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Nipping bad behavior in the class

By Alan Horowitz
Education Week

When gay issues are brought up, there is often discomfort on the part of the teacher, hindering a quick response. I began teaching first grade in 1988. At that time, it was rare that I heard words related to gay issues from my students. When I left the classroom in 1998, appropriate and inappropriate discussion about gay issues was commonplace. I remember once during "learning centers" I heard the word "gay" coming from the block center. I walked over to investigate. Kelli whined, "Jordan said if you hug your dad it means you're gay."

"No, if you hug your dad it doesn't mean you're gay," I responded.

Then I listened as I walked away.

"Gay is a bad word," Kelli scolded.

"No, it's not," replied Jordan. "If it was, Mr. Horowitz would have said something."

Conversations such as these are occurring in block centers around the country. Worse yet, harassing words such as "fg" are among the most common pejorative words in elementary school classrooms, hallways and playgrounds. When I heard the word "gay" in my class, I knew how to respond. Most teachers don't.

As teachers, we make more than 30 decisions a minute. Through experience, we increase the bag of tricks that helps us make these decisions. When students make racial slurs, most teachers have an appropriate response in their repertoires. When gay

issues are brought up, however, there is often discomfort on the part of the teacher, hindering a quick response. The key to successful response is to become comfortable talking about gay issues.

Students mirror a society that is becoming increasingly more comfortable discussing gay issues.

In elementary schools, students use the word "gay" definitively, erroneously and pejoratively. When students use the word definitively, it is clear that they know its meaning and are using it in a proper context. For example, "My uncle and his partner are gay." This type of usage requires no response on the part of the teacher.

My block-center scenario illustrates an erroneous use of the word "gay." In this case, "gay" was used incorrectly. Here, a short, age-appropriate clarification was the most appropriate intervention.

When a student uses the word "gay" pejoratively, he or she intends to mean something incorrect and negative. For example, "That drawing is so gay." In this case, it is important for the teacher to help the student say what he really means. The following dialogue will illustrate:

Teacher: When you say the picture is "gay" what do you mean?

Jane: I don't know.

Teacher: Is there something you like or don't like about the picture that makes you call it gay?

Jane: It's weird.

Teacher: So, why did you say the picture

was "gay" instead of weird?

Jane: I don't know.

At this point, it is important for the teacher to clarify.

Teacher: "Gay" is a word that is used to describe a group of people (depending upon the age of the student one could clarify further). When you use their name to mean "weird," it hurts their feelings. How would you feel if somebody used your name to mean "weird?" How would it make you feel if someone said "that picture is so 'Jane'?"

In elementary school, students also use homophobic words, such as "fg," that are clearly derogatory. In these instances, a teacher should respond as she would to any harassing behavior — name it, claim it and stop it.

• **Name it:** "That is homophobic harassment (or an age-appropriate alternative)."

• **Claim it:** "That is not permitted in this classroom (or school) because it is disrespectful."

• **Stop it:** "It will never happen again. If it does (state the consequences)."

Since my teaching career began, times have changed. Students mirror a society that is becoming increasingly more comfortable discussing gay issues. The media are portraying more and more positive gay role models. Gay men and lesbians are raising children at unprecedented rates. As teachers, we need to match our students' level of awareness in this area. In this way, we can add appropriate interventions to our teaching "bag of tricks."

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