How can a classroom teacher respond to a student telling them that they’re gay?

GLBT students are unlike other groups of students who encounter discrimination in school settings in the sense that sexuality, unlike the colour of a person’s skin, for example, is in many ways invisible. Because of this, GLBT students can sometimes escape direct harassment by passing as straight. Passing as straight can mean changing what you wear, changing what you say, changing how your voice sounds, or changing how you walk. It’s perhaps not all that surprising therefore that most teachers have never encountered a GLBT student and are unsure about what to do if they do. In fact, when I was a high school teacher, only two students ever came out to me.

One student came out as bisexual during a legal studies class where we were discussing newspaper reports on lesbian access to IVF technology and how the law should respond to this issue. There were different points of view in the class and the discussion was fairly polarised. At one point a student said that she didn’t think lesbians should have children and this is when another student, who I will call Peter, hurled the fact that he was bisexual into the discussion.

The class became silent. Initially I was unsure about whether this was a statement of truth or whether it was just a student ‘mucking around’. My gut feeling was that he was telling the truth. He seemed nervous and self-conscious after making the statement. I was left speechless for a moment (which is very unusual for me). All that came to me to say was: ‘That’s okay.’ I then moved the discussion on and refocused the class onto written work to reduce the tension.

After class I spoke to the student welfare coordinator and told him what had happened. I said I was concerned about Peter and about how the rest of the class would react, in the long term, to the news. He listened and said that he was unsure about what to do in this situation as this was the first time a student had come out in such a public fashion at the school.

The next day, Peter stayed away from school. The student welfare coordinator spoke to his homeroom teacher, who spoke to all of the
other teachers who taught him. We decided that as Peter had made a public statement, and as this would most probably become public knowledge throughout the school, that it was acceptable to discuss this with other members of staff. Essentially teachers kept an eye out over the next couple of weeks in order to ensure that Peter didn’t encounter any harassment. We discussed whether we should ring him at home to check that he was okay. We decided not to but in retrospect I think that it would’ve been prudent to do so.

Peter came to school the following day, looking tired and stressed out. He was withdrawn and seemed to be very self-conscious. He stayed behind the rest of the group at the end of the next legal studies class. I gave him a small postcard advertising a social support group for GLBT teenagers. He put it in his back pocket and moved towards the door. I said that if he wanted to talk to anyone he could ring them or he could speak to the student welfare coordinator or to myself or to anyone else on staff. I also made sure that he knew about the gay and lesbian switchboard, who offer a phone counselling service, and gave him the number.

He never spoke to me about his sexuality after that. I don’t know whether he ever made it to the group or whether he spoke to other teachers. I decided that I’d leave it up to him to talk about these things if he wanted to and also not to put pressure on him to feel that he should go to a support group. He should only do what he was ready to do. He did seem less self-conscious as the weeks wore on, and the class didn’t marginalise him in any way.

The other student, John, came out to me in a conversation. He was homeless and rarely attended school. We spoke for about an hour. He told me that he was ‘out’ at the refuge but that he didn’t want to be ‘out’ at school. I told him about a support group and how to find useful phone numbers in the telephone directory. He listened to this and I had the feeling that he might attend the group I had suggested. In retrospect, I should’ve organised a taxi voucher or a lift for him to get there if he wanted that support. John didn’t attend school for the remainder of the year.

I mentioned the conversation to the student welfare coordinator and stressed that I had reservations about discussing a private conversation. There’s a tension here that needs to be discussed. It’s very important to respect confidentiality but it’s also important that conversations about sexuality are carried from private spaces into broader public arenas within schools. The next time a young person speaks to me about a
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sexuality issue, I’ll explain to them why I think it’s important that the broad details be discussed with the student welfare coordinator. I’d also explain to them that discussing broad details would mean that I might say something like: ‘A student in Year 9 has come to me to discuss sexuality issues.’ I would always seek to obtain the permission of the young person in this regard.

In light of the above experiences and my other work with young people, I’d like to offer a few brief points that might be some guide for teachers.
1. Listen to what the young person has to say with as little interruption as possible. Let the young person say all that they want to.

2. Recognise what a difficult thing it is to come out to a teacher and tell the young person this.

3. Reassure them that being GLBT is fine. If you are unable to do this you should seek counselling to deal with your own homophobia and refer the young person on.

4. After a while ask the young person if there are any issues at school that are causing them problems.
5. If the young person is being bullied, talk to them about this. Ask them what they’d like you to do about it.

6. Offer the young person counselling to deal with the effects of bullying but reassure them that they are not the person with the problem. Also ensure that the perpetrators of the bullying are required to undergo counselling.

7. Engage in dialogue with other staff to begin to unpack the structural features that might be generating bullying behaviours and attend to these.

8. If the young person is feeling isolated, it’s imperative that you give them information about existing peer and other support groups.

9. As many young people won’t ask a teacher about available supports, make this information available to students in the form of posters, pamphlets and student notices, and in school diaries and on school websites.

10. Ask the young person to come and see you again at a mutually convenient time. If you are aware of other GLBT young people, ask them if they’d like to meet others at their school and then find a way to make this happen.

11. Without (unnecessarily) breaching confidentiality, discuss this with colleagues and also how the school community might affirm sexual and gender diversity and minimise homophobic harassment.