

It's Elementary

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Profile: Controversy over, "It's Elementary," videotape looking at how and whether gay and lesbian issues should be discussed (All Things Considered (NPR), 07-01-1999)

Host: LINDA WERTHEIMER

Time: 8:00-9:00 PM

LINDA WERTHEIMER, host: Now through September, the documentary "It's Elementary" will be shown on public television stations around the country. The videotape focuses on six elementary and middle schools. It looks at how and whether gay and lesbian issues should be discussed. "It's Elementary" has been controversial ever since its release three years ago. Educational groups praise it for teaching tolerance, other groups say it promotes a homosexual agenda. Despite the disagreement over the video, it has been used in teaching seminars across the country. Now Chicago has decided to distribute the tape to administrators in all of its public schools. NPR's Cheryl Corley reports.

CHERYL CORLEY reporting: A number of national surveys show violence against gays is on the rise. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Program says the number of victims hospitalized last year as a result of gay bashing rose 108 percent. A national Gallup Poll released this year says high school students believe violence-prone groups in their school are a particular threat to gays.

Chicago school officials don't have such statistics. However a school counselor, who preferred to remain anonymous, said harassment and threats of being beaten up is definitely a serious issue for gay students.

Unidentified Chicago School Counselor: Particularly, I know in my case, there's a student, one student in particular, who is always being tormented because of his sexual orientation.

CORLEY: Ask students in middle school or high school, more than likely they'll tell you the worst epithet these days is to be called 'gay.' A 19-year-old who goes by his nickname, Debrayus(ph), says it's common for students to call peers that may act or look different names. Debrayus looks like a typical teen-ager. He wears baggy pants and an earring. He dropped out of high school when he was 17. He says during middle school and high school he tried to hide his sexual orientation by having friends pretend to be his girlfriend. Sometimes he was even called a 'player' or a 'ladies man.' But Debrayus says after a while, the disguise didn't work and he was harassed, threatened, and at one point in high school, jumped by two other students. He eventually left school.

DEBRAYUS: I couldn't talk to nobody. I had to keep building it up inside. It bothered me in my brain. I had to come up with new ideas to keep people away from me, how to always be on my guard. I mean, my brain was always working 24/7, constantly, just being prepared for anything that happened, trying to think ahead of everyone else, try to figure out how to make everyone think that I'm not gay, how to deal with the

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situations that I've been in. So it was like--plus, my schoolwork alone. It was very hard to do that.

CORLEY: Despite those problems, Debrayus got his GED late last year, but it's the type of pressure that he faced, says Mary Morten, the head of Chicago's Advisory Council on Gay and Lesbian Issues, which made her work to get "It's Elementary" in Chicago schools.

Ms. MARY MORTEN (Advisory Council on Gay and Lesbian Issues, Chicago): Children do not learn when they're not in a safe environment, and if they don't feel safe, they drop out, and they turn to alcohol and drugs and all the other statistics that we know about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth.

Unidentified Woman: We're delighted to have with us this afternoon a presentation on sexual orientation issues in the public schools.

CORLEY: This past school year, the Chicago public schools district and the advisory council began presenting workshops, showing "It's Elementary" to social workers and school administrators. In the video, schoolchildren talk about what they think the word 'gay' means, teachers discuss homosexuality in the classroom, and students get to ask gay volunteers visiting their school about their lives and things they've heard. (Soundbite from "It's Elementary")

Unidentified Student #1: Being gay, like, do you want to have to act like a woman or, like, how does that go? I mean, I heard that, like, gay men keep their clean house and stuff like that.

Unidentified Student #2: How do you mostly find out that the other person is gay or a lesbian?

Unidentified Student #3: How does your parents feel about you being a lesbian?

