Dear Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, & Transgender Teacher

Letters of Advice to Help You Find Your Way

Edited by William DeJean and Jeff Sapp
Dear Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Teacher

Letters of Advice to Help You Find Your Way

A Volume in
Educational Leadership for Social Justice

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Edited by

William DeJean
_Inspiration Unleashed_

and

Jeff Sapp
_California State University Dominguez Hills_

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SERIES EDITOR’S PREFACE

Jeffrey S. Brooks  
*Monash University*

I am pleased to serve as series editor for this book series, *Educational Leadership for Social Justice*, with Information Age Publishing. The idea for this series grew out of the work of a committed group of leadership for scholars associated with the American Educational Research Association’s (AERA) Leadership for Social Justice Special Interest Group (LSJ SIG). This group existed for many years before being officially affiliated with AERA, and has benefited greatly from the ongoing leadership, support, and counsel of Dr. Catherine Marshall (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill). It is also important to acknowledge the contributions of the LSJ SIG’s first chair, Dr. Ernestine Enomoto (University of Hawaii at Manoa), whose wisdom, stewardship, and guidance helped ease a transition into AERA’s more formal organizational structures. This organizational change was at times difficult to reconcile with scholars who largely identified as nontraditional thinkers and push toward innovation rather than accept the status quo. As the second chair of the LSJ SIG, I appreciate all of Ernestine’s hard work and friendship. Moreover, I also thank Drs. Gaetane Jean-Marie and Whitney Sherman Newcomb, the third and fourth chairs of the LSJ SIG for their visionary leadership, steadfast commitment to high standards and collaborative scholarship and friendship.

I am particularly indebted to my colleagues on the LSJ SIG’s first Publications Committee, which I chaired from 2005–2007: Dr. Denise Armstrong, Brock University; Dr. Ira Bogotch, Florida Atlantic University; Dr. Sandra Harris, Lamar University; Dr. Whitney Sherman, Virginia Com-

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monwealth University, and; Dr. George Theoharis, Syracuse University. This committee was a joy to work with and I am pleased we have found many more ways to collaborate—as my fellow series editors of this book series—as we seek to provide publication opportunities for scholarship in the area of leadership for social justice.

This book, Dear Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Teacher: Letters of Advice to Help You Find Your Way by William DeJean and Jeff Sapp, is the 21st in the series. The book makes an important contribution by sharing letters of experience and advice to educators. Each of the book’s letters is individually powerful, but collectively considered they represent a source of love and compassion for teachers who are too often marginalized, oppressed, or persecuted for just being their authentic themselves.

Again, welcome to this 21st book in this Information Age Publishing series, Educational Leadership for Social Justice. You can learn more about the series at our website: http://www.infoagepub.com/series/Educational-Leadership-for-Social-Justice. I invite you to contribute your own work on equity and influence to the series. We look forward to you joining the conversation.
INTRODUCTION AND OVERALL FRAMEWORK

William DeJean
Inspiration Unleashed

Jeff Sapp
California State University Dominguez Hills

INTRODUCTION AND OVERALL FRAMEWORK

This book is full of the voices of queer educators. Our original call for letters was sent out to senior queer professionals and invited them to write letters to their younger selves responding to the general prompt of “What have you learned as a queer educator that you believe is essential to the success of current or future gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered educators?” The responses are thoughtful, powerful, shocking, poignant, and direct. Along with these senior queer letters, though, we also received letters from preservice teachers who were currently in university courses at the very beginning of their careers, pre-K–12 professionals at the beginning, middle, and end of their careers, administrators, counselors, teacher-educators at the university level, community educational leaders, lawyers, and heterosexual allies. There are early childhood teachers, elementary teachers, middle school and high school teachers representing nearly every content area, special education teachers, Gay Straight Alliance leaders, school counselors, university professors of education across various fields of specialization, and activists. There are many races and
ethnicities represented as well as eight countries. There are rural professionals and urban professionals. There are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered educators represented. This group of letters represents the intersectionality of queerness in all of its rich splendor.

**METHODOLOGY**

Our research methods are as queer as we are and they certainly mirror our journeys from the personal to the political as we reject an antiquated paradigm of “objective” research. Writing these letters has called us to find the deeper parts of ourselves, heal old wounds, enhance our sense of self, and even alter our sense of our own identity (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 965). Our beautiful letters are intimate, personal narratives of memory that answer Denzin’s (as cited in Finley, 2005) call for a new movement in qualitative inquiry in which researchers take up their pens, their bodies, and their voices so that we might “conduct our own ground level guerrilla warfare against the oppressive structures of our everyday lives” (p. 689). Furthermore, Denzin and Lincoln (2005b, p. x) believe that research like our letters represent “critical personal narratives” that “have become a central feature of counter hegemonic, decolonizing methodologies.”

