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# Homophobia and Heterosexism in Public School Reform: Constructions of Gender and Sexuality in California's Single Gender Academies

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This article examines heterosexist assumptions and the role of homophobia in students' experiences in California's public "Single Gender Academies," in an effort to include issues of sexuality in current discourses on adolescent gender identity and public school reform. Interviews with students, conducted as part of the most comprehensive research on public single-sex schooling in the U.S. to date, reveal a critical link between students' notions of sexuality and definitions of masculinity and femininity. Alongside dichotomous, static notions of gender, the ideology and structure of the Single Gender Academies largely promoted heterosexist assumptions of students' sexuality. Such assumptions pervaded school policies and practices as well as peer relations and students' sense of gender identity. Students, in turn, both actively constructed and resisted a theory of gender which framed boys and girls in opposition and promoted heterosexuality as the norm. This article provides an analysis of homophobia among students and the influence of academy assumptions on students' attitudes. Such a focus allows for an investigation of gender and sexuality at both individual and institutional levels. While the research is based on data collected at public single-sex schools, the findings provide insight into students' articulations of gender and sexuality across a variety of school contexts.

**T**he last decade of educational reform has been notable for the wide array of alternative initiatives introduced in the public school system. Alongside the more nationally renowned charter school and voucher movements is a resurgence of interest in single-sex education. At this point, at least 15 states have experimented with single-sex schooling, in the form of all-girls or all-boys classes within a coed institution or as separate institutions. The Bush administration has recently brought national attention to the movement with an appropriation of funds to expand single-sex schooling in the public sector (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). In 1997, California's former Governor Pete Wilson introduced single-sex education into the public secondary school system through the funding of "Single Gender Academies,"<sup>1</sup> the largest experiment with public single-sex education to date.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this resurgence, we still have little understanding of students' experiences of single-sex schooling, particularly the influence of an all-girl or all-boy environment on student definitions of gender and sexuality. Based on research in California's public Single Gender

Academies, this article provides a much-needed analysis of constructions of gender and sexuality in single-sex schools. The ideology and structure of the academies largely promoted heterosexist assumptions of students' sexuality, which were in turn reinforced through student relations and students' own expectations of gender and sexuality.

Within the literature on single-sex education, there has been little attention to issues of sexuality, such as the impact of single-sex institutions on the construction of sexuality or students' experiences of homophobia in single-sex schools. The two most exhaustive literature reviews on the topic of single-sex education (Mael, 1998; Morse, 1998) uncover no discussion of issues of sexuality. At the same time, there is little research that considers the impact of heterosexism and homophobia in students' lives, regardless of their sexuality. Most studies focus on the experiences of gay and lesbian youth, and very few consider the experiences of middle and high school students (Mandel & Shakeshaft, 1997).

This article pushes the discussion a step further, offering an analysis of heterosexism and homophobia among middle and high school students enrolled in California's public Single Gender Academies. Ultimately, this research expands our understanding of gender and sexuality as salient factors in students' lives. Any school reform

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which highlights gender as a significant marker of identity must consider the implications of such policy on students' lives. Girls and boys attending the Single Gender Academies were no longer merely "students," but were systematically defined by gender and sexuality.<sup>3</sup> How students respond to, interpret, and act upon those definitions is of central relevance to educators. Beyond simply a study of single-sex education, this research brings considerations of gender and sexuality into discussions of school reform and has implications for raising awareness of students' experiences of homophobia across school contexts.

### UNDERSTANDING CALIFORNIA'S SINGLE GENDER ACADEMY "EXPERIMENT"

In an effort to initiate public single-sex schooling in California, districts were invited to submit proposals for the creation of one girls' and one boys' academy within the same school site. Each district would receive \$500,000—a significant amount of money for a state-funded reform effort—for the start-up and continuation of the academies for two years, with the expectation that the academies would become self-sufficient after that time<sup>4</sup>.

The 12 resulting academies (six girls' and six boys' academies in six participating districts) represent the largest incidence of single-sex schooling within the public sector since the passage of the federal legislation Title IX (Education Amendments of 1972)<sup>5</sup>. Most recent efforts, whether in the form of separate classes or entire schools, have been criticized and eventually shut down. California policymakers were quick to realize that any attempts to provide separate schooling would have to be offered equally to boys and girls. Therefore, the legislation called for "equal access to the schools," and required that for "all aspects of the curricula, the educational opportunity must be equal for boys and girls" (CA Education Code 58522b, 2–3).

The recent interest in public single-sex education is notable, given the absence of consistent research findings supporting this structure. Indeed, the research conducted thus far reveals far more contradictions than patterns of commonality (Morse, 1998). Research on single-sex schooling tends to employ quantitative approaches, using student outcome measurements (standardized test scores, grades, career aspirations) to assess its effectiveness as compared to co-educational environments (Lee & Bryk, 1986; LePore & Warren, 1997). Although these measurements are important to consider, they provide little attention to the complexities of students' experiences.

This article draws from one of the first comprehensive qualitative studies of public single-sex schooling (Datnow, Hubbard, & Woody, 2001), with a specific focus

on student experiences (Woody, 2001). Qualitative data from over 300 interviews with students (girls and boys), teachers, administrators, and parents, conducted during three years of site visits, provides insight into adolescent articulations of gender and sexuality. Teams of two or three researchers visited each site for a period of two to three days during each school year from 1997–2000, conducting interviews and classroom observations. Despite the closures, site visits continued in an effort to explore students' transitions back into a co-educational environment. Following a semi-structured interview protocol, the majority of students enrolled in the academies were interviewed individually or in same-sex focus groups of two to four students. Students were asked their reasons for enrollment in the academies, and their impressions of the impact of the academies on their social and academic experiences, as compared to co-educational experiences. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, along with field notes from school and classroom observations. Using qualitative data analysis software (Hyper-Research), transcripts were coded according to predetermined and emergent themes. Case reports were written for each site, in an effort to illuminate cross-site similarities and complexities.

