Inclusion in Schools: Gender and Sexual Diversity

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Abstract

Gender and sexual diversity (GSD) needs to be identifiable, included in curriculum, and accepted in schools. School leaders need to advocate for policies to include a queer-inclusive curriculum. A gay-straight alliance is an extra-curricular group that promotes diversity and supports gender and/or sexually diverse students. Schools need to support GSD in the curriculum and resources. GSD needs to be a priority for schools to include for gender and/or sexually diverse students to feel welcome.

It is crucial for gender and sexual diversity (GSD) to be seen, taught, and accepted within schools. School divisions need to understand why GSD needs to be acknowledged in schools. School leaders play an important role in changing school policies so that a queer-inclusive curriculum is taught (Steck & Perry, 2017). A gay-straight alliance is a positive extra-curricular group that can help students who are gender and/or sexually diverse feel supported. Educators can take many steps to make certain their classrooms and schools promote diversity. GSD is often not visibly identifiable within schools, and teachers need to be consciously aware of how to represent them appropriately. GSD needs to be viewed as a priority for schools to include within all aspects of the school.

Acknowledgement of Gender and/or Sexual Diversity

Research affirms that GSD must be acknowledged in schools. Gender and/or sexually diverse students face many challenges (Arora, Kelly, & Goldstein, 2016). Every student needs to feel "included, protected and respected" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 1). School leaders in divisions need to advocate for changes related to how GSD is represented in schools. They play a large role in whether a division supports GSD in the curriculum. Schools have a responsibility to accept that GSD needs to be addressed.

Schools need to recognize the challenges that gender and/or sexually diverse students may face, and understand why GSD should be embraced in schools. The challenges can include "frequent harassment, victimization, and discrimination" (Arora et al., 2016, p. 722). These students are at a higher risk of being bullied by their peers, and then "engaging in dysfunctional behavioural patterns as a means of coping with peer abuse" (Crothers et al., 2017, Introduction section, para. 4). Human rights laws "prohibit discrimination based on an individual's gender identity, sexual preference and/or orientation" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 4). Students who do not feel accepted or safe struggle to learn and feel good about themselves (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). Creating an environment that is comfortable discussing, accepting, and acknowledging GSD can create "levels of empathy and compassion" among students (Steck & Perry, 2017, "Benefits," para. 4). GSD needs to be incorporated to address the challenges that gender and/or sexually diverse students encounter.

School leaders play a vital role in how school policies inhibit GSD (Steck & Perry, 2017). Gender and/or sexually diverse students often "walk through space and curriculum unnoticed" (Schmidt, 2015, p. 269). School leaders are tasked with providing gender and/or sexually diverse students with a "safe and inclusive school environment" (Steck & Perry, 2018, Introduction section, para. 1). Teachers may want to include queer content into their teaching, but they need a school division that will support them. Leaders also play a large role in "disrupting school policies" to include queer-content in the curriculum and course materials (Steck & Perry, 2017, Abstract). Many schools have accepted GSD at an extra-curricular level

(Schmidt, 2015). Anti-bullying assemblies, bullying policies, and gay-straight alliances are fairly common in schools (Schmidt, 2015). However, it is the "curriculum, pedagogy, learning, teaching" aspect of school that needs reform (Schmidt, 2015, p. 254). It is up to the leaders of school divisions to advocate for change regarding the inclusion of queer-content in schools.

A queer-inclusive curriculum is needed in schools to represent a group of people who were oppressed for many years. A curriculum shows students the "dominant interests, values, and acceptable ways of behaving" (Steck & Perry, 2017, Introduction section, para. 1). When there is an absence of queer-content, it reinforces heterosexuality as normal, and homosexuality as the opposite (Schmidt, 2015). Gender and/or sexually diverse students need a curriculum that "represents them and speaks to them" (Demissie, Raspberry, Steiner, Brener, & McManus, 2018, Discussion section, para. 6). It provides the opportunity for heterosexual students to view and understand their experiences (Steck & Perry, 2017). It will hopefully "reduce fear and discomfort" that some students may have regarding GSD (Steck & Perry, "Benefits," para. 4). Teachers need to be provided with a queer-inclusive curriculum in order to successfully ensure that all students are represented.

The gender and/or sexually diverse community must be well represented in schools. Schools need to understand the challenges and lack of privilege that they have. For many students, school might be their safe place, so schools need to create a community that respects and accepts all students. School leaders need to change policies and encourage a curriculum that includes GSD, in order to "create and sustain supportive and safe learning environments" (Abreu, McEachern, & Kenny, 2017, Conclusion section, para. 1). GSD needs to be easily recognized in schools.

