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The Sexuality of Adolescents and How It Affects Student Achievement in General Music Classes

Everyone knows the adolescent age is a confusing time for a number of different reasons. This paper will seek to identify some of the confusions that the development of sexuality in adolescents will play an effect in classrooms and specifically general music classrooms. “Developmental research suggests that most adults recognize their lesbian or gay sexual orientation in early adolescence” (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). These then are some of the most important times in a students’ life for these are the times when students are going to be starting to form views of him or herself. Thus, it is important to discuss the effects of students’ increased awareness to sexuality at this grade level and how that will affect students both inside and outside of classrooms and in particular general music classes.

As adolescents enter junior high, they are confronted with the world of dating, sex, and sexuality. While disparities exist between genders view on sex, they are unsure of how to navigate these new urges. In a study of 1800 junior high students, for example, “Females…saw sexual activity as more detrimental to future goal attainment” while “more males anticipated partner pressure for sex” (DeGaston, J.F., Weed, S., & Jensen, L., 1996). It is clear that adolescents are unsure of how to proceed when it comes to sex during this age and educators should expect in their classrooms to see this manifested especially in male and female interactions.

This confusion becomes even more heightened when an adolescent is struggling with his or her sexuality. Not only are these adolescents struggling with the complex world of dating and sex, but they are also trying to discover who they are attracted to within this intricate dating universe. Undoubtedly, this has major effects on adolescent classroom behavior as well as peer-to-peer interaction that educators must deal with. “Surveys of schools in several regions of the United States showed that LGB [Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual] youth are exposed to more discrimination and violence events than their heterosexual peers” (Meyer, 2003). This article also points out that “Compared with heterosexual youth, LGB youth are at increased risk for being threatened and assaulted, are more fearful for their safety at school, and miss school days because of this fear” (Meyer, 2003).

For this reason teachers need to be on edge, noticing students who are being left out because of a different orientation. In a class as involved as a general music class with as much interaction that exists between students and teachers, having an environment where students feel accepted and welcomed is crucial. Imagine trying to gain the confidence to play a social instrument in front of the class—if you, as the student, believed that several people in the class did not like you and automatically were going to scrutinize any action you take simply because you are different, then you would feel more anxiety towards playing and your willingness to participate would suffer.

According to a study conducted by Bontempo and D’Augelli (2002), even when heterosexual students are victimized or bullied, they are still victimized less often than their peers who are homosexual, and these students therefore exhibit “substantially more health risk behavior, compared with heterosexual youths in the high-victimization group” (371). Of the approximately 4600 students researched, 5.8% of nongay females reported smoking more than half a pack of cigarettes per day, compared with 25.5% of homosexual or bisexual females who reported the same. Similarly, 8.2% of nongay males reported smoking the same amount of cigarettes, and 22.5% of homosexual or bisexual respondents said the same. The study found that this trend extended to a multitude of health risk behaviors, including truancy, drinking alcohol, marijuana and other drug use, and suicide attempts.

In fact, some surveys have pointed to a disturbing trend, noting, “An unusual prevalence of suicide attempts and ideation among homosexual persons has surfaced recently” (DeGaston, Weed, & Jensen, 1996, 869). In a study done by Deisher, Farrow, and Remafedi (1996) on this subject, “Approximately one third of gay and bisexual youth…reported at least one intentional self-destructive act, and almost half of them repeatedly attempted suicide” (873).

Studies like these show that setting up an environment in a classroom where students feel safe to learn and express themselves is vital to their identity of self. “With accumulating empirical analyses of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth…it is becoming increasingly clear that the personal and social crystallization of nonheterosexual orientation occurs for many during adolescence” (D’Augelli and Hershberger, 1993). This study goes to show that if early on in their life students’ feel ostracized, their view of self-worth could be affected for their entire life. Setting up a positive environment in which to learn from will have results on students’ lives if they are not going to feel accepted elsewhere. Also, for the sake of retention in music, students who are not comfortable in a class are going to be more scared to learn, question, and participate if they feel left out. If music provides all the benefits we say it provides, and we want to extend those benefits to as many students as possible, we owe it to our classroom to encourage involvement from everyone, regardless of gender, orientation, or race.

In conclusion, the issue of sexuality for adolescents becomes increasingly relevant as they enter the adolescent period of life and again into adulthood. As an educator, it is important to examine this subject because it greatly affects students’ performance, behaviors, and sense of self-worth. Being a supporter and ally by making the classroom environment an open, friendly, and safe place to learn for all students, educators can work to reduce the victimization experienced by homosexual or bisexual students. “Greater acceptance of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people over time encourages more openness at earlier ages about sexual orientation” (Herdt, qtd. in D’Augelli and Hershberger, 1993). This positive environment where students feel safe and welcomed will create the best atmosphere to learn in for general music students as all students will feel welcomed and appreciated. All students in general music classrooms with teachers who are sensitive to the differences of students will receive all of the benefits that music has to offer, and at the end of the day, that should be any music teachers goal.

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