



SUPPORTING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF LGBTQ+ STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS: A VISUAL DATA TOOL FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

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About the Centers

Great Lakes Equity Center (Center) is an educational research and service center located in Indiana University's School of Education at IUPUI. The Center engages in equity-focused technical assistance and related research with educational and community agencies focused on systemic improvements to serve all learners with particular focus on educational access, participation and outcomes for those who have been historically marginalized. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is a project of the Center and provides technical assistance related to educational equity based on student race, national origin, sex, and religion at no cost to public educational agencies throughout its 13-state region in the Midwest and Plains.



Introduction

Supporting the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Students in School: A Visual Data Tool for Teachers and Administrators illustrates research on the effects homophobia and transphobia have on the mental health of LGBTQ+ students, as well as strategies and resources teachers and administrators can use to address this issue.

This *Equity Tool* consists of three printable infographics to help education stakeholders understand this information, and share it with others, in an accessible and engaging way. In addition to each infographic, this *Equity Tool* includes corresponding information and questions to help education stakeholders engage with the content.

SUPPORTING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF LGBTQ+ STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS:

A VISUAL DATA TOOL FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS



A BRIEF OVERVIEW

RESEARCH SHOWS THAT MENTAL HEALTH IS A GROWING CONCERN FOR TEENS. THE ADVERSE EFFECTS OF MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS ARE EXACERBATED FOR TEENS ALREADY UNDERGOING IDENTITY-BASED PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION (KELLEHER, 2019). THUS, THE CONSEQUENCES THAT HOMOPHOBIC AND TRANSPHOBIC SCHOOL CLIMATES HAVE ON LGBTQ+ YOUTH ARE SEVERE IN REGARD TO BOTH THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AND EDUCATION. REDUCING THE WAYS HOMOPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA ARE BOTH EGREGIOUSLY AND SUBTLY ENACTED NOT ONLY REDUCES DISCRIMINATION IN SCHOOLS, IT CAN IMPROVE THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF LGBTQ+ STUDENTS .

1 IN 6

U.S. YOUTH AGED 6-17 EXPERIENCE A MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER EACH YEAR

50%

OF ALL LIFETIME MENTAL ILLNESSES BEGIN BY AGE 14

SUICIDE

IS THE 2ND LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AGED 10-34

(NAMI, 2019)



LGBTQ+: AN ACRONYM FOR LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, AND QUEER. THE USE OF A + INDICATES INCLUSIVITY WITH ALL GENDER IDENTITIES AND SEXUAL ORIENTATIONS THAT DIFFER FROM CISGENDER AND HETEROSEXUAL.



[Image description: Graphic of 3 diverse people standing in front of a rainbow flag.]



[Image description: Graphic of a person looking out over a landscape.]

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- As you read this infographic, think about the complexity of this topic and the diversity of LGBTQ+ students. What have you learned? What do you still not know?
- Why is it important for you to reflect on the mental health of LGBTQ+ students? How does this topic connect to your own educational context?

HOMOPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA IN SCHOOLS



SCHOOL FACULTY AND STAFF HAVE REPORTED **INACTION** TO HOMOPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA DUE TO REASONS LIKE FEELING IT IS OUTSIDE OF THEIR JOB DESCRIPTION AND FEELING THAT DOING SO IS TAKING A POLITICAL STANCE ([BLACKBURN ET AL., 2018](#); [WALKER, 2018](#)).



A LOT OF STUDENTS ARE SUBJECTED TO **NON-INCLUSIVE CURRICULA**, WITH SOME REPORTING THAT THEY WERE ACTUALLY TAUGHT NEGATIVE CONTENT ABOUT LGBTQ+ TOPICS ([GLSEN, 2019](#)).



SCHOOL POLICIES AND DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES ARE OFTEN NON-INCLUSIVE AND EVEN DIRECTLY DISCRIMINATORY TOWARD LGBTQ+ STUDENTS ([GLSEN, 2019](#)).

COMPREHENSIVE RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY GLSEN (2019) SHOWS THAT LGBTQ+ YOUTH REPORT HOSTILE SCHOOL CLIMATES. IN ORDER TO TRANSFORM THESE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS, WE MUST UNDERSTAND WHAT MAKES THESE SCHOOLS HOSTILE. PHYSICAL AND VERBAL HARASSMENT, STAFF INACTION, NON-INCLUSIVE CURRICULA, SCHOOL POLICIES, AND DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES CAN ALL ADVERSELY AFFECT LGBTQ+, OFTEN IN CO-OCCURRING WAYS.

Yet, [GLSEN \(2019\)](#)'s research shows that victimization based on sexual orientation has decreased over time, and dedicated support for LGBTQ+ students works!



[Image description: Graphic of 2 people looking out over a landscape.]

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What policies exist in your school for LGBTQ+ students? (Specifically, think about whether your school has policies in place protecting LGBTQ+ students from bullying and harassment and to allow students to use their chosen names and pronouns).
- Is there alignment between these policies and actual practices?
- How can you interject if you see policies failing LGBTQ+ students?

HOMOPHOBIA, TRANSPHOBIA, AND MENTAL HEALTH



[Image description: A profile of a head cut from white paper with "Mental Health" written in a brain shape. There are rolled up papers in a circle around the head; half are white, half are rainbow color.]

