

Creating Safety in Schools for LGBT and Gender Non-Conforming Students

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Abstract

This article examines the problem of bullying LGBT youth and gender minority students in school. Harassment and bullying toward LGBT and gender minority youth take place on an international level, engendering concerns of mental and physical well-being of LGBT youth and gender minority students due to heteronormative pressure and lack of inclusion. Solutions include community education, school support, and spaces of safety for youth. Educators and students can employ various strategies to make schools safe and accepting to LGBT students.

Addressing school-related anti LGBT bullying and harassment of gender non-conforming youth is vital in the role of having a safe school where all students should be protected. Bullying and marginalization of LGBT youth in schools is a problem that exists globally. Because of the acceptance of bullying that occurs toward LGBT youth, it affects all aspects of a young person's life, including mental health, sense of safety, and risk of suicide. Students are affected in schools, at home, and communities through peer victimization, intimidation, harassment, and non-supportive school policies. Supports must such as anti-bullying policies, safe zones, supportive adults, and inclusive curriculum are some steps needed to create safe and healthy spaces for LGBT and gender non-conforming youth in schools. Moving forward, it is important to look at the challenges facing LGBT and sexual non-conforming youth, in order to overcome barriers and create the positive outcome of a safe school environment.

Discrimination and Bullying of LGBT and Gender Non-Conforming Students

LGBT and gender non-conforming students are subject to a higher rate of school-related bullying and discrimination on a global level (UNESCO, 2016). Youth who identify in the "gender minority" will receive bullying on a greater level than their peers who are not in this minority (Fenaughty, 2019, p. 628). The United Nations recognizes that bullying and discrimination toward LGBT students is occurring on a global scale (UNESCO, 2016). School-related gender-based violence occurs from norms and stereotypes held by others toward LGBT individuals (UNESCO, 2016). Bullying threatens well-being and safety in forms of physical harassment, verbal harassment (Anderson, 2014), sexual harassment (UNESCO, 2016), psychological harassment (UNESCO, 2016) and online harassment (UNESCO, 2016), resulting in tragic consequences such as suicide. Bullying toward LGBT students occurs in schools all over the world, where policies and stigma fail to protect them from ongoing harassment, often due to legal and socio-cultural reasons where same sex relationships are seen as taboo or as criminal behaviour (Cornu, 2016). It is apparent that this issue is widespread and not contained within political borders, and that LGBT students on a global scale have less safety in schools; their well-being and safety are threatened continuously.

LGBT and gender non-conforming students are more subject to acts of bullying and discrimination at a higher rate than gender conforming students. Discrimination and violence are exhibited on a widespread basis, including discriminatory behaviour from home, hospitals, school, and team sports (UNICEF, 2014), with New Zealand and Australia having the highest reports of bullying during physical education classes (UNESCO, 2016) and within the community (MacDonald, 2016). In Canada, 70% of LGBT students surveyed reported some form of discrimination, with 91% average of all individuals witnessing or experiencing "homophobic or transphobic psychological violence" against peers (UNESCO, 2016, p. 44).

Eighty countries have laws that act against gender non-conforming lifestyle, and may possibly support violence toward LGBT students (UNICEF, 2014). Stigmatization and discrimination occur toward LGBT and gender non-conforming students on a global scale, affecting the well-being of LGBT and gender non-conforming students.

Direct or indirect discrimination (Anderson, 2014) leads to a belief that bullying is initiated by the bully merely on the perception of an individual's orientation. Direct and indirect bullying demonstrates examples of discrimination toward LGBT students. Students who reported discrimination in their Manitoba school division shared that they felt "cornered and despised" by their peers (MacDonald, 2016, para. 14). Direct acts can include gender discrimination in school events, such as barring same sex couples from attending prom, inappropriate derogatory language, and homophobic generic expressions such as "That's gay" (Anderson, 2014); indirect discrimination can be seen with the community of Steinbach's mixed response to their first Pride Parade (MacDonald, 2016). Discrimination toward LGBT and gender non-conforming students is an international problem (Cornu, 2016) that violates human rights.

Acts of discrimination toward LGBT students in school occur within the school community. According to the UNESCO (2016) report, older boys are the main aggressors of physical violence toward LGBT students. In Steinbach, Manitoba, LGBT students reported name calling by peers, such as "dyke," harassment from the immediate community, and indirect non-support of local dignitaries in Steinbach's first Pride parade (MacDonald, 2016). In brief, stigma toward LGBT students is not limited to peers as predators, but also community members.