This research adds necessary layers of complexity to existing quantitative data, offering insight into current assumptions of single-sex education. More importantly, this article offers a unique look at public single-sex schooling from the perspective of a diverse student population, both girls and boys<sup>6</sup>. Four of the sites served middle school students, and two sites served high school students. The school sites include a rural, predominantly white, working-class community, a suburban middle-class community, and several urban Latino and African American communities. There was significant racial and socioeconomic diversity among students at each of the academies (see Appendix). This is a key difference between this and other studies of single-sex education, which have primarily been conducted in private or Catholic institutions. The following discussion provides an analysis of salient themes throughout each academy, across race, class, and community, representing a diversity of voices and contexts.

### SCHOOLING (HETERO)SEXUALITY

Heterosexist assumptions were pervasive in California's Single Gender Academies. While the unique context of the all-boys and all-girls academies may have highlighted such attitudes, they are hardly unique to single-sex institutions. The formal curriculum in most schools excludes the voices of gay and lesbian writers, historical figures, and scholars. Issues of homosexuality, for example, are consistently avoided in the context of English courses (as in the case of failing to discuss

an author's sexuality when relevant) or in sex education classes (when homosexuality is not presented as an acceptable expression of love and desire) (Epstein & Johnson, 1994).

Recent efforts to include discussions of homosexuality in the curriculum have been met with overwhelming opposition. The well-publicized battle in New York City public schools over the Children of the Rainbow curriculum demonstrated a continuing resistance to the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in an otherwise accepted multicultural curriculum (Karp, 1995). Despite statistics which estimate that two to eight million parents in the U.S. are gay, schools continue to silence the experiences of those students and their families (Patterson, 1995).

Informal school practices contribute to a privileging of heterosexuality as well. Friend (1993) writes of the "systematic exclusion" in schools, "whereby positive role models, messages, and images about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are publicly silenced" (p. 212). Teachers' inability to be "out" in the context of their classrooms, often due to administrative or community disapproval, results in the absence of adult role models for gay youth. The irony, of course, is that heterosexual teachers do not experience the same constraints in discussing their personal lives. The resulting message is that homosexual relations are something to be hidden, kept separate from the daily interactions of school life.

When issues of homosexuality are discussed in schools, the result is often what Friend (1993) calls "systematic inclusion." Homosexuality is presented as a negative concept, associated with deviance or disease. A common example is the inclusion of gay or lesbian voices only in the context of a discussion about AIDS in a sex education course. As discussed later in this article, teachers in the Single Gender Academies rarely discussed issues of homosexuality in their classrooms. The few instances where such issues were addressed occurred in a marginalized context, with a guest speaker on the topic of AIDS:

*Interviewer:* Do teachers teach you about sexuality, about gays and lesbians and stuff?

*Student:* They don't teach us that at all, but they have these people who came in and talked about it and said, [that] you can get AIDS from, stuff like that.

The underlying messages are that all gay people have AIDS, or, conversely, that all people with AIDS are gay. Neither message is useful to students, and both fuel students' misconceptions of homosexuality. The use of a guest speaker places issues of sexuality outside the context of the formal curriculum. Inevitably, homosexuality is seen as the "other," not acknowledged as an integral part of the social fabric of students' and teachers' lives.

## DEFINING GENDER THROUGH HOMOPHOBIA AND HETEROSEXISM

The majority of research on sexuality in schools focuses on the experiences of gay and lesbian students, asking how heterosexist assumptions influence such factors as academic performance and self-esteem. Indeed, only a handful of studies exist that consider the influence of the heterosexist curriculum on all students (Mandel & Shakeshaft, 1997). This paper expands the literature by examining the intersection of gender and sexuality in students' lives, regardless of sexual orientation.

Mandel and Shakeshaft (1997) note how the heterosexist curriculum influences not only gay and lesbian students, but all adolescents involved in the process of gender identity formation, "Not only do students believe that a heterosexual identity is central to their gender identity, but assumptions about heterosexuality appear to dictate gender roles and expectations about who they believe they can and can't be as females and males" (p. 27). Epstein (1996) writes of similar links between gender and sexuality in her analysis of young children's understandings of what it means to be a girl or a boy. When asked, for example, to predict their futures, many of the girls in her study drew themselves as brides and mothers. Epstein interpreted this not only as "reflecting stereotyped gender roles," but also as "an active reinvestment in and construction of themselves as heterosexually feminized beings" (p. 4). Heterosexuality was another means by which these girls defined femininity.

Coupled with assumptions of heterosexuality are attitudes of homophobia, often manifested in peer relations through bullying and teasing (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 1993, 2001). Homophobia, as a byproduct of heterosexism, becomes a means to regulate gendered behavior among boys and girls. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) argue:

Name calling and physical and psychological abuse are not merely a series of incidental events arising from backward attitudes. They are part of a larger set of practices which assist in the construction of a daily gender and sexual reality (p. 164).

Indeed, homophobia must be understood not merely as a disapproval of homosexuality, but as a means of enforcing normative masculinity and femininity. Homophobic teasing allowed students in the Single Gender Academies to define gender-appropriate behavior. Students understood that any deviations from normative behavior would result in being labeled gay. The threat of being called gay, in turn, kept students from crossing those boundaries of gender.

Homophobia towards boys in the Single Gender Academies often focused on their similarity to girls. A boy who acted outside the norms of appropriate

gendered behavior by exhibiting stereotypically feminine traits was labeled gay. In describing social practices of gender construction, Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) explain:

One of these is the rejection of homosexuality, another is the disparaging of femininity, and both are connected in the equation of homosexuality with effeminacy. Misogyny and homophobia are therefore closely linked in their relation to dominant masculinity (p. 164).

