

## **Teaching About Identity and Sexuality in a Technological Era: Promising Practices for Family and Consumer Sciences Educators**

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*Family and consumer sciences teachers should demonstrate confidence in teaching about issues related gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation. This article provides an overview of strategies used to teach these topics in an identity and sexuality course. Recommendations provided can be used to augment teaching associated with sensitive issues related to sexuality. Implications pertaining to the professional development of teachers related to the inclusion of these issues in the classroom are also highlighted.*

### **Introduction**

President Obama issued Executive Order 13672 on July 21, 2014, an order that “prohibit[ed] discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity” in the United States’ (U.S.) federal government (Presidential Documents, 2014, p. 42971). One year later, the Supreme Court’s June 26, 2015 decision in the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges* made same sex marriages legal throughout the United States (Kennedy, 2014). In May 2016, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice penned a directive to allow transgender students to use bathrooms and lockers based on their gender identities. To date, 23 states have filed suit against the federal government to remove this mandate (Emma, 2016). This directive came on the heels of North Carolina’s controversial House Bill Two (HB2) which restricts choice of bathrooms to one’s biological sex (Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act, 2016). Consequently, transgender issues have dominated the media. Certainly, these policy changes impact the content taught about families and interpersonal relationships in family and consumer sciences (FCS) classrooms and elsewhere.

Another issue often highlighted by the news and educators is sexual harassment and assault on high school and college campuses. Cases such as the Steubenville, Ohio rape by high school football players (New York Times, 2013), Vanderbilt University rape case (Washington Post, 2015), and Stanford University rape case (National Public Radio, 2016) are among the cases that have generated discussions about sexual assault among high school and college students. Sexual violence and/or assault often occur in the context of romantic and interpersonal relationships. These are issues relevant to the FCS curriculum.

Understandably, there has been an increased focus on issues pertaining to gender, gender stereotypes, and sexual identity among policy makers and educators in recent years. FCS Standards provide for the inclusion of related topics in their goals. Standard 3 of the National Standards for Teachers of FCS focuses on “principles of human development, interpersonal relationships, and families across the lifespan in contexts such as parenting, care giving, and the workplace” (Erickson, Fox, and Stewart, 2010). More specifically, Standard 12.2.3 supports the “analysis of the effects of gender, ethnicity, and culture on individual development” in FCS classrooms. Standard 4 of the National Council Accreditation of Teacher Education emphasizes the need for preservice teachers to “identify how issues of diversity such as age, family type, gender, race, ability, religion, and sexual orientation impact human and family development subject matter and the teaching strategies used to teach that content” (Erickson, Fox, & Stewart,

2010). Therefore, in-service and pre-service FCS teachers must be prepared to teach the myriad of topics associated with these standards.

The purpose of this article is to share strategies that worked well in the author's post-secondary classes, approaches that may be adapted to fit the high school FCS education curriculum. The discussion provides suggestions for teaching about gender discrimination, sexual harassment/assault, bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth, and sexual identity. Although curriculum goals and standards allow coverage of topics discussed in this article, some states and school districts do not permit discussion of these issues in the classroom. Teachers should work within the guidelines provided by their school districts.

### **Impacts of Recent Changes on the FCS Curriculum**

Recent reports from national surveys conducted by the PEW Research Center (2016) suggest greater acceptance for gender equality, same sex marriage and adoption, and more openness to sexual variation. In a March 2016 Poll, over half of Americans (55%) indicated that they favor same sex marriage, while 37% remain opposed to these unions. In 2006, the reverse was reported: 55% were opposed, while 35% were in favor. The growing acceptance is readily seen among younger Americans and individuals who lean toward liberal values. Despite this trend, many teachers maintain a conservative view about sexuality and teachers report low self-efficacy for teaching issues such as sexual orientation (Brandt, 2014). Recent research indicated that Democrats are more than twice as likely as Republicans to favor gay marriage (70% vs. 33%) (PEW Research Center, 2016). Therefore, the political climate may impact teachers' views and policies designed to allow teachers to cover content related to LGBTQ issues.