We revel in these “narratives of memory.” They are ours. Our stories. These letters are how we remember our stories unfolding. They are part of our ongoing making as we embrace that we are in the process of becoming and far from being a final product (Chambers, 1995). Paulo Freire (1990) would say that we are struggling toward our own conscientisation; we are attempting to become more fully human at the same time that we understand that we will never fully arrive.

We have chosen a heuristic research paradigm because in “heuristic research the investigator must have had a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated (Moustakas, 1990, p. 14). In this way our letters—and all research for that matter—are autobiographical, as the researchers must have experienced the phenomenon being studied in its entirety. Our primary task as researchers is to recognize whatever exists in the consciousness of ourselves as a fundamental awareness, receive and accept it, and then dwell upon its possible meanings (p. 11). Our intent is to extend the knowledge and understanding of becoming and being a queer educator. In heuristic research there is an unshakable connection between what is out there and what is within the researcher in reflective thought, feeling, and awareness (p. 12). The truth is that what is “out there” and what is “within” the researcher cannot be separated. The heuristic process challenges the researcher to rely on their own resources, and
to gather within themselves the full scope of their observations, thoughts, feelings, senses, and intuitions (p. 12). The “data” is within us.

In Parker J. Palmer’s (1999) *Let Your Life Speak* he says, “People take copious notes on what the retreat leader says, and they sometimes take notes of the words of certain wise people in the group, but rarely, if ever, do they take notes on what they themselves say. We listen for guidance everywhere except from within.” We called for queer educators around the world to write first person, narrative letters. We wanted them written in familiar, personal voices. We wanted the letters to be intimate. Consequently, the letters presented in this collection are in different styles because contributors wrote in their own voices, some choosing an historical narrative about their journey, others poetry and other art forms, some a diary format, and others an academic narrative. It is quite common for qualitative research to use literary sources (poetry, stories, plays) as textual material for writing (Van Manen, 1990, p. 74). Denzin and Lincoln (2005a, p. 26) agree that we are in “a new age where messy, uncertain, multivoiced texts … will become more common” in our research.

Autoethnography also informs our collection of letters. This methodology combines autobiography, the story of one’s own life, with ethnography, the study of a particular social group. As queer educators we believe that autoethnography is transgressive (Watson, 2009, p. 526) because it confronts the thought that research must be “objective” to be authoritative (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). We reject texts that remove the “I” and invoke the “other” through textual detachment, third-person prose, and dispassionate observations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). We concur with Miller (2008, p. 94) when he questions,

*Why would I want to take “me” out of my views? So much would be lost, even if I did naively believe that objectivity and neutrality were achievable and desirable; no, I want this text to reflect me: my idiosyncrasies, my feelings, my subjectivities, my adventures, my insights, my energy, and my growth. I want these conflicting aspects of self to be examined and reflected at different times, in different places, from different perspectives, in different moods, using different voices, and with different levels of certainty and confidence.*

**VOICE GUIDES**

We have worked extensively to include as many voices and perspectives as possible in this book. To extend this further, throughout the introduction pieces of the different chapters, we have also included even more voices of beginning and veteran queer educators to further enrich the theoretical
framework from which this book draws upon. These educators are present and past queer individuals in the university credential programs where Jeff taught over the course of his 38-year career. You will see their quotes throughout the book to illustrate important points and guide us as we read—and relish—this collection of letters. Throughout the book we’ll refer to these individuals as our Voice Guides and they are:

- Marcus: A Latino gay male veteran high school English teacher;
- Veronica: A Black lesbian high school science teacher;
- Ray: A Latino gay male just beginning credential courses; no teaching experience;
- Shawn: A White gay male in the middle of his credential courses; no teaching experience;
- Amie: A White lesbian at the end of her credential program; has completed student teaching; and
- Eddie: A Latino gay male at the beginning of his credential courses; has been a substitute teacher.

These six Voice Guides formed a focus group Jeff held to discuss becoming or being a queer educator (Morgan & Spanish, 1984, p. 253). This focus group is phenomenological because it gave me “access to the common sense conceptions and everyday explanations” around the book’s topic (Calder, 1977, p. 64). Phenomenological approaches emphasize the individual participants’ voices because, as Carter (1993) states, “these stories capture … the richness and the complexity of our understandings of what teaching is and how others can be prepared to engage in this profession” (p. 5).