While girls enrolled in the academies were certainly subject to homophobic teasing, such comments spoke less to notions of femininity. Homophobia directed at girls was primarily a result of their enrollment in a single-sex institution, and less in response to non-conforming gendered behavior. This may be in part due to the fact that a girl challenging gender stereotypes (i.e., acting like a "tomboy") might not raise the same concerns as does a boy acting like a girl. As Epstein (1997) explains, "For a girl to be more like a boy can be interpreted positively, while for a boy to be more like a girl is, almost invariably, seen as problematic because being a girl is, in some sense, disreputable" (pp. 109–110). The underlying message is that being gay and being female are both negative.<sup>7</sup> Epstein concludes, "The dual Others to normative heterosexual masculinities in schools are girls/women and non-macho boys/men. It is against these that many, perhaps most, boys seek to define their identities" (p. 113). Constructions of masculinity are tied not only to appropriate notions of gender, but to sexuality as well.

Girls, too, face pressures to prove their femininity through heterosexual behaviors. A girl who decides she does not want to have sex with a boy may find herself subject to homophobic teasing. One girl in Haag's (1999) report stated, "And when I didn't [have sex] because I'm not that kind of girl... They called me a bitch and a lesbian" (p. 29). Girls are confronted with contradictory notions of sexuality; they risk being labeled a "slut" if they do decide to have sex, or being called "gay" if they do not have sex. Within the Single Gender Academies, girls consistently heard messages to "stay away from the boys," warning of the risks of heterosexual activity. Yet the simultaneous teasing for being enrolled in an all-girls' school (and hence "staying away from the boys") sent contradictory messages about the risks of homosexuality as well. Girls' gendered and sexual expression is limited by notions of appropriate femininity as well as expectations of heterosexuality.

After extensive interviews with middle school boys and girls, Mandel and Shakeshaft (1997) offer several findings that are consistent with the research findings on the Single Gender Academies:

The heterosexist curriculum requires girls to focus on appearance and boyfriends, and boys to focus on machoism, athletics, and sexual prowess... reinforces gender asymmetry between female and male students... [and] enforces highly (hetero)sexualized gender relations (p. 27).

Heterosexist assumptions within the Single Gender Academies reinforced a dichotomous theory of gender that framed boys and girls in opposition and promoted heterosexuality as the norm. As a result, students' notions of gender and sexuality were reinforced by institutional assumptions of heterosexuality in the Single Gender Academies.

### INSTITUTIONAL ASSUMPTIONS OF HETEROSEXUALITY IN THE SINGLE GENDER ACADEMIES

The Single Gender Academies were created under the assumption that a segregated environment would reduce distractions between boys and girls. Single-sex schooling was seen as a means to prevent what adults described as the inevitable sexual tension between adolescent girls and boys. The "discourse of distractions" which fueled the establishment of these academies was grounded in the assumption that the primary sexual relationship among students would be of a heterosexual nature, and that students were distracted almost exclusively by members of the other sex. It also was assumed that sexual distractions would only occur among boys and girls in co-educational spaces.

Such assumptions failed to provide a complete understanding of sexuality in adolescent peer relations. As we found through interviews and observations, students continued to distract each other regardless of classroom organization. Boys complained of an increase in physical harassment in the all-boys classes; girls reported an increase in fighting among girls at several academies (Datnow et al., 2001). Distraction was not simply a cross-gender, co-educational phenomenon; girls were distracted by girls and boys were distracted by boys.

Yet clearly there was a significant link between the institutional design of the academies and notions of sexuality. The Single Gender Academies were presented as an alternative to what adults described as (hetero)sexually charged co-ed environments. Single-sex spaces represented more than simply a place to educate girls and boys. Separating boys and girls sent students clear messages about gender and sexuality. Separate spaces for boys and girls supported the theory that gender was an oppositional characteristic, highlighting differences and obscuring commonalities between the sexes. The structure of the academies also had implications for

students' sexuality, resulting in what Connell (1996) describes as the "heterosexual construction of masculine and feminine as opposites (as in 'the opposite sex,' 'opposites attract')" (p. 215). Students' sexuality was defined in terms of heterosexual relations; the inevitable physical attraction of boys and girls would get in the way of academic pursuits.

The Single Gender Academies at once constructed students' sexuality and made efforts to remove sexuality from the classroom. Within the all-girls and all-boys environments, there were fewer opportunities for students to "enact" heterosexuality. The familiar, albeit often harmful, patterns of boy-girl relations, including teasing, flirting, and harassment, were no longer available to students within the single-sex classrooms<sup>8</sup>. This provided a certain amount of freedom for many students, removed from academic and social distractions. Yet, students recognized the implications of admitting a preference for the single-sex environment. A seemingly innocent question of whether a student enjoyed their all-girls or all-boys classroom raised hesitations in our interviews. Articulating a preference for the Single Gender Academies carried unforeseen risks. Often, students were compelled to qualify their answer with an assertion of heterosexuality:

And first I think the all-boys' class, instead of being distracted by girls, academically you can learn more. But it's not like I don't like girls, I love them.

Through such comments, boys and girls made clear the distinction between their support of same-sex classrooms and same-sex relationships. Admitting a preference for all-boys' or all-girls' classes carried with it an assumption of homosexuality. The single-sex structure of the academies held unforeseen implications for students' sense of sexual identity.

## STUDENT CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE SINGLE GENDER ACADEMIES

Perhaps most significant in our findings was student agency in the construction and maintenance of an institutional framework of heterosexuality. Students actively constructed sexuality, and in turn, gender, through homophobic and heterosexist comments. These comments were homophobic in the sense that students considered a homosexual identity to be a derogatory accusation, and heterosexist in that students presumed heterosexuality as the norm. Such comments were made largely in the form of teasing between academy and non-academy students, as well as among academy students.