Unidentified Student #4: Has anybody really, like--you know, like, when you told them you were gay, they, like, just totally said, 'I don't want to be your friend anymore' and just laughed and never saw you again or something? (End of soundbite)

CORLEY: The decision by Chicago officials to distribute "It's Elementary" to top staff in the city's nearly 600 schools came before the brutal murders of Matthew Shepard last year and Billy Jack Gaither this year shocked the country. Both men were killed in gruesome attacks because they were gay. Gay activists and other argue "It's Elementary" could help prevent such attacks in the future by suggesting ways teachers and other adults can address gay issues appropriately.

So far, there's been no local opposition to distributing the videotape, but groups outside of Chicago say it's wrong to do so. The American Family Association has produced its own video offering a different view about homosexuality. Spokesman Ed Vitagliano says only presenting "It's Elementary" gives an unbalanced view about a controversial

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issue.

Mr. ED VITAGLIANO (Spokesman, American Family Association): We certainly are not--and I would hope that no one even on the other side of the issue would characterize us as being for harassment or for verbal or physical abuse for any reason. Our solution to the problem being raised by homosexual activists is that schools simply ought to crack down and tell children there will be no verbal abuse, no harassment, no tormenting, no physical abuse of anyone for any reason. They're there to learn and those kinds of disagreements are to be settled in a civil manner.

CORLEY: Chicago school officials won't talk publicly about their decision to distribute "It's Elementary." Repeated requests for interviews with NPR were ignored, but NPR was present during a workshop held for hundreds of school social workers. Administrators made it clear that even though each school would receive a tape, "It's Elementary" would not be shown to students. Jill Vaughn, with the Illinois State Board of Education, told the social workers, 'Although the school system's goal is to make sure all students are safe, teachers often don't respond to some name-calling which could lead to problems.' She says "It's Elementary" was being used to help educators and counselors learn how to handle situations that might make students who may be gay or are accused of being gay feel safe.

Ms. JILL VAUGHN (Illinois State Board of Education): You know, 98 percent of the time, you walk down the hallway and you hear 'faggot' and 'lesbie, dyke,' whatever the case may be. And what do you say after you say, 'That's inappropriate,' or, 'Don't talk like that,' you know? 'Cause kids might say to you, 'Oh, what, are you gay?' Or they might give you some sort of response back that you might not be prepared to handle. So I think it's really important, and I think that part of our next step is going to be planning how can we give you more information so you know what to say or so you know how to help teachers so they know what to say.

CORLEY: The AFA's Ed Vitagliano says "It's Elementary," however, is not just simply about teaching educators what to say about gay issues, he says it's designed to bring the issue of homosexuality into the public schools.

Mr. VITAGLIANO: You know, if a kid gets harassed for being overweight or for being the class brain, that should be treated the same way as somebody with a different religion or sexual orientation: 'You don't harass people, you're here to learn,' and, 'You'll be punished if you do otherwise.' But they're not really interested in that across-the-board approach, and that's what red flags videos like "It's Elementary" to us, because they are only interested in a special focus on sexual orientation.

CORLEY: During the workshop for school social workers, Mary Morten, the head of the city's Advisory Council on Gay and Lesbian Issues, told the group it's not enough for them to simply say, 'Respect other students.' She said it is necessary to specifically talk about discrimination and violence aimed at gays and lesbians.

Ms. MORTEN: Often we know that, you know, racism is bad and sexism is bad, but how often do you hear someone saying that homophobia is wrong and that just as if

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someone were of a different religion, it is not OK to harass them, to torture them, to beat them up simply because you may disagree with their sexual orientation.

CORLEY: The Chicago schools will continue to hold workshops for administrators and show "It's Elementary." This month, Mary Morten and others will be part of a mandated seminar being held for principals on sexual orientation, race, gender and other issues. That's also when videotapes of "It's Elementary" are scheduled for distribution to all of Chicago's public schools. Cheryl Corley, NPR News, Chicago.

NOAH ADAMS (Host): Music of 3 Leg Torso, that's next on NPR's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED.

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