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

LGBTQ+ IDENTITIES HAVE HISTORICALLY BEEN CONFLATED WITH MENTAL ILLNESS AND SUCH PREJUDICES EXIST TODAY (DATTI, 2014). BEING LGBTQ+ IS **NOT** A MENTAL ILLNESS ITSELF; RATHER, THE TRAUMATIC PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION LGBTQ+ PEOPLE ARE SUBJECT TO CAN LEAD TO MENTAL DISTRESS.

IMMEDIATE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS

HOMOPHOBIC AND TRANSPHOBIC SCHOOL CLIMATES CAN RESULT IN ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, AND SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL (THE TREVOR PROJECT, 2019a). RESEARCH IN THIS AREA IS LIMITED, POSSIBLY BECAUSE THERE IS OFTEN UP TO A 10-YEAR DELAY BETWEEN ONSET OF SYMPTOMS AND TREATMENT .

Often, the phrase "it gets better" is used in the context of LGBTQ+ youth. This phrase is not sufficient when the consequences of homophobia and transphobia are severe in the present moment and have the potential to be enduring.

LONG-TERM MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS

THE ADVERSE MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES LGBTQ+ YOUTH EXPERIENCE CAN CONTINUE INTO ADULthood. WHILE THE PHRASE "IT GETS BETTER" WAS POPULARIZED BY THE MOVEMENT OF THE SAME NAME, SUCH LANGUAGE IS NOT ONLY UNHELPFUL IN THE MOMENT: IT IS ALSO NOT ALWAYS TRUE AS LGBTQ+ PEOPLE EXPERIENCE POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS, ANXIETY, AND DEPRESSION FROM PRIOR VICTIMIZATION (D'AUGELLI ET AL., 2002).



[Image description: An adolescent with rainbow hair smiles at the camera.]

SUICIDALITY

HOMOPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA CAN ALSO RESULT IN ATTEMPTED OR COMPLETED SUICIDES (THE TREVOR PROJECT, 2019b).

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What policies exist in your school regarding the mental health of students and staff?
- Is there an alignment between these policies and actual practices?
- Do you know what to do if a student comes out to you? What resources can you direct them toward?
- Do you know what to do if a student expresses mental health concerns to you? What resources can you direct them toward?



[Image description: Graphic of 2 people looking out over a landscape.]



CREATING SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS

[Image description: Un-capped markers pointing down in the colors of a rainbow.]

INCLUSIVE CURRICULA

INCLUSIVE CURRICULA CAN HAVE A MYRIAD OF POSITIVE EFFECTS ON LGBTQ+ STUDENTS. IT ALLOWS THEM TO SEE THEMSELVES REPRESENTED AS WELL AS ALLOWS NON-LBGTQ+ STUDENTS TO LEARN ABOUT THOSE WITH DIFFERENT IDENTITIES THAN THEMSELVES. CURRICULA IN ALL SUBJECT AREAS CAN BE MADE INCLUSIVE.

GAY/STRAIGHT ALLIANCES (GSAS) & EXTRA-CURRICULARS

IN ADDITION TO SHOWING LBGTQ+ STUDENTS THEY ARE WELCOME AT SCHOOLS, GSAS PROVIDE A PLACE FOR COMMUNITY AND COALITION. HOWEVER, GSAS ARE NOT ACCESSIBLE TO ALL LBGTQ+ YOUTH ([MCCREADY, 2010](#)), SO IT IS IMPORTANT THAT ALL EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES ARE SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SPACES.

MINDFULNESS

MINDFULNESS IS A MEDITATION PRACTICE WHERE ONE BRINGS AWARENESS TO THE PRESENT MOMENT WITHOUT JUDGMENT.

4-7-8 BREATHING

THIS BREATHING STRATEGY CAN HELP CREATE CALM DURING STRESSFUL MOMENTS.

INHALE FOR 4 COUNTS, HOLD FOR 7 COUNTS, EXHALE FOR 8 COUNTS



[Image description: A person's profile shaded like a galaxy.]

ADDITIONAL CURRICULAR RESOURCES



LEARNING FOR JUSTICE



FACING HISTORY AND OURSELVES

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Are LGBTQ+ people represented in your curriculum? If so, how? How can you be more inclusive in your own content area?
- Does your school have a GSA? Who is the sponsor? Would you be willing to be a sponsor?
- How can you use mindfulness with your students and in your own life?
- What faculty, staff, and parents have demonstrated allyship in your school and district? How can you connect with them?



[Image description: Graphic of 2 people looking out over a landscape.]



About the Authors

Alyssa Chrisman is a doctoral student at The Ohio State University in Teaching and Learning, with a focus in Literature for Children and Young Adults and a specialization in Disability Studies. Prior to graduate school, she was a teacher in Memphis, Tennessee. Her research interests include mental illness in young adult literature and critical literacy among preservice teachers.

Mollie Blackburn is a professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University. Her research focuses on literacy, language, and social change. She is the author of *Interrupting Hate*, editor of *Adventurous Thinking*, among other co-authored and co-edited books. She has received NCTE's LGBTQ+ Advocacy and Leadership Award; WILLA's Inglis Award for work in gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, and young people; AERA's Queer Studies SIG body of work award; and the Alan C. Purves Award for an article in the *Research in the Teaching of English* deemed rich with implications for classroom practice.



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