Mental health and sense of safety are affected when young people are subjected to hate-related behaviours "at a crucial moment in their lives" (Cornu, 2019, p. 6). Suicide risk is higher for LGBT youth than gender minority youth (Turpin et al., 2019). Steinbach youth interviewed by Macleans stated that they had been harassed in the community, called names, and feared loss of employment and friendships (MacDonald, 2016). Students in Hanover school division have contemplated suicide (MacDonald, 2016). Bullying causes an increase in factors that affect mental health and well-being, including depression-related behaviours that can lead to suicide, low marks, social isolation, and stress-related illness (Fenaughty, 2019). Anderson (2014) affirmed that anti-gay bullying threatens well-being of gender minority students, creating stress that affects mental health. On a global level, gender non-conforming students experience a large volume of bullying and harassment from peers and community, which affects their mental health wellness and personal safety, with extreme cases leading to suicide.

Suicide results when supports are not in place for students to feel safe (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019). Gender minority youth are two to three times more likely to commit suicide than non-LGBT peers, with youth being most vulnerable to action at the ages of 15 or younger (Turpin et al., 2019). "Heteronormative discourse" creates non-acceptance of LGBT students in the classroom, through the "valorizing" of heterosexual behaviour (Peter et al., 2016, p. 202). Lack of intervention increases a suicide risk caused by stress and depression (Gilbert et al., 2019). Marginalization can occur in and out of the school environment, because LGBT students do not feel they have a safe space. Lack of policies and support isolates victims, affecting their mental health; there is a feeling of not being safe in school and a higher suicide rate among LGBT gender non-conforming students (UNESCO, 2016).

Heteronormative dominant groups' behaviours are consistent on a larger scale of "othering" their peers by rejecting people who do not fit the common norm of their perception of gender. Females mark non-feminine females as "other," and heterosexual males shame gender non-conforming males (Levesque, 2019, p. 213); heterosexual males have negative attitudes toward males who deviate from the norm (Poytner & Tubbs, 2008). Peer victimization occurs through gendered non-acceptance (Levesque, 2019) and peer-to-peer sexual harassment (Levesque, 2019). Thus, peer victimization is distributed by dominant groups through specific group behaviour that is negative toward the mental health and physical well-being of LGBT youth.

Students are affected mentally and physically by the actions of homophobic and transphobic individuals (UNESCO, 2016). Students are mistreated through various forms of

harassment and harmful behaviours. LGBT students' sense of safety and mental well-being is affected by the actions of name calling, intimidation, witnessing peers be harassed, sexual abuse, and marginalization. Depending on what part of the world LGBT students live in, there are influences that affect how the students can be perceived, including governmental and cultural influences. Although this discrimination is now being recognized by policy makers, and changes are slowly starting to take place, LGBT and gender non-conforming students are a vulnerable minority that is affected negatively in schools by the conforming majority.

Making Schools Safe for LGBT and Gender Non-Conforming Youth

Safety and well-being for LGBT and all students can be created with the support of school, family, community, and friendships. Brave spaces, gay straight alliances, intervention, training, and policy building permit freedom of expression and safety. They help students to be themselves, feel safety, receive school support, and maintain mental health. Solutions support teachers and school staff, family, friends, and community, as well. With the solutions come barriers that need to be overcome, yet success in action toward positive outcomes is growing.

Safe zones, brave spaces, and gay-straight alliances are places of safety that serve the function of "talking, training, and skill building" (Ali, 2017, p. 6). These places give LGBT youth a "guarded" space (Ali, 2017, p. 6) and have "ground rules" to enforce limits and respect (Poytner & Tubbs, 2008, p. 126). Students can be honest and exchange ideas authentically in brave spaces (Ali, 2017). Results of these spaces include personal growth, empowerment of campus leaders, and provision of a space where "voices" matter, by allowing young people to feel less isolated (Ali, 2017) and affirm their identity (Colvin et al., 2019). Gay straight alliances and safe zones can be used as places for LGBT and allies to train, talk, and develop new skills (Ali, 2017) for people to connect to each other socially. Safe zones, gay-straight alliances, and brave spaces provide the opportunity for LGBT and gender non-conforming students to be themselves, and to experience personal growth and safety while receiving support.