The onslaught of lawsuits in various states as a response to the Obama Administration's directives for marriage sexuality signals that intolerance still persists. With a mixed response to these issues, some teachers may hold more conservative values and struggle to find innovative ways to effectively teach about gender identity and work with sexual minority populations (Brandt, 2014). In a recent interview with the online magazine, *Education Week*, the founder of Gay Lesbian, Straight, Education Network (GLSEN) acknowledged that even with legislation supporting marriage equality and gay rights, schools are slow to include LGBTQ topics and issues in their curriculum. He indicated that the typical textbook makes next to no mention of LGBTQ material. He also questioned the adequacy of the information that the average teacher training program provides for teaching LGBTQ-related concerns. Therefore, if teachers do not have sufficient knowledge and expertise, they are not likely to include related content in their classrooms (Education Week, 2015).

Curriculum, policies, and laws are reflecting the changing structure of the family. Therefore, FCS educators must reflect these changes in the curriculum. Teachers may enter the classroom with their own preconceived ideas and their moral belief systems and be unprepared to teach or be sensitive to "teach . . . LGBTQ . . . and non-gender conforming youth and to work against heterosexism and homophobia in schools" (Clark, 2010, p. 711). Across public schools, students who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or transgender often report being misunderstood and treated in a discriminatory manner (Sawyer, Porter, Lehman, Anderson, & Anderson, 2006; Vacarro, 2009). FCS Standard 8 of the National Standards for Teachers of Family and Consumer Sciences (National Association of Teacher Educators for Family and Consumer Sciences [NATEFACS], 2009) addresses ethical behavior and objectivity in the classroom. According to Couch and Alexander (2009), "FCS teachers, especially, need to exercise ethical objectivity when teaching content related to families and family structures" (p.

258). Teachers' personal opinions and beliefs need to be "checked" at the door and the educational needs of all students need to be addressed fairly and appropriately (Couch & Alexander, 2009). Issues such as parenting and sexuality are taught in the secondary FCS curriculum, and it is important that FCS teachers demonstrate confidence in teaching the issues related gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation.

### **Sexual Assault Among Youth**

The *Teach Safe Relationships Act of 2015*, introduced by Senators Claire McCaskill and Tim Kaine, requires schools to address sexual assault and dating violence within the curriculum (Kaine, 2015). Health education courses tend to cover sexual assault; however, Standard 3 of the FCS standards allows for inclusion of this growing problem in FCS classrooms. A thorough understanding of healthy sexuality may help to prevent sexual assault by addressing gender stereotypes and teaching about boundary setting and consent in the context of interpersonal relationships (The National Sexual Violence Resource Center, n.d). The Centers for Disease Control (2016) reports that 21% of high school females and 10% of males who dated report experiencing sexual dating violence. Within the past five years several disturbing cases of sexual assault among adolescents and young adults were covered in the media. FCS educators can infuse prevention messages within the curriculum.

### **Strategies for Teaching Identity and Sexuality**

College-level human sexuality courses may influence students' attitudes toward homosexuality, specifically, (Finken, 2008; Rogers, McRee, & Arntz, 2009), and lead to a greater tolerance and acceptance of sexual-minority families, fluid gender roles, and increase acceptance of variations in gender and sexual identity (Frederick, 2015). FCS secondary and post-secondary educators should be prepared to address these topics in their classrooms.

A variety of activities can be used to foster greater tolerance and understanding of gender and sexuality. The recommendations that follow can be used to teach in-service and pre-service teachers how to effectively teach sensitive issues related to sexuality. FCS teachers can also modify these activities to use in current secondary school curriculum. Strategies selected by FCS teachers should be discussed in advance with administration in their school districts, and parents should be informed of course topics at the time of enrollment. High school teachers should also establish guidelines and classroom expectations before students begin the course or unit of instruction that covers the suggested topics, especially at the secondary level.

### **Reflective Practice**

According to Brookfield (1995), teaching in a critically reflective way involves teachers trying to discover, and research, the assumptions that frame how they teach (p.32). Consequently, teachers will be aware of practices that needs modifying and areas of strengths. Being a reflective teacher is very important no matter the content. It is critical to encouraging pre-service teachers and students to engage in reflective practices when teaching or learning about sexual identity. Students may be asked to reflect on their experiences during or after specific lessons. Students may also be asked to write a reflection about their experiences in the course at the end of the semester. Writing prompts for such reflection may include an evaluation of preconceived notions and actions that students may take to address stereotypes related to sexuality and gender identity.

