In his famous “Hope” speech, Harvey Milk (1978) made the following statement, “You have to give them hope. Hope for a better world; hope for a better tomorrow… hope that all will be alright. Without hope, not only gays, but the blacks, the seniors, the handicapped, the us’es, the us’es will give up … and you, and you, and you, you have to give people hope.” During this time in American history, the dehumanization of people abounded across the nation. It was a time in history that depicted the very ugly truth of hatred toward a minority population in our country. Twenty years after his famous speech, I walked into my first teaching position in a typical middle class school district. I was an idealist seeking to change the world through my pedagogy. I wanted my students to love literature and to embrace the truths that can be gained from reading Shakespeare and Faulkner. Yet, it became a time when I saw the same ugly truth of hatred that Milk discussed 20 years earlier. It was a truth that I was not prepared to address.

I walked down the hallway during the first exchange of class periods and heard every type of hate word directed toward non-heterosexual individuals possible; at one point, I literally thought that there was a toxic level of hate in this building. I heard the F word repeatedly. The language choices caused me to cringe. In that moment, I actually regretted accepting this job offer. I was offered several positions while in my student teaching experience, but I had chosen this district because of its size and student population. It was in a metropolitan area; thus, I was naïve in thinking that such problems did not exist within larger cities.

After this epiphany, it was difficult to remain focused on my instructional activities. I wanted to begin discussing this hatred. I wanted to begin the revolution to combat this toxicity. Yet, I realized that I needed to reflect on the appropriate ways to address the challenge because my undergraduate program had not prepared me to do so.

As the days passed, I began collecting data on the use of hate language by notating the number of times I heard certain words. These language choices were part of the normal vocabulary of these students and, in a number of cases, the faculty members within this school building. However, it was not simply my school district. I was not working in a special district that was different from others. My friends in other districts noticed the same use of hate language in their school buildings. In that moment, I began questioning how I could change the vocabulary and eventually
the social belief systems of my students. I questioned why my teacher preparation program had not prepared me to address homophobic hate language. I was not prepared for the tumultuous task that I faced. It was that moment that engendered my desire to become a scholar in creating safe schools for all students, regardless of difference.

Each day, many students attend schools that are constructed to be safe places. The buildings are constructed with state of the art fire alarm systems. Slip-resistant strips on stairways prevent students and faculty from falling. Posters presenting specific safety procedures for students to follow are hung in science labs. There are Heimlich posters in the cafeteria, should individuals choke. School buildings are built with students' safety in mind. Yet, the school culture, during my first few years of teaching, was not constructed to provide all students with a safe learning environment. Today, I argue that a majority of school cultures continue to perpetuate the hegemonic forces that create intolerant educational experiences for non-heterosexual students.

Specifically, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2013) recently reported on their National School Climate Survey statistics that discuss how gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students experience schooling:

- 71.4% of students heard gay used in a negative way frequently or often at school.
- 64.5% heard other homophobic remarks frequently or often.
- 51.4% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff.
- 74.1% were verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) in the past year because of their sexual orientation.
- 16.5% were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) in the past year because of their sexual orientation.

These statistics prove the necessity for future teachers to begin addressing school climates. Having said that, it is difficult for teachers to address these challenges because a majority of undergraduate teacher preparation programs do not offer specific courses to confront issues surrounding tolerance and acceptance of different sexualities. Although many teacher education programs postulate they they discuss diversity across their programs, a number of these discussions do not include in depth dialogue concerning issues related to non-heterosexual identities. These discussions are necessary to begin creating more tolerant school communities toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning individuals.

Therefore, my advice for novice teachers as they meander the halls of their first few years of teaching is simple: all hate language must be addressed within classrooms and schools. In this capacity, I offer the following strategies to create tolerant classrooms.

First, it is important to create the appropriate culture within classrooms and schools. By this, I mean a culture that validates and affirms all students regardless of difference. This is a vital aspect that must be addressed the first day of school. In this manner, teachers should have firm conversations with students about the