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Creating Safe and Inclusive Schools for LGTBQ Students

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Abstract

Positive school climates foster an optimal learning environment in which students feel safe and supported, and are in a greater position to thrive in terms of academic performance, better relationships with peers and staff, and overall social-emotional well-being. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) students often have to navigate more challenges and hostile school climates compared to their heterosexual peers because school practices, policies, and curricula tend to prioritize heteronormative structures. Significant work is required to challenge these structures, such as by implementing zero-tolerance policies, LGBTQ-inclusive curricula and mandatory professional development for educators, and by creating safe spaces for LGTBQ students within schools.

All students have the right to feel included, respected, and safe in a school environment. However, schools can be a hostile and lonely environment for students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ). LGBTQ youth are more likely to report feeling that schools are unwelcoming or unsafe due to unsupportive peers, staff, and policies (Colvin et al.). Compared to the heterosexual student population, LGBTQ students experience worse outcomes in mental and physical health as well as education (Snapp et al., 2015). Schools have a responsibility to create a safe and inclusive environment that supports LGBTQ students academically, physically, and social-emotionally. However, heteronormative structures that exclude the LGBTQ student population, lack of supportive policies that offer protection, and unsupportive/untrained teachers contribute to hostile learning environments. Challenging heteronormativity[1] by the implementation of zero-tolerance policies, LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, and mandatory professional development for educators, and creating safe spaces within schools, will promote a positive school climate for LGTBQ students.

The Negative Impact of a Hostile School Environment

There is a growing body of research on the negative impact that sexual/gender minority-related disparities and the heteronormative culture in schools have on LGBTQ individuals. For example, LGTBQ youth are at a significantly higher risk for peer victimization, sexuality-based discrimination, and harassment when compared to heterosexual youth (Colvin et al., 2019; Hatchel et al., 2019; Steck & Perry, 2018). In an exclusionary and hostile school environment, LGTBQ students experience physical abuse, verbal harassment, ostracism, and other forms of victimization. Feeling unsafe and unsupported at school has significant consequences on LGTBQ students' mental well-being and academic outcomes. Due to a hostile school environment, LGTBQ students are more likely than their heterosexual peers to feel marginalized and to have low motivation for learning (Steck & Perry, 2018). LGTBQ students are at a higher risk of academic failure with alarmingly high dropout rates, which is associated with the chronic stress from verbal and physical victimization at school (Snapp et al., 2015; Steck & Perry, 2018; Wimberly, 2015). Also, a higher proportion of LGTBQ youth who experience gender victimization report substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Colvin et al., 2019; Hatchel et al., 2019). The consequences of hostile school environments for LGTBQ students

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[1] The term *heteronormativity* is based on heterosexuality and assumed binary as normative, consequently marginalizing and othering those who identify as LGTBQ.

are significant and demonstrate that more supports are required to reduce negative impacts and to enhance the well-being of LGTBQ students in schools.

School curricula, structures, and policies typically prioritize heteronormative structures and contribute to hostile school environments (Steck & Perry, 2018). *Heteronormative* refers to the perspective that promotes heterosexuality as the normal sexual orientation. School systems grounded in heteronormative structures marginalize other student populations, such as LGTBQ students who do not fit this structure. For example, most schools limit or do not include LGTBQ inclusive language in the curriculum, consider the LGTBQ experience in courses, or provide access to safe spaces for LGTBQ students who feel threatened or want more information about LGTBQ issues. Consequently, LGTBQ students are marginalized and excluded when they are not reflected in school curricula, structures, or policies. Heteronormative culture in schools continues when staff does not take effective action against the exclusionary and discriminatory environment that oppresses LGTBQ students (Steck & Perry, 2018).

Creating Safe and Inclusive Schools

Positive school climate is linked with important measures of school success such as academic achievement, high morale staff productivity, and overall better social-emotional well-being (Day, Fish, et al., 2019; Manitoba Education, 2013). Improving the school experience for LGTBQ students requires a multifaceted approach and commitment from administrators and staff. There are key factors that create safe and inclusive schools for LGTBQ students: zero-tolerance policies, LGTBQ-inclusive curricula, mandatory professional development for educators, and safe spaces for LGTBQ students.