## **Learning Games**

Learning games are effective for holding attention and encouraging active participation (Path, 2002). Teaching sexuality issues can be tense and uncomfortable to teachers as well as students. Games can help break the tension, increase retention, cohesiveness, enhance conversations, teach social skills, and build critical thinking skills (Path, 2002).

Teachers should carefully select games that are within the guidelines set forth by his or her school and must be appropriate for minors. Games such as bingo can serve as an icebreaker as a difficult topic is introduced. For example, a bingo sheet can be used with examples of gender stereotypes that students can indicate if they ever had a similar experience.

Many television game shows can be modified for use in the classroom. A LGBTQ jeopardy game can be used to present questions related to the historical timeline of advocacy related to sexual identity. The LGBT Resource Center at the University of Southern California recommends a non-gender specific dating game. This game involves a challenge to talk about a recent date with a significant other or friend without using gender specific language (she, him, boy, girl, woman, etc). Participants will be timed for two minutes. A buzzer can be used to create excitement when someone uses a gender-specific pronoun. This game will give students an understanding of the challenges faced by individuals in non-heterosexual relationships when talking about their partners or spouses. The teacher can follow this game with a discussion where students reflect on the experience and how they felt while playing the game.

## **Electronic Audience Response Systems**

Teachers can use Audience Response Systems (ARS) to encourage wide participation, discuss controversial topics in sexuality, and test student knowledge. Web-based ARS such as Plickers and Poll Everywhere provide inexpensive ways to collect anonymous responses from students. ARS allow the facilitator to conduct anonymous polls, quizzes, and provide immediate feedback to students or their audience. Participants who are shy or afraid of voicing their opinions have the opportunity to do so. Topics such as gender role attitudes, attitudes about pornography, sexual orientation, and debunking myths about sexuality may be explored using ARS. Teachers should ensure that the use of ARS does not reveal students' identity.

Kahoot is an online-based platform that teachers can use to develop surveys, quizzes, ice breakers, and games for use in or outside the classroom using electronic devices. Questions for discussion of challenging topics can be posed and responses solicited in an anonymous way. Students' responses to a lesson can also be assessed using this tool. For example, myths about rape, reaction to news about a sexual assault, reaction to the bullying of someone because of their sexual identity, may be presented and facilitated on Kahoot. After students' responses are recorded and displayed anonymously, a discussion should follow.

There are multiple benefits of using Kahoot and similar electronic platforms: Teachers who are nervous about introducing the topic have a way to ease into the discussion, students have the opportunity to think about the issues, and students may present their perspectives without fear of being identified by other students. Teachers should ensure that the use of any electronic devices are approved by their school. Because the internet will be required for online games and ARS, it is beneficial for schools to provide computers, tablets, or similar devices with the appropriate controls to limit the use to the particular stimuli being introduced.

## **Videoconferencing**

Skype, Adobe Connect, Uber Conference, and Blackboard Collaborate are resources instructors can use to bring guest speakers into the educational setting at little or no cost. For example, teachers may know a person who is transgender, who is not accessible in the community. Using any of the online resources described above, a panel of experts and/or people with experiences with sexual harassment, or LGBTQ-associated bullying could share insights with students without entering the classroom. It may be helpful to ask students to submit questions for guests and panel speakers ahead of time so the teacher can gauge the questions and concerns of the students, and also stimulate ongoing dialogue. Video-conferencing tools can be used to include international perspectives and diverse experiences that learners may not encounter in their environments. Such tools could also be interactive, with participants dialoguing with video guests.

## **Social Networking**

Many schools utilize programs such as Blackboard, Moodle, etc. These platforms provide interactive opportunities such as wikis, blogs, online discussions, polling and quiz tools. However, many organizations, practitioners, and teachers may not have access to these large-scale programs. For those who do not have this technology on hand, interactive networking is available through such readily accessible and free sites as Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Survey Monkey, and Twitter. All have interactive tools that can be used to engage students and teachers. Some schools restrict the use of social media on school-owned electronic devices. Parents may also restrict children from having social media accounts. Teachers should check the rules before requiring the use of social network sites. With careful planning, teachers may be able to obtain permission to use Twitter and online platforms with high school students teach about sexual assault prevention and bullying.