Academy students, both boys and girls, across all sites, complained of persistent harassment for their enrollment in an all-boys or all-girls school. The assumption was that

any student who chose to attend in a single-sex institution was either gay or risked "becoming" gay:

*Interviewer:* What do your homies say about you going to an all boy's school?

*Student:* Ah, they say you're queer. That you're going to be a faggot and shit.

*Interviewer:* What do your friends say that are not in the single gender? What do they say about you guys being in a class with all girls?

*Student 1:* They say we're lesbians.

*Student 2:* Yeah. They say we're gay and then they say we're either gay or we're going to turn gay.

The significance of such complaints is that students consistently perceived assumptions of homosexuality to be derogatory. Indeed, according to the AAUW (1993) survey on sexual harassment, homophobic teasing ranks among the most upsetting forms of sexual harassment for both boys and girls. Eighty-seven percent of girls and 85% of boys reported that they would be very upset if they were identified by their peers as gay or lesbian<sup>9</sup>. These percentages are notable when considering how homophobic teasing is perceived as just as, if not more, offensive than other, more physical types of harassment, "No other type of harassment—including actual physical abuse—provoked a reaction this strong among boys" (AAUW, 1993, p. 20). Students clearly understood that to be called gay or lesbian is to be insulted.

Assumptions of homosexuality are not uncommon among students at single-sex institutions (Ruhlman, 1996). In an effort to understand the reasoning behind assumptions that a single-sex school could "turn" someone gay, we asked students for their interpretation of the teasing. Put simply, one student explained, "Because it's just all-boys and all-girls." We then pushed students to consider other instances of all-boy or all-girl groupings:

*Interviewer:* Why do you think it is that people would think that a school, like a single-gender school, would be gay, but would they ever say that all the girls in the all-girls ballet class were gay?

*Student:* No, 'cause then they go see people . . . they see boys, they're not in there all day.

*Interviewer:* The ballet class?

*Student:* Yeah, in the ballet classes they see boys and they're not in there all day, and they can go to school with the boys.

The stereotype of homosexuality was partially grounded in temporal issues; being in a single-sex environment for a short period of time was less suspect than one that lasted the entire school day. An all-girls ballet class, for example, did not limit girls' exposure to boys throughout the day.

Ballet and football provided examples of single-sex events which did not raise the same fears of homosexuality. These activities occurred within a limited time period, and did not preclude daily co-ed interactions. More importantly, students pointed out, they were accepted as, and indeed expected to be, single-sex institutions, "It's always been guy football, but the gender academy, they're kind of new." By virtue of their newness, the academies were considered suspect:

*Interviewer:* So just because this was the only school that had it, why does that make it different?

*Student:* If every school had a gender academy, it would be kind of different because everybody would see it at every school.

*Interviewer:* Oh, so they'd just be used to it?

*Student:* Yeah.

Students explained that the uniqueness of single-sex academies within the public school system contributed to assumptions of homosexuality.<sup>10</sup>

Issues of choice also played heavily into perceptions of homosexuality in the Single Gender Academies. Enrollment in the academies was officially open to any student in the district, thereby requiring students to actively enroll in an all-boys or all-girls school. Many saw the willingness on the part of academy students to choose single-sex over co-ed classes as a sign that they were gay. In several cases, the assumption of homosexuality associated with choosing an all-girls or all-boys school deterred students from enrolling in the Single Gender Academies: "At first—well I refused 'cause I was like, 'I'm not going into no all-boy's class. Do I look gay or something?'" While this student eventually did enroll, his initial response to the academies reflected prevailing stereotypes. Once students did enroll, they encouraged non-academy peers to join them, often to no avail, "They're like, "No. I don't want to be gay." Despite a positive endorsement from friends in the academies, many students did not enroll due to a fear of being considered gay:

*Interviewer:* Why did not a lot of kids show up?

*Student:* Because they want to put on an act. . . . They might want the single gender class but they're not going to say, "I want that." A bunch of people might think I'm gay, which I'm not gay.

The stigma of being gay prevented some students from even showing interest in the academies.

## STUDENT RESPONSES TO HOMOPHOBIC AND HETEROSEXIST TEASING

Across the sites, those students who did enroll in the Single Gender Academies tended to respond to homo-

phobic comments in similar fashion. When teased for being gay, a common retort was to point to the extra resources associated with the academies<sup>11</sup>. Students reminded their non-academy peers that the academies provided opportunities like field trips and access to computers which were unheard of in other schools in the district. Along with resources, students relied on the argument that enrollment in the academies would improve their grades, in an effort to diffuse assumptions of homosexuality. For a variety of reasons beyond the single-sex environment (including a reduction in certain types of distractions, smaller class size, and a sense of teacher commitment) many students did experience academic improvement in the Single Gender Academies (Datnow et al., 2001). Grades then became another means of justifying enrollment in an all-girls or all-boys school. Students pointed to those aspects of the academies which held universal appeal, thereby drawing attention away from the more questionable single-sex aspect. In this sense, students diverted accusations of being gay by providing "legitimate" reasons for their enrollment.

When students did directly address accusations of homosexuality, the emphasis was on denial. Students would simply insist that they were not gay, or in some cases, offer an assertion of heterosexuality. One boy, for example, made sure to tell us that he had a girlfriend, "Who has the cutest girlfriend in this room? Thank you very much." Denials were most often heard in conjunction with students' insistence that they were not bothered by the teasing. Students explained that they were offended by assumptions of homosexuality, because it simply was not true:

*Student:* But I know they were kidding around. Like my friend said, "You're a lesbian."

*Interviewer:* Is it even an issue by someone calling you that?

*Student:* No. Because I know it's not true.

