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Addressing Gender & Sexuality in the Classroom and the Effects on

Adolescents

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Abstract:

This literature review presents research examining the social school
environment and the type of effects a positively and negatively perceived
environment can have on students that are part of the Lesbian, Gay,
Bisexual, Transsexual and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) community as well as
the impacts these same environments can have on educators and peers.
Bullying and harassment are still a concern in schools despite advancements
in anti-bullying programs and policies (Poteat & Vecho, 2016). This is
especially true for LGBTQ students. There have been recent changes in the
sociopolitical climate and the movement to support this group of students,

but they continue to face harassment and lack of support from educators and school administrations (Dragowski, McCabe, & Rubinson, 2016).

Not only do LGBTQ students face difficulties with their peers and teachers, but also with their education. There is pushback against inclusive sexual education that addresses topics such as sexuality beyond heteronormativity and gender nonconformity (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). However, research states this lack of education can result in LGBTQ students not feeling safe in schools because their peers, who are not familiar with the issues surrounding this community, may harass them and teachers may not know how to respond when a student is being harassed or is in need of someone to talk to (Dragowski et al. 2016).

This literature review will look at what LGBTQ students face at school in regards to bullying from their peers, discussions for and against discussing gender and sexuality in the classroom, and what effects a lack of support, as well as abundant support, in school may have on LGBTQ students. Literature that discussed elementary aged children or college aged students were excluded. Research was limited between the years of 2013 and 2018 with the exception of "[h]eteronormativity, school climates, and perceived safety for gender nonconforming peers" by Toomey et al. (2012).

For this literature review, adolescence has been defined between the age range of 13 and 19, these are usually the middle school and high school years. Heteronormativity has been defined in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as "[t]he property or quality of being heteronormative; the privileging of biologically determined gender roles and heterosexuality." Gender nonconformity has been defined by Merriam Webster as "a state in which a person has physical and behavioral characteristics that do not correspond with those typically associated with the person's sex." The databases used to find the literature were: Science Direct, specifically looking in the *Journal of School Psychology;* Wiley Online Library database, specifically in the journal *Psychology for the Schools;* and psychARTICLES in ProQuest. The key words used were: gender, sexuality, LGBTQ, and gender AND sexuality.

What LGBTQ Students Face at School

LGBTQ students who openly express any gender nonconformity and a sexual orientation other than heterosexuality or both are harassed and bullied by their peers (Dessel, Kulick, Wernick, & Sullivan, 2017). LGBTQ students would be considered part of the "sexual minority" and will experience homophobic victimization, hear homophobic language, and witness other LGBTQ students being victimized as well (Poteat & Vecho, 2016). Some studies even indicate that this type of bullying is more prevalent in middle school and high school settings rather than in elementary schools (Dragowski et al., 2016). LGBTQ students may also

experience friