols will not be tolerated. Third, it is a place where differences are celebrated. Finally, it is a supportive environment, both academically and socially, where students and staff co-operate in a mature and responsible way with respect to attendance and completion of school work. (This mission statement addresses the concerns not addressed in the initial proposal about non-white and bisexual lesbigay youth).

From 1:00 p.m. to 3:45 p.m., the students do class course work. There is a total of ten three-week units of study, which include Personal Life Management, Social Studies, or English. Students work on adapted assignments according to different levels of expectation. These units of study focus on issues, literature, and history of the lesbigay and transgendered people. From 9:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. students work on two individualized study units (ISU) from the following list: Math - grade 9, 10, 11; Keyboarding - 9; Geography -10; Science - 10; English - 11, 12 ( grade 9, 10 and OAC English offered in afternoon units); Co-op Education - 11, 12; and Physical Education -9, 10, 11, 12. Most
ISU’s are offered at both general and advanced levels. The Physical Education credit is achieved by doing activities deemed exercise and keeping track of specifics in a log book. Once a certain number of hours are accumulated, a credit is awarded. On Wednesday, classes end at 2:30 p.m.. From 1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m., there is a class meeting in which the staff and students discuss and make decisions concerning issues relevant to the operation of the program.

The Triangle Program has one full-time teacher - Vanessa Russell, one social worker - Steven Solomon, and one street worker - Krin Zook and one part-time teacher. Vanessa’s and the part-time teacher’s role is to guide students through their academic program. Krin and Steven’s roles are to help students with the non-academic aspects of school life. They provide information and assistance with the following: student financial assistance (TTC tickets or monthly bursaries); registration letters; student welfare progress reports; referrals to community agencies; personal counselling; and information on other educational institutions and programs. Help with obtaining welfare and financial assistance was essential for most Triangle students since most had left or were kicked out of their homes. In 1997-1998, 15 of the 20 students lived away from home. Financial assistance was essential in allowing them to concentrate on their studies, particularly for those students who had psychological, social or emotional problems, and/or learning disabilities or gaps in their education. Many students had part-time jobs, but without assistance, they could not afford the time required to go to school and study. The program is based in the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto and the fee for rent is nominal.

The Triangle Program - 1997-1999

My study of the Triangle Program began in September 1997 when I worked as a volunteer twice a week for three hours helping with the independent studies. As noted
earlier, I interviewed 11 students and four Triangle team members. Antonio Gambini stated in the first year of the Triangle’s operation, “This program has been designed to help those who have been damaged” (Lownsbrough, 1996, p.87). I asked McCaskell why the Triangle Program is needed and his answer was quite similar:

Probably the vast majority of them [lesbigay high school students] survive by suffering in silence but there is a minority of those kids who get identified as being queer, and when they do that, their lives pretty quickly turn into absolute hell. So that kids find themselves unable to survive in a normal school setting or experience family breakdown for the same reason and have to live on the streets or whatever. There is a growing number of kids who have developed a sexual identity at a young enough age that they are facing these kinds of things in a high school setting and can’t cope. So the Triangle Program provides a safe space for them to continue their education.

It is in response to this “hell” that the Triangle Program staff gives a lot of time and effort to rebuilding the self-esteem of the Triangle students. John Terpstra, the full-time teacher for the first three years, acknowledged that “therapeutic need often took precedence over academic rigour” (Lownsbrough, 1996, p. 89). This is reflected also in the number of credits accrued by the students in one year. In 1996, forty-five credits were granted to the group which, at its highest point had 22 kids, and a low of 13 (Lownsbrough, 1996, p. 89). The fluctuation in the number of students that attended is also a testament to the importance of dealing with non-academic issues. Addressing these issues keeps students in the program. Russell said:

It is really hard for students to concentrate on academics when they (the students) are homeless and/or when they are hustling or when they don’t have enough food in their bellies or when there is no place where they feel safe to talk about who they are and what their issues are. . . . and I think that helps in terms of supporting them to be able to be successful at the Triangle Program. A lot of the students have not experienced any
success in any type of mainstream school . . . . on several occasions more than one student has said, "I have never done so well". They surprise themselves with the work that they produce.

Terpstra mentioned that there were three main things with which the Triangle Program needed to provide the students. First, "a safe place where the students could be themselves - where they could be openly gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered and they would be in a supportive gay, lesbian, bisexual environment." Secondly, the program must provide as much gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered information in the main areas of English, History and Personal Life Management. Russell said that this helps the students "develop a sense of self and a sense of pride." Moreover, according to Zook, Personal Life Management sometimes involves discussion of issues such as social assistance, homelessness and money management. She added that she and Solomon gave workshops/discussions on these issues to the class and individually. Thirdly, the program must focus on the necessary skills with which the students can "arm themselves" to continue their education beyond the Triangle program (April 24, 1998).

At that time, and when I volunteered in 1997-1998, the ratio of males to females was approximately 3 to 1. Lownsbrough, who did a report about the Triangle Program, suggested that this was a possible "indication of the male psyche's greater sensitivity and vulnerability to the slings and arrows of homophobia and may be a reflection of how the female psyche has already been toughened by dismissive misogyny" (Lownsbrough, 1996, p. 88). It also suggests that "feminine characteristics" among boys are less accepted than masculinity among girls. However, the worth of a girl is often based on being in heterosexual relationships: her ability to be with a man and have a child.

Lownsbrough also spoke about the diversity of student personalities. He said, "It is
easy to understand why . . . Shawn, with his in-your-face insouciance, might experience problems in the conventional school system. Not so Jagdish and Kevin, who were not harassed in the sense of threats and slurs. They did, however, resent the absence of any discussion about lesbian and gay issues" (Lownsbrough, 1996, p. 89). I too witnessed the same personality types - some were bold, while others were subdued. Some seemed comfortable with their sexuality while others were fighting internalized homophobia. One student said he hated the gay boys in class because "they are so effeminate and flamboyant."

Although many of the young men and women did fit stereotypes such as being effeminate or butch, this is not surprising, as it is these characteristics which often lead to the harassment that pushes these students to drop out of school. However, the differences among the students were quite obvious. Clothing was a visible indication of these differences. On February 13, 1998, while tutoring, this is what I observed: one girl with short hair was wearing a plaid shirt, another girl with long hair was wearing a white blouse, while another, a black sweater; one boy was wearing a dog collar and black jacket, another wore a surfer shirt and docker pants, and another was dressed in a checkered conservative dress shirt.

Moreover, beyond fashion and personalities, there were differences in ages (the student ages ranged from 14 to 21), socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, interests, learning abilities and other factors. Tim McCaskell said that the uniqueness of individual students was one of the reasons he was impressed with the Triangle Program:

It has had a remarkable [three-year] history. A one-room school house where you have one teacher trying to teach kids who have a whole series of problems, not just problems around sexual identity. Substance abuse, homelessness, you name it, they have been through it. A whole bunch of different levels
with a whole bunch of particular social and personal problems. They have been able to maintain a full slate [of students]. There is actually a waiting list to get into the program. They have developed a very interesting curriculum for the kids and they have graduated kids with their high school diplomas and they have integrated kids back into the school system. . . . So, in terms of other similar programs for kids at high risk, they seem to be doing remarkably well.

As McCaskell mentioned, some of the students had been or were currently homeless when they entered the Triangle Program. One student I interviewed said he had not had a permanent address until he came to the Triangle Program. Other students were more economically stable, but since the majority were not living at home nor receiving financial support from their family, they were in the same low socio-economic bracket. Consequently, economic issues have been an integral part of the Triangle Program, and the Triangle team has provided economic as well as emotional stability for many students.

Helping students economically is a central responsibility for the Triangle team. Many lesbigay youth are kicked out of their homes, live on the streets, prostitute themselves, and abuse drugs. Many of the Triangle students have endured some or even all of these situations, and it is a challenge for the Triangle team to help each of these students find stability again. Unfortunately, Canada's homophobic society provides another resistance to helping these students effectively. The Triangle team has to devote further time and energy to combatting homophobic opposition in the media, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the Ontario government. Moreover, many administrators and politicians in the TDSB and Ministry of Education who make decisions about resources for the Triangle Program are homophobic, and thus dismiss the importance of the program. Such attitudes, particularly in the new amalgamated TDSB, threaten the continued existence of the program.
McCaskell concluded that "in terms of other similar programs for kids at high risk, they [Triangle team] seem to be doing remarkably well." The Triangle team has done a remarkable job in teaching a diverse and needy group of students. While the Triangle team continues to face criticisms as regards dealing effectively with issues of race, gender, bisexuality and socio-economic status, the situation within which the Triangle Program has been operating needs to be considered. The Triangle team has not only created a program which can accommodate all students, with all their differences and problems, but has done it by overcoming many barriers. Continued growth and expansion will require more financial support and support by politicians, administrators and educators. Moreover, some issues that the Triangle Program needs to address, also need to be addressed by other alternative programs and schools in Toronto. For example, the TDSB and many of its schools have historically been criticized for not properly addressing issues of race and gender. Therefore, the Triangle Program is only one of many programs and schools that needs improvement, and around some issues, there need to be changes in policies and attitudes at the TDSB before this evolution can occur in the Triangle Program.

_Opposition to the Triangle Program:_

There has been opposition to lesbigay issues appearing in the curricula of Toronto high schools. Alex Chumak, a Toronto Board of Education trustee at the time, expressed his views on curriculum changes that addressed lesbigay issues by saying, "If all these courses are taught by gay and lesbian activists, then I would be concerned. I would want to see some balance" (Lenskyj, 1994, p. 282). Lenskyj points out that Chumak’s need for "balance" points to another concern of many educators. Some educators feel that gay and lesbian sexualities should not be portrayed in a highly positive manner or the gay “life” will be too appealing to impressionable teenagers (Lenskyj, 1994, p. 283). Citizens United for
Responsible Education (CURE) has campaigned against many of the initiatives to include lesbigay issues in Education in Toronto.

There was also controversy around the Triangle Program itself. Many people were critical of having a separate "school" which they viewed as advocating segregation. Much of this criticism was diffused by Triangle Program supporters who emphasized that it was a special program similar in nature to those for the gifted or learning disabled. However, some homophobic critiques arose. One article in the Alberta Report Magazine about the Triangle Program was titled "Reading, Riting and Rimming" (Campey, McCaskell, Miller and Russell, 1994, p. 90).

One critical analysis of the Triangle Program which concerned Triangle supporters was by Kathryn Snider (1996). Snider had three main critiques: the program did not address how issues of sexual orientation interact with issues of race and gender; students were encouraged to come out without consideration to how it would affect students of colour and female students; and segregating lesbigay youth meant the administrators at the Toronto District School Board would not be motivated to deal with homophobia in the traditional system. Tim McCaskell and Margaret Schneider responded to Snider’s article in two separate letters to the editors of the Harvard Educational Review. They both criticized Snider for not interviewing any Triangle team members. McCaskell said that the Triangle Program was likely more understanding of race and gender issues than most mainstream schools (1998, p. 96). Schneider argued against Snider’s "coming out" critique, saying it was irrelevant since the students are "out" before they come to the Triangle Program. With respect to the question of segregation, Schneider said that the Triangle Program is not a substitute for non-discriminatory education, but for now, it is the only alternative for some students (1998, p. 102). This opinion about segregation and "coming
"coming out" was shared by all the Triangle team members I interviewed.

Each Triangle team member also said that addressing race and gender issues along with sexual orientation was imperative. In fact, in 1999, McCaskell was working for the Equity Studies Centre trying to ensure that schools in the TDSB were places of equity for people of all races, sexes, sexual orientations, socio-economic statuses and for groups that are treated inequitably. However, though the Triangle team is committed to equity, none of the interviewees mentioned guidelines established to ensure that race and gender issues were addressed alongside sexual orientation issues. Moreover, neither Schneider nor McCaskell provided examples of how racism and sexism were being addressed in the program. Snider explained that if racism and sexism were addressed in the practices of the Triangle Program, then the Triangle team could counter concerns with evidence of their actions, which would both quash the concerns and extol the merits of the program. The Triangle team is justifiably concerned that negative publicity could be used by right-wing critics to end the program. However, now that the questions of racism, sexism, "coming out" and segregation have been publically raised, the Triangle team needs to respond to an extent they deem appropriate.

The proposed Equity Policy:

Opposition has also come in the form of policies such as the Equity Policy for the Toronto District School Board. As of 1998, the six Boards of Education in the Greater Toronto Area (Scarborough, East York, City of York, North York, Etobicoke and Metro Toronto) have amalgamated into the Toronto District School Board. As a result, a new equity policy has been drafted. This policy currently (May, 1999) only addresses racism and ethnocultural equity. Consequently, the curriculum policy and the Human Sexuality Program are in jeopardy, as there will be no mandate supporting them. In this new
proposed policy, the only groups mentioned as protected are: Aboriginal, racial, ethnocultural and faith communities (Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity Draft Policy, 1998). This draft policy covers only the minimum of what the Ministry of Education has mandated.

A petition responding to this draft policy was distributed to many students at OISE/UofT and sent to the Toronto District School Board. The students raised three main concerns and supported the Anti-racism and Equity for All Draft Policy developed by the Anti-racist Multicultural Educators Network of Ontario (AMENO). The first concern is that the TDSB Draft Policy is based on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Ontario Human Rights Code, yet it does not identify all of the other disadvantaged groups protected by such codes, including women, people with disabilities, the economically disadvantaged, and gay and lesbian people. Secondly, the TDSB Draft Policy focuses exclusively on harassment suffered by Aboriginal, racial, ethnocultural and faith communities and does not include other inequities such as sexism, homophobia, class bias, etc. Finally, the TDSB Draft Policy is based on the assumption that racist and ethnocultural discrimination is a distinct and separate social problem and the AMENO Policy recognizes that all forms of discrimination are connected and all need to be addressed by school policy.

Tim McCaskell, involved in the development of the policy, mentioned that there was a committee established by the Policy Task Force to address the exclusion of the aforementioned groups. However, at the time of my interview, Tim stated that approximately one month after the Equity Policy was first discussed, the committee had not met, had no membership, no mandate and no time lines. He also said that, if and when the committee does meet, they will have to "reinvent the wheel for everyone [all the people
excluded] and it could be years and years and years before we have any comparable policy to the one that has existed in the Toronto Board since the early 90's" (Nov. 23, 1998). Presently, the TDSB Draft Policy removes any guarantee of protection for students and staff who address lesbigay issues as well as class, gender issues etc..

People connected to the Task Force have raised four main arguments for the exclusion of sexual orientation from the policy. First, they argue that there is a consensus about race and ethnocultural minorities and that the Task Force will deal with the more controversial issues later. Secondly, dealing with the issues of homophobia goes against the religious convictions of many parents, and therefore it should not be included. Thirdly, as a result of these tough economic times in education, there are going to be fewer resources available. Hence, if the Equity Policy includes all groups then there will not be enough resources for those that are really suffering - racial and ethnocultural minorities. Finally, some contend that gay people and women in the women's movement are primarily white, have privilege and are trying to “gobble up more resources and ride on other people's coattails, so who the hell cares about them” (McCaskell, 1998)

McCaskell then gave some counter-arguments: the Toronto District School Board has a “legal obligation to provide services to everybody and it cannot discriminate in the provision of these services. So they have to find the funds necessary.” Moreover, he stated that to have a mandate that promotes equity across this range of issues does not cost more than to have a mandate around one issue. McCaskell said, “Whether I am doing one homophobia workshop and one racism workshop, one after the other or two racism workshops does not cost anymore at all. . . . but the board has to provide enough resources for all of the groups.” McCaskell addressed the argument that parents do not agree with homosexuality by saying:
I am sure I could find somebody else that would say that Black people are inferior and they should not be in the same classroom as white people. But to say, well we have not all agreed on this, therefore we can not do anything about this, is nonsense. We have a responsibility to everybody in our schools to provide the services and protect them from discrimination and to do what is necessary to ameliorate the kind of contempt and discrimination they face from other people.

The Triangle Program as viewed by the staff:

I interviewed four members of the Triangle Program team: John Terpstra - the first full-time teacher; Vanessa Russell - the current full time teacher; Steve Solomon - social worker; and Krin Zook - street worker. There is one other part-time teacher. They provided me with information about: the students that attend the Triangle Program; the barriers that the members have faced in developing the program; recommendations; the strengths; and the areas that need improvement.

The Triangle staff noticed three main things about the students who attended the program. First, many were seen as being clearly identifiable as lesbigay. Terpstra said that many of the program's students “fit straight society's stereotypes of gay kids.” He stated that some of the boys were “more effeminate or queeny” and “perhaps frustrated and rebellious against the macho demands of being jocks and being male.” Some of the females he described as “visibly dykes, butch dykes” and those who “get into trouble in regular high school because they are perceived as being too manly.” Russell provided a similar description saying, “The kids that end up at Triangle, by and large, are the ones who cannot pass [as heterosexual]. The queeny boys and the butchy girls.”

Secondly, most have had little support from educators, family and peers with regard to their sexual orientation. Solomon said that the students who remain in mainstream schools often have much more extensive informal support networks - more friends to turn
to for support and encouragement (Nov. 10, 1998). Moreover, a number of the students' families were also unsupportive, further limiting their support networks. At the time of my interview with Russell (November 30, 1998), seventeen of the nineteen students at the Triangle Program were not living at home and some of them were staying at shelters or with friends. Russell said, "The amount of movement is unbelievable - people who in one year move five, six, seven times, sometimes once a month, sometimes every couple of weeks." Terpstra mentioned that some students had been kicked out of their homes and sometimes ended up "working the streets to make enough money." However, this does not describe all the students. Terpstra stated that at one time, during the school year of 1997-98, the parents of four students had come with their children to investigate the program.

Finally, many endured exceptionally difficult coming out periods and severe homophobic harassment. Terpstra said that, because many of the teens are identified as being "different", they are often forced out of the closet, sometimes before they are aware of their sexual orientation. They then become "targets of some terrible homophobia." Solomon stated that "more of the students in the mainstream system have had relatively stress-free coming-outs . . . . The students at Triangle, the students I have met which are a particular population, have had some pretty catastrophic coming-outs - had the crap kicked out of them at home, kicked out of their homes." Zook said that the Triangle students usually fit into one of two categories. Some students have been out of school for a while and want to start school again but do not want to go back to a mainstream high school - "that horrible setting." Other students have been kicked out of their house and "could not attend the other [mainstream] schools because they were busy surviving" (April 28, 1998).

However, the Triangle team has faced many barriers while attempting to help these
youth. One of the most difficult obstacles that the team has had to overcome is educating students who are far from homogeneous. At the time of my study, the students' ages ranged from 14 to 21. The students' grade levels ranged from 9 to 12 and their academic levels ranged from basic to advanced. Some students had learning disabilities and "unbelievable gaps in their education". Others were ESL students for whom the English language was a major barrier. Finally, some students had "unbelievable psychological problems" and most students were dealing with socio-economic problems (John Terpstra). Consequently, the teachers needed to create different material and assignments for each student. Sometimes all the students would be given the same task but different outcomes would be expected. Russell spoke about the difficulty of educating within such a multi-level environment:

Trying to accommodate all their needs is very, very difficult. So you will get some students really struggling with concepts like what is a stereotype, that might appear really simple to someone who is at the OAC level. And you can tell they are getting really frustrated and start rolling their eyes and the person trying to figure it out and asking questions feels very judged.

I asked Russell about how she evaluated the students' assignments in the afternoon courses. She responded:

One of the biggest equity issues for me over the last few years is evaluation. It is humongous and I am still learning. So how do you grade different? How do you evaluate different grade levels. We have different expectations for different grade levels and expectations and sometimes it is just damn difficult.

In addition to dealing with diversity in one class in one year, Terpstra, and then Russell, have had to change parts of the independent study curriculum and "lesbigay" curriculum each year to fit the students that enrolled. They also have to ensure that for two consecutive years there is little overlap in what is taught in the lesbigay courses, as that is
the longest that the students can stay in the program.

A second barrier is the limited number of resources available to the Triangle Program, and OASIS, in general. Terpstra explained that:

Alternative programs cannot function as successfully and in a traditionally qualitative way as a secondary school where you have an administrative staff. You have got huge libraries. You have lots of equipment, lots of special education assistance. You've got ESL assistance; you've got a gym. You've got a play area. We don't have any of that.

Zook's main recommendation was to have more teaching staff so they could offer a broader range of credits. Russell said there needs to be at least two full-time teachers and more room because "the students' needs are enormous and . . . we need more people to be able to meet those needs [and] . . . we need more resources, money, [and a] bigger space."

However, of all these barriers, the one which caused the most frustration among the Triangle educators was the "educational climate" in which they had to work. This climate was one of tension and stress. The principal factors creating this climate are the changes to Ontario's Education funding scheme, the Ministry of Education's policies and mandates, and the amalgamation of the six school boards.

Ontario's Education funding scheme has created difficulties for all Ontario schools including the Triangle Program. Taking into account the $211 million funding increase for pupil accommodation announced by Premier Harris in November, 1998, the Government of Ontario's estimates show a reduction in on-going education funding of $672 million in the Bill 160 funding formula (Mackenzie, 1999, p. 99). The Toronto Public Board's funding shortfall is 21 % (Mackenzie, p. 119). According to Mackenzie, this funding scheme reduces available funding for Special Education and fails to adequately recognize additional costs associated with the education of disadvantaged children (p. 121-122). Such a
scheme will cut funding to the Triangle Program, which has limited resources already. Moreover, it is a program devoted to helping students who are disadvantaged, some of whom need Special Education.

In practice, this funding scheme is worse for the Triangle Program because the students attending do not have money to supplement lost funds. Many Toronto school administrators are turning to parents to contribute financially through fundraisers, buying supplies and providing their children with money for trips, events, shows and more. In 1997 and 1998, most Triangle students did not have parents who would or could support the program financially. Moreover, since many of the Triangle students are living on their own, the Triangle team must divert some of their funding and resources toward meeting the basic needs of their students such as food, shelter and counselling. Therefore, even less resources can go toward meeting their students' higher needs such as extra-curricular activities and the enhancement of the academic program.

The Ministry of Education's mandates and policies have also created problems for the Triangle Program. Terpstra stated that according to the people concerned with equity at the Ministry level, "The creation of the Triangle Program was seen solely as something to irritate the conservative, right-wing elements and if they had had the power, they would have eliminated it from the beginning, but because it came from the curriculum of OASIS, they were not able to touch it." However, Terpstra stated that Bill 160 will make it easier for the Ministry to eliminate them. He believed that if were it not for the administration support, the gay trustee (John Campey) and the Gay and Lesbian Teacher Association, the Triangle Program would have never come to life. Krin described it this way:

The really big question is what are they going to do with us. Are they going to suddenly discover us and the Tory government remember that we are here and say we want that
program gone. Or are they going to say, 'Well let’s let it exist and be quiet about it,’ and let us go on our merry way. Who knows. And definitely our survival will depend on OASIS’s survival because we are so tied up in them. . . so if they decide to get rid of all alternative programs, we could be in trouble.

Until recently (1998), OASIS was one of 138 schools listed for closure. It no longer, is but the fear that they could still be closed is real.

Moreover, Helen Lenskyj, a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (UofT), pointed out that Bill 160 prohibits teachers from criticising governmental educational initiatives, and as such, this “makes our [lesbigay] political activism even more difficult to sustain” (1998, p. 7). However, she does note that the Federation of Women Teachers Association of Ontario (FWTAO) had an anti-homophobia focus group in May, 1998. Some recommendations that came from that meeting were: organizing workshops on heterosexism/ homophobia for teachers, administrators and school councils; lobbying the Ontario College of Teachers to include sexual orientation in its policies; increasing attention to these issues in federation newsletters; and establishing support groups for members. These recommendations were taken to the joint executives of FWTAO and Ontario Public School Teachers Federation (OPSTF) with respect to future Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario’s (ETFO) deliberations (Lenskyj, 1998, p. 13).

The amalgamation of the six boards of education has also had a negative impact on the Triangle Program. McCaskell said that the five other boards amalgamating with Metropolitan Toronto did not have the same history of creating policies and programs to protect lesbigay students and celebrate diversity in sexual orientation. Therefore, the new Toronto District School Board (TDSB) will be less likely to develop or protect the Triangle Program. The TDSB’s first proposal for an equity policy (January 1999) indicates the difficulties that advocates for gay-positive education will have. At the time the policy was
proposed, McCaskell said it would have a negative impact on mainstream schools, and could have an even more serious impact on the Triangle Program - its demise. McCaskell explained:

So the programs which the [old] Toronto Board established such as the Human Sexuality Program, or the Triangle Program . . . are still operating at this point, but if this [equity] policy becomes the one finally adopted by the board, there will be no mandate for any of that kind of work. And so . . . it would only be reasonable that those would be the kind of programs that would be chopped.

In conclusion, Solomon provides an excellent summary of how the amalgamation of the six school boards, the Ministry of Education's mandates and policies, and Ontario's Education funding scheme have impacted the Triangle Program's team:

Just the current state of education in the province of Ontario could be interpreted as a barrier . . . . What would the Triangle Program be like if everything was secure? We talk about that at staff meetings and ask, "I wonder what it would be like," because you are constantly on watch. You are always sort of looking over your shoulder in terms of perception . . . . So I guess the energy that goes into being vigilant about the program could be perceived as taking away energy that could be directed somewhere else. You are always on your toes. Always trying to think on your feet and respond to crises, both real and imagined.

Strengths of the Triangle Program:

The three main strengths of the Triangle Program are the fact that it provides safety, there is support from staff, students and community, and its lesbigay curriculum. Safety is the most important of these three. Russell said, "I think the strength of the program is obviously that they [the students] feel safe to be who they are here, and they all say it over and over again." The teachers unanimously felt that the main strength of the program was that it provided a safe environment in which lesbigay youth can learn.

Triangle Program is a safe place because it is not like most mainstream schools -
there is no homophobic harassment. Zook affirmed that in public schools, homophobia is rampant. She said, "The messages get out there very quickly and early in elementary school that to be a fag or queer is a terrible thing." Whereas the Triangle Program "is a gay-positive environment, a gay environment. If it was a regular school building, you would still have to hassle with the problems of a bigger school, the homophobia." She did say that there has been improvement, but that it depended on the school administration and teachers at the individual schools. However, the amount of anti-homophobia work being done was not significant. Zook said:

If there is someone in the school pushing for it [anti-homophobia work], be it a student or staff member, they may do some equity work around the issue. Individual teachers will bring in Steve [Solomon] or Tim [McCaskell] to do work: a one-shot thing in the classroom, which helps, but it is a drop in an ocean.

Terpstra said, "There is lip service to inclusive curriculum [inclusion of lesbigay issues], but it is only lip service. There hasn't been enough done. It hasn't been clear enough to teachers and students that it is against gay and lesbian human rights to not support them [lesbigay people]." Terpstra did admit that change was occurring and that in Metro Toronto, there were a lot of lesbigay-positive personnel, especially in the counselling areas. "Guidance counsellors tend to be more sympathetic because they have to deal with problems of gay and lesbian students as they struggle with orientation and homophobia." Terpstra said it is these people that "seek out TEACH or Steve Solomon's Human Sexuality Program, creating workshops and having speakers on equity days . . . so that perhaps the atmosphere in high school will become safer and safer for lesbian and gay youth." However, Terpstra also felt that not enough was being done. He said:

But by and large, what happens to most gay and lesbian youth is they have to maintain the tension between partially-closeted
existence and the other celebratory parts of their lives by going to support groups... where they can talk with other gay and lesbian youth and become aware of the private gay and lesbian culture that is out there.

Solomon hopes that, through the Human Sexuality Program, he will improve conditions for lesbigay youth in mainstream schools. He said, "we have to put responsibility on the system as a whole to provide a safe gay environment - safe, nurturing that is conducive to learning. Dealing with the issues of heterosexism and homophobia." However, Solomon said that these were long-term goals, but that right now, lesbigay youth were being harassed and dropping out of school. Solomon said, "We need to deal with these students right now and at the time [the Triangle Program was proposed], there was nothing meeting those needs with respect to a place they felt safe and the Triangle Program fills an important role in their lives in terms of stepping back in school."

Russell stated that the homophobia in mainstream schools causes lesbigay youth great hardship, but most are strong and doing fine. However, she said, "I think a lot of the students who end up at Triangle are barely surviving and they get beyond it at some point, but they come here a little bit worn down." Russell said that some of the students that come into the program are "shell-shocked" by the homophobia they have endured. Solomon said, "For those that come overwhelmed by homophobia, it [Triangle Program] is a respite." Terpstra also spoke about "shell-shocked" students and how the Triangle Program made a difference:

You can see it [influence of program] immediately in students who do not want to talk about their sexual orientation because that is not something they feel safe about, and then they go into the Triangle Program, and in a week, they feel comfortable and start talking about how much it is part of their lives and part of their identity.

Russell said something similar:
I mean how do you measure success by a kid who comes here with absolutely no personality, who is completely disassociated, completely, like catatonic. Frightened all the time. Then 3 to 6 months later they are a mischievous, funny, articulate person who cares about the community here. That is incredible and I think that is because of Triangle.

The difference in time frames, of a week and 6 months, in Terpstra's and Russell's comments is evidence that the support provided within the Triangle Program gets both immediate and gradual results. Immediately, a student feels comfortable, perhaps for the first time, to talk about his/her sexuality in class, and this makes the student relieved and happy. Gradually, this safe environment allows the student to feel comfortable dealing with other issues associated with homophobia which allows the students to be more confident in their identities.

Being in a safe environment also helps Triangle students develop healthy self-images. Terpstra said:

If we assess or evaluate the number of students that have come to us who have been able to be in a safe environment for a month, a year, whatever, it has been a very positive experience [for the students]. It has given them a sense of themselves that they would never have believed possible because many of them felt badgered, many of them felt alienated, many of them felt wounded, many of them suffer from severe inner-homophobia.

Solomon believes that attending school at the Triangle Program allows the students to spend time working through their personal problems. Solomon said:

It is a chance [for lesbigay teens] to be less split from within, emotionally, socially. Triangle gives them a chance to present all their pieces together. They are still putting those pieces together, mind you, in whatever combinations work for them but there is no facade when it comes particularly to sexual orientation. There is no need to pretend. There is no need to try and pass.

The second strength mentioned, support from the staff, students and community, is
an integral part of safety. Zook said that the safe environment of the Triangle Program was the result of the support provided by the staff and students. “The students that come here also need an environment where they have lots of people supporting them either through phone calls, counselling, advocacy and that the teachers and support workers know as much as possible about what is going on.” Russell said that part of this support is role-modelling done by the staff. She said:

Another strength is the fact that for them [the students] to see teachers who are out and all the things we do around resource people who are out there and who have something to share and push them to think a little bit further. The whole role-modelling thing is very important.

Zook said this support extended beyond the staff and students to the lesbigay community itself. “We have very good support in the gay and lesbian community and others that are supportive in the gay and lesbian community. Not just support emotionally, but concrete financial support in donations coming through, and tutoring.” Zook said that this helped the Triangle students gain a “sense of belonging to the community, the gay and lesbian community.” Solomon actually saw the students and staff developing into their own community which is even more of a strength, when most have felt alienated for such a long time. He said:

One of the overriding issues is that they [lesbigay students] face isolation. I am the only one out there. I am the only one struggling with it and it [the program] brings them together under the purpose of education. They come together and hear other stories, validate, affirm and legitimate their feelings that they have gone through. So when one student tells a story about life at school, they can look around the classroom and see the other students nodding in agreement. So they have their own community of sorts that is evolving.

The lesbigay curriculum is the last major strength of the Triangle Program. Solomon said the students learned to actively challenge homophobia. The Triangle staff provide “the
support to fight back about certain issues things that they do not like, like obvious homophobia and harassment.” The way the staff provides some of the support is through the lesbi-gay curriculum. In 1998, Russell taught a three-week unit on homophobia and they learned about systemic homophobia. Later, there was a three-week unit on the practice of homophobia, where the students developed a workshop that they later presented in a few elementary schools. Russell said, “It is a big pile of work and they [Triangle students] are excited about it, but I think if they do pull it off, it will completely help in the purpose of pushing them on beyond survival and being able to create something.” Russell said that in the homophobia practice unit, they learn how to respond to stereotyping and discrimination. She asks the students to think about things like ‘What does it mean when people call them “perverts”?’, and ‘What is the assumption?’ “So the skills we develop are breaking something down and being able to create an argument around it.”

All of the strengths of the Triangle Program are based on safety. The Triangle staff provide immediate safety by providing a relatively homophobia-free environment. Then, through support and a lesbi-gay-positive curriculum, the staff attempt to ensure that the students’ collective self-esteem improves. This way, the students can feel safer outside of the Triangle Program because they have an inner strength that can ward off the negativity they encounter living in a homophobic society.

Areas in need of improvement:

Two of the barriers that the Triangle team has tried to overcome were also recognized by the team as areas that needed improvement: a lack of resources and a curriculum which, at times, excludes certain groups of youth. The other area which the team acknowledged needed to be improved was the transition of students into other schools.
The program staff acknowledged that as a result of limited resources, the program staff were restricted in the academic and social assistance they could provide to the students. Russell explained, "I think of students that are advanced [and think] yes, we are certainly limited by the courses we offer. I mean we don't offer science past the grade 10 level . . . [and] we don't offer grade 12 or OAC math." Zook suggested, "It would be better if we had at least a few more teachers to be able to provide more credits in a bigger area. . . And also, if we could have more space for students, we would probably have more [students]." Zook also spoke about providing responses to social needs. She said,

There are times we cannot provide things to students that I consider real basic necessities, such as I would really like to see a housing program attached to it [the Triangle Program]. We could provide stable housing for a lot of them because, like I said, only three of twenty-two are living at home so . . . it seems they are constantly dealing with housing.

With respect to the inclusion of the issues of certain groups - visible minorities, lesbians, and bisexuals - in the lesbigay curriculum, Solomon acknowledged that the Triangle Program needed to develop this further. He suggested, "I think that it has to be an ongoing role, not a process that can be reached. I don't think there will come a time when we will say: 'I think that we have reached parity.' . . . So we will not stop at some point but it will always be there." When I questioned Solomon about the needs of visible minorities and the multiple identities they bring with them, he explained, "That has to be reflected in the resources available and the curriculum that is developed. It is all part and parcel of anti-homophobia work that when you think of gay, you think of white, male or woman, which feeds into the stereotype."

The last area which needed to be strengthened was helping Triangle students make an easy transition into other schools. Views about homosexuality, lesbianism and
bisexuality have changed very slowly in the last few decades and unfortunately, for the most part, our society is still heterosexist and homophobic. Terpstra explained:

When we take an 'at risk' student for a year to a year and a half and provide them with a safe space and a lesbigay curriculum, it does not mean that homophobia has gone away. It doesn't mean they [the students] have changed so that they can survive in a straight world without going back to the closet and surviving with it. Many of the kids have such safety that they do not want to go back to the closet; they don't want to hide again. They want to be open about it. Well, to be open about it and to go back to a suburban school is to ask for trouble... So we have had a couple of students come back to us, begging to come back to the program.

Terpstra mentioned that the Triangle team has a number of questions to answer about the transition mandate. Terpstra did not have any specific solutions but said that presently, he could only do his best to prepare his students for the transition. He was opposed to establishing a high school for lesbigay students and, at the same time, was saddened by having to insist that fearful students move on from the Triangle Program. His compromise is providing strategies to deal with the transition, and for those not wanting to return to mainstream schools, he recommends an alternative school in which homophobia is less prevalent.

Recommendations:

Solomon said:

If I was speaking to the powers that be in the school board [I would push them] ... to continue the efforts to address the homophobia system-wide ... I think to redouble the efforts to address homophobia system-wide will make it easier for our Triangle students to move back into the mainstream setting where they have every right to be.

In fact, Solomon recommended that the services provided by the Triangle Program should be made available across the whole system. Russell had a similar request. She asked for
the mainstream schools to address homophobia in addition to racism, sexism and class bias. She stated that in this way, lesbigay students would be able to choose to go to the Triangle Program because the mainstream schools would be making schools safe for lesbigay teens; instead, students come to the Triangle Program as matter of survival. Zook reiterated Russell’s request saying, “the public schools [need to] clean up the homophobia and offer a lot of anti-homophobia work and really put out the message that it is really not okay on a consistent basis to be racist, sexist and homophobic.” Unfortunately, Russell does not see this happening in the near future:

The scary thing is with all the cutbacks to education and . . . all the equity programs that are being pushed off the table within the Toronto District School Board, there is going to be less and less of that [work on anti-homophobia] happening in mainstream schools and that scares me. There will be more wounded kids out there with less and less of a choice of where to go and it seems that people try to get information about the Triangle Program, and they are not getting it from their schools even though the flyers have been sent out.

However, Solomon and Russell disagreed about having a complete alternative school that could meet all the academic needs of the students from grade nine to OAC. Solomon stated, “I would have a problem with that because the school [Triangle] should not be a dumping ground for the rest of the system.” Russell, on the other hand, said that even if all mainstream schools dealt with heterosexism she would like there to always be an alternative program for lesbigay teenagers. She provided this explanation, “Even though most of the time, when I walk around in the world, it feels okay, sometimes you want to be around people who are the same as you in terms of social identity.”

However, mainstream schools are not likely to change in the near future. While I was researching the Triangle Program from 1997 to 1999, there were three major changes that affected schools in the Toronto District School Board: the amalgamation of six school
boards into one; the change in the TDSB equity policy; and Bill 160. These changes have caused an upheaval in many schools, and administrators are now under pressure by the Ontario Ministry of Education to concentrate their efforts on academic programs. As a result, "non-academic" programs, such as those dealing with anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-homophobia, often receive less attention. Therefore, in many schools, anti-homophobic initiatives are not progressing or are deteriorating, and the problems of lesbigay students are not being addressed. This sort of situation puts pressure on the resources of the Triangle Team because there could be more students enrolling (enrolment increased from 1997 to 1998) and those coming may have more problems. As a result, the Triangle team would have to focus their energy on the immediate needs of housing, food and building self-esteem. This will take away energy from dealing with academics and expanding curricula to further address issues of homophobia, racism, and sexism.

The current tense and insecure environment also makes actually running the Triangle Program difficult. There is limited opportunity for collegiality between the Triangle team and mainstream educators. Many mainstream educators know very little about the Triangle Program or lesbigay youth, and thus are not interested in providing the Triangle team with any support. Consequently, the ties between mainstream schools and the Triangle team are often weak or non-existent.

Conclusion

Special school programs such as the Triangle Program, the Harvey Milk School and PROJECT 10 are helping lesbigay youth who have suffered the impact of homophobia. There are only a few programs like these in Canada and the United States, not because there is not a need, but because homophobia has created strong opposition. The primary objective of these programs is to provide a safe learning environment and to build the
students' self-esteem. While trying to do this, the Triangle team has had to deal with numerous issues, such as meeting the needs of youth living in poverty, lesbians and bisexuals and lesbigay youth of colour. The initial proposals and policies indicate that the Triangle team had considered these issues but perhaps had not realized how significant they would prove. However, considering the barriers that they have faced, it is understandable why some issues have yet to be fully addressed. Many of the issues which consume much of their energy are those connected to helping the youth regain their self-confidence after enduring homophobic violence.


Chapter 8

Students' School Experiences Before Entering the Triangle Program

I asked Dominique, a gay teen, what he would like to say to the educators in the mainstream schools with respect to lesbigay issues. He responded, "Oh, man! They are shot to hell. They are going down in smoke. There is no helping them. I wouldn't even bother.

(Oct. 1, 1998)

Reynold: I always had the fear when I was young of going to high school. In the back of my mind I always thought I would kill myself before going to high school because I didn't want to deal with the whole [homophobic harassment] thing.

(Sept. 30, 1998)

In Chapter Five, I discussed the experiences of Canadian and American lesbigay students to show why programs to help these students are necessary. In this section, I will discuss the experiences of the Triangle students specifically to show why the Program was necessary for them. The mainstream school experiences of many of those interviewed were negative and depressing, and it was clear from the Triangle team that the situation was not improving. Therefore, the Triangle Program was their only educational alternative because their experiences had made them distrust school, and because advocates for these youth did not expect the situation in their schools to change.

Greg Pow, TDSB high school teacher, said, "I think it [sexual orientation] is the biggest area of discrimination. We have made a lot of headway in anti-racism but not in anti-homophobia, and I see my students, I hear them talking and I hear a lot of homophobic talk." The students interviewed gave descriptions of their school experiences which provide a clear understanding of why the safety of the Triangle Program was appealing. The situations these students encountered were almost entirely negative. The question I used to elicit information about their experiences was, "What were your experiences in the high
school(s) you attended before coming to the Triangle Program?” They all spoke about what it was like being lesbigay in high school. They could have included anything they desired in their answer – favourite class, favourite teachers, school dances, school parties, extracurricular activities – and yet none made mention of any positive school experience. Part of the reason for this is they knew that my research centred on the Triangle Program, which they were attending because of their sexuality. However, I believe the main reasons are that their sexuality is trans-situational, and their high school experiences were overwhelmingly tragic. Trans-situational in this context means our heterosexist society made their sexuality relevant to them in every situation of which they were part. I have categorized the experiences of the students into four themes: physical and verbal violence; response of educators to lesbigay issues; alienation; and escaping the pain. I have also included a section on how the proposed TDSB equity policy would affect the lesbigay students attending the Metropolitan Toronto Secondary Schools.

**Physical and verbal violence**

I define violence as any action taken against a lesbigay person which inflicts immediate pain and suffering. Some of the students interviewed endured physical violence while others had not. Three had been in physical fights because of their sexual orientation. Dominique stated that the reason he only went to school for only two weeks before chronically skipping school and then dropping out was because of the abuse he endured in middle school. Dominique stated:

> It was the middle school that I went to that really made me not want to go to school. I was teased there, laughed at and beaten up. All the time, I got stuff written on my locker you know. I would be cornered and my money and everything would be taken. So that really messed me up.

Sanafa, a lesbian teen, was also infrequently physically attacked in public school,
though it stopped when she entered high school because then she was bigger. She stated, "I used to get into fistsfights. I used to get called Boy George." Sanafa also remembered having eggs and bricks thrown at her house. Finally, Star, a lesbian teen, said that the reason she left her final school was because another student accused her of being in the wrong washroom. Star said that the way she dresses causes her sometimes to be mistaken for a boy. In this situation, Star told the other woman that she was "not illiterate" and that she knew the difference. At that point, the woman became very rude, and it escalated into a fight. Star said she was scared to go back to the school and possibly be charged and kicked out of school, so she dropped off her textbooks and dropped out of school.

Of the other students, three also expressed concerns of the possibility of violence. Victor, a gay teen, said that a gay person could not "flaunt being gay", if you did, you would have five guys beating up on you. Yolanda, a bisexual teen, also experienced the constant threat of violence. I asked Yolanda if her friends knew she was bisexual when she attended her mainstream high school. She responded, "No, that was one thing no one could ever know. I would have gotten my face beaten in."

Verbal violence was a much more common experience among the students interviewed. Six interviewees gave specific examples of being verbally harassed and four others spoke of being harassed, not specifying if it was verbal or physical. Dominique said he was teased in middle school, and that when they figured out that he might be gay, they "laid it [the harassment] on me thick." Xavier, a bisexual male, said the harassment he encountered while attending a Catholic high school created "experiences that were pretty unhealthy. Everyday I would get harassed: not beaten up, but called names."

As a result of the homophobia, some of the youth I interviewed tried to change their
behaviour in order to fit the heterosexual image, in hopes of avoiding harassment. Anthony stated, “I had to deal with a lot of bullshit like being called faggot and basically the odd other comments or remarks, but basically I got over it and I learned to hide it [his sexuality] better and dress a certain way.” This one statement depicts how many lesbigay youth resign themselves to being harassed and to disguising themselves to prevent harassment. Anthony began his statement with anger at being called a “faggot” but quickly stated that he “got over it” and then calmly told of how he changed his behaviour to look more heterosexual.

The response of educators to homophobia

The question that begs to be asked then is what are educators doing about the homophobic violence going on in their schools? Greg Pow said:

I am privy to a lot of things because most people do not even suspect that I am gay. And I used to use the Phys Ed office all the time because I exercise at school and I would hear the Phys Ed teachers talk and ooh there was some really scary [homophobic] joking.

Pow went on to say that the administrators in his school were not supportive of lesbigay issues. He cited being on the Equity Committee and trying to bring up gay and lesbian issues and having them “politely channelled into anti-racism.” Finally, Pow said there was a lot of denial in his school around lesbigay issues. “It [lesbigay people] is not here at my school; it does not exist here.”

Xavier’s suggestion to educators in mainstream schools was, “Schools are schools, they can’t ignore the fact that they know there are gays, lesbians and bisexuals at their schools. They can’t ignore it.” Unfortunately, in most cases they do. Brighton, a gay teen, provides insight into another problem: educators, themselves, are homophobic. Brighton urged schools to do the following:
Schools need to educate the students more. They try to a point, but teachers themselves discriminate, so how can they make it so the students don’t discriminate when teachers, themselves, make smart-ass comments and everything else.

Brighton further implicated teachers when I asked why other lesbigay teens he knew chose to leave school. He said:

Just students being beaten up all the time and teachers not doing anything about it. I remember one student being beaten up pretty bad where it was criminal and a lot more should have been done about it and the school brushed it off because of the topic: gays and lesbians. If it was something else, I am sure they would have done something about it and been more involved in it.

Besides suggestions, Yolanda provides a specific situation in which a teacher did not challenge homophobia. A student said that gays, lesbians and “queens” should be shot. The teacher did not denounce the comment as unacceptable but instead only mediated the discussion that ensued. In this discussion, certain students used language such as fags, and “the shits” should be shot, hung, burned. I asked Yolanda if the teacher commented about these remarks and Yolanda said, “No. She just said, ‘Wait your turn.’ . . . Some students defended lesbigay people. . . . and I sat at the back of the classroom and thought ‘Oh my God! What if they find out I am gay.’”

This teacher should have addressed and reprimanded the students who were saying the homophobic comments. It is likely that this teacher was not accepting of homosexuality. It is also possible that the teacher taught in a board that did not have a policy that protected lesbigay rights. Even the most gay-positive educators may be somewhat hesitant to address the homophobia they encounter, and certainly hesitant to provide positive information about lesbigay issues, if they teach in boards that do not have policies protecting lesbigay rights. In these schools, lesbigay teens would be even more alienated
than in Toronto schools and would not have any board policies to challenge homophobia in their school.

Isolation and alienation

Harassment by peers and educators' failure to stop this harassment resulted in the Triangle youth feeling isolated. Few educators protected them from homophobia and even fewer provided positive reinforcement. Tim McCaskell stated:

It is safe to say that almost any high school is not a very safe or welcoming place for lesbian or gay or bisexual kids who are out. There is a very high level of contemptuous comments and name-calling that is part of the air that is breathed in most of the high schools. A few exceptions -- some of the alternative schools are a bit different.

Nine of the eleven students interviewed spoke about alienation/isolation in their other high schools. Star summarizes well what happens when a student must deal with violence and homophobia alone: sexuality becomes trans-situational:

It [the threat of homophobia] is in the back of my mind. It is always there, constantly there. Is today going to be the day that I am going to get my ass kicked? Is today going to be the day that something really happens? Am I in danger here? It is always in the back of your mind, always, but you have to try and learn to live with it and put it at the back of your mind always. Not constantly looking over your shoulder all the time and not second-guessing yourself when people are talking about relationships and they ask about your relationship. Do you be honest with them or do you lie to them? You always have to ask yourself that before you say something. This can really get to you after a while.

The isolation that these students experienced can be categorized either as blatant or subtle. The "subtle" category includes situations in which the students are not comfortable being themselves in school, whereas the "blatant" instances are ones where the student speaks specifically about being alone. In fact, most of the "subtle" situations are ones in which the student is unable to express intimacy, verbally or physically. Anthony
stated, "All the guys were getting attracted to girls and started sleeping with them and I wanted to be with the guys and I just kept that a secret." I asked Star if there were subtle things that made high school less enjoyable. She stated, "I think everything else is pretty normal. I mean there is always [the situation of] if I saw an attractive girl in the hallway or something. I knew I couldn’t go up and start trying to talk to her. Odds are she was straight. It was kind of frustrating. It wasn’t just like other people. It was weird." Finally, Tarima, lesbian teen, said, "I couldn’t express myself. If you had a girlfriend, you felt uncomfortable walking down the hall holding hands, if you dared to do it at all" (Sept. 28, 1998), while Latisha, lesbian teen, spoke of having to wait a while before she decided to let on about her sexual orientation because she did not know how her peers would take it.

Some students spoke of more blatant instances of alienation. Dominique said:

I had no friends . . . . I would go to class and as soon as classes were done, I would leave. I wouldn’t stop to talk to anybody. I wouldn’t do nothing. It was just class, class, class, home. I would go home for lunch everyday on my lunch break as soon as the bell rang. I was out of the door and at the stop lights in a heartbeat.

Dominique’s middle school was an extremely unwelcoming and undesirable place to be for a lesbigay adolescent. Further evidence of the oppressiveness within Dominique’s school is provided in his account of his interactions with the only other gay male he knew at the school. Dominique said that the other male forced him out of the closet by “hounding” him. He constantly told Dominique that he knew he was gay until, after much thought, Dominique admitted he was. The tenacity with which this boy “hounded” Dominique shows how being gay at this school was a desperate and alienating situation. That is to say, the other boy was desperate to have someone legitimize his feelings, even if he had to force them to do it. Anthony told me he chose not to return home after coming to Toronto for “just the fact
that I would not be able to feel like I was the only one.” Sanafa said she did not want to attend school because “I wasn’t welcome there. There was no point in being there.”

Escaping the pain

Sanafa’s statement that she did not want to attend school because she did not feel welcome was a common feeling among those I interviewed. Pow said, “I know of two students that had to leave the school because of homophobia.” Pow said this about one of the students, “Even though no one was pinpointing him as gay, just to hear the other students talk in such homophobic ways really hurt him, so he went to a more liberal school.” Many of the interviewees spoke of dropping out of school or chronic skipping. Xavier stated, “After that [2 1/2 years], I dropped out of high school, I had had enough of it.” Only one student did not speak of skipping or dropping out of school. Eight of the students dropped out of school before entering the Triangle Program. Two students spoke of skipping school enough times that it was affecting their academic progress. I asked Brighton how he did academically in his mainstream school. He responded, “I was doing okay. My concern wasn’t really school. I wasn’t part of it. I was there just because I had to be there. I would skip and everything else. My marks weren’t very good. I had the potential but I didn’t make it a priority.”

The fact that school wasn’t a concern for Brighton because he “wasn’t part of it” indicates that he felt alienated. Many other students conveyed the same feeling, and they too responded in the same way: they avoided school. Yolanda said she had accrued approximately 14 credits in five years of mainstream schooling because of poor attendance. Sanafa said, “I was very unhappy living in [Toronto high school]. I was very unhappy going to that school, and at times, when they weren’t suspending me for anything, I was getting in trouble to get suspended just not to go.”
The students who skipped and dropped out spoke of many situations similar to those described in the literature on lesbigay teens and education. First, some spoke of skipping school because friends, both heterosexual and lesbigay, were of higher priority. When I asked Star why she dropped out of high school, she said, “The school I went to, a lot of my friends were there, and they kind of helped me kind of get distracted and I was never going to class and since I was doing that I ran into problems with my teachers so it was a big mess.” Reynold said he did not attend junior high very often because “hanging out with my friends was one of my priorities.” The reason that friends were more important than school was because friends provided support and happiness at a time when school was causing them pain. Mercier and Berger (1989) reported that 90% of the United States’ lesbigay adolescents surveyed said their friends were helpful resources when dealing with their sexual orientation, while only 30% said that their teachers were viewed as helpful (p. 90).