*Student:* Some people in the mixed classes say, "Are you in the gender academy?" And we're like, "Yeah." They're like, "Man you're gay," and stuff like that.

*Interviewer:* Really? And then what did you say? Well how did it make you feel?

*Student:* I didn't care.

*Interviewer:* You didn't care?

*Student:* Cause we're not fruity.

The underlying logic in their responses was that to take offense would imply that one actually was gay or lesbian. Thus, it would follow, the ability to ignore the teasing confirmed one's heterosexuality. The surest "proof" against accusations of being gay was, quite simply, to not be gay. Students, in a sense, sidestepped issues of sexuality by not engaging in a dialogue about the possibility

of being gay. They were not interested in challenging the faulty rationale behind the myth that an all-boys or all-girls institution might turn someone gay. Instead, with straightforward denials, they upheld institutional assumptions of heterosexuality.

## TEACHER RESPONSES TO HOMOPHOBIC AND HETEROSEXIST TEASING

Teachers' responses to the persistent homophobic teasing in the Single Gender Academies contributed to a normalizing of heterosexuality as well. Teachers across all sites encouraged students to ignore the teasing, further promoting the response that they were simply not gay. In many ways, the teachers' and administrators' responses mirrored student responses of denial. During an interview with the principal at Eastlake, for example, the topic of lesbian students was raised. There was a small group of self-identified lesbians who were generating some controversy on the campus. The principal made sure to declare the heterosexuality of her students, "Don't get me wrong, this is a small segment of the population. . . . The majority of the girls here are boy-crazy; the majority of them are boy-crazy." She insisted that the lesbian students were a minority population at the school, thereby effectively marginalizing their experiences and upholding a presumption of heterosexuality.

The majority of homophobic comments took place outside of the classrooms, beyond the presence of teacher supervision. This is not to say, however, that teachers were unaware of the teasing. Yet most teachers chose to dismiss the issue and encouraged students to do the same:

*Interviewer:* Did you guys—were the teachers aware of this?

*Student:* Yeah.

*Interviewer:* And did they talk to you guys about it?

*Student:* Yeah. They said don't worry about it. Like they said [to] tell them that you don't want to hear it or whatever.

*Student:* I say, "I'm not," and then they still say it, "Yeah you are gay, you are gay," like that.

*Interviewer:* Did you talk to teachers about what students say?

*Student:* Yeah, and then he said—

*Interviewer:* What did Mr. Bernardo say?

*Student:* Mr. Bernardo said, if they call you gay just ignore them, that's all—

While issues of homosexuality clearly played a prominent role in students' daily experiences in the Single Gender Academies, teachers failed to take on meaningful discussions around the topic. Just as we found teachers reluctant to discuss issues of gender, we found little

evidence of a willingness to engage with students around issues of sexuality.

Perhaps sensing teachers' reluctance to engage in these issues, students told us that they rarely bothered to report the teasing to their teachers. This was largely due to the fact that when teachers did become involved, their input was seen as ineffectual:

*Interviewer:* And they don't talk to you about that?

*Student 1:* No.

*Student 2:* Sometimes they'll get up once every three months and say, "All right I've heard enough of this stuff." And nobody ever says it [homophobic comments].

*Student 1:* And like ten minutes we'll start again.

Students recognized that teachers' efforts to stop homophobic teasing would have only a temporary effect, with little impact on behaviors or attitudes. This may be attributed to the fact that teachers in the Single Gender Academies rarely took a proactive stance against homophobia. Their response to students' complaints about teasing was either to ignore it or to silence it. Both approaches may have provided a short-term solution (albeit very short-term, as the above student suggests) to the problem at hand, yet did not address biases or misconceptions of homosexuality.

The academy teachers' responses are not unusual, as Gordon (1995) explains, "Because homosexuality is such a charged issue, teachers rarely confront children who use homophobic name-calling to humiliate and infuriate other children" (p. 40). Yet a seemingly innocent dismissal of the teasing may actually send a strong message about sexuality to students, as Gordon argues, "If adults criticize other forms of name-calling but ignore antigay remarks, children are quick to conclude that homophobia is acceptable because gay men and lesbians deserve to be oppressed" (p. 41). Simply ignoring the teasing in the Single Gender Academies allowed for a tacit approval of homophobia, and did little to dispel myths or to clarify students' understanding of homosexuality. Teachers' disciplinary actions, or lack thereof, further contributed to a privileging of heterosexuality and a silencing of homosexuality.

## UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' USE OF HOMOPHOBIA AND HETEROSEXISM TO DEFINE GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In order to understand the prevalence of homophobic teasing in the Single Gender Academies, it is useful to consider students' definitions of "gay." For the most part, the term gay was used to denote difference. As mentioned earlier, assumptions of homosexuality in the Single Gender Academies were largely based on the fact that public single-sex schooling was different from the norm.

Students applied similar assumptions of homosexuality to peers whose behavior was seen as unusual or different. Gay, therefore, could be applied to an institution, like the academies, or to a person; in either case, it was the difference of that institution or person that resulted in being labeled gay.

Student notions of “difference” among their peers held two distinct themes; the first was applied to boys or girls who acted outside the norms of gender, the second simply referred to odd or “weird” behavior regardless of gender or sexuality. In both cases, students directed homophobic comments towards peers whom they felt did not exhibit socially appropriate behavior. While homophobia was largely grounded in expectations of masculinity and femininity, assumptions of homosexuality were not limited to gendered behavior. Students often directed homophobic comments towards peers who were different not only for their non-normative gendered behavior, but simply because they were considered “weird.”

*Interviewer:* And do all guys like sports?

*Student 1:* Except Eugene.

*Student 2:* He’s gay.

*Interviewer:* And so that’s what makes you think Eugene might be gay?