The Importance of Gay-Straight Alliances

Gay-straight alliances are important in schools. Gay-straight alliances are clubs within schools that are led by students to help anyone within the queer community feel safe and supported (Arora et al., 2016, p. 724). The safe environment that a gay-straight alliance provides has been proven to benefit all students, heterosexual or gender and/or sexually diverse (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). Schools need to ensure that all students feel represented and safe at school. A gay-straight alliance can help students feel welcome and included at school.

Gay-straight alliances, which support gender and/or sexually diverse students, are led by students, and promote diversity and inclusion (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). They provide a place for students to meet and talk about topics related to GSD (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). They also educate the student body on GSD issues, and support students who identify as part of the GSD community, along with their allies (Arora et al., 2016). Students within the alliance are not required to reveal their gender identity or sexual orientation (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). These alliances should follow the same protocols for other school clubs, groups, or teams (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). Even governments have been showing support for these alliances within the schools. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education requires all schools to have a positive response for a request to establish an alliance (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). Student-led gay-straight alliances do not just support gender and/or sexually diverse students; they promote a more positive, accepting, and inclusive school community.

Increasingly more studies have shown that gay-straight alliances help students who are gender and/or sexually diverse feel welcome at school. Gay-straight alliances are "important in educational institutions for even the youngest school children" (Coles, 2018, Introduction section, para. 2). Students have reported "feeling safer and less harassed because of their involvement with GSAs" (GSA Network, 2009; Wells, 2005, as cited in Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 70), and sometimes it is the only space that students feel comfortable being themselves (Sadowski, 2017). Schools with alliances have also seen an improvement in

"student achievement and educational experience" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 29). Misinformation and stereotypes often surround people who are gender and/or sexually diverse. Alliances can help to educate the student body about gender and/or sexually diverse students (Arora et al., 2016). They can also lessen homophobic comments made by students (GLSEN, 2007, as cited in Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). Research shows that gay-straight alliances help students feel safe and welcomed at school, and increase students' knowledge about GSD.

Gay-straight alliances are important for gender and/or sexually diverse students and their allies. The goals of alliances "are about valuing all people regardless of their gender and/or sexual diversity" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 30). Research has been done to prove that they have the ability to make schools "a better, safe and more accepting place" (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 71). All students need to be represented and feel safe at school. Gay-straight alliances are a way to celebrate diversity and inclusion.

What Can Educators Do?

Schools must be proactive in establishing change that accepts GSD within their walls. Teachers may struggle with where to begin when integrating GSD in their classroom. They must take the time to expand their knowledge and language, and learn how to advocate for youth (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). A crucial step for all teachers is to make sure that gender and/or sexually diverse persons are identifiable in visuals, resources, topics, and instruction (Steck & Perry, 2017). Schools need to make GSD visible through curricular and extra-curricular capacities

Teachers need to put in the time and effort to understand how they can successfully implement GSD into their classrooms. They need to "develop knowledge and awareness" to provide meaningful discussions and effectively support students (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 80). Language is very powerful within the GSD community. Teachers must be conscious of the language they use around students (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). Unknowingly, teachers may be using heterosexist language such as "mom and dad," or "boys against girls." Youth who are gender and/or sexually diverse need someone to advocate for them. Teachers need to learn how to advocate for the youth and support them (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). For many teachers, understanding how to integrate GSD within their classrooms may be a challenge, but it is something that needs to be done.

Unfortunately, gender and/or sexually diverse persons are all too often not identifiable throughout schools (Schmidt, 2015). Teachers need to look closely at their classrooms (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). Textbooks, materials, novels, homework, instruction, and visual images can reinforce heterosexual values (Steck & Perry, 2017). Classrooms and libraries need to have a diverse selection of books. Resources used during instruction time need to include more than just heterosexual people and families. Something as simple as a pride flag should be hung in the classroom to let students know that everyone is welcome. There is a lack of acknowledgement of the GSD community, and schools need to make it a priority.

Changes must be made to include GSD in schools. It will take schools and teachers many hours to learn how to integrate GSD organically in the classroom. Teachers need to develop awareness individually, and learn how to be allies (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). Gender and/or sexually diverse persons need to be seen in materials, resources, and lessons in schools (Steck & Perry, 2017). Schools need to make integrating GSD a priority.

Conclusion

The inclusion of GSD in schools is imperative. Educators and school divisions need first to understand why it is important to acknowledge GSD. The curriculum needs to include GSD, and school leaders need to advocate for those changes to be made. Gay-straight alliances are an opportunity for students to educate their peers on diversity, and how their extra-curricular group can help gender and/or sexually diverse students. The resources, lessons, materials, and discussions that teachers bring to their classrooms need to be inclusive to the GSD community. Governments, school divisions, schools, and educators all need to come together and recognize that the inclusion of GSD in schools will benefit all students.

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