

Sexual Identity: "I Don't Know"

CRITICAL INCIDENT

Background

I am a male school counselor in a high school of 2,000 students that is located in an urban setting. I am part of a guidance department with three other counselors, one of whom is female. We are a close department, often consulting with each other regarding particular students, parents, and teachers with whom we are working. We are about the same age, are energetic, and consider our program to be one of the more effective guidance and counseling programs in our school system. I did not realize how an incident

ke this could divide us so quickly and decisively. I am still not sure I made the right decision, and frankly am waiting for the repercussions of my actions. However, I consider myself a student advocate first and, fundamentally, an advocate for human individuality and believe that my decision was the most appropriate.

Incident

One day during class change, one of our physical education teachers asked if she could speak to me. She stated that our meeting might take some time and she would appreciate if we could be alone and our discussion be in the strictest confidence. I asked her if the problem dealt with any type of physical or sexual harm or potential harm to our faculty or students. She told me she believed this was not about anything physical, but it very much might be sexual. Then she added, "but not in an abusive manner." The first bell to class rang, stopping our conversation. Because I did not have any appointments scheduled after school, I told her I would be happy to see her and assured her our conversation would remain confidential.

About 3:15 p.m., the teacher knocked on my door. She sat down and reminded me about the confidentiality of our conversation. As she began, it became apparent that what she was talking about was that she did not want her name connected in any way with what she was going to tell me. I told her that was a reasonable request and I would do my best to honor it. She then proceeded to tell me about two junior boys (both of whom were in my "alpha") she had in her class, one of whom was a fairly new student to our school. Apparently over the course of about a month, she had noticed they had become friends. I responded I had been a little concerned about the adjustment of the new student and was glad he had found a friend. The teacher then stated that was not the problem. The problem was the two boys were too friendly. When I asked her what she meant, this is what she said:

I began noticing them always standing together, talking, and laughing. At first I didn't think anything about it, espe-

cially since one of them was new to the school. Then one day I noticed they seemed to be looking and laughing at and with each other in a way that was different—in fact it looked like the behavior one would see between a boy and girl who liked each other. It was sort of flirtatious. One day I was walking by a group of students and overheard one of them make a reference toward the boys. I heard the words "gay" and "fag-got." I immediately stopped and questioned the boys about who they were talking about. They acted as if I was the last person on the earth to hear about any of this. They said it was common knowledge around school that both boys were "fag-gots." They had even been seen walking together after school with their arms around each other and dancing together at weekend parties.

As the teacher finished her story, I started to get a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I thought I knew where she was going with this and what she was going to ask me. However, I was wrong. She launched into how this type of behavior was unacceptable, immoral, and sinful. She stated that young people have enough to worry about (growing up) without being subjected to this type of indecent behavior. She wanted me to call in the two boys and find out if they were indeed gay, then she suggested I call the parents and tell them what was going on. Then she added again that she did not want her name brought into this.

Discussion

After she left, I sat in my office and stared out the window. I felt hollow inside. I began to think about the issue of homosexuality, my personal feelings, morals and values, the rights of individuals, and what my responsibility was to the students in question, their parents, and the students of our school. I decided to think about the teacher's request overnight, but I was leaning toward calling both boys into my office.

The next morning I decided to speak to both boys. I sent for them and they arrived about 5 minutes later. It was the most diffi-

cult conversation I have ever had with anyone. I told them there were rumors going around school that they were "a couple." They said they had heard the rumors but had decided to try and not pay attention to them. Their response surprised me, so I asked them pointedly if they were a couple, to which they replied yes! At that point I knew that I was about to "get in over my head." I asked them did their parents know of their relationship. They stated they did not think their parents knew, but they thought they would find out sooner or later. I told them their behaviors were being noticed around school by both students and faculty. They agreed, but felt it was not their (the faculty and students') problem and they could "weather the storm." I cautioned them on acting inappropriately because of the trouble they could get into. One of the boys looked at me and said, "What do you mean acting inappropriate? Would you be warning us if one of us were a girl? Or are you calling our behavior inappropriate because we're gay?" As I sat there listening to the question, I realized I did not have an appropriate answer. So I answered the best way I could. I replied, "I don't know." The two boys got up and left my office.

After a few moments, I asked for a meeting with two of the other counselors and explained what had happened with the teacher and the students. The general consensus from my colleagues was that I needed to inform the parents of the two boys. In their opinion, this was information the parents needed to know. To my surprise, one of the counselors talked about the "unnaturalness" of the relationship and if one of the boys were his son, he would want to know. The other counselor cited health issues (sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS) that mandate the parents to be notified. In addition, she stated I should tell the principal immediately so that he could deal with any repercussions from parents. She was confused as to why the principal should be informed. She explained that eventually word will get out and parents will call wanting to know what he is going to do about it. As I listened, I found myself becoming more and more angry. Trying to remain calm, I thanked them for their suggestions.