## **Internet/Websites**

Making sexuality education and advocacy websites available for learners may expand their awareness, support textual material, and reinforce legitimacy and activism for teaching concepts such as gender identity and sexuality. Teachers can visit the websites in class and highlight pertinent information to students. Teachers can ask students what they would like to know, then, show them how to retrieve the information from the websites. Another strategy that teachers can use is to give students specific information to search for on the website. For example, some websites have links to definitions, teachers can have students find the definitions for a list of terms. Students can also search for rates of sexual or dating violence among middle and high school students using the Center for Disease Control's website or websites identified by the teacher. Teachers can create a screencast to walk students through the process as well.

There are also several websites that teachers can use for his or her own professional development:

- Edutopia
- Gay Lesbian, Straight, Education Network (GLSEN)
- Gay Straight Alliance
- Green Dot
- National Gay & Lesbian Task Force
- Parents, Families, & Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)

- Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)
- The Kinsey Institute

### **Creating Videos/Documentaries**

Class assignments can be created to require students create/design videos/public announcements to promote positive aspects of sexuality. For example, students could create a short documentary promoting gender equality or tolerance for variations in gender identity. Students can interview teachers, peers or family members about their response to sexual assault, dating violence or bullying of LGBTQ populations (students should be instructed to avoid using minors and protocols for the protection of human subjects should be followed). A YouTube account controlled by the teacher or school can be used to upload the videos. As mentioned in previous sections, students should be educated about copyright issues and referencing the work of others. School policies related to the use of electronic devices and the internet must be considered. It is likely that projects will be completed at home so parental approval may be needed. Teachers should follow school protocol for assignments and obtain permission from parents as needed.

### **Videos and Documentaries**

Facilitators should locate current and up-to-date videos and documentaries. Older films can be effective because students will see the film for the first time in class and will not have preconceived notions about the characters in this particular film. The following are films that can be used in with high school students to raise awareness of sexual identity issues. *Courage in the Face of Hate* (2012) is a Canadian documentary which shows the perspectives of LGBTQ people and their experiences in a variety of settings. The entire film does not have to be shown. One or two of the stories could be highlighted as part of a lesson. A guided class discussion should follow.

*Miss Representation* (2013) is a documentary that examines the way women and represented in the media and provides many examples of over-sexualized media images of females and its impact on viewers. The ways women in leadership roles and politics are portrayed are highlighted. Media personalities such as Katie Couric and Rachel Madow are featured. This documentary includes a discussion guide tailored to fit a middle or high school audience.

The recent case of high school football players in Steubenville Ohio who sexually assaulted a peer is available in a documentary format on ABC's *20-20*. The documentary can also be found on Films on Demand. FCS teachers can use a short clip to begin a discussion about the impact of bystanders and sexual violence. Teachers should be mindful about how graphic words or pictures are and should warn students ahead of time about the nature of the content. A partnership with school counselors may be necessary to help adolescents who experience emotional distress. Seniors in high school FCS classes will benefit from viewing this documentary because it mirrors many of the recent cases of sexual assault on college campuses. The teacher should allocate substantial time for debriefing if this documentary is used in the classroom.

There are a variety of sources of free online videos that teachers can also use: YouTube EDU, PBS video portal, Hulu documentaries. As part of professional development training, documentaries can be used to aid in teacher reflection. It is a good way for teachers to check their biases. The following are some titles: 1) *For the Bible Tells Me So* (2007), which examines the intersection between religion and homosexuality in the U.S.; 2) *Trans* (2012), a film

featuring transgender identities; and (3) *Hunting Ground* (2015) features sexual assault on college campuses (MPAA rating, PG-13). The content of these films are better suited for adult audiences and help teachers understand the issues pertaining to gender and sexual identity. Teachers can use these films to reflect and address their own biases and develop effective strategies for teaching the course.

## Music

Music can provide an invaluable bridge to the discussion of issues. Teachers may access several songs from popular artists with music that promote gender stereotypes. Videos that help to empower women and challenge gender stereotypes are also available. These can be downloaded and used in an online course or experientially in a face-to-face session. Teachers must ensure that showing the videos is within copyright guidelines. Consultation with a media or library specialist would be imperative before showing any videos or movies. Many videos and clips on YouTube infringe on copyrights so teachers should take steps to ensure that he or she is within copyright laws.