*Student 2:* He makes all these weird noises. I don’t know why. He . . . talks to himself and makes these weird noises when he’s at his desk. He just gets so annoying.

Assumptions of homosexuality, as defined by difference, encompassed gendered expectations (that a boy who did not like sports would be gay) as well as non-gendered expectations of appropriate behavior (that a person who “makes weird noises” would be gay). When asked to explain why they used homophobia as a means to tease peers, students told us how any difference, regardless of its relevance to sexuality, elicited accusations of being gay:

*Student:* It’s not usual, it’s like, ok, every time somebody does something different, like hey, I mean, Chester, he pisses in the bed, that’s different, so everybody makes fun of him. Or like if somebody [stinks] people make fun of them ‘cause it’s different. If it’s real different that means they’ll make fun of them.

*Interviewer:* Ok, so it’s just difference.

*Student:* The difference.

Calling someone gay was one way to mark that difference. As a gay student interviewed in the recent Human Rights Watch report (Boechenek & Brown, 2001) put it, “It’s not like someone calling someone else an idiot. Not everyone gets called a faggot. It’s only for people who are different” (p. 22).

Pharr (1992) interprets the prevalence of homophobia during adolescence as part of the process of learn-

ing to conform to societal expectations of gender and sexuality:

It is not by chance that when children approach puberty and increased sexual awareness they begin to taunt each other by calling these names “queer,” “faggot,” “pervert.” It is at puberty that the full force of society’s pressure to conform to heterosexuality . . . is brought to bear. Children know what we have taught them, and we have given clear messages that those who deviate from standard expectations are to be made to get back in line. The best controlling tactic at puberty is to be treated as an outsider, to be ostracized at a time when it feels most vital to be accepted (p. 435).

A pronouncement of homosexuality allowed students in the Single Gender Academies to make sense of those boys or girls who did not fit the norms of gender. Students acknowledged diversity among boys and among girls, recognizing that all boys or all girls would not act the same (Woody, 2001). At the same time, however, students upheld traditional notions of gender, reinforcing strict definitions of how girls and boys should act. Homosexuality, then, provided a means to reconcile contradictions of gender:

*Student:* There’s a lot of guys that are a lot more feminine than regular guys. Like there’s some kids that I see walk around and talk to girls and like they kind of like, bounce around, kind of like a girl would. And they’re a lot more shy or something, like a girl. And a guy would notice that about another guy. And he probably would make fun of him. But in a sense he’s not really making fun. He’s just kind of saying like, look that guy kind of acts like, gayish or something.

The boy above explained how a boy who acted outside the norms of gender (i.e., “more feminine”) might be considered gay. Calling him gay might not necessarily be an effort to “make fun of him” so much as simply to offer an explanation for non-normative behavior. Any non-conforming behavior could be conveniently explained by homosexuality, which in turn was dismissed as deviant, thereby preserving the boundaries of appropriate masculinity or femininity.

Boys were particularly susceptible to claims of being gay when they exhibited non-stereotypical gendered behavior. Such teasing reflected students’ stricter definitions of masculinity (Woody, 2002). A boy might be called gay, for example, “like if he liked something like ballet, or the color pink.” Students also explained how showing affection among same-sex friends would hold different meaning if the friends were two girls or two boys:

*Student 1:* No, no, I think it’s normal if like girls hug or kiss each other.

*Student 2:* It’s just like a friend that they have.



*Student 1:* But I mean, like if we saw two boys hugging . . . and it's kind of different, but if they kiss.

*Interviewer:* If guys?

*Student 1:* Yeah, 'cause you're not used to it, you're not used to seeing that.

The sight of girls hugging seemed to be a fairly common, or "normal," event. However, the sight of two boys hugging would raise more concern, once again for its unfamiliarity. As Ferguson (2000) found in her research with urban African American boys, "Boys from an early age learn that affectionate public physical contact such as an embrace with those who are seen as most like oneself, other males, is taboo" (p. 192). Students' understanding of homosexuality was consistently grounded in notions of difference, and, more importantly, inappropriateness.

Students used sexuality as an indicator of masculinity or femininity. Boys and girls were expected to act within the norms of their gender, and to be heterosexual. Any evidence of challenging gender roles raised suspicions of sexuality as well. Boys who exhibited stereotypically feminine traits faced a questioning not only of their masculinity, but of their heterosexuality:

*Student:* There's one kid right there who's not very interested in girls. He's not straight.

*Interviewer:* Oh yeah? How do you know? What does he act like?

*Student:* I think this guy was supposed to be born a woman.

*Interviewer:* Why? Why do you say that?

*Student:* You sit around with him for a week and he acts like a girl.

"Acting like a girl" carried with it the presumption of homosexuality. As discussed earlier, homophobia and misogyny are linked in the construction of masculinity, "If boys are to feel secure on their dominant masculinity, they must convince themselves and others that they will have no part of the feminine or the homosexual" (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 164). Being called gay was seen as an insult; thus, the threat of being called gay served as a regulating force in the Single Gender Academies. When applied to gendered expectations, students' homophobic comments played a powerful role in defining masculinity and femininity.

For the most part, students' understanding of homosexuality had less to do with sexuality and more to do with gender and social relations. Students seemed more concerned with the stereotypical characteristics of a gay man or lesbian, for example, that a gay man would "like girly things," than with sexual aspects of homosexuality. Homophobia in the Single Gender Academies was not grounded in the actuality of gay or lesbian students so much as in the perception that those students exhibited characteristics of homosexuality, as defined by dif-

ference. Indeed, some students acknowledged this split between sexual activity and assumed traits:

*Interviewer:* Ok, you said that they might think that the guys were gay, what do you mean by that?

*Student:* Because they like girly things, so they would be gay.

*Interviewer:* So gay people like girly things?

*Student:* No, it's just that they . . . people would think that they might be [gay].

