

Discussing Marriage of Same-Sex Couples with Students

As the issue of marriage of same-sex couples makes its way into the national spotlight, students will surely bring their feelings and questions about this subject into the classroom, presenting educators with an opportunity to deepen students' thinking about matters that are of great legal, economic, social and moral importance. Students will benefit from an accurate presentation of the facts and the opportunity to discuss important issues in a safe space.

Since students are routinely bombarded with all sorts of information from television, the Internet, peers, and community leaders, it is an outdated and false notion that keeping controversial issues out of the classroom will somehow protect and preserve students' "innocence." On the contrary, students are harmed more when they have no place in which to make sense of complex issues, work past stereotypes and misconceptions, and to develop a strong sense of personal ethics and morals.

It is therefore both appropriate and important that issues such as marriage of same-sex couples be discussed and debated in class. As you discuss the issues with your students, bear in mind the following ideas:

1. ***Many students have had experiences with same-sex couples:*** Don't assume that your students have no experience or knowledge about same-sex relationships. Growing numbers of children today are being raised in same-sex headed families. Many others have friends, neighbors, and relatives that are in committed, same-sex relationships. Draw upon your students' experiences to enrich the conversation and try to acknowledge the many different family constellations from which they likely come. Discussions based on personal understandings will have more meaning for students than those that are abstract or removed from the real lives of community members.
2. ***Same-sex families already exist:*** Unions of same-sex couples have existed around the world for thousands of years. Despite social and legal obstacles, same-sex partners have always found ways to demonstrate their love and commitment for one another, and to create a sense of family for themselves. It is important for students to understand that—legally sanctioned or not—marriages of same-sex couples already exist. Legislation preventing or blocking recognition of these marriages would not change this fact, but would deprive millions of existent families of the legal and economic benefits that many of their heterosexual counterparts enjoy.
3. ***There is no evidence to support the notion that marriage of same-sex couples would pose a threat to the institution of marriage or to the fabric of society in general:*** Some opponents of marriage that is inclusive of same-sex couples feel that legally permitting such unions will somehow diminish the institution of marriage and contribute to a moral decay within society. There is little objective evidence to support these claims, however. Studies of same-sex partnerships indicate that these relationships function similarly to those of opposite-sex couples in terms of commitment, endurance, and mutual care and support. Findings also support the conclusion that the great majority of same-sex couples share the kind of intimacy and economic sharing that marriage laws seek to encourage. Concerns about the integrity of the institution of marriage and societal decay are therefore unfounded. Such fears have been historically expressed when changes to the rules of marriage have been considered. When interracial marriage bans were lifted, many asserted that this would lead to polygamous coupling and incestuous relations. When England was considering allowing wives to own property, the London Times declared that doing so would "abolish families in the old sense" and "break up society into men and women" creating "discomfort, ill-feeling and distrust where hitherto harmony and concord prevailed." These foretellings of societal disaster proved foolish. Indeed, if one looks to the many countries that have given formal status to unions of same-sex couples today, there is no evidence of negative societal consequences.
4. ***The emotional health of children reared in same-sex headed families does not differ from that of other children:*** Though many married couples cannot or choose not to have children, for young students, notions of marriage and parenting are inseparably intertwined. Students may therefore question the ability of same-sex partners to be good parents. It is important to stress that the best parents are those who provide love, support, and a caring home for their children. Sexual orientation and gender identity should be de-emphasized as criteria for evaluating child-rearing ability in favor of these more enduring characteristics of good parenting. There is no existing research to support the claim that same-sex parents rear children with greater emotional or identity conflicts than heterosexual parents. The American Psychological Association concluded, in fact, that "not a single study has found children of gay and lesbian parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to the children of heterosexual parents. Indeed the evidence suggests that

home environments provided by gay and lesbian parents are as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to support and enable children's psychological growth." This is not to say that being raised by same-sex parents comes without difficulties; children will inevitably have to cope with teasing, feelings of embarrassment, and other realities as a result of the negative social stigma attached to homosexuality. Studies show, however, that despite these special problems, the mental health of children reared in same-sex headed families does not differ from that of other children. These children learn to deal with community stigma based on their families' difference just as children living in other minority families. Relying on community stigma as a basis for regulating marriage is problematic, and such arguments have been rejected by the courts in cases claiming that social stigma resulting from interracial marriages would be detrimental to children.

5. ***Marriage is a basic human right:*** When discussing this issue, help students to move past preoccupations with the "rightness" or "wrongness" of same-sex coupling or homosexuality in general. Place the debate over marriage within the context of human rights, thereby expanding the dialogue beyond the realm of morality. The core concern of students—and all citizens—should transcend their moral stance and be an objective consideration of the justness of a government that denies social, legal and economic benefits and protections to one segment of the population while affording them to all others. Marriage should be understood as a basic human right and an individual personal choice. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ratified by the United Nations in 1948 and considered the standard for human rights practices internationally, declares marriage and family a fundamental human right, stating that "the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the state."
6. ***This is not just a "gay" issue:*** Marriage of same-sex couples is an issue about which many citizens—both gay and straight—are concerned. Non-gay people are affected, among other ways, by attempts to use anti-marriage laws to strip away domestic partnership laws and protections. Laws that are discriminatory and unjust pave the way for future limits to our freedom, and this affects us all. Students should be encouraged to take an interest in matters that may not affect them directly, but threaten the integrity of other individuals and our society in general. It may interest them to know that Coretta Scott King and many other community leaders have expressed their support for the right of same-sex couples to marry.
7. ***Students may be directly impacted:*** Marriage legislation affects not only the couples, but the families that they support as well. By denying same-sex couples the right to marry, the government may also be denying students eligibility for financial aid and scholarships, which is often affected by marital status. Committed, same-sex couples still in school may also be denied student housing and the ability to move easily from state to state for study and work.
8. ***This is not the first instance of government interference with people's freedom to marry:*** Less than 50 years ago, interracial couples were prohibited from legally marrying. Today, very similar discriminatory arguments are being used to prohibit same-sex couples from marrying. A Virginia judge ruled in 1958 that "Almighty God created the races...and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for [interracial] marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix." Americans today recognize the inherent prejudice in this statement, and the right of each individual to marry the person she or he loves, regardless of race, class, religion and the like. Examined against the backdrop of interracial marriage bans, it becomes difficult to make a rational case for marriage prohibitions against same-sex couples. Students should understand both the historical parallels to marriage prohibitions against same-sex couples as well as the similarities among racism, homophobia, and all other oppressions.

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