I decided not to call the boys' parents, nor did I inform the principal. I met with the teacher the following day and told her that I

had met with both boys and had cautioned them about their behavior. I also told her that I probably would be seeing them again in a professional manner, though that would be up to the boys. She said she thought I was acting unprofessionally. She said she thought I would "take care of this." She also had thought about it over night and believed her religious convictions mandated that she report this entire situation to the principal. She turned and walked away, leaving me to wonder what was going to happen.

QUESTIONS

1. Was I correct in speaking to the two boys?
2. Should I have contacted the boys' parents?
3. Should I have reported this to the principal?
4. Were my colleagues correct in their rationale?
5. I stated that I would probably see the boys "in a professional manner." Can I ethically do this? Do I want to?

RESPONSES TO THE INCIDENT

Lawrence E. Tyson

The counselor in this incident promotes himself as a "a student advocate first and, fundamentally, an advocate for human individuality." This counselor allows his emotions and overt pressure from others to taint his approach and ethically compromise his behavior. It appears that his behavior is not congruent with his philosophy.

The counselor is approached by a teacher who is concerned about the personal interaction between two junior boys. According to this incident, the teacher is concerned that "the two boys were too friendly" and that "they seemed to be looking and laughing at and with each other in a way that was different...like the behavior one would see between a boy and girl who liked each other; sort of flirtatious." At no time did the teacher state that the boys' behavior was causing any type of disruption in her classroom. This is where the counselor made his first mistake. The teacher disclosed her personal agenda regarding the boys "allegedly inappropriate behavior." This had nothing to do with her classroom management

style or the students' behavior that might be contributing to her teaching other students.

First, the discussion with the counselor would not have taken place if the students in questions were male and female. It would be a mute point. Second, it is apparent the teacher had her agenda to promote and was approaching this as a discipline issue. The counselor allowed himself to be manipulated into the role of disciplinarian by not defining his role to the teacher either during the initial conversation or later in his office. By inferring he would and then deciding to talk to the students, the counselor changed his role and reinforced the teacher's perception of that role. If the teacher had a concern about the students' behavior (in terms of class disruption), she should follow the required preliminary steps as stated in the school's discipline code, which would be consistent with action taken for any student. This is not a counseling issue unless the two students wish to discuss concerns with a professional counselor.

The counselor should not have arranged an appointment with the two students unless they wished to speak to him. The question should be, "Would the counselor call a female and male student in for the same behavior as described by the teacher?" The answer is no. Again, it is a nonissue unless the behavior is disrupting the normal operation of the school day.

In addition, the counselor should not contact the boys' parents or the principal. The teacher has described flirtatious behavior (not disruptive) and second-hand information overheard from other students regarding student behavior that allegedly occurred off-campus. There is nothing to discuss with parents. This is not the role of the school counselor. It is also not the role of the school counselor to discuss this issue with the principal. This should have been made clear to the teacher during their initial conversations. The teacher always has the option of reporting anything to the principal herself. If she felt this was worthy of such an option, she should do so—but without the initial involvement of the counselor.

In this case, I would have suggested the counselor consult with his colleagues before making any decision. We have the luxury of knowing their views, which are ethically and professionally incor-

rect. However, it is important for counselors to consult with their colleagues, while protecting student confidentiality, before critical action is taken. If the counselor in this incident was troubled by the information provided by the teacher, then consultation was in order. In this incident, his colleagues were incorrect in their assessment. And it should have been clear to the counselor that there really wasn't any issue here to contemplate. He apparently was overwhelmed with the issue, and perhaps had personal, unresolved value issues that contributed to his improper action.

It is my belief this counselor has acted unethically. In addition, there is no indication in the incident that this counselor is professionally competent "to see the boys in a profession manner." The counselor has overstepped his professional boundaries and has given the indication to the teacher and the boys that he can provide a service I seriously doubt he is competent enough to deliver.

Harry Steven

I believe the counselor was correct in speaking to the students in question. Their alleged behavior was causing some disruption in the school given the fact that other students were already talking about them and calling them names. The teacher, though obviously promoting her personal agenda, seemed to be coming to the counselor because she initially did not want to involve the principal. The fact that groups of students were already discussing the boys' behavior could escalate into a volatile situation given the attacks on gay men and lesbians in other parts of the United States. Therefore, this was proper behavior on the teacher's part to ask the counselor to talk to the boys and for the counselor to call them in to discuss their alleged actions.

I do feel the parents should be notified, but only after the boys admitted they were in a personal relationship. There are other issues here beyond that of two same-sex individuals in a relationship. It is insinuated in this incident that the school, located in an urban area, is perhaps in a more liberal area than if the school was located in an rural environment. However, because of the developmental age of other students in the school, it is very probable

that issues of concern (e.g., emotional and physical abuse) may develop; the students in question may be in potential harm. Of course this could happen in a city or in the country.

The principal should also be notified. Because students are already talking about the students in question, it will be just a matter of time before more students and parents will become informed. The principal needs to know because of the potential of parents and others outside the school commenting and questioning school policy and wanting to know what the principal is going to do about this. We may not like this course of action, but this is the reality of our culture and we must be prepared to deal with the "real world."