A safe school includes different forms of support based on a change in perspective and practice. The reduction of homophobic behaviour and affirmation of identity, can increase acceptance within a school climate (Weinhardt et al., 2018). When gender and identity are affirmed, students feel more supported with increased attendance and a "stronger sense of belonging" (UNESCO, 2016, p. 93). Peer and teacher support can promote inclusive practice within a school that accepts people for who they are, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Shifting from heteronormative instruction, as referred to in "queer theory" (Vega et al., 2012, p. 254), to inclusive curriculum is the responsibility of the school (UNESCO, 2016). Curricular outcomes can be both inclusive (Poytner & Tubbs, 2008) and multicultural (Vega et al., 2012), leading to normalization of LGBT culture. Curricular outcomes can also be designed for certain age groups, in turn increasing empathy (Smith et al., 2019). Normalization and acceptance can make students feel they have a voice and can ask for help (Poytner & Tubbs, 2008), learn about the "intersections of straight and gendered identity" (UNESCO, 2016, p. 223), and promote social justice (UNESCO, 2016). By means of normalization, the curriculum of inclusion provides a framework to support LGBT and gender non-conforming students.

School staff who are fully trained to support LGBT can provide support and awareness of needs of LGBT students (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019). With training in place, staff have more confidence to work with students in need, and be confident with students through acceptance and affirmation. Staff must be dedicated (UNESCO, 2016) and approachable so that students are comfortable (Smith et al., 2019). Front line mental health professionals being "counsellors, school psychologists and school social workers" provide services to students, in which students feel most at ease (Smith et al., 2019, p. 399). "Teachers have burden of responsibility" to show support and acceptance toward their students (Vega, et al., 2012, p. 253). In turn, LGBT students have a safe school environment with trusted and trained adults.

School safety also requires changing policies within schools to contain negative homophobic behaviour toward LGBT students, in order to protect them from physical and mental harm. Policy changes that protects LGBT students increase a sense of safety, with some US districts showing lower suicide rates as a result of these policies (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019). Other policy changes may be social changes of general acceptance, one example being the idea of allowing LGBT students to show affection while dating (Smith et al, 2019) and protection from physical aggression (Levesque, 2019). Increased support is needed, because 10% of US school districts currently have LGBT anti-bullying policies in place (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019). With increased anti-bullying and inclusive policies in place, negative homophobic behaviour is reduced, creating school safety through normalization of LGBT culture and a safe environment.

Socially constructed barriers need to be overcome in order to implement the following positive solutions of supporting LGBT and gender non-conforming students to increase empathy and support. These barriers include personal belief, lack of language, and that teachers may be undertrained. Public perception affects progress when people have fears of political climate changing, fear of being thought to be gay, and fear of backlash from families and school authorities (Vega et al., 2008). Lack of training creates lack of confidence for teachers (UNESCO, 2016, p. 93), with teachers remaining “silent” (Vega et al., 2012, p. 255), including failure to report incidents and downplaying language such as name calling, instead of supporting LGBT youth (Vega et al., 2012). Moving forward, training exists (UNESCO, 2016) that will create awareness for teachers to work with LGBT students and to support marginalized identities (Poytner & Tubbs, 2008). When socially constructed barriers are overcome, acceptance and empathy toward LGBT students is increased.

Positive solutions exist for LGBT and sexual non-conforming schools in school, but staff must overcome barriers in order to support positive action. Brave spaces, safe zones, gay-straight alliances, supportive adults (Colvin et al., 2019), and change in curriculum and policy are necessary for the implementation of a safe environment free of homophobic behaviour toward LGBT youth. As UNESCO stated clearly, it is the responsibility of the school to change delivery to an inclusive model, thus resulting in positive mental health and positive school climate outcomes (Colvin et al., 2019). By overcoming difficult barriers of perceptions and practices that marginalize gender identity, positive action moving forward can be taken.

Moving Forward Toward Positive and Inclusive Practices

In conclusion, school safety for LGBT and gender non-conforming students can be implemented by dedicated professionals who promote inclusivity. Acceptance toward LGBT youth can be nurtured through changes in school practice, policies, and the roles of support that people play to create a safe school. Normalization through curriculum changes and adequate training for staff to be effective are key to this process. All schools have a responsibility to implement changes (UNESCO, 2016) in the area of LGBT youth safety. Safe zones can create places to have a voice and grow, gay-straight alliances can strengthen students’ confidence, and anti-bullying practices must be put into place to protect LGBT students. Although socially constructed barriers of belief, stigma, and silence exist within school walls, the journey toward understanding can take place through education and training for school staff and students with the help of brave spaces (Ali, 2017). Thus, safety for LGBT and gender non-conforming students is possible when a school moves forward through the barriers of social norms to create safety and equality for all students through learning and support through inclusive practices.

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