

What Teachers can do to Support LGBTQ Students

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2020

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### **Introduction**

LGBTQ students face many challenges within our public schools. These challenges come in the form of both outward harassment by their peers and a non-conducive learning environment when within individual classrooms. Educators who may be quick to decry the use of other demeaning language may be silent when overhearing the use of terms that harass and degrade LGBTQ students within the classrooms or hallways. In addition, how the content we teach is delivered may not be sufficiently differentiated for the needs of LGBTQ learners.

These unsafe school conditions result in both immediate and long-term consequences for LGBTQ youth. In the short run, LGBTQ students' ability to fully participate in school is interrupted by higher rates of absenteeism due to hostile school conditions. In the long term, research shows that LGBTQ students are more likely to engage in high-risk behavior, such as drug use, and have emotional problems, including depression, suicidality and other forms of emotional distress. (Bravewomon, 2018, p. 9).

Aside from policies enacted by administrators and school boards, individual teachers have the power and influence to support LGBTQ students through their choice of instructional activities and the structure of the learning environment within their classrooms.

### **Social and Emotional Supports**

Teachers have a responsibility to create a learning environment which is conducive for all learners. How this learning environment is set up can help to support the social and emotional needs of LGBTQ students. "Teachers should treat derogatory remarks about sexual orientation

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just as they would such remarks about race, ethnicity, gender, disability, or religion.” (Baker, 2002, p. 104). This type of learning environment can be supported by stopping derogatory remarks and harassment, allowing the topic of homosexuality to be discussed comfortably in the classroom, and being sensitive to how our language assumes that everyone is heterosexual.

Demonstrate to your students that you are accepting of all minorities and that a person’s character and behavior are what is important, not religion, not color, not gender, not sexual orientation. You can accomplish this by freely discussing the topic of diversity – how human beings are different in many ways – and emphasizing that we should appreciate and respect these differences. (Baker, 2002, p. 106).

Sears (1999) addresses this social and emotional learning environment through the process of queering elementary education, or “creating classrooms that challenge categorical thinking, promoting interpersonal intelligence, and foster critical consciousness.” (p. 6). The author additionally states that teaching in this manner “demands that we confront our prejudices inculcated through decades of heterosocialization.” (Sears, 1999, p. 8.). This structure of trust and respect for all beliefs can help to foster a strong, supportive social and emotional learning environment for LGBTQ students.

### **Instructional Supports**

“An additional way teachers contribute to the negative school conditions LGBTQ students experience is by failing to provide instruction that includes positive images, language and themes of LGBTQ people.” (Bravewomon, 2018, p. 10). Instructional supports that address

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these positive images, language, and themes can be helpful by representing a wide variety of diverse backgrounds and views when it comes to the content that we teach. Teachers can incorporate these instructional supports by including LGBTQ materials in their curricula and being aware of materials and resources. These instructional supports can come in the form of discussions specific to the relevant course, including the topics for class presentations, and connecting with local community resources who may be willing to provide speakers for your class. These types of instructional supports do not change what educators teach, but how they teach by incorporating diverse resources that assist in differentiating the content for these learners.

“Educators historically teach from a heteronormative stance and doing otherwise is a departure from most teachers’ instructional practice.” (Bravewomon, 2018, p. 50). It is just as important that resources are used that portray positive LGBTQ content backgrounds as any other differentiated resources incorporated into the instructional setting. Although educators may feel that the exclusion of these resources helps to avoid conflict, Sears (1999) states that “a curriculum that is the product of the lowest common cultural denominator may offend nobody, but it also serves no one.” (p. 12). Differentiation should be for all students.

### **Conclusion**

Although teachers may not be able to change the what in terms of curriculum, they can change the how in terms of teaching it. The choice of instructional resources, how LGBTQ individuals are portrayed within them, and connections with community organizations for speakers can all be used to create a more equitable delivery of the curriculum. In addition to content, the learning environment itself is equally as important. Educators must create a safe and

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conducive space for LGBTQ students to learn. The choices that each individual educator makes in response to these issues can have a profound impact not only how these learners progress in their lives, but also in fostering a more positive culture of understanding and respect for diverse backgrounds and beliefs.

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### References

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