**FRAMEWORK**

The letters in Part I: Preservice Credential Candidates represent two preservice credential beginning educators. Michelle Butters is a bisexual woman beginning her career in rural Australia. Having moved from Sydney, she found herself to be the only queer and person of color in this rural, conservative area—what she refers to as “the only gay in the village.” One of her practicums was in a conservative Christian school and, although her journey to becoming a teacher was what she refers to as a winding road, she is emphatic that it is worth the ride. Bernie Davern, also from Australia, tells the journey of his beginning teaching experience and his first years as a humanities teacher. He recounts the moment he came out and how that act of liberation led to his own self-acceptance.
Erin P. Greaves, also hailing from Australia, is a special education teacher who writes about a common fear of many beginning teachers—the dreaded staffroom. “The staffroom can be as intimidating as the schoolyard,” she declares. These three teachers all had a journey that led them through rural and urban experiences and each of them note the specific ways that conservative areas impacted the beginning formation of their teaching selves.

Part II: Pre-K–12 Educators contains the largest set of letters we received and are from pre-K–12 professionals. Australian Geoff Allshorn was a public school English and humanities teacher for 25 years and writes beautifully about the role of queer educators in human rights education. Melissa Ash-Balá is from California and is an eighth-grade English teacher and she offers an excellent model of how to proactively approach an administrator about queer issues. Her administrator, likewise, is a very positive model of social justice leadership. Hau Bui, a middle school mathematics teacher in California, writes a charming letter to his younger self that is full of tender compassion for his beginning teacher journey and advises that, among many things, “bringing a part of yourself to the workplace is neither good for you or the workplace.” Kathy Cloughessy is an Australian early childhood educator who writes about confronting heteronormativity. Shaun Dellenty is an openly gay deputy head teacher in London. His letter identifies professionals who have not helped queer children in the past and then of his hope for school leaders—those whom he refers to as “the very important people”—today making a difference. Itsuki Doi is a transgender math teacher who lives in Kyoto, Japan with her partner (former wife) and two children. She writes powerfully about the power of the student-teacher relationship. Dora J. Dome is a California-based attorney who practices education law, primarily focusing in the areas of student issues and special education. She is passionate about developing and conducting professional development trainings for schools that focus on bullying, equity, and legal compliance. Raul Duque is a special education teacher from Spain and addresses how being gay gave him a heightened sense of empathy for children whose peers saw them as different. Lorelei Estrada, a veteran kindergarten teacher in California, pens a poignant coming out story where she figures out exactly why it was that she spent her entire career advocating for others and what it feels to finally advocate for her own happiness. Tara Goldstein is a Canadian educator who shares 15 strategies for doing antihomophobic work and particularly focuses on gay-straight alliances. Janna Jackson taught English in Georgia and her letter contains sage advice for teachers in regards to their relationship with their administration. Australian educator Rebecca Langham writes about the fear in coming out and having an unsupportive administration, but also salutes the allies that are some-
times covert and other times fearless in their public support. Jack Migda-lek, a drama teacher in Australia, writes a very poignant letter where he admits to having directed plays that had gay characters in them to elicit laughs from the audience. This is a letter every drama teacher must read. Elizabeth Miline-Kahn, a San Francisco elementary teacher, tells some harrowing experiences of homophobic administrators in what many consider to be one of the queerest cities in the world. Paul Chamness Miller is a professor of international liberal arts at Akita International University in Japan. He reflects from his perspective as a high school language teacher and reminds us that students are “neither naïve nor ignorant” when it comes to discerning our sexual orientation. Olivia Noto teaches sexuality education in Australia and writes of the importance of considering geographical place when being a queer educator. Ginny Taylor teaches English in Fresno, California and speaks to the principle of self-love, especially when it takes 19 years of teaching before you come out.

Part III: Counselors and Mediators contains letters from counseling and mediation professionals. Carol Sullivan, a professor of school and college counseling and heterosexual ally, beautifully frames this chapter by emphasizing that self-love is a cornerstone in helping others self-accept. She states, “Love creates a soft landing” from which we are able to self-examine with gentleness. Stuart Chen-Hayes is an associate professor of counselor education at City University of New York/Lehman College and invites queer school counselors to “be all of whom you are early and often.” Erwin “Sino” Donato has two academic degrees in negotiation, conflict resolution and peace-building and, as a professional mediator, submitted a touching poem he wrote for his best friend Amber for her wedding; he reminds us all that some of the greatest teachers in our lives are the best friends who have always supported us. Osvelio C. Lastre is from Los Angeles, California and is a college advisor and writes powerfully about having to come out over and over again as he moved from school to school during his career.