The literature also mentioned that homophobia pushed lesbigay teens to criminal activities and substance abuse. Pow said he knew of one student who was kicked out of his parents’ home and then became HIV positive. Another gay student came into class one day with a bandaged wrist, and when asked what happened, he said he tried to commit suicide. “He had broken a glass door with his wrist.” Reynold said that the friends he was associating with were the “wrong kind of people and I started to get in trouble with the law.” Brighton was involved in prostitution once, while Anthony’s escape was drugs. Anthony stated:

I think the drugs actually helped me change my perception and change myself mentally and physically. . . . When I moved away and lived with my mom, I got into some bad things and started taking acid and thought I could change my perception and make myself more butch and everything, and it did work for a while. I fooled myself and made myself believe that I could do that. And it actually did work because I never had anyone
touch me or anything like that. Other than that, it was more of a mental kind of thing. . . . I think it helped to hide a lot of things. That was the number one thing. I was really into a lot of really heavy drugs because it helped me hide a lot of things from myself.

Future directions for Metro Toronto high schools

Currently the TDSB is functioning according to the old equity policy, which allows educators to implement gay-positive activities. Tim McCaskell of the Equity Studies Centre and Steve Solomon of the Human Sexuality Program assist with some of these activities. They also provide guidance to educators and students about lesbi-gay rights. However, all of this could change with the amalgamation of the six boards and the creation of a new equity policy. Much of the work of 10 years to change the heterosexist culture in the Toronto school system may be drastically undermined. Four of the other five Boards (Scarborough is the exception) do not have a history of policies and guidelines advocating for gay-positive environments in schools.

Tim McCaskell spoke about the possible implications for the schools in the amalgamated board of education:

No teacher would want to read a book in class that has to do with lesbian/gay issues, because if someone complains, then they have no mandate to have done so. So they are left swinging in the wind because no one wants to do a workshop for the same reason. No school is going to include that when they are doing their equity days because God knows what might happen, because the board has not told them they have permission to do so. So what it will mean is that the work that never happened out there [outside of Metro Toronto] will continue not to happen, and I would imagine that work done here [Metro Toronto] will slowly grind to a halt.

On January 26 and 28, 1999, there were public consultations about the proposed equity policy. At that time, the committee received approximately 60 depositions. Written depositions were accepted until February 12, 1999. The Equity Policy Task Force had
originally hoped to have their recommendations become part of the new Board policy in April. However, due to the size of the response, the Task Force had to allot more time to analysing the responses. In June, a statement of principle called the "Foundation Document" which now includes all groups previously in the old equity policy was passed. Secondly, they decided to set up task groups on issues of gender, people with disabilities, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation. These groups are to meet in December and present their recommendations to the Board. McCaskell wonders why the Board did not just integrate the other groups into the equity guidelines that previously only included "aboriginal, racial, ethnocultural and faith communities." McCaskell said that the time frame set by the Board to accomplish everything was unrealistic. The task groups will not be set up until September, and therefore the groups will only have three and a half months to develop their recommendations. It took the Race Task Force one year to design their recommendations. Until the year 2000, the old Toronto Board Equity Policy will be used for all schools in the Toronto District School Board with the "Foundation Statement" having an overarching influence.

It does seem as though the new policy will eventually include sexual orientation as one of the groups to be protected from discrimination. However, the fact that it was not included in the first place is an indication that many educators and administrators in the Toronto District School Board do not support lesbigay rights. Therefore, even if sexual orientation is included, there will be a significant amount of opposition to lesbigay-positive teachings and actions. Thus, educators supportive of lesbigay issues, and lesbigay teachers and students, will not necessarily feel enough protection to make significant changes in their respective schools.
Chapter 9

The Triangle Program: Evaluation

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an analysis of some of the Triangle Program's key components: safety, resources, peers, issues of race, lesbianism and bisexuality, and the promotion of social, emotional and intellectual skills. My evaluation of these aspects will take into consideration the sociological context in which the Triangle Program was created and is now functioning. One of the most significant factors affecting the Triangle Program from 1997 to 1999 was the educational climate in Ontario, a time when many felt the Ontario government was undermining the effectiveness of schools in general. This time saw the introduction of the Equity Policy and Bill 160, and the amalgamation of the school boards.

With the amalgamation of the boards, McCaskell expects that there will be less education about the diversity of sexualities and anti-homophobia. If this prediction comes about, then students in Metropolitan Toronto high schools would probably become less tolerant of lesbigay teens. Subsequently, there could be an increase in the amount of verbal, physical and psychological violence against lesbigay youth in these schools. This could then result in an increase in the number of students who want to attend the Triangle Program. Ten of the eleven students interviewed said that safety was one of the advantages of the Triangle Program. This is particularly significant since the question they were answering was, "What are the advantages and disadvantages of the Triangle Program." I did not ask if safety was an issue in their decision to attend the Triangle Program.
Some of the students referred to safety as physical. Latisha called the environment at the Triangle Program “a successful environment” and one where the students “can learn without being scared of what would happen, like who is going to beat you up.” Xavier said, “You don’t have to worry about being harassed.” Reynold spoke about safety when he was talking about transferring from the Triangle Program to another school. He said, “As far as the school goes, for a part of the day, I am in a safe environment and the thought of going to an environment that is potentially dangerous because I am who I am, is really scary.”

Others described it in terms of verbal attacks. Dominique spoke of a comfort factor when describing the Triangle Program. He stated, “Just the fact that you know you don’t have to worry about anything when you go to school. You can do and say whatever you want and no one is going to jump down your throat.”

Others made reference to the general uneasiness experienced in other schools and how they were able to escape it at the Triangle Program. Xavier said that at the Triangle Program there is “no monster behind your back.” Anthony said, “I decided to go to the Triangle Program. I thought it was the greatest thing that I had heard of when I was coming out because it was an actual school that supported gay students that had dealt with homophobia.” Yolanda said, “I like it there [at the Triangle Program]. They are gay there and everyone that comes there is gay-positive.”

However, the most common way that the students spoke about safety was in terms of being accepted. Sanafa said that the Triangle Program was better than her mainstream school because, “I wasn’t an outsider. I didn’t have to adjust to be there. I just fit in. No one picked on me. . . . I didn’t feel like I didn’t belong anymore. I felt like I belonged somewhere.” Victor said he chose the Triangle Program because “I found out it was a good
area to study — in a gay, bisexual and lesbian school. I knew that it was the only place I could fit in.” Dominique gave the best description. He said, “Everyone is on the same wavelength [as you], so practically everyone has been through the same type of thing, so they are able to relate, and you kind of feel that after a while, you belong there. That’s where you are supposed to be. It is intimate almost.”

One result of feeling safe in school is that learning improves, because it is difficult to learn in an environment where you are concerned about your safety. Some of the students spoke of this connection between safety and learning. Anthony said he liked the Triangle Program because of “the fact that you get to learn, and if you are in the coming-out process, it makes it a lot easier having somebody help you out every step of the way.” Star said before she came to the Triangle Program, she was just “spinning [her] wheels” and “doing all kinds of destructive things with [her] education”. Star also spoke of being harassed at school, thus one major reason she was “spinning [her] wheels” was because her school was unsafe. Star stated, “Once I got there [Triangle Program], I realized I was not hurting anybody [academically] but myself, and I realized what I was doing, and that was the place where I could make the changes.” Brighton said that in the Triangle Program, “You feel comfortable. . . . You are in a friendly environment, and they [staff] understand where you are coming from, and they look at any problems you have in your personal life as well as school life, so you can concentrate on school.” Victor said that he thought the Triangle Program had survived for three years because “it has helped out students that aren’t able to take care of their education on their own inside of a regular school.”

The consequences for lesbigay students who drop out and choose not to attend an alternative program can be quite tragic. They can end up homeless, living in poverty, becoming prostitutes and/or drug addicts. Brighton told me about some of the lesbigay
teens who dropped out of school and chose not to come to the Triangle Program. He said, “They have nothing to do. They are not going anywhere because they have no education behind them, and they are just kind of floating back and forth, and what else is there to do but go and party if you are not working and you are not going to be in school.” He went on to say, “All the students [at the Triangle Program] are on a different level. They all said they wanted to be there. They may not be all into work and stuff obviously, but they do more than they would in a normal school.” What is the main difference between the “normal school” and the Triangle Program? In the Triangle Program, the students are fully accepted and feel safe.

**Resources**

The curriculum obviously helps students develop the skills to feel comfortable with their sexuality. However, there are other resources that the Triangle Program provides with the same goal in mind - making the students’ lives better. Three of the main resources that the Triangle Program offers are counselling, housing and food.

**Counselling:**

Zook (the street worker), Solomon (the social worker), social work students from Ryerson and the University of Toronto, and the Triangle teachers are the various people the students turn to for counselling. Zook talks to the students who miss class. She helps students obtain access to social services such as health care, social assistance or welfare. Lastly, she does advocacy and counselling with the students as she has a degree in counselling psychology. Zook stated that she works together with Solomon, Russell and Terpstra - “I like to think of us as a team all together. How we can best serve the students is the idea.”

Solomon provides counselling to the students. The initial part of counselling involves
regular 'check-in' meetings. Out of these meetings, other more in-depth counselling sessions may develop, but the students choose if they want them. Solomon stated, "We do not want to give the students the impression that because they are there, they must have counselling."

Much of the actual formal counselling with the Triangle students is done by the Ryerson and the University of Toronto (U of T) students. The Center for Social Work at Ryerson and the Masters of Social Work Program at U of T have some of their students doing their field practica in the Triangle Program. Solomon ensures that the social worker students are lesbigay or transgendered. In the practicum application form, there is a section that asks if there are any special aptitudes or particular requirements the employer requires. In this section, Solomon specified - "Best suited for a student that is out as a lesbian, bisexual, gay or transgendered student."

The work done by the practicum students was for the most part appreciated by the Triangle students. Sanafa said that she spoke with the social work students from Ryerson once every two weeks. She said it was her choice to talk about whatever she wanted. She said if she didn’t want to talk about anything personal, then they would ask about non-personal things like school, looking for an apartment etc. Moreover, Sanafa said that the counsellors also helped with some of the non-personal problems such as finding accommodation. Sanafa said, "It is nice to have students to talk to instead of having to talk to teachers or guidance counsellors". She said, "It was like talking to a friend, rather than a teacher." I asked if these counsellors could have done more. Sanafa said she did not think so, unless they brought in more counsellors because there were too many students needing help.

Latisha said that the counselling was good. "I liked my counsellor. [We talked
about] what I was going through at the time and relationships and stuff like that.” Like Latisha, Dominique seems to stress the informality and relaxed air that was part of receiving counselling. He said, “I would go and talk to them and they would ask me questions like, how school was, how my life was, what I was up to and I would just talk to them. It was not anything like a shoulder to cry on.” This is the feeling that Solomon wanted the students to have. He did not want them to feel they needed counselling but wanted them to feel comfortable using it. Others students felt this way as well. Anthony said, “I liked some of the counsellors there. Some were actually helpful. Some were really friendly.” Finally, I asked Reynold if the students in the program formed good relationships with the counsellors and he said that many had that year.

However, for some, the counselling was not useful. In Tarima’s case, she felt that the counselling sessions were too relaxed and did not deal with serious issues. She said, “I thought it [counselling] could have been a little more about . . . some deep things that I kind of felt like I needed. It was not as beneficial as it could have been.” For Xavier, counselling in general was not something he was interested in. He said, “It is not for me. I am my own help. Sometimes you talk, chat it up with friends. That helps me. A person I hardly know getting paid to listen to me is bull crap.”

Some students sought counselling from Solomon or Zook. However, the students I interviewed gave me the impression that these counselling sessions were more about help with general problems, such as welfare and housing, than personal problems. Brighton said that he did not take advantage of the social work students, but he did speak with Solomon and Zook when he got kicked out of his old apartment and was trying to get social assistance. Brighton said, “He [Solomon] was trying to help me do all the right things [to get assistance] like getting the right papers in order to have all the information I needed so
I could get accepted as soon as possible." Tarima said that she received most of her counselling from one of the Ryerson students. She said that Solomon was not always in (his time is also taken up by the Human Sexuality Program), and Zook helped her with welfare, but Tarima felt uncomfortable talking about anything personal with her. This is not to say that the counselling was good or bad, as it was likely an issue of a good fit between certain students and the counsellors. Another issue may be a lack of funding with which more qualified counsellors who are available on a regular basis could be provided.

**Food:**

Various volunteers, food establishments and lesbigay organizations donated their time (some people were compensated by the Triangle team for the cost of making the meal) and/or food to the Triangle Program so the students could have lunch each day. Lunch has been provided since the inception of the program. The lunch program was introduced because a majority of the Triangle students live away from their parents and have to be financially self-sufficient - most survive on social assistance and part-time jobs. Many of these students are living in poverty and having enough money for daily necessities, such as food, rent, utilities and transportation, is often a struggle. Even before the Triangle Program had begun, the Triangle team knew that there would be a need for a lunch program because they had talked with many people who worked with lesbigay school drop-outs. Many of the people consulted for the Triangle Program proposal worked with street youth, and some said that a significant proportion of their clients were lesbigay. Moreover, they realized that students who are hungry have difficulties concentrating in school.

Many people and organizations were approached by the Triangle team, while others offered to help without being solicited. Those students who spoke about the lunch program said it was helpful. Brighton said the lunch program was good: "If it wasn't for that [lunch
program] maybe they [the students] wouldn’t have time to make lunch or the money to go and buy lunch and it helps concentrate in school. It is one less worry that you have to think about.” Star stated that the lunch program was helpful “big-time”. She explained why by stating:

[For] most of the students that go there that is their biggest meal all day. When you are on welfare, it is really hard enough to support yourself for dinner, let alone three meals a day. So when you have a big lunch at the school, it frees up some money you can have better dinner meals. When I was going there, I didn’t have breakfast. I would have lunch and come home and have dinner. So I would have two meals a day. A lot of other students were having two or one meal a day.

Anthony reiterated what Star said about the importance of the lunch program. He said:

That [the lunch program] was an absolute must. It was very very important because there were a couple of other people that were in the same sort of situation [homeless and with little money] as me because a lot of the students that go to that school and also a lot of gay youth have no choice but to leave their home or are kicked out of their home.

Three other students interviewed mentioned that the lunch program was useful - Xavier, Yolanda and Tarima.

**Housing:**

Since the majority of students that attend the Triangle Program live away from home, help with housing is one of the more important services that the program offers. When Anthony first came to the Triangle Program, he was homeless, and thus appreciative of the support he received from the Triangle staff. He said that they not only gave him advice about getting housing, but more importantly, they understood his situation. He said, “Just the fact that they understood when I needed time to look for a place. . . . It was a big help because they knew I needed the days off and that actually helped me out. If it was a regular high school, I would have got in shit for taking that amount of time off.” Most of the
students found housing on their own, but they also recognized that the counsellors would help if called upon. Reynold said he found his place by himself but said “had I wanted it [housing help], Steve would have helped with finding housing.”

Finding affordable housing is difficult as many of the students support themselves almost solely on social welfare, and the help with housing given by Solomon and Zook amounts to a lot of time and energy. This may have been the reason Tarima felt Solomon and Zook were less approachable about personal problems than the student social workers. Solomon and Zook had to devote much of their time to issues of survival. Sanafa stated, “Welfare only gives you a maximum of $355 for rent. You can’t get a bachelor apartment for that much money so they [the counsellors] have to find cheaper places.” Sanafa said that in one case, it took a group of students three months to find a place and when I asked what help the counsellors provided she said, “They were checking to make sure they were looking in the right spots and finding other available options where they could look.” Yolanda told me that she was searching for housing at the time of my interview with the help of Solomon. She said, “[He] refers [me] to apartments set up with welfare and an attendance person, [a person who decides] if you fall within a category. [If] you have to live so far away and make a certain amount of money, they give you attendance money.”

Zook said that because most of the students had a limited amount of money to spend on rent, they were forced to live in poor living arrangements, because of problems with the apartment, the landlord or roommates. As a result, the students often moved more than once a year, which disrupted their studies. It is for this reason that the Triangle team attempted to attain funding to buy a house in which they could rent out rooms to OASIS students and monitor the living conditions. Unfortunately, they could not find appropriate funding.
Other resources:

The Triangle team also provided a number of other resources that were important in helping the students emotionally, socially and intellectually. At the time I volunteered, there was a large table outside of the classroom with various pamphlets about subjects such as housing, lesbigay and transgendered support groups, and safe sex. Tamira said “It [pamphlet table] has good resources; if you need anything you can come up with something.” However, Anthony said that there should be more pamphlets and other information about finding jobs. He said, “I had to find that [a job], on my own and I found that very helpful to know where those places are. . . . If one of the counsellors sat down and did that and posted that kind of stuff [about jobs] it would be useful.” Anthony’s reasoning was that “[a] lot of the kids need money because most of them are not rich and a lot of them are not living with their parents and a lot of them are trying to make it on their own.”

Information about organizations for lesbigay youth is also accessible at the Triangle Program. However, according to Reynold, many of the organizations were not advertised and students had to go to the teacher to ask for their suggestions. Reynold said, “We have always been aware that’s what Steve and Krin are for, for personal things and other things to talk to them about [such as organizations for lesbigay youth].” Two organizations that some students are involved in are Teens Educating and Challenging Homophobia (TEACH) and Xtra, one of Toronto’s lesbigay magazines. The staff and students have also played an integral part in organizing the Gay Prom which is open to all teens and has been running for a number of years now.

