Social-Cultural Problems of 21st Century America and How They Effect Education

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How They Effect Education

Several issues come to mind regarding the social and or cultural problems that exist in 21st century America. Investigation into these problems has lead me to research two issues in particular. The issue of technology, its effects on education, and the issue of homophobia and the students that it impacts daily. Today we are constantly bombarded with new technology, some would say that technology is an asset and that its use assist the educational community enormously, and I would agree, but it is also negatively affecting the family and could also, in some ways be hindering today’s students in development of needed skills and knowledge. We have all heard stories in which car accidents occurred because someone was texting while driving or someone was bullied on Facebook, and the idea of privacy invasion on the internet is one America has to deal with along with the world. These issues are especially close to teens that interact using social media daily, for hours on end. Gay marriage legislation is in the news daily and bullying toward students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) is something that is real and very frightening today’s society. Reports of students harming themselves or being harmed by others, do to this homophobia and discrimination, is increasing. These two issues really hit home with me because I teach this population and have students who have had to deal with discrimination due to their sexuality and students who seem to live in a technology bubble, not really aware of the physical world around them, or the harm that it may cause.

Today’s young teens have always lived surrounded by technology, they use it continually throughout the day and night. Laptops, PDA’s, iPods, smart phones and other technological gadgets are here to stay, but are teens losing the ability to develop social skills and writing skills? What about privacy issues and the development of self-esteem? We all know that eating meals at home with family has a positive impact on adolescent behavior, according to Small (2009) “it not only strengthens our neural circuitry for human contact, but it also helps ease the stress we experience in our daily lives, protecting the medial temporal regions that control emotion and memory”. When I discussed this issue with my eleventh and twelfth grade students, I was not surprised to find out that very few of them eat dinner or any meal with their family, and this had a lot to do with the social media they are continually interacting with. They have multiple conversations but not face to face. They interact socially on the internet. It seems as though they are looking for others to validate their every move. Instant gratification and acknowledgement is expected. Small (2009), goes on to explain that this interaction could be affecting the development of neural networks in the brain that are responsible for face-to-face social skills. Some would say that today’s teenagers are lacking for social skills. Jayson (2006) describes today’s teens as paying little attention to social approval and being generally “clueless about established social mores”. She goes on to describe how teens today “have a decreased concept of privacy and personal boundaries”. This may be due to the fact that they are placing every bit of their lives on the internet for all to see, and are somehow detached from the reality of it all.

Texting is an issue I must deal with daily in my high school classes. A day doesn’t go by that I don’t have to take a cell phone from a student. This need to constantly communicate via text language may be affecting teens ability to write. I have seen this in several student papers in which students use text language, for example, “u” instead of “you”. Are students carrying over the writing habits they pick up through text messaging into school assignments? According to a study done by The University of Alabama (2009), “ 64 percent of teens admit that the breezy shortcuts and symbols commonly used in text messaging have appeared in their school assignments.” This is not the issue that concerns me as an educator, I believe that students, once directed to the issue can easily correct it. The issue, as stated by The University of Alabama, is “students have a lack of depth, details and descriptive phrases in their responses, essays, and formal papers”. This, as the study describes, is due to the tendency to use “shorted phrases and answers used in texting” (The University of Alabama 2009). This is a problem I often hear about from English teachers, students are having difficulty using the writing structure that is needed to pass those dreaded state exams.

According to the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (1998), as taken from Lambda.org (2011), “gay and lesbian teenagers have increased rates of assault, suicide, substance abuse and homelessness”. This journal addresses this as “a reflection of homophobic attitudes”. Homophobia as defined by psychiatrists, “refers to irrationally negative attitudes toward homosexual people” Lamda.org (2011). In this study by Drs. James Lock and Brian N. Kleis, “80% of gay and lesbian youth reported verbal insults, 44% were threatened with violence, 31% were chased or followed and 17% were physically assaulted” Lamda.org (2011), all due to their sexual orientation. These numbers are staggering, and even worse the findings by Caldwell (2004 p.90), indicate that of those incidents that occurred at school, “83 percent said that faculty members rarely or never intervened when present”. With more and more students openly stating their sexuality as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), we as educators must be aware of our reaction to anti-LGBT speech at our schools. As stated by Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig (2009 p.952), “these subtle expressions of prejudice also may negatively impact peer relationships between heterosexual and sexual minority youth and contribute to unsafe or unwelcoming school climates.” We as educators must deem sexual slurs like, “*gay, dyke, faggot*, *homo*, and *sissy*, as unacceptable. According to McGarry (2011 p. 57) “72.4 percent of LGBT students heard homophobic remarks frequently or often at school”. How can these students feel safe and receive the same opportunities as others in school if they are fearful to even attend? The study done by McGarry (2011 p. 58), goes on to say that teachers responding to homophobic and anti-LGBT words and phrases did not go beyond a simple “I don’t want to hear that…. Or We don’t say that in here”. These comments point out the importance and lack of teacher education in dealing with this issue. I know that I have not been given any additional in-servicing on how to react to this issue. Yes, the annual teacher development meetings inform us on these issues providing statistical data and help lines for students in need, but they don’t inform me on the proper way to deal with this when it occurs in my classroom, and I know that my school district does not have a written plan on dealing with this type of discrimination. A starting point such as GLSEN’s Safe Space Kit available at [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org) may assist my district in addressing this issue. I have students, colleges and friends that are gay or lesbian; I don’t see them as different from anyone else. Their sexuality is their business, I know that they are intelligent, strong and willful people, but they continue to face discrimination in our society. Sexual prejudice is an issue that we all must deal with. It is imperative that we support and defend all of our students facing discrimination. Our school culture must reflect this and acknowledge the rights of each individual.

Technology has its place in society, especially in education, moreover it is essential today. Although the positive aspects are important, so are those that can effect education and family in a negative manner. Students must understand and interact with more of the world than just the one that exists in cyberspace. Protection and support for all students is the primary role for teachers. School cultures change and teachers must be educated on the process to educate all students and make sure that homophobia and the tactics that go along with it are not welcomed in the school culture.

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