Some examples of popular songs that could be used with FCS teacher education students include:

**Disney-themed songs.** Songs such as “Someday My Prince Will Come,” from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) the princess wants and needs the prince to kiss her to lift a spell. The lyrics of “Kiss the Girl,” depicts Ariel in her beauty and demands that Prince Eric must take the initiative to kiss Ariel. The songs reinforce gender stereotypes and the beliefs that it is okay for men to act on impulses. Teachers can discuss with students the impact of maintenance norms such as these on employment decisions, sexual harassment, and romantic relationships.

**Songs related to stereotypes.** Beyonce Knowles’ song, “If I were a boy,” shows a reversal of the male stereotype when Beyonce takes on the stereotypical masculine role. Students can identify the many stereotypes portrayed through this song. It would help if the music video is used for this activity because it puts several actions that students can readily choose from. Rae Lyn’s “God made girls” is another example of a song with sexist messages: "Somebody's gotta wear a pretty skirt / Somebody's gotta be the one to flirt / Somebody's gotta wanna hold his hand / Somebody's gotta be the one to cry/Somebody's gotta let him drive, give him a reason to hold that door/ So God made girls" (Raelyn, 2014). This song, like several other Disney movies, reinforces patriarchal gender roles where girls are expected to support their male partners and maintain societal standard of beauty (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek, 2011). Teachers can have students demonstrate how the songs reinforces gender stereotypes. Students can indicate why the assumption of a pretty look limits females. They can also make connections to the rape culture and other pay equity issues. They can lead the conversation to show that if the expectation is that girls are expected to hold a man’s hand and to look pretty then their value in the workplace may not be acknowledged on the same level with a male and that they are mainly for the sexual gratification of their partners. Such issues are in line with FCS Standard 3 and the development of healthy interpersonal relationships.

## Limitations

The FCS curriculum is well suited to address issues of gender and sexual identity, but it is not an easy task. The strategies discussed above may not be appropriate for all audiences. Purchasing videos, tablets, and other programs to implement the strategies documented above can be a challenge for schools with limited financial resources. Across the United States, policies and laws are being implemented to either support sexual minority families, or, in some cases,

restrict them. Many schools retain a very conservative approach to sexuality education and convincing school officials and parents about the need to use the materials with students may be a daunting task. The National Conference on State Legislatures (2016) indicated that four states allow for parental consent before students can receive instruction in sexuality education and 35 states provide an opt out of sexuality education. Additionally, 38 states require school districts to allow parental involvement in sexuality education programs. Therefore, obtaining parental consent could be difficult and burdensome for teachers. Despite these limitations, recent legislative changes have made it easier to advocate for a more inclusive curriculum.

### Conclusion

Family structures have evolved and may continue to change. With the legalization of same sex marriage and heightened discussions of inclusion and gender equality, we can anticipate changes in schools across the country. From issues of bathroom use to changes in textbook definition of marriage and parenting. Thus, high school FCS teachers must be ready to adapt curricula to fit the diversity within families and among the students that they teach. Reports from Pew (2016) clearly shows a changing perception for LGBTQ issues and individuals. More Americans are showing greater acceptance and tolerance. The changing of laws and executive orders have also cemented the changing view of family structure, sexual orientation, and gender fluidity. FCS teachers will see changes in state standards, textbooks, and school policies. Teachers' personal and professional responses may affect the atmosphere in the classroom. Like teachers, students enter the classroom with their personal beliefs and the classroom must be a place that encourages discourse as well as provide accurate information regarding family life and human development.

The activities described in this paper can serve two purposes: 1) FCS teachers can use the materials to help increase their knowledge, comfort, and awareness of the gender identity issues; 2) where appropriate, the activities can be modified for a high school audience to help students increase their knowledge and awareness of the issues affecting families. Despite the limitations in providing instruction about sexuality and gender in the context of interpersonal relationships, the FCS curriculum and changing policy can encourage teachers to teach with more inclusion of LGBTQ and gender identity issues.

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