The Gay Prom is an excellent example of the Triangle team attempting to provide some of the amenities of mainstream schools. Others include providing them with access
to a local gym and introducing them to the gay archive and art galleries established by lesbigay artists. The Triangle team, however, was unable to provide regular extra-curricular activities such as sports, band and others because of a lack of funding and staff, as well as its physical location.

This is a problem for many alternative school programs. However, it is worse for the Triangle Program because they are separate physically from the OASIS school, whereas some alternative programs are situated within mainstream schools. Therefore, the Triangle team cannot offer the facilities to which many other alternative students have access. Most of the students I spoke to, though, were not concerned. Brighton stated, "That [extra-curricular activities] has never been an issue for me . . . most of the students aren't really interested. Their interests are on outside things like youth meetings and LGBYT and those things." This lack of interest could be a result of the alienation they experienced in school, which led them to avoid extra-curricular activities.

However, some students, like Dominique and Anthony, did miss some aspects of the extra-curricular activities. They wanted to get more involved in "regular" school activities. Anthony stated, "I would like to see it like a regular high school like have a gym and stuff. . . . And art classes and . . . I would like to see more extra-curricular activities and getting out and actually do something instead of sitting in the classroom all day." Later he stated, "It would be nice to get involved in some sports or have some sort of art, or music or band or something." However, Anthony is aware of why providing these activities is impossible. Anthony said, "I don't know if there is enough funding for it and that is probably the reason why."

An attempt to recognize the differences between the students is apparent in the posters that adorn the classroom. The posters not only address diverse interests but also
diverse backgrounds, such as women and people of colour. Posters about bisexuality are, however, absent. Around the classroom itself are a number of posters advocating Human Rights. The posters I saw in December 1997, included the following titles: Women in Education, AIDS Action Now; Canadian Women in Sports; Building a Diverse Movement for A Common Future (by Metro Network for Justice); Women in Science and Technology; Organize, Educate, Resist - Labour Council for Metro Toronto and York Region 1871-1996; Rosa Parks Poster; Tradition=Transition in African Letters (Art Exhibit); Poster for men to sign if they want to help end violence against women; Exposing the Face of Corporate Rule; Women's Rights/Human Rights; and the Rainbow Triangle. There were also three computers; lesbigay magazines such as Xtra, Fab, and Siren; lesbigay videos; and a bulletin board with the following postings: a support group for gay and bisexual guys under the age of 21; a support group for gay or bisexuals who are HIV positive and under 21; Multicultural Womyn in Concert; Toronto Human Rights Film and Video Festival; Writing Contest about the Holocaust; and getting a Health Card.

Peers

Perhaps the most useful and most accessed resource for teenagers is their peers. As a resource, peers have a tremendous impact on each other's identities. Schools are the places where peers interact and influence each other the most. At the Triangle Program, students spend more time together than the average students - the Triangle students come together in one classroom five days a week for six hours a day. Moreover, it is the first time they have felt completely accepted in a school. In fact, for many, this may have been the first time they have walked into a school and not hidden their sexual identity. Acceptance is one benefit that comes from peers, the other is the development of a healthier self-identity. Of course, peers can also have a negative impact on each other. At the Triangle
Program two problems arise from the students being with their peers for extended periods of time: issues of ex-girlfriends/boyfriends, and adolescents involving themselves in "adult" situations such as going to bars and doing drugs.

Acceptance:

Eight of the students interviewed spoke of acceptance when talking about their peers at the Triangle Program. Dominique said, "I got along with everybody. I wasn't on bad terms with anybody." This was the sentiment of most of the students I interviewed. Reynold said he could discuss things at the Triangle Program that he could not at a mainstream school. He is presumably speaking about things connected to his sexual orientation or even things that society deems unacceptable for his gender. Reynold said, "I couldn't have any kind of relationship with people at a regular school because they don't have the same things in common."

Of course, many of the students at the regular schools he attended had things in common with him, whether they were gay or not. However, he was made to feel that his sexual orientation was his whole identity and he could not or would not be allowed to relate to other students. Moreover, there were other lesbigay students attending his school but they also were trying to hide their sexual orientation. Therefore, like the majority of lesbigay youth in Canada and the United States, he felt like he was the only person that felt the way he did. Conversely, at the Triangle Program, Reynold said, "you can all go out at smoke breaks and talk about things you learn in class or on a personal level trade stories and things . . . even if you don't like somebody, you still have something in common [your sexual orientation]."

Many other students I interviewed said they liked the fact that the Triangle peers had gone through the same experiences - isolation, harassment, problems with friends and
family, secret crushes and more. I asked Xavier what it was like to be in a class where all the students are lesbigay and he answered, "It is great to know that they are bi, gay whatever... being gay, bi whatever we all know where we are coming from with our sexuality." Anthony expressed this about his classmates, "Everyone shared the same experience... Some came from far away, some from the city and some have been out for a while. Basically you have some sort of connection with them. You interact with them pretty well." Tarima expressed the same sentiment. She said, "because you have so much in common, your sexuality with other students, you have that kind of bond with each other. They know some of the stuff you have been through because some of the stories are very similar to your own." Anthony stated, "You do not have to worry about your sexuality because you are all in the same boat."

The fact that all the students are in the "same boat" allows them to learn from each other. All the students at the Triangle Program live in a heterosexist society. They have had very little support from family, friends, and community about how to deal with the homophobia they face. Most have had few opportunities to discuss, see, learn and hear in a positive way about what it means to be lesbigay. Therefore, when they come to the Triangle Program and everyone they meet has similar questions and has experienced similar things, then it is a joyous learning experience about the most important aspect of life, themselves. This commonality has created strong bonds between many of the peers. For some peers, this bond helped to fill a void in their life. This void was the absence of love and acceptance by their families. Tarima said this about her classmates, "after they get to know you, they become like your family." Although only two students used the word "family," it is clear from many of the descriptions given by other students that they were not the only ones who felt that way. Anthony said, "The first few weeks I thought the school
was heaven because it was like I did not have to worry about everyone knowing I was gay because it was no big deal. It was normal. I found acceptance.

Development of a Healthy Self-Identity:

This acceptance aids in the development of a healthier self-identity. Many of the students I interviewed had either in the past denied their sexual identity or were harassed by their peers when they revealed it. Therefore, coming into an accepting environment gave them the opportunity to explore who they were and what they wanted to become.

Brighton said:

You don't have to hide and pretend you are someone you are not. You can deal with what you have to deal with and then from there identify, who you are so you can go to school and do what you have to do at the same time. Before, everything else was pushed aside until I figured out who I was and what I was doing and then this way you can do both and at the same time. . . . In a way, it is like a big happy family.

Being among other lesbigay youth also made coming out an easier process. I asked Anthony if his peers talked to him about coming out and helped him through the process. Anthony said, "Basically, I heard that story [coming-out story] from everyone and how they went through that. Basically, that is part of things [being in the program and hearing coming-out stories]." Most of the students would not have been encouraged by their family and friends to obtain information about being lesbigay, much less befriend other lesbigay peers. Therefore, coming to the Triangle Program can be overwhelming at the beginning but rewarding in the end. It is like going from a society (school, family, etc.) devoid of any positive discussion of lesbigay issues to an environment where lesbigay culture is everywhere. Tarima describes it this way,

The first few days [at the Triangle Program] were rough because I mean I almost had never heard gays talk so freely and talk about bath houses and boyfriends and everything. I
thought, “Oh my God! This is too gay. I can’t handle this.” I was going to leave, but when I got into it, a lot of the students were really nice. They knew I was from out of town . . . so they took me under their wings.”

Anthony said he too felt that the Triangle Program was “too gay” at first but that he was able to fit in quickly.

Tarima and Anthony described their experiences as fitting in. However, it is more likely that the program and the students simply gave Tarima and Anthony the opportunity to be who they were (a lesbian, gay or bisexual person) and the freedom to allow other aspects of their identity to flourish.

**Overexposure to Peers:**

Nevertheless, regardless of how great acceptance feels overall, if you are with the same people for six hours a day, tension can build. Anthony said:

The smallness of the class can cause tension. It is the same students all day long, every day for the whole year and basically, if you place anybody in a room with ten [actually could be as high as 20] other people there will definitely be some sort of conflict. If they switched [classes] like a regular high school, then you could release some of that tension because different students make it more interesting, and if you do not like someone you do not have to be with them 24 -7 [24 hours a day - 7 days a week].

When I asked Reynold what some of the disadvantages of spending everyday with peers in a positive gay environment were, he said, “Now we get on each other’s nerves a lot more. I think it is because it is a small room . . . I don’t have a problem myself, but other people get driven out of the program because they can’t deal with the people here.” Many of the students also socialize with the same people outside of class. Brighton said, “For a while, I was staying with a couple of students . . . and we were going to school together, were living together and it was like everyday, 24-7 we were seeing each other.” Brighton
did say however, “they were helping me out and it all worked out for the best.”

Two particular problems that can arise from this “overexposure” are issues of ex-boyfriends/girlfriends, and youth involving themselves in “adult” situations. Many Triangle students spend most of their leisure time with their classmates. Hence, romances are inevitable. However, problems occur when these romances dissolve and the ex-lovers must face each other in the one classroom every day. Anthony also pointed out that problems can arise because the community of lesbigay youth who are out is small. Therefore, many of them know each other and perhaps will date each other. Anthony said that a possible result is even if a student meets someone outside of the Triangle Program, it is likely that one of their classmates will be an ex-boyfriend/girlfriend, again creating tension. Anthony also said that part of this problem is gossiping. This situation is common in all high schools, but at the Triangle Program, it occurs in one room. Thus, the chances of tension escalating faster and higher are greater.

A more serious problem is the adolescents’ involvement in adult-oriented situations. The night life of the lesbigay community in Toronto is still bar- and adult-oriented. There are other lesbigay establishments that are not exclusively for adults, and which youth can and do frequent, such as restaurants, coffee shops, and video stores. There are also organizations exclusively for lesbigay youth such as Supporting Our Youth, Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Program, and those programs at the 519 Community Center. However, many of the Triangle students I interviewed spoke about being involved, or wanting to be involved, in the bar night life (some were 19-years-old or older). For the Triangle and other lesbigay youth, it may be viewed as the easiest way to gain acceptance into the lesbigay community. In the Triangle Program, the ages range from 14 to 21 and the number of students is small, approximately 20. Therefore, younger students will
probably socialize with older students.

Tarima spoke about how partying interfered with her studies during the initial stages of going to the Triangle Program. She said, "My roommate and me would go to school, party until two in the morning and then go to school the next day hung over . . . . It's a gay thing. I feel the gay scene is too focussed on the bar scene and there is no alternative." Tarima said that few of the younger students were involved in the bar scene. However, she was 18 when she was going to the bars, therefore what she considers young is unclear. She said:

I know when I first came here . . . I felt, "Ok I am from a small town, I want to fit in" and they can but all it was, was drinking and partying and I was like getting so burnt out I can't do my school work. I was missing school. I was not interested in anything academically. All I wanted to do was party, party, party.

Brighton, a 16 year old, said that one of the disadvantages of his peer group was "people get a little off track at school. They make more of socializing than school, but all around you get your work done, and when it comes down to it, there is nothing really bad about it. " Later he said, "When I first came out, it was clubbing all the time and it takes over you and you can either booze a lot or you make it over it. Once you make it over it, it is just kind of there. You know on the weekend you socialize and go to the clubs. If you don't, it is no big deal." Though Brighton assured me that this excessive socializing is "no big deal" and something students just have to "make it over" (something most students involve themselves in and something they eventually have to get away from in order to focus on their studies), it must be a problem for some. While I was volunteering at the Triangle Program, I noticed that a number of students frequently missed classes. This could have been a result of excessive socializing as it was not uncommon for students to speak of
going to bars.

These thoughts led me to ask Brighton if he knew of younger people who did not “make it over.” He said, “I have seen some people who have tried the drugs and the drinking and now they are into crack cocaine, ecstasy, partying every weekend and drugs during the week.” I asked if some of the Triangle students could be included in this group. He said, no, that he was speaking of youth in general, including those not who are not lesbigay. However, he did say that “it happens in the gay community because that is what everyone does.” I asked Brighton why Triangle students were not involved in heavy drugs, whereas some of the other gay youth were. He said, “Most of them [non-Triangle students] I see have dropped out of school and they have nothing to do. They are not going anywhere because they have no education behind them . . . . But the Triangle program students are there by choice . . . so they all kind of respect the fact that education is a privilege and not a right.”

Choosing to come back to school may make them different from other lesbigay drop-outs. Their determination and will is perhaps stronger. When I volunteered at the Triangle Program, few students dropped out or were sent out of the program. Moreover, though some of the students at the Triangle Program were partying heavily and struggling with their studies near the beginning of school, most of them were much more studious later. For some it was months, and others it was a year, but it did seem that they were seeing education as a “privilege and not a right”.

Most of the students in their first year at the Triangle Program need to deal with identity questions and self-esteem problems. During the second year, they are mentally and emotionally stronger and better able to concentrate on academics. Another possible reason that few students get involved in destructive behaviours is the vigilance of the
Triangle staff. They acknowledge that the possibility of problems exist and they do what they can to prevent it from happening.

Race, Lesbianism and Bisexuality in The Triangle Program

Three groups who have a history of experience with discrimination, not only outside of the lesbigay community but also within it, are: lesbigay people of colour, lesbians, and bisexuals. Lesbigay people of colour experience racism; lesbians, sexism; and bisexuals, homosexism. In this section, I will discuss how the Triangle team is addressing the issues around race, lesbianism and bisexuality. Addressing these issues is important because the students in this population are not only experiencing homophobia but other forms of discrimination, and thus they are at a higher risk of self-esteem problems.

Race:

Vanessa Russell said that she and the co-teacher try to address the needs of non-white lesbigay youth by teaching about histories of other minority groups who have been oppressed, not just sexual minorities. She said that they wanted the students to discover who the allies (other oppressed minorities) have been in the lesbigay movement. Then, she wants the students to know what strategies the other minorities used to fight their oppression, strategies which the gay movement has adopted or should adopt, and finally, the differences and similarities between the experiences. "Obviously," she stated, "the resource people we bring into the program can't be all "white, old men", so we need to make sure there is a diversity of people". Russell said, "What I am trying to do for this year is really link stuff up so we are going to be doing stuff on activism rather than looking at queer activism and only queer activism."

In 1997-1998, there were four students of colour in the program, two of whom were deeply immersed in the gay Latino community. The social worker and street worker
attempt "repair work" with some of the families of various ethnicities who, initially, turn their backs on their child. (This work is done with all students and families wanting reconciliation). The Triangle staff also helps the students learn more about their particular racial group or how lesbigay people of the same ethnicity have organized and characterized themselves.

Solomon said that visible minorities have to be reflected in the resources available and the curriculum that is developed. Solomon stated, "It [dealing with issues of race] is all part and parcel of anti-homophobia work, that when you think of gay, you think white, male or woman, which feeds into the stereotype, which is sort of the broader social message." He said that, although the Triangle team has made a concerted effort to include issues of race in the curriculum, "sometimes it can be somewhat daunting when you are addressing homophobia, racism, sexism, classism, [and] anti-Semitism."

Both Russell and Solomon acknowledged that Toronto's gay community was commercially geared to white lesbigay people. This sentiment was shared by many of the students. Latisha said Toronto's gay community was "male and white", and Tarima said there is a lot of racism. Xavier said that there were "very few African-Americans walking around [the lesbigay community]. The majority were white males." Reynold said, "I think it is intimidating for a gay Black teen to come out within a community that is mostly white, because white gay guys are attracted to other white male guys and Black guys are usually left without a date." I asked one student how important his race was to him with respect to being gay and he said, "half and half." He also said that the lesbigay community had provided some support, and that the Triangle Program had a section of the curriculum devoted to gay historical figures from his race.

Some of the students interviewed spoke of racism in the Triangle Program. Tarima
said that she heard the term “rice queen” (derogatory term for Asian gay males) and she said some male peers said they would not date a Chinese guy. There were two Asian gay males who she believed left the program because of the name-calling. Latisha said that “if there was a little racism [in the Triangle environment], you can still manage and even though that is not acceptable, it wasn’t constant. The students that were doing it were gone by the first month or two.” When I asked Xavier if there was some racism in the Triangle Program, he said, “Yes - people are people.” Tarima also pointed out that the curriculum at the Triangle Program was primarily oriented toward whites, but she did not blame the curriculum coordinators; rather, she felt it was a reflection of society in general. She said, “What can you do, you know? Because what information is out there? No one pays attention to minorities.”

One student of colour in the Triangle Program was usually extremely quiet during class time. However, one of the interviewees, a close friend of the student, said that this student was not quiet when he was away from the program. This person said that the non-white teen “really did not like the gay community . . . [and did not] really talk very highly at all [about the lesbigay community] and got really angry when it was brought up.” However, when I asked the interviewee if he ever witnessed or heard about racist incidents in the Triangle Program, he said that no one ever said anything racist against any student of colour at the program.