*Interviewer:* Ok, so you're not saying that they actually are gay, you're just saying that they might be teased about it?

*Student:* Uh huh.

This student expressed the subtle, yet significant distinction between actually being gay and being perceived as gay. If a boy liked "girly things," he would be teased for acting gay. The fact that he might not actually be gay was of little importance:

In most cases, perpetrators of vilification, harassment, bullying and gay bashing do not know if their victims are gay; they only presume that they are, or associate them with some stereotype of what typical gay behavior is thought to be (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 162).

Homophobic teasing in the Single Gender Academies was more often in response to gendered behaviors and attributes than to sexual experiences. As Friend (1993) explains, "A homophobic label is used to enforce a sexist arrangement and functions to try to keep all students, heterosexual and homosexual alike, from violating what is expected of them in terms of gender-role behaviors" (p. 232). The sexual orientation or behavior of the victim becomes irrelevant; homophobic teasing does not address sexual behavior so much as gendered behavior.

## STUDENT KNOWLEDGE OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Throughout our interviews, it became increasingly evident that students' knowledge of homosexuality was grounded in misinformation. Students admitted to having little or no contact (to their knowledge) with gay men or lesbians, as this girl explains:

I don't know. Everybody thinks she's—I don't know if she's gay or what. But she acts like it sometimes. . . . Because there isn't anybody that we actually know is gay in our school but there's some people that act like it.

When asked then, how they came to form opinions about homosexuality, the most common response was the popular media, such as the Jerry Springer show. While students today may have greater exposure to issues of homosexuality through popular media, there

is no guarantee that such information will be truthful or constructive. In their national survey of adolescents' knowledge of sexuality, Carrera and his colleagues (2000) conclude:

Adults in America sometimes assume that teens are very knowledgeable about sexuality and reproduction. They cite the ubiquity of sexual activity on television, in the movies, and in song lyrics as evidence that young people are getting lots of sex education. But these data do not support that conclusion. Whatever media exposure may be present is not leading to a well-informed teen population (p. 49).

Parents also played a significant role in influencing students' understanding of homosexuality, often reinforcing negative attitudes, as one student noted, "Some parents are like, gay people should be shot, and stuff like that." Students reported negative responses from parents concerning the assumptions of homosexuality associated with their children's enrollment in a Single Gender Academy:

*Interviewer:* Do you think your parents have a problem with the other kids calling you gay?

*Student 1:* Oh, my parents . . . my step-dad would probably get pretty mad.

*Student 2:* Yeah, my mom would get mad.

For the most part, messages about homosexuality from the media and parents confirmed students' belief that to be gay, or perceived as gay, was undesirable. Notions of homosexuality heard from parents and the media were then further reinforced through the institutional heterosexism of the academies. With limited exposure to gay or lesbian individuals in their lives, and no discussion of issues of homosexuality in their classrooms, students lacked opportunities to challenge the stereotypes which informed their homophobia.

## LIMITED NOTIONS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION

It is useful to consider California's Single Gender Academies within the context of school reforms and research of the last decade. The establishment of the Single Gender Academies in California's public school system coincided with shifting discourses in education and gender. The last several decades of research and program initiatives have provided a critical understanding of gender bias in schools, with a particular focus on girls' experiences. Educators, sociologists, and psychologists have documented a "shortchanging" of girls in academic contexts, including biases in curriculum, teacher attention, and course enrollment patterns (AAUW, 1992;

Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Girls were presented in need of a safe (interpreted by many as single-sex) space, academically and socially, to combat what many saw as a significant drop in self-esteem during adolescence (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Streitmatter, 1999). Single-sex programs were seen as the antidote to the biased co-ed classroom, providing an environment where girls could flourish without distractions or intimidation from boys<sup>12</sup>.

Researchers and practitioners are now shifting their attention to the experiences of boys, with a recent shift in public discourse around a crisis of boyhood. Similar to concerns of the girls movement, educational initiatives now target a range of issues, from boys' participation in reading and language arts courses to greater emotional expression and sense of self. Once again, single-sex education is being proposed as an effective means of addressing boys' needs and interests. Educators involved with the African American male academy movement, for example, cite the importance of an all-boys environment to combat the lack of strong male role models in many urban communities (Grant-Thomas, 1996). All-boys' schools also are seen as a means to provide the structure and discipline that some argue are central in the development of boys' self-esteem and sense of identity.

Despite significant attention to the experiences of girls and boys in schools, many researchers and practitioners maintain limited notions of gender. More often than not, girls and boys are presented as homogenous groups, uniquely different from the other. The recent interest in single-sex education, for example, embodies a dichotomous framework of gender, following the assumption that girls' and boys' needs are distinctly different and cannot be met within the same classroom. Indeed, the rationales for California's Single Gender Pilot Program mirror popular discussions of gender in education. Educators involved with the academies consistently expressed differential goals for each gender: a goal of empowerment for girls and a goal of discipline for boys. Educators also held limited notions of sexuality for boys and girls, as witnessed by their belief that distractions were grounded in heterosexual interests. However, students reminded us that classroom distractions occur regardless of school organization. In fact, a reform such as single-sex education may result in an increase in teasing and harassment, as a result of students' heightened awareness of issues of gender and sexuality.

At the same time, across the country, and in California in particular, the concept of public education was being redefined through such initiatives as charter schools and voucher programs. Educators and politicians began to envision alternatives to a singular school system, in an effort to target the needs of a diverse population. California's interest in single-sex schooling was largely driven by a desire to experiment with alternative

approaches to education. The issues specific to all-boys and all-girls classes were an afterthought; single-sex education was more a vehicle to gain funding and provide choice to students and parents (Datnow et al., 2001).