Zero-Tolerance Policies

Challenging the heteronormative culture takes systematic policy reform to set the tone and promote the inclusion and acceptance of LGTBQ students. Zero-tolerance policies can change the negative climate of schools for LGTBQ students by including protections from discrimination and harassment based on students' actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity (Wimberly, 2015). Such policies send a message to all students, staff, and the community that the school is a safe and inclusive environment wherein discrimination is not tolerated (Day, Ioverno, et al., 2019). In The Every Teacher Project (a large scale research survey of Kindergarten to Grade 12 educators), findings demonstrated that educators and students who were in districts with anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia policies in place were more likely to view their schools as being safe (Taylor et al., 2016). Zero-tolerance policies that specifically address sexual orientation or sexuality-based harassment and victimization contribute to a reduction in bullying and other forms of victimization (Steck & Perry, 2018). Used inappropriately and without implementing preventive measures, zero tolerance policies will not be effective in changing normative structures and attitudes toward students with LGTBQ. Using a proactive approach rather than reactive, educators can send a message of zero tolerance of bullying and harassment through open dialogue, modelling, and teachable moments.

LGTBQ-Inclusive Curricula

Integrating LGTBQ-inclusive curricula also challenges a heteronormative culture that is prevalent at schools by explicitly addressing LGTBQ-related issues. Incorporating information about the LGTBQ community into the curriculum gives all students the opportunity for insight into the experiences of LGTBQ individuals, and facilitates a more inclusive school climate that celebrates diversity. LGTBQ students benefit greatly from an inclusive curriculum that teaches about LGTBQ people, history, and events. It is important for LGTBQ students to see themselves represented in the curriculum and respected in the classroom (Prescott, 2019). LGTBQ students

feeling safer, and experience less bullying and more peer support when schools teach LGTBQ-inclusive curricula (Snapp et al., 2015). They also miss less school because of safety concerns and are more comfortable and likely to talk to their teachers about LGTBQ issues (Komosa-Hawkins & Fisher, 2013). Implementing policies that protect LGTBQ students and incorporating inclusive curricula disrupts heteronormative culture in schools. Manitoba Education has numerous support documents and resources that help schools to develop their own policies and guidelines for ensuring safe and equitable learning environments for LGTBQ students. For instance, *Safe and Caring Schools: A Whole-School Approach to Planning for Safety and Belonging* is an evidence-based support document for planning and sustaining positive and safe schools. Another source to consider is British Columbia's *SOGI[2]-Inclusive Education Resource Guide*. Educators who have been actively supporting SOGI students for years share recommended practices and provide details on how to implement SOGI-inclusive education.

Problematic Gaps in Educators' Beliefs and Practices

Creating positive school climates are crucial. Educators are a key factor in transforming schools into safe and inclusive environments that all students deserve. However, research indicates gaps between what teachers believe about LGTBQ-inclusive education and how they practise it. The Every Teacher Project identified teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and practices in regards to LGTBQ-inclusive education (Taylor et al., 2016). The findings revealed problematic gaps in creating a safe and inclusive learning environment for LGTBQ students. For example, most teachers would approve of LGTBQ-inclusive education, but few would be comfortable practising it. Although most educators believe that LGBTQ-inclusive education should be taught, many do not have adequate professional training, and feel unsupported or unequipped to do so if their school does not have policies in place (Meyer et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2016).