With respect to racism and ethnocentrism, the Triangle Program does not seem different from many high school classrooms. Staff in both mainstream classes and the Triangle Program are attempting to combat racism and integrate non-Eurocentric culture into their curriculum. However, there is still racism and Blacks and people of colour are still not represented as effectively as whites within the Triangle curriculum. Moreover, Black
lesbigay people and those of colour must endure homophobia in addition to racism, and they are sometimes alienated from their ethnic community as well as the lesbigay community. Though the Triangle Program is combatting racism better than many other mainstream schools, the needs of the Black students and those of colour may also be greater than non-white, heterosexual students since the non-white students at the Triangle Program must deal with both homophobia and racism, while perhaps being excluded from their ethnic community as well as the lesbigay community.

Lesbianism:

The students and staff of the Triangle Program also felt that the lesbigay community did not treat lesbians fairly. Most of the students who mentioned the inequality in the lesbigay community referred to the small number of bars for lesbians compared with those for gay males (all those that responded to the question were 19 or older). Sanafa, Tarima, and Xavier all mentioned that there were only two lesbian bars in the community. Yolanda said, “When you walk down Church Street it is white male, basically all gay men . . . one or two lesbian bars and a lot of guys go to them.”

Many of these same students felt that the Triangle curriculum was dominated by gay male issues. I asked Reynold if he thought the Triangle curriculum put any barriers up for lesbians. He said, “Yes . . . I do not think we did anything on lesbian issues at all last year [during the second year of the program].” Yolanda agreed, “Last year . . . it was basically all gay male [curriculum] with Vanessa [part-time teacher at the time] introducing lesbian stuff.” I asked her how that made her feel. She said, “a little left out.” Star said that the needs of lesbians were not fully addressed at the Triangle Program because there were more gay males than lesbians in the program. When she first entered the program, there were four females. Sometimes the Triangle teacher had to confront gay male youth who
were saying inappropriate comments during the showing of movies with lesbian themes.

According to some students, lesbian issues were overshadowed by gay issues in the curriculum. Various factors contributed to this situation. First, the program had only been running for three years at this time. Therefore, the Triangle team was still in the initial stages of developing a comprehensive curriculum for lesbigay youth. The team has had to develop the curriculum on their own; there were few, if any, pre-existing guidelines, resource lists, lesson plans or books about how to teach lesbigay youth. They had to do extensive research to find out what teaching resources were available, what was being taught in other programs, and how to teach lesbigay youth effectively. (Again, the Triangle Program is the only school program in Canada, and one of a few in North America, where lesbigay youth are taught separate from the mainstream system). The size of this task and time restrictions made it extremely difficult to find enough information about lesbians, or lesbigay people of colour for that matter, in order to create a curriculum which fairly represented the lesbigay population. Additionally, there is much more material about gay males than about any other group of lesbigay people.

The Triangle team members were themselves products of gendered, classed and raced socialization in mainstream society. In the first three years, the development of the Triangle curriculum was the work of a small group of individuals whose own experiences influenced decisions about what should be included. The gay males involved in the curriculum process may have inadvertently focussed more on gay male issues because they drew primarily on their own experiences. Moreover, until 1995, the Triangle teachers had been teaching in mainstream schools or programs where teaching about lesbigay issues is usually not encouraged and there is little in-service training about lesbigay youth. As a result, these teachers had not had many opportunities to create extensive units on
lesbigay issues, and thus have not accumulated a wealth of resources and activities. The Triangle team also has had to direct a lot of energy towards meeting the basic needs (shelter and food) of their students, as well as planning curriculum.

Some of the students saw some changes over time. This was probably the result of the Triangle team having more time to find resources, and the increase in the number of women involved in curriculum planning. Star said that, at first, there were not enough resources for lesbians but that, by the end of the school year, there were more lesbian books. Reynold said, “With Vanessa, it [representations of lesbian issues] is going a little better . . . . this year it is pretty even - we are doing as much lesbian as gay [teachings]. I think she tried to incorporate both in every lesson.” When I asked Solomon how the Triangle Program was addressing the needs of the female students, he too spoke about the two lesbian teachers. He said, “This year, having both the teachers, full time and part-time, and a part-time street worker [Zook] being women, there has been a strong female representation in the staff. This has not been the case in other years.” Solomon went on to say that addressing gender issues will be an ongoing process.

Two of the lesbian students who felt there was a lack of parity between the gay and lesbian curriculum said it was better than mainstream schools. I asked Sanafa how this lack of parity made her feel. She said, “It didn’t bother me. I was willing to learn about anything that was about being gay. I came from a town where the library down the street only had two books about homosexuality.” When I asked Yolanda how she felt about this issue, she said, “A little left out but it was better than mainstream schools, there was still gay and lesbian stuff.”

Many of the students seemed much more certain about the increasing inclusion of lesbian issues than issues of race. This could have been a result of having lesbian role
models in Zook, Russell and the other co-teacher. With three female staff members, there have been tangible changes. The students spoke of having more lesbian resources and I noticed an increase in posters of women, and although no student mentioned race being integrated into the curriculum, they did speak of the integration of lesbian issues.

**Bisexuality:**

The Triangle team did not speak much about needing to improve the curriculum and the amount of resources devoted to bisexual issues. However Xavier, a bisexual, said that the needs of bisexuals were not being addressed. He said that the information provided about bisexual issues was "sometimes a little bit good and sometimes, nothing at all." He said that issues of bisexuality were not brought up in the program as much as gay and lesbian issues. He said, "Most of the gay community are against bisexuals. They [gay males/lesbians] are stuck-up." There were only seven books in the Triangle library under the category "transgendered/bisexual books". Solomon said that one of the weaknesses of the Triangle Program is the limited curriculum around lesbigay issues: "We often say lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered all in the same breath but there are distinctions between lesbian and gay and then lesbian/gay and bisexuals." He said that the Triangle curriculum could be expanded upon and be more inclusive.

According to the literature, bisexual issues are sometimes at best ignored and, at worst, denounced by gay and lesbian people. Therefore, it is a group, like lesbians and non-whites, that needs specific attention. They need more than seven books about themselves or, at the very least, they need to be represented in other ways, such as posters. **Promoting Social, Emotional and Intellectual Skills**

Any educational program should attempt to develop a young person’s social, emotional and intellectual skills. I defined social skills as the ability to interact with people; emotional
skills as the ability to be confident in oneself; and intellectual skills as the ability to solve concrete and abstract problems.

**Social skills:**

Almost all of the students interviewed felt that being in the Triangle Program had helped to develop their social skills. Social skills were learned through the staff, their peers and the curriculum.

Certain social skills were learned through curriculum - the teachings about the history of homophobia and the sociological reasons behind homophobia. Learning about homophobia allowed the students to confront it in a rational manner. Tarima said:

> They [Triangle staff] give you a lot of strategies on how to deal with an argument if it arises with a straight person. How to handle it with a more educational viewpoint within the history of certain things . . . . It would help me out socially if someone was to lash out or even to educate them.

Moreover, the information they used to educate other people challenged their own internalized homophobia. This gave many of the students the self-confidence they needed to stop isolating themselves from others and to begin socializing. I asked Anthony how the Triangle Program had developed his social skills and he said, "it helped me more to respect myself so I can be more socially interactive with other people and not worry that they are going to find out my orientation." Sanafa said, "It [Triangle Program] just allowed me to be comfortable with myself when I'm talking to someone else. . . . I was no longer afraid to talk to people. If you asked me to do this [interview] two years ago, no way." Yolanda said, "They [the Triangle staff and students] made it [socializing] a lot easier. We talked about the problems of being gay and stuff and I became more confident about being gay, to be open with people and be who you are."

The staff helped develop social skills by encouraging the students to speak with
them about any of their concerns. Brighton said, "you respect the teacher and the teacher respects us as individuals, not as children." He said "they [Triangle educators] respect the fact that you want to learn, and if you don't agree with something, then make a point [for your argument]." Brighton said this was helpful in developing his social skills because "you can be more of a person, not someone who is being controlled by strings. It is real life." Brighton also said that the students were given the leeway to involve themselves in discussions that were necessary to their well being. He said, "Everyone has other issues [non-academic] to deal with. You can talk about it, no problem. It comes up in class all the time . . . things that don't usually come up in public schools." Brighton summarizes how this sort of environment develops the students' social skills:

It gives you the opportunity to be more comfortable with yourself. Basically you can be anything. You go into that classroom and talk about any problems that you may have . . . . In the afternoon classes, in the circle everyone talks about everything; their thoughts about each subject. No one is left out. Being comfortable with everyone and yourself helps you be more confident, not afraid to go and meet new people.

Peers were also important in the development of social skills. Tarima also pointed out that her peers were equally informative. She said that she learned a lot about coming out and the lesbigay community from the other Triangle students. They taught her the vocabulary that was common among many lesbigay people, and how to deal with homophobia. Tarima said:

You learn [from the students] to deal with certain social things as well. Like they talk about certain rules around name calling, insults, different strategies of how to handle things so they are not resolved through violent conflict or anything. Only once I was almost in a fight in the whole year. So that is pretty good compared to the schools I came from.

Yolanda said talking with her classmates helped her socialize with heterosexual people.
She said, “You hear other people’s stories and they give you ideas about how to approach people and let them know you are gay.”

Anthony said that just meeting the wide spectrum of students at the Triangle Program helped him to interact with various people in the lesbigay community. He said, “I had a personal problem with transgendered and transsexual people because I never felt comfortable around them. I had a big problem with that, but then I made friends there that were transgendered and transsexual and I lost that fear.” Star also spoke about the variety of students at the Triangle Program and how interacting with them helped her to develop her social skills. She said, “Everyone comes from such different backgrounds, such different ways of being raised, from different areas of Canada and Ontario, and I think the social part is just learning to get along with your classmates.”

However, Tarima did feel that the Triangle Program should have developed a formal lesbigay youth support group. She felt that a lot of the Triangle students were stressed because they were lesbigay. Tarima said it would have been particularly helpful when she first came to the Triangle Program. “I was 18 and there was nothing. I wasn’t old enough to get into bars and . . . there wasn’t baseball, wasn’t any “all-ages nights” [at clubs].” She went on to say, “It [a support group] would have made us feel that we could meet people on a more intimate level within the school and not have to worry about running off here and there and partying all the time.”

Most students (including Tarima), however, were thankful for the support given by the Triangle students. Some of this support came from informal counselling by peers, while other support came from just being in a class made up of lesbigay and transgendered youth. In the Triangle Program, most students felt comfortable interacting with all of their classmates, an almost impossible situation in other schools. Tarima said, “I think it [the
Triangle Program] was good - I felt that because I was with my own community within my school. I could express myself more and not worry about "Oh my girlfriend" slipping out of my mouth and worrying about harassment." Sanafa said, "The Triangle Program showed me there are others like me and I learned how to deal with it [being a lesbian]."

Dominique mentioned that the close bond that developed among the students helped develop his social skills. He said, "It isn't really anything that they teach you . . . but I guess the environment you are in, you do become very social, you know, it is very close." He went on to say that it has helped outside of the Triangle Program. He said, "I am very comfortable with myself, more now. Before I was out and going to the Triangle Program . . . I always sat back and just watched [people] but I don't do it as long anymore . . . now I watch people and ten minutes later we are exchanging phone numbers."

Sanafa pointed out that her classmates made her feel comfortable not only in class, but also outside of the class. I asked Sanafa if it was the teachers or students that made her be more outgoing and she said that it was the students: "They dragged me out. They wouldn't let me stay by myself at my house." Reynold said that before he entered the Triangle Program, he was quieter, but that changed shortly after he was accepted by the other students. He became more comfortable with himself and, as a result, he began interacting with all the students and sharing personal information. He said, "It doesn't matter if we like each other or not, we have to bond."

Reynold said that the students are likely to bond, not only because they were all part of the lesbigay community, but also because they spent six hours each day together. Tarima said, "Because it is such a small school as well as there is only a certain amount of students, you get to know everybody on an intimate level." Star also mentioned the amity among the students. She said:
It is different from a normal school. I think so because a bigger class is not a social atmosphere. You are just there to learn something. You don’t interact with the students during the class, unless you have a group assignment and that doesn’t last very long. So you really don’t have a lot of time to interact with students, unless it’s lunch hour and then everyone is in their own little groups so you don’t pay attention to each other.

Star’s comment, “It is different from a normal school”, is an indication that, though being in a small class of lesbigay or transgendered youth allowed her to develop her social skills, she did not feel “normal”. Dominique said he wanted to finish high school away from the Triangle Program because he wanted a “bit of normal education”. This is an indication that some students may have internalized homophobia and have been socialized to think that it is normal to learn in a school where heterosexuality is propagated.

**Emotional Skills**

The intimate environment also seems to have helped develop the students’ emotional skills. This environment was the product of acceptance, of learning in a program where their sexual orientation was celebrated. This acceptance helped build confidence among many of the students. Confidence was also built through academic successes.

The academic aspects of the Triangle Program helped students in two ways: the students gained more confidence each time they achieved some academic success; and the lesbigay curriculum provided students with a sense of history and allowed them to explore that part of their identity. I asked Dominique about the ways the Triangle Program helped to develop his emotional skills and he said:

That’s like the afternoon classes [lesbigay curriculum]. They just kind of say everything. It could be negative or it could be positive. We talked about the execution of gays and lesbians in the Holocaust . . . but there were aspects that we were taught too that weren’t so bad, that almost made you feel better. So I guess with everything you learn you just feel more confident about yourself.
Dominique said that history about homophobic discrimination helped him emotionally: "It helps me understand more the negativity toward the gay community. . . . I don't condone it at all but I can understand it. I can accept it." Helping students to understand why people are homophobic is vital to the development of the students' emotional stability. They learn how to challenge homophobia, as well as the social constructs behind the discrimination, which can help to depersonalize the statements and actions. Moreover, the students also learn how to diffuse homophobic situations. This understanding helps the students defend themselves against homophobia and protect their newly restored self-esteem.

The program also helps to challenge their own internalized homophobia. Reynold spoke about how just being with a variety of lesbigay people gave him the chance to change some of his beliefs about lesbigay people. Reynold said:

I came out and came to the Triangle Program and I had a lot of internalized crap, bad stuff told to me about gay people. I was expecting an elite, freaky school. I was expecting a bunch of liberty queens screaming at each other . . . . I thought I would become a big puff . . . [but] it gave me a sense it [being lesbigay] was okay.

He went on to say that being in the Triangle Program helped him to feel more confident. Now, he said, he had the confidence to walk around Toronto holding his boyfriend's hand. "I know it is not safe in some places and taking a risk, but the Triangle Program gives you confidence to be able to, and know what could happen so I can avoid it." He also said that the Triangle Program had helped him deal emotionally with his family: "By belonging to the Triangle Program, I can talk to them about it [being gay]. Answer questions they have and give them the right answers, instead of blowing up."

Most of these students have also had little academic success in high school, and even middle school. For many, homophobic harassment and the resulting poor self-esteem
were educational barriers they could not overcome. However, at the Triangle Program, their sexual orientation is accepted, and thus homophobic harassment is non-existent. This provides the students with the opportunity to concentrate on rebuilding their self-esteem and academic performances. It also provides a curriculum whereby much of what you do is individualized, either through independent studies or independent assignments. This allows some students to work at a slower and less stressful pace, and others to accumulate credits faster, see results faster, and get closer to graduating. Star said:

   I think the only way it [Triangle Program] does that [increase self-esteem] is through academics because . . . you kind of realize you can do more because sometimes in a regular school you hold yourself back or you are too scared to try. It is as simple as that. So when you get there [the Triangle Program], it is one on one, so you are just dealing with yourself and are only competing against yourself . . . . You can either take off and blossom or kind of do the opposite.

When I asked Tarima how the Triangle Program helped to develop her emotional skills, her response was: “It [Triangle Program] helped me work on my grammar and articulation and things like that”. Improving her academic skills strengthened her emotional skills.

   Tarima also said that being in the Triangle Program meant she did not have to worry about homophobia in the classroom. However, she said, students had to be cautious not to become dependent on the program.

   You tend to only stick with gays because you are always around them. When I first went to the Triangle Program all I read was gay books. I watched gay movies. Hung out with gay people. So I kind of isolated myself from the community [of Toronto] because I felt so safe within a gay community.

Most students, however, were not concerned about isolating themselves. When I asked them how their emotional skills were being developed, most spoke about the safe and accepting environment of the Triangle Program. For many of the students, coming to a
school that celebrates their sexual identity not only improved their self-confidence but was an emotional relief. They no longer had to hide their identity. Anthony expressed it well: “When I came here, it was, “Wow! I have died and went to heaven.” There were all these people and they were proud of who they were.” Anthony went on to describe how this environment helped him to achieve academic success and improve his self-esteem:

I really enjoyed being there because if it wasn't for them [Triangle staff and students], I don't think I would get myself motivated again because, I mean, I have been struggling for about two and a half years, and basically this school helped me get back on track and helped me focus on getting things done. Because the biggest thing is the acceptance part. And I have an easier time getting by and there is not that extra baggage and problems [homophobia] I have to carry around. Because basically I am getting involved and it has slowly been lifted off my back.