Letters from those in higher education fill the pages of Part IV: Higher Education. Montreal, Quebec resident Fiona J. Benson is an associate professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. Her framework of “Queer-Care” will ring true to all queer higher education people and her recommendations for sustaining that role are sage advice for all of us. Michael Crowhurst is a lecturer in education at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. He writes powerfully about how “anger is something that you can’t avoid when you are involved in working for change in the queer space.” William DeJean is from Sydney, Australia and is an internationally recognized scholar and speaker on education. His inspirational letter urges the study of the self as a cornerstone in the teaching profession. Hailing from Melbourne is Anne Harris
who is an American-Australian playwright and senior lecturer in education at Monash University. Harris writes a beautifully aesthetic piece that wishes for the day when bringing a partner to a school event just is not a big deal anymore. Terence Humphreys is the capacity building manager and senior educator at Twenty10 in Australia. He writes about the power of continually learning about diverse genders, sexes, and sexualities and urges all of us to give up our old binary thinking. Mitsunori Misawa, an assistant professor in the Higher and Adult Education Program of the Department of Leadership at the University of Memphis in Tennessee, addresses his letter, “Dear International Queer Scholars of Color.” As a Japanese academic who took a job in America, he writes to the all too common experience of trying to find his place within higher education when so many identities form his being. Mara Sapon-Shevin is a professor of inclusive education at Syracuse University in New York. She writes a poignant letter telling of her journey as a nationally known married, heterosexual scholar and then coming out as a lesbian in scholarly circles. She encourages queer educators “to both name their own queer identities but also be thoughtful about linking their struggles for liberation with other struggles.” Jeff Sapp is a professor of education at California State University Dominguez Hills in Southern California. His letter addresses practical aspects like reading the faculty manual and knowing your rights, but he also encourages authenticity as the cornerstone of the teaching self. Last of all, Paul Venzo is a writer, journalist, and lecturer in the School of Communications and Creative Arts in the faculty of arts and education with Deakin University in Australia. He describes the many instances of discrimination he has faced and overcome in both rural and urban settings.

Our final section, Part V: Allies, Accomplices, and Coconspirators, contains letters from heterosexual allies. Elexia McGovern-Reyes, an assistant professor of education, introduces this chapter by inviting allies to consider positionality, self-reflection, and humility as frameworks for solidarity. She highlights intersectionality and, as a Chicana herself, draws upon the Chicana Feminist Gloria Anzuldúa’s concept of Nepantla—being in the middle of two epistemologies—as a way into solidarity. Christine Clark is a professor and senior scholar in multicultural education and the founding vice president for diversity and inclusion at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and Doris L. Watson is a professor of educational psychology and higher education and associate dean of academic and professional programs at the same institution. One straight and one queer, one White and one mixed race, together they address their letter to Audre Lorde and write, among many things, about the power of being accomplices. Paul Gorski has worked with schools, colleges and universities, community organizations, and other organizations all over the world to
help build the competencies necessary to authenticate diversity and equity efforts. He writes a letter to a current student of his and wisely advises, among other things, for her to define herself in the oppressive waters of academia, to watch for burnout, and to be mindful about developing healthy habits of self-care. Many will know the name of Sonia Nieto, an American scholar and professor emerita in language, literacy, and culture in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Nieto is an internationally known scholar in multicultural education. She writes a very personal, intimate letter to a young friend of hers named Elena whom she describes as “a strong, urban Spanish-speaking, English-speaking, Nuyorican lesbian.” It’s a gorgeous letter that intimately passes the baton from a retired veteran to a beginning middle school science teacher. Lorri J. Santamaría is a faculty member in the areas of educational leadership and critical studies in education at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. She writes a powerful last letter for us as she calls for us to be brave … and dangerous.

LIMITATIONS

We have made our best efforts at including the many identities in the complex intersectionality of gender and sexuality. That being stated, this work falls short of including all identities among the people in the queer community and some will not find their voices represented in this collection of letters. We apologize. We specifically targeted various groups so that this work would include wider representations of sexual identities like agender and genderqueer (those who do not identify as female or male and see themselves outside the gender binary), intersex (those who are born with chromosomes, hormones, genitalia, and/or other sex characteristics that are not exclusively male or female), and asexuality (those who are not interested in or do not desire sexual activity), to name a few (Butler-Wall et al., 2016). We abhor being a part of these hurtful omissions and can only hope that future works that build upon ours will find voices to represent more people in our communities. Our hope is that you will see these letters as an invitation for dialog and understand, alongside us, that they are incomplete and represent our attempt at sharing some—not all—queer issues with those interested in social justice leadership.

REFERENCES