Mandatory Professional Development for Educators

Mandatory professional development programs enable educators to gain the necessary knowledge, awareness, and skill to deliver appropriate services to LGBTQ students (Komosa-Hawkins & Fisher, 2013). LGTBQ-related components of these programs include the opportunity to explore one's misconceptions/biases to break down stereotypes, information on the unique challenges encountered by LGTBQ youth, current policies, strategies to advocate for change, and skill-building in recognizing and handling LGTBQ issues. Professional development equips educators to support LGTBQ students and respond to forms of victimization such as bullying, harassment, or discrimination. Having trained educators in schools creates a strong social support network for LGTBQ students. This is especially vital, considering that LGTBQ students often experience varying levels of support from family members and would benefit from outside support systems (Day, Fish, et al., 2019). Research also shows that positive teacher-student relationships are associated with benefits for LGTBQ students such as greater school engagement, better academic performance, and overall better social-emotional well-being (Colvin et al., 2019; Day, Fish, et al., 2019; Day, Ioverno, et al., 2019). Mandatory professional development to equip educators with the necessary knowledge and skills to support LGTBQ students is necessary in transforming the culture of schools.

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Safe Spaces for LGTBQ Students

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LGTBQ students who experience victimization, need information about LGTBQ issues, or want emotional support require access to safe spaces. This is especially important for LGTBQ youth who experience varying levels of acceptance or rejection from family members. When

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[2] SOGI is an acronym for sexual orientation and gender identity.

social support is available within schools, LGTBQ youth feel safer, have a greater sense of belonging, and have better health and education outcomes (Day, Fish, et al., 2019). Safe spaces can include a classroom, administrative offices, and Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs.

GSAs provide opportunities for LGTBQ students to form positive and supportive relationships with peers and staff, to have a sense of belonging, and to engage in social justice-based activities that challenge the hostile school environment through awareness campaigns (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Manitoba Education, 2013; Steck & Perry, 2018). In a study of the relationship between GSAs and school climates, results showed reduced gender-based bullying and an improvement in school climate due to stronger social support (Day, Fish, et al., 2019). Egale, a Canadian organization for LGTBQ people and issues, conducted a national survey of Canadian high school students to investigate school experiences for students with sexual or gender minority status (Egale, 2011). In this survey, students from schools with GSAs were much more likely to agree that their schools were supportive of LGBTQ people, be open with some of all of their peers about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and see their school climate as becoming less homophobic (Egale, 2011). Safe spaces, such as GSAs, act as an inclusive environment that can support students' physical and socio-emotional well-being.

My Workplace and How It Supports LGTBQ Students

In my workplace, Winnipeg School Division recognizes the importance of promoting actions and attitudes that create a safe and inclusive learning environment. Initiatives at the divisional level and within many individual schools address harassment and discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. All employees are required to attend a half-day human rights/anti-homophobia workshop, which provides skills, strategies, and resources to address homophobia and to support a safe and inclusive learning environment for LGTBQ students. In 2013, Winnipeg School Division established an anti-homophobia initiative committee, Inclusion Across the Rainbow, to support student participation in national and local LGTBQ events. Currently, many schools in the division also have GSAs. In the school I work in, many teachers already integrate human rights studies in their teaching. I would advocate for the intentional integration of LGTBQ-inclusive curricula, which lends itself well in social studies, health, and family life units. We also have staff members who are openly gay and engage in dialogue with colleagues and students regarding inclusivity in schools. I would propose starting a GSA in my school, since we do not currently have one. It is important to have an identified safe space in the school where students can have access to information, emotional support, and allies they can turn to. I highly recommend Manitoba Education's (2013) *Safe and Caring Schools*, which features information and supports for facilitating positive change in learning environments.

Conclusion

Creating schools that are safe and inclusive, free of harassment and violence for LGTBQ students, takes a whole school approach and commitment to positive change. The long-term negative repercussions of unsupportive and hostile school environments for LGTBQ students highlight the critical need for schools to reform. Systematic policy reform through zero-tolerance policies and LGTBQ-inclusive curricula fosters acceptance of diversity and does not accept discrimination or harassment. LGTBQ-inclusive curricula raise awareness of all students, validate the LGTBQ community that is often marginalized or unseen in typical curricula, and promote inclusivity. Mandatory professional development provides educators the opportunity to build awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to support LGTBQ students. Lastly, providing LGTBQ students with access to safe spaces within the school environment supports their physical and socio-emotional well-being. Safe spaces also act as a community-based resource that students use when they encounter challenges. Schools have a responsibility to educate, protect, and care for all students and must take appropriate action for LGTBQ students.

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