Dominique said that he has noticed a significant rise in his self-esteem in the one year he has been at the Triangle Program. He said that by gaining acceptance from the Triangle staff and students, he was able to accept his sexuality. He said that now he does whatever he wants to do. “Before I was in the Triangle Program, and before I was kind of into the gay community, I felt isolated . . . . but now I know that there are a lot of people behind me and stuff like that makes me more confident.” Yolanda also said that her potential had been restricted. I asked Yolanda what her confidence was like before she came to the Triangle Program and she said, “No one was to know who I was. I acted differently around other people. At a party, I couldn’t bring a girlfriend.” I asked her if she was more confident now and she said, “I can bring a girlfriend now, it’s okay. I don’t care.” Tarima also said that her self-esteem had increased: “I could be myself [at the Triangle Program] whereas in another school, I couldn’t.” Only two students felt their self-confidence had always been fine and did not need improving.
The students' comments provide proof that at the Triangle Program the "therapeutic need often took precedence over academic rigour" (Lownsbourgh, 1996, p. 89). No student interviewed said the Triangle Program diminished their emotional skills or that the Triangle staff did not try to help build their self-esteem. Moreover, descriptions by interviewees about the enhancement of their emotional skills were more elaborate than those about the enhancement of social and intellectual skills.

In one way, the development of their emotional skills was easy. The Triangle Program is perhaps the only alternative education program in Canada where homophobic harassment is non-existent. Studying in a class where being lesbigay is celebrated would have a positive impact on most lesbigay youth. This environment allowed many Triangle students to be more confident about themselves. This increased their confidence with respect to academics, bettering their achievements, which further developed their self-esteem. The Triangle staff are the ones who develop and sustain this supportive environment and address many emotional problems that Triangle youth have. Finally, they have established a curriculum that develops the students' emotional skills on a deeper level.

**Intellectual Skills**

I investigated this issue by asking three main questions:

- What were the advantages and disadvantages of the independent studies and gay curriculum?
- What were the advantages and disadvantages of the Triangle Program academically?
- Did the Triangle Program help develop their intellectual skills?

I expected that a lack of resources and a wide range of student interests and abilities would
impede the Triangle staff’s ability to fully challenge their students intellectually. However, most of the students interviewed were not disappointed with the Triangle Program academically. In this section, I will discuss what the students thought about the Triangle Program’s independent studies, the flexibility of the curriculum and program, and the lesbiansay curriculum.

**Independent Studies:**

Three themes evolved out of the discussion about independent studies: self-discipline, learning pace, and its effectiveness as a learning style. With respect to self-discipline Star stated:

> Independent studies allows you to show your real ability at school — how much you really want it, your education, because you really have to push yourself because there is no one there cracking the whip behind you to get your work done. So you kind of realize, I really want education, and work at it or you slack off and don’t do anything. So I think it is a sobering experience as well.

Self-motivation was a must if one wanted to attain eight credits - the maximum number possible in a mainstream school. Latisha reiterated Star’s sentiments saying, “Some people take to it [independent studies], some people don’t. Some people can learn in that environment very well, others have a tendency to slack off.”

While volunteering at the Triangle Program, I found that motivation was difficult for many students and that most were on track to get a moderate amount of credits, but not the maximum. At one end of the spectrum were those attempting to attain the maximum number of credits or more. At the other end were those who were having extreme difficulty motivating themselves to get one or two credits. Reynold acknowledged that motivating himself was a challenge, saying, “For me, I used to slack off a lot. You have to want to do it for yourself because they [staff] are not going to push you. It is like a regular high-school,
if you don't do it, you are going to get zero. You have to rely on yourself to do it."

Most of the students also had to discipline themselves to work on their studies outside of the classroom, since they lived away from their parents. This could be one reason why only forty-five credits were attained by the 1995-1996 Triangle class (the maximum 20 students could attain was 160 credits) (Lownsborough, 1996, p. 89).

The students also spoke of how an independent study curriculum allowed them to set their own pace. The pace they set was related more to priorities than motivation. One priority was the need to digest information at a slower pace — a pace that courses offered within mainstream schools did not allow. Dominique said that independent studies were good: "Just the freedom of it all . . . . If you learn anything, it's on your own level . . . . I found that when I was in school, I had to hear it a couple of times and it needed to be very specific for me to do something right, or else I kind of did it my way, which is not the way to do it." Reynold stated, "I can take my time. It is not like having a teacher stand in front of the class and say do this and have it done by tomorrow and if you don't do it, you get a zero." Brighton provided a good example of how a slower pace helped him:

[When] you are in public school the teacher would say, "We're all on lesson three today and we're doing this work today hand it in tomorrow" . . . . I remember being in public school, I would just be finishing lesson one and actually comprehending it and lesson two and lesson three would be a total blur and all the units thereafter [I would] just be passing, just getting by, because I didn't understand what was going on before.

I suspect that for Brighton, a major reason he fell behind was that he skipped many classes because of the homophobia he endured.

Brighton also spoke of another advantage of independent studies - dictating your own pace meant being able to accomplish more. Brighton stated, "If you are behind, the advantages are you can, if you know what you are doing or your mind is set, you can work
ahead. You can get a lot more done faster.” Anthony agreed: “Another advantage is I can work at my own pace. I am really getting serious about school work and I want to get my schooling done.” He said that he started school late in the year and that independent studies allowed him to get some credits: “All it took was for me to sit down and do the work and I got some good marks and some credits.”

In general, this sort of learning style seemed to suit the students. Brighton said that he preferred independent studies to a teacher giving lectures: “The lectures that they [teachers] go through are pretty well establishing what you already know, and the rest is skimmed over real quick and here [at the Triangle Program] . . . the booklet teaches you step by step.” Tarima said, “I found that in regular schools, teachers were talking, talking, talking so when it came to doing your work you only had half an hour to do it, then end up with more homework.” Star said that independent studies helped her to achieve more:

You kind of realize you can do more because sometimes in a regular school, you hold yourself back or you’re too scared to try . . . . So when you get there [at the Triangle Program], it is one on one, so you are just dealing with yourself and you are only competing against yourself, not anyone in the class.

Sanafa gave another reason why a teacher in the field of study was not necessary. She said that other students were doing the same courses, and thus they could always get help from their classmates if problems arose. “There is always someone who is better at something and a couple of students are doing the same thing and might be ahead and [if] another person has trouble, you can go over and figure out the answer [together].”

Some students, however, did express some dissatisfaction with the independent studies. Dominique mentioned difficulties with concentrating, saying, “When people start talking, then I start talking. I would do little bits here and there. Then a little bit more. Then a conversation . . . only half of the time I was able to work.” Star mentioned two other
problems with independent studies. First, there is a lack of variety in the courses you can choose: "you can't get a lot of different experiences in different subjects to get a feel for what you want to do in life and [see] what your strong suit is." Secondly, you are not exposed to the potential depth of the subject because "you don't have full-time teachers teaching your subjects from start to finish."

Another disadvantage is that with only one teacher and perhaps one volunteer, students who are not self-motivated are prone to get less work done. The reason for this is that many of the students have extreme needs - social, emotional or academic. Therefore, one student can demand a lot of the teacher's or volunteer's attention. Hence, those lacking self-discipline sometimes do not get the push they need from educators to complete their work. Moreover, the flexible deadlines that are part of independent studies can encourage procrastination. Brighton stated:

In school [Triangle Program], it is a bit more lenient. You work at your own pace, which is good, but it can be bad at the same time. It is on you. If you don't want to learn then you don't get the credits. You know what I mean? They are not going to be on top of you to do it. It is more like an adult education centre.

This sort of learning environment can be particularly problematic for the younger students who may not be mature enough to be self-disciplined. Dominique, 14-years-old, stated he wanted to enter another school soon because "it would be good for me to have that kind of push. At Triangle, I can slack off as much as I want."

**Flexibility of Curriculum and Program:**

When students have varying academic, social and emotional needs, there has to be flexibility built into the program. Zook said that the flexibility of the curriculum was one of its strengths. She said, "the way the curriculum is structured allows for each student to get the kind of credits that they need." The Triangle educators allowed the students to work
at their own pace, to take time to socialize, and decide for how long they studied each subject. Sanafa said:

I like how the school is set up academically because if you don't want to do English, you can do your science all morning. Instead of doing science for the first half and English the second half, you can do the subject you hate and get it done, or do the one you like. I like having it less structured because there are less rules and I can't get into trouble as often because I don't have someone forcing me to do this. If I turned around and said, "John, I'm not doing my science," he said, "Okay. Fine." I just sat and did my English.

The educators also allowed students to do independent projects to supplement the curriculum and get credits. For example, Tatima came up with an idea to do a photography project on women and HIV. This flexibility was appreciated by many of the students.

There was also flexibility in the way the independent study units were accredited. The courses were divided into quarter units, which were worth a quarter credit each. This helped students get some credits, even if they were partial. In Brighton's case, he took a zero in his last quarter credit and used the high mark in his first three quarters to get his whole credit at a lower mark. The Triangle staff also understood that some students had "life issues" with which to deal. Consequently, the staff were flexible in their expectations. Victor missed a lot of classes throughout the year, so I asked him what the staff's attitude was toward his absences. He said, "They never gave me a negative attitude as long as I was in school."

This flexibility within the program and the use of independent studies was imperative if all 20 students were to learn. However, the drawback was that some of the academic challenge was lost. The Triangle educators needed to help students who were doing a variety of courses; however, some of the subjects were not the educator's forte. Sanafa said that she disliked science and that she often asked Terpstra for help, but many times,
he did not know the answer either. Sometimes, Terpstra or I would try to help a student with math by first doing the problem(s) ourselves, and thus gaining an understanding of the process. Upon figuring it out, we would explain how we did it and the formula to use. This was a time-consuming process which took away tutoring opportunities from other students, and sometimes we could not give a proper explanation as to why certain things were done.

Four of the students said the curriculum was not challenging. Dominique wanted to attend an academic school, saying it was frustrating that the Triangle Program did not offer a grade 9 English course that he could take. (In fact the Triangle Program offers few grade 9 courses.) He also stated, “I don’t think I am doing anything in school that requires me to be intellectual when it comes to my independent studying.” Latisha also added that she was not challenged intellectually: “It was all easy work and often, I am bored.”

When I asked Latisha what suggestions she had to challenge students academically, she responded, “Some people have a lot of different [academic] levels and abilities in school. For some people, it [studies] might be too hard, for some people it might be too easy. They need to cater to everyone.” Both Star and Reynold mentioned that if you are in the program for longer than a year, then the curriculum becomes less challenging. Star said, “I think it is good for the short-term and not for the long-term. I say a year would be okay but after that, no, because I think you lose too much [academically]”. Reynold said, “In the afternoon, because I have been there so long, it feels like I am learning things over and over again.”

One reason that the curriculum is not challenging for some students is that there is a lack of resources, making it impossible to incorporate the needs of every student into the curriculum. In fact, Dominique understood the challenges that the Triangle Program faced, saying, “They do what they can do, considering it is one classroom and one full-time
teacher. I mean, there is not a lot of pushing that you can do in a classroom full of people. There is not much that you can do, but I feel they are trying really hard.” In fact, Star said that Terpstra was particularly good at challenging students, considering the situation. She said:

He would know where your levels were and he would test you and he would have more confidence in you than you would. So he would give you something more challenging and help you through it and make you realize, “I can do it, that wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be,” and kind of build you up.

However, with one teacher and 20 students of varying ages, needs and abilities, one teacher cannot ensure the productivity of all students. The students are expected to motivate themselves, but some find this incredibly difficult and at the end of the year, are surprised to find they only attained one or two credits. Brighton, however, defended the Triangle Program by saying, “Those are two credits they would not have had if they were in a normal school. Most of the students wouldn’t be able to go to a normal school and last more than a week or two.” In fact, Dominique points out that many of the Triangle students honed their intellectual skills before entering the Triangle Program because of “the problems that they were going through.” He said:

Just from having to deal with a lot of things made me a confident thinker but everyone that does go there [Triangle Program] went there as an intellect, as opposed to becoming an intellect. . . . When I was being harassed I was thinking, “I hate you so much, but I am not going to change that.” I was thinking . . . I could beat you up if I wanted to, but it is not going to do anything for me. It’s not going to make me more of a person or less of a person, so I am not going to sit here and waste my time. So I didn’t even acknowledge them in any way. It affected me - yes, but I never really came back at them . . . [otherwise] I would be in there throwing punches forever.

Lesbigay Curriculum:
The afternoon curriculum focuses on the issues, literature, and history of lesbigay and transgendered people. I will discuss how this curriculum provides them with history about themselves and enhances their identity. First, it is important to recognize that courses about lesbigay and transgendered issues are a rarity in Canadian high schools. The Contact Alternative Secondary School, in the Toronto District School Board, has a grade 12 course on Gay, Lesbian and Bi-Sexual History. However, according to Steve Solomon, this is the only course in the TDSB that is dedicated entirely to lesbigay issues. A few students spoke about the absence of lesbigay issues in high school curricula. Anthony said that when students come to the Triangle Program, they find that "there is quite a bit they do not teach you in regular high school." Tarima stated that one of the advantages of the Triangle Program was what you learned about lesbigay issues. "You never hear about it in a regular high school curriculum."

Teaching about lesbigay issues in English, History and Personal Life Management validates an important part of their identity. Dominique spoke about both the absence of lesbigay issues in mainstream courses and what it meant to him to finally learn about it. He said:

Well, the first unit we did, I thought, "I'm going fail this stuff." I knew nothing about anything that had the word gay in it except for the fact that I am gay. Like how am I supposed to do this? But nobody knew. I didn't mind it. I liked it actually. It was just kind of like going to your roots and finding out more about who you are and what you belong to.

Brighton said, "In the future, it will be important to us students to know about Oscar Wilde. It brings us to where we are today." Reynold also spoke of how learning about lesbigay history provided roots. He said, "You learn a little bit about the struggles. You learn a little bit of the background. You learn about the generation that came before you and what they
had to go through . . . it is realizing where you came from.”

The lesbigay curriculum also addresses homophobia and how to combat it. When Latisha spoke about how she was taught to combat homophobia, History was an important component. Latisha stated, “They [Triangle Staff] teach you where it [homophobia] comes from, what’s behind that kind of thing. If you know what is behind all of it, it makes you stronger. If you have no clue, then how are you going to fight it?” Later Latisha emphasized that one can only combat homophobia by understanding what causes it. She stated, “If you know why people are homophobic or heterosexist, then you are stronger - you can fight back.”

The cumulative effect of learning about lesbigay issues is that students can gain a better understanding of who they are. It begins by understanding that people with the same sexual orientation existed long before now, then discovering that these same people had successful experiences, and finally being given opportunities to celebrate their sexual orientation. Reynolds stated that he found the afternoon courses interesting because “it has to do with me.” In fact, the teachers at the Triangle Program encouraged students not only to gain a better understanding of their gay society but also heterosexual society. Star stated, “They get you to look at society as a whole . . . . You can really look at the preconceived notions [you have] of straight society and gay society, even the stereotypes you have against straight people.”

These courses helped some of the students with specific issues in their life. Yolanda said, “Going to the Triangle Program made it easy to come out to my family.” I asked her how, and she said that she gathered information and strength from talking with students and teachers. One impetus behind these rap sessions was the lesbigay curriculum. In fact, according to Xavier, one of their courses had a unit on “coming out.” He said, “It was
challenging. You had to gather up what happened to you throughout your life and while coming out. Going back and going through it once again . . . [and knowing] I did the right thing felt important to me and challenging.” Anthony said that the lesbigay curriculum helped him talk with his parents about his sexual orientation:

I had a lot more understanding about things because when I first came here it changed my point of view and perspective about being gay. I am still developing the skills to feel comfortable in public with my sexuality and the school is helping a lot.

Reynold said that the “gay stuff [curriculum] . . . helped me a lot after I came out. I am more comfortable with my sexuality and homophobia on the streets, and know how to deal with it.”

In conclusion, it appears that, to the extent that the Triangle team did not fully develop the intellectual skills of their students, this was largely the result of a lack of resources and staff. Many of these students had potential beyond their current levels of achievement, and some students with special learning needs were not given the help they needed. However, with only one full-time and one part-time teacher, the amount of time the teachers could allot to each student was restricted. This was particularly a problem for those students with learning disabilities. Secondly, the students' interests varied widely, and some independent studies did not meet their needs. Moreover, the Triangle Program did not provide education in all the possible subject areas, and thus, it could not provide certain independent study units at the advanced level. Finally, the students' abilities varied widely; however, the Triangle Team did not have enough time and energy to produce a lesbigay curriculum that fully challenged all the students. Moreover, some of the students had significant psychological and/or emotional problems because of psychological and physical abuse, and some disliked school because of the experiences they had endured.
The Triangle teachers did well with the resources they had because they were knowledgeable in various fields, had experience working with disadvantaged youth, and had a passion for what they were doing. Russell said she and the other teacher worked well together and challenged each other and that she loved helping the students. She said, "A student whose eyes get big and like, "That's it [I understand]" and they get excited about that. Wow! What can you ask that would be any better than that? I don't know. I love being a teacher."

The staff of the Triangle Program and the Harvey Milk School stated that without programs such as these, some students would not be attending school and those who attended would have had their self-esteem destroyed. Therefore, for many of these students a lesbigay program gave them a place to attain school credits, rebuild their self-esteem and learn about living life as a lesbigay person.