District applications for funding reflected Governor Wilson's intentions; the Single Gender Academy Pilot Program was seen as a means to remedy a lack of school and community resources, high truancy and drop-out rates, and low academic achievement. Issues of gender were rarely heard in districts' rationales for the academies, except for the theme of eliminating distractions between boys and girls, grounded in heterosexist assumptions of boy-girl relations. Instead, districts admitted that their interest in single-sex schooling was largely driven by a need for additional funding. As one administrator explained, "Single gender was just another big grant, it's a lot of money." A colleague added, "My main interest? Honestly, the gender part of it wasn't huge. I didn't really think about gender bias and all those sorts of things." Similarly, a school board member described the additional funding as a "fantastic boost, as far as getting equipment, getting books, and everything."

California's lack of attention to gender issues is not surprising, given recent efforts to dismantle Title IX, or at the very least ease requirements for equitable distribution of funds in public institutions. The implications of such efforts are twofold; first, the message sent is that gender is no longer an "issue" in schools; second, such a dismantling would facilitate the establishment of single-sex schooling within the public sector with fewer concerns about providing equal opportunities and resources to boys and girls. Thus, more states will likely experiment with single-sex education with little attention to issues of gender and sexuality. Yet as we have seen in California, single-sex education risks reproducing limited notions of gender and sexuality if such concerns are not given deliberate focus. Educators involved in such reforms must be prepared to address heterosexist assumptions and to interrupt homophobic teasing among students. Moreover, policymakers and educators need to question the practice of separating girls and boys as a means to promote achievement or reduce distractions.

## NOTES

1. "Single Gender Academies" is California's name for the academies created as a result of state funding; however, I find "single-sex" to be a more appropriate term in describing separate schooling for boys and girls.

2. For a comprehensive analysis of the California Single Gender "experiment," see Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody (2001).

3. As discussed further, students and educators at the Single Gender Academies operated under dualistic defini-

tions of gender (male/female) and sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual).

4. Five of the six districts decided to close the academies, not coincidentally at the end of the two-year funding period. In most cases, administrators initiated the closures in the face of strong student, faculty, and parent support for the academies. The demise of the Single Gender Academies resulted from a lack of district-level support, an absence of a strong theory as to why schools were implementing single-sex education, and high turnover rates among faculty and staff (Datnow et al., 2001).

5. Legal restrictions to single-sex education in the public sector are largely based on Title IX (Education Amendments of 1972). The law states, "No person in the U.S. shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972. Title 20 U.S.C. Section 1681 (a).

6. Within the field of gender studies, and within the literature on single-sex education, very few researchers look at gender from both boys' and girls' perspectives. Despite the universality of many adolescent experiences, researchers are often more interested in drawing clear boundaries between the world of girls and the world of boys. Yet students are active in constructions of gender and sexuality across gender lines. Thus, in this article, the experiences of girls and boys are not presented as distinct and isolated from the other; instead, student notions of gender and sexuality are analyzed from both girls' and boys' perspectives simultaneously.

7. Students understood the negative ramifications, including a lack of power (physical and social), of being a girl in this society, as was evidenced by their awareness of male privilege (Woody, 2002).

8. Other types of teasing did occur among same-sex peers and between boys and girls in coed spaces, such as the playground or hallways (Datnow, Hubbard, and Woody, 2001).

9. Interestingly, the percentage of students who said they would be upset by being called gay or lesbian has dropped from 86% in 1993 to 73% in 2001. Yet, the incidents of students reporting being harassed with homophobic comments has increased, from 51% in 1993 to 61% in 2001 (AAUW, 2001).

10. The link between difference and homosexuality is key; students reiterated similar notions of difference in their articulations of what it meant to be gay, as I discuss later in this paper.

11. The additional resources, as a result of the \$500,000 grant, were a significant impetus for enrollment in many cases. Students and parents admitted that the opportunities available through the academies were often more appealing than the single-sex aspect alone, particularly in low-income and rural community.

12. Interestingly, attitudes towards all-girls' schools have shifted in recent years to accommodate goals of empowerment. Supporters for girls' schools, once seen as sites of traditional femininity, now include conservative groups who want to shelter and protect girls, alongside feminist groups who want to empower girls.

13. The extent to which each site was sex-segregated varied; students attending academies within a larger school had more

opportunities for coed interactions during lunch and break periods than their peers at self-contained academies.

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## APPENDIX

## Characteristics of California's Single Gender Academies in 1997–1998

District	Location	Grades served/type <sup>13</sup>	Student population	Approximate ethnic distribution*
Palm	Urban	Grades 7–12 Self-contained alternative schools.	60 boys; 30 girls Students had a history of truancy, gang violence, or substance abuse.	80% Latino 12% Asian 8% White
Evergreen	Rural	Grades 7–8 Schools within a K–8 school; 2/3 of middle school students were in academies.	28 boys; 30 girls Students were very low income. Most relied on public assistance.	88% White 9% Latino 3% Native American
Cactus	Suburban	Grades 7–8 Schools within a K–8 school; 1/2 of middle school students were in academies.	36 boys; 50 girls Students were a mix of upper-middle, middle, and low income.	65% White 14% Black 9% Asian 8% Latino 3% Pacific Isl.
Birch	Urban	Grade 9 (expanded to grade 10 in 1998–1999) Schools within a high school.	18 boys; 22 girls Students were predominantly low income.	32% Latino 27% Black 12% White 14% Asian 10% East Indian 5% Pacific Isl.
Pine	Urban	Grades 5–8 Self-contained schools.	90 boys; 50 girls Students were low income and at-risk due to academic, health, and human service needs.	46% Latino 38% Black 18% Pacific Isl.
Oak	Urban	Grades 6–8 Schools within a middle school.	67 girls; 46 boys Students were predominantly low-income.	32% Asian 27% Black 16% Latino 13% White 11% other non-white

\*Some percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

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