Conclusion

Overall, the Triangle Program has been beneficial for its students and the Triangle team has provided much of what would be expected of a program for disadvantaged youth. The students feel safe and receive help attaining food, housing and jobs and counselling from staff and other students. One of the most valuable services the program provides is emotional and social support from staff and peers. Given its physical location and small staff, the Triangle program lacks most of the resources available to mainstream educators. However, these youth could not survive in mainstream schools. Creating a curriculum that challenges all the Triangle students and recognizes their diversity is one of the biggest challenges facing the Triangle team.
Chapter 10

Challenges Facing the Triangle Program

Transition after the Triangle Program

When asked about transition after the program, Russell said that Solomon was available to go to the new school with the teens, talk with the guidance counsellor, show them around and talk to the students about courses and the school environment. She also mentioned that the Triangle staff gave support to those who have made the transition and returned asking for advice. "Obviously, we are going to be here for them, for that is one of our jobs at Triangle, to make ourselves available."

Some students said that the development of their self-esteem made the transition into other schools or work easier. However, most interviewees were not clear about how the Triangle Program helped them with the transition. Some students even felt that the Triangle Program did not or could not prepare them for the change. The responses from those who did feel the Triangle Program prepared them can be grouped either according to issues of confidence or issues of academics.

Self-confidence:

Just the confidence thing again from going to Triangle and knowing more about gay and lesbian History and just feeling that acceptance makes me more confident. And that is all that I need, that is all that I ever needed, to go to a regular school.

Dominique said he came to the Triangle Program because he needed a break from the harassment he was withstanding in his mainstream school. For some Triangle students, this is all the transition preparation they need - a time to feel safe and be assured that being lesbigay is "normal." This improves their self-confidence and allows them to handle the discrimination they are bound to face when they go to other schools or work. Anthony said
that the Triangle Program "has not really helped me that much, but it did help me build my confidence."

Tarima has made the transition and is now working. She felt that the development of her self-confidence at the Triangle Program was the key to her smooth transition. She is now working at a job where she is the only female working with "totally testosterone, heterosexual males." Regardless of her work environment, though, she said, "I am out [as a lesbian] at work and I just don't care. I am who I am." However, she knew that things would be a lot different if she had not gone to the Triangle Program. She said, "If I came straight from _______ and went to work, I wouldn't say a word." She would not have had the self-confidence to reveal her identity.

**Academic achievement:**

Tarima also has plans to go to college or university and feels that the Triangle Program has prepared her for this transition as well. It is the academic work she did at the Triangle Program which she feels will help with the transition. Brighton said that confidence-building and education were the transition tools he was given. He said:

> You are more confident with yourself. You can get your education, while being comfortable with everything else and basically the program makes you realize you want to get through [school]. You are not being forced. You do not have to do it. So if I go into a normal school now, I can turn around and say I want to get it done.

Other students mentioned two other facets of the academic program which helped with transition: co-op and counselling. Yolanda said that the co-op program helped her get work experience and help with the transition into the working world. Moreover, she stated that the Triangle staff were preparing her for the discrimination she might encounter in the workplace: "We have talks about discrimination, how to talk to someone, ways to react to
comments about gays.”

Star said she had prepared herself for the transition into her next school, saying, “I think you develop that [transition skills] on your own. A lot of the program you have to take from it what you need because it is really not that structured. So it is all your own will-power.” She did say, however, that counselling prepared students for the transition - students could speak with counsellors if they had any concerns with moving away from the Triangle Program. Xavier was another student who felt that he did not need help with the transition to the next school. He too prepared himself: “I would deal with it [his next school] the same way I am dealing with it now. I am just doing it, whether it be the Triangle Program or university.”

Dominique felt that there were some things for which the Triangle Program might not be able to prepare students, such as harassment. I asked him if he dealt with harassment differently now that he had been at the Triangle Program for a year. He said, “I always think, okay if someone were to yell something at me, I would be able to take it this way, but I mean if someone does it, it is just like ‘holy’, it still hits me the same way. So I am never going to get over that.”

Reynold said that the Triangle Program did not prepare him for the transition.

I don’t know what I am going to do when it comes time to leave. A lot of people [lesbigay] say . . . ‘If I had that [Triangle Program] when I was a kid, I would have been different’ and it’s true. It’s scary to think I have to move and get back into the real world.

I asked Reynold if there was anything within the Triangle Program to prepare students for the transition and he said, “I started to talk about it last year and no one really started to prepare me. They sort of said, ‘Are you ready?’ I said, ‘No.’” Reynold also mentioned that he would like a transition program similar to the one that occurs before you enter high
I remember when I went to junior high, they sort of like prepared us for high school. A couple of months before the end of school, they went through what high school was going to be like and all the transitional kind of things. That got me to go for two weeks instead of killing myself. They do not do that at the Triangle Program.

The Triangle team needs to create more concrete guidelines about how it will help students make the transition into other schools or work. By going through the process the educators will have a clearer idea of what is necessary to make transition successful, and with the guideline, they can make sure that all the steps are followed to ensure success. Furthermore, the guideline can be outlined to the students in order to assure them that a structure is in place to help them with transition. This will give them more confidence that the Triangle staff are trying to help them with the transition. If guidelines are not established students may be less prepared for their transition and drop out of school again, and this would damage the self-confidence the Triangle team helped to build.

The Triangle Program as a complete alternative high school

Reynold's remark about "killing himself" is indicative of the pain that many of the students endure. It is also a reason that many of the students would like to see the Triangle Program become a complete alternative high school. Nine of the eleven students interviewed wanted to have the Triangle Program expand into a complete alternative high school, wherein the students could complete their entire schooling. Sanafa and Dominique were the only students to say it was not a good idea. Sanafa said, "you can't just have the interaction with everyone else who is gay or lesbian. You have to have the other interaction. You have to learn not everyone in the world is going to like you." Dominique said, "I am not sure I want to finish high school there because I need that little bit of normal
education stuff... I don't think I was harassed or anything that bad to stay that sheltered for so long."

Star was another student concerned about students becoming sheltered. However, she thought that having a completely lesbigay high school had potential. Star said:

If the kids are handling the academic side of it, and they offered you a wide range of subjects and really challenged you and gave you the same kind of level they could get out of a collegiate, yes, then it would be cool. But there is also the other side, becoming dependent on that and kind of getting bogged into just that and hiding away from everything... because what happens when it is not there and you go back out there? Then, emotionally, you are even farther behind than when you first went in.

Yolanda, on the other hand, dismissed this concern of students being sheltered. Even if they wanted to "go back out there" - away from the lesbigay community - many heterosexuals would discourage them from participating in their organizations. She said that there were only a few places she could go to church and if she went out to dinner with her girlfriend, they could not go to any restaurant or any other place if they planned on being romantic. I asked Brighton if a completely alternative school would shelter students and he said:

I think that is because the normal education system does not have things in order themselves. If it was, it would not be a problem. Then they [lesbigay youth] wouldn't have this school. If it [homophobia] wasn't an issue, there would be no such thing as the Triangle Program. It wouldn't come up if in other schools; students are not harassed... and the school board would take responsibility for what was going on. I don't think there would be the question of being sheltered.

Xavier also alluded to schools not fulfilling the rights of lesbigay students. He said there should be an all lesbigay alternative school because "there are many young, gay, bisexual boys and girls growing up who need that." Anthony thought it would be good to
have such a school because “it would be nice to be the majority and not the minority.”

Reynold supported the idea of a lesbigay high school because “it really sucks that I can only stay there for a year and a half. We should learn different things. I think it is kind of stupid that the grade 9’s and the grade 12’s are doing the same thing. . . . there should be different classes for different grades.” Finally, Tarima thought expansion would be good.

That would be great. I think a lot of the curriculum shouldn’t be so gay-oriented. Some people could think it is too gay. I think there is a whole lot of things you have to know about the straight society and straight history, as well as gay history. But it is nice to know you are not within that homophobic environment.
Chapter 11

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Triangle Program was established to help the 2% of the Toronto lesbigay youth who drop out of school (or who are on the verge of doing so). The reason that these youth are in this situation is that they are constantly dealing with overt and covert messages that their very existence is wrong. Initially, Gambini and Solomon consulted leaders of various organizations for youth, street youth in particular. During this consultation period, it was decided that the Triangle Program had to provide students with a safe learning environment, lesbigay information and the necessary skills to continue their education beyond the Triangle Program.

Most of the Triangle students had three commonalities: they were identifiable as lesbigay; they had had little support from educators, family and peers; and they had endured severe homophobic harassment. Ten of the eleven students spoke about extreme homophobia in their previous schools. One possible reason that the students were more susceptible to homophobic harassment was that most fit the stereotype of gay or lesbian in appearance and behaviour. Most students had tried to escape the pain brought on by homophobia by changing their behaviour to fit the heterosexual image, skipping school and/or dropping out of school. Only three of the 20 students lived at home and the majority had family within the Greater Toronto area. Most of the students spoke of teachers not addressing homophobia, let alone teaching about lesbigay issues. Many mentioned the problem of alienation, which is directly correlated to the homophobia and silence about lesbigay issues that was occurring in their schools.

However, the students have many more differences than similarities. Teaching such
a diverse student population is one of the major challenges facing the Triangle team. The Triangle students ranged in age from 14 to 20, in grades from 9 to 12 and in academic ability from basic to advanced, and many had various psychological difficulties. Another challenge was the fact that many students were receiving little financial support from their parents, and thus much of their time was spent dealing with issues surrounding jobs, food and shelter.

Perhaps the greatest barrier the Triangle team faced was the educational climate in Ontario. First of all, the team had had to deal with the homophobic backlash and resistance from society, educators, and the government against their program. However, during the time of my research, the team also had to deal with changes to the Ontario funding scheme, the Ministry of Education’s new policies and mandates, and the amalgamation of the six school boards. These and other concerns often preoccupy members of the Triangle team, limit the resources available and increase the time and energy required to deal with real and possible crises. This is time and energy taken away from developing other aspects of the Triangle Program.

More time and energy needs to be dedicated to the quality and amount of resources provided to the students. First of all, the Triangle team was not fully prepared for the demands of students living on their own. Many students were not able to concentrate fully on their studies because they were dealing with the problems of supporting themselves. The initial proposals for the Triangle Program indicate that the Triangle team did not anticipate how daunting a task it would be to help these students. Now, after four years, they are well aware of the seriousness of this issue but without additional finances they are still struggling to help the students find appropriate housing, food and employment, among other things.
The counsellors helped the students secure the financial support necessary to survive living away from home, and obtain social assistance for rent, but they did not have a lot of time to help them search for good apartments. As a result, many students spent a lot of time looking for apartments and later moving because of problems with their apartments, landlords and roommates, which interfered with their studies. However, the counsellors did provide the students with the skills needed to search for an apartment, budget their finances and deal with any other economic problems that arose. This empowered the students and provided them with useful skills that helped them overcome many everyday challenges. One problem the Triangle team did address decisively was food. Developing a lunch program ensured that each student had one good meal a day, which helped them to study and saved them money.

The lack of resources also restricted academic, social and emotional development. Many students felt frustrated by the lack of variety in the program. The students spent each day in one classroom with the same students and this generated some tension. Again, the staff spoke about the insufficient finances available to provide additional staff and resources necessary for assisting students who were struggling to attain an education and basic living requirements.

A number of students felt issues facing lesbigay people of colour, lesbians and bisexuals were not fairly represented in the curriculum. Moreover, though the Triangle staff acknowledged that lesbians, bisexuals and lesbigay people of colour were discriminated against in the lesbigay community, they did not give examples of how they incorporated these issues into the curriculum. Finally, the guidelines for the transition of Triangle students into other schools were not firmly established and this left many students feeling insecure about the change. This could account for why nine of the eleven students
interviewed thought that expanding the Triangle Program into a complete “lesbigay” high school was a good idea.

Overall, however, all the Triangle students had few criticisms and felt it was an extremely useful program, identifying the program’s greatest strength as safety. The idea of learning in a safe environment draws them to the Triangle Program and the continued support from the staff and their personal interest in learning about lesbigay issues keeps them there. The severity of the homophobia experienced in mainstream schools and in the world at large makes the safety within the program immediately beneficial to those enrolling. The students at the Triangle Program could not learn in a mainstream school. For some students, homophobia meant they could not concentrate on school work, and as a result, they accumulated few credits or quit high school altogether. Students spoke of support from staff but attached greater emphasis to the support of their peers. This support brought about a feeling of acceptance that few had ever experienced and this was integral to the development of their emotional and social skills. Academic success also enhanced these skills, but some felt that the academic aspects of the program were not challenging enough.

Hearing about the homophobia the students experienced helped me to better understand what I observed at the Triangle Program. While volunteering there, I had some concerns about the academic challenge of the program. However, I realize now that the staff were concentrating their efforts on the more important safety issues. After interviewing some of the students, I have come to realize that providing a safe learning environment is needed before further academic challenges are presented. More fundamentally, the self-esteem of many Triangle students was damaged by their former school experiences, an issue that needed to be addressed before academic success could be achieved. The Triangle staff were successful both in creating a safe learning environment and nurturing
the self-esteem of their students, and in doing so, have helped these "at-risk" youth immeasurably. Members of the Triangle team are dedicated to helping lesbigay youth have successful educational experiences. The eleven students interviewed (half of Triangle's student body in 1998) were all satisfied with the Triangle Program. However, the interviewees were self-selected and not necessarily representative, and thus certain perspectives are missing. Some of the students may not have volunteered to be interviewed because they felt marginalised within the program, and therefore did not want to participate in anything associated with it.

Those who have developed the Triangle Program are innovators who have created a program that is beneficial to every student. The benefits begin during the students' first few weeks in the program when they realize their sexuality is accepted, and continue in the months to come as their self-confidence increases and their academic achievements accumulate. It is to be hoped that the Triangle team will continue to address the issues of diversity that arise within the lesbian student body, specifically issues of bisexuality and gender and ethnicity. This program needs to be supported by the Toronto District School Board and the community at large. These innovators are the driving force behind Canada's only alternative school program for lesbigay students - a program which, for some, is their only educational alternative and the only way they can begin to feel deserving of happiness, success and even life.

Support is required because most of the crises with which the Triangle team deals continue to arise. There are no clear signs that homophobia is decreasing in schools, not to mention society in general. Thus, the Triangle Program is essential to those lesbigay youth who leave school. More importantly, it can serve as a source of information for educators wanting to help lesbigay people, instead of just being an "OASIS" lesbigay youth
can savour before setting out again across an educational desert, lacking social, emotional and intellectual nourishment.
Dear Triangle Program Staff Member,

I am a Masters student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, and I am conducting a study about the impact of the OASIS alternative school program - the Triangle Program - on the lives of the lesbian, gay and bisexual students who attend. I would like to include you in the study.

I will interview you for approximately one hour. My interviewing style will be extremely flexible in order to encourage you to express the thoughts and issues that are most important to you. I am interested in finding out how your school is addressing the academic, social and emotional needs of gay, lesbian and bisexual students, and what you feel could be improved. Your name will be used. If you would like a pseudonym please tell me.

The study has been approved by the Toronto District School Board’s Research Review Committee. The research is important because both the Triangle Program and the public secondary school system can benefit from knowing what teachers believe is working and not working in the school system for gay, lesbian and bisexual students. It will also provide other teachers with an understanding of how they should best serve gay, lesbian and bisexual students. When the study is complete a letter will be sent to you containing a brief summary of the results and how you may access my thesis from the OISE library.

If you agree to participate in this study please call me at 416-603-3438 to set up an interview time and place most convenient for you. Also please complete the form at the bottom of this letter and bring it to the interview. Should you wish to withdraw from the study at any time or not answer particular questions, you are free to do so.

I sincerely appreciate your co-operation. If you would like to receive more information about the study, please contact me at 416-603-3438 or email me at cknighth@oise.utoronto.ca.

Thank you,

Calvin Knight

Consent Form-Individual Consent:
I have read the letter describing the study to be conducted by Calvin Knight about the impact of the OASIS alternative school program - The Triangle Program - on the lives of the lesbian, gay and bisexual students who attend. I understand the procedures and safeguards outlined, and agree to give my consent.

Name and Signature:__________________________________________________________

Date:____________________________________________________________________
Appendix B

Dear Student,

I am a Masters student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, and I am conducting a study about the impact of the Triangle Program on the lives of the lesbian, gay and bisexual students who attend. I would like to include you in the study.

I will interview you for approximately one hour. My interviewing style will be extremely flexible in order to encourage you to express the thoughts and issues that are most important to you. I am interested in finding out how your school is addressing your academic, social and emotional needs and what you feel could be improved. You will be given a pseudonym to protect your identity and I will not use any information from the school’s records.

The study has been approved by the Toronto District School Board’s Research Review Committee. The research is important because both the Triangle Program and the public secondary school system can benefit from knowing what students believe is working and not working in the school system for gay, lesbian and bisexual students. It will also provide teachers at the Triangle Program and other high schools with an understanding of how they should best serve gay, lesbian and bisexual students. When the study is complete a letter will be sent to you containing a brief summary of the results and how you may access my thesis from the OISE/UT library.

If you agree to participate in this study please contact me at 416-603-3438 to arrange a convenient time and place for the interview. Please complete the form at the bottom of this letter and bring it to the interview. Should you wish to withdraw from the study at any time or not answer particular questions, you are free to do so.

I sincerely appreciate your co-operation. If you would like to receive more information about the study, please contact me at 416-603-3438 or email me at cknight@oise.utoronto.ca.

Thank you,
Calvin Knight

Consent Form-Individual Consent:
I have read the letter describing the study to be conducted by Calvin Knight about the impact of the Triangle Program on the lives of the lesbian, gay and bisexual students who attend. I understand the procedures and safeguards outlined, and agree to give my consent.

Date of Birth: __________________________________________

Name and Signature: __________________________________________

Date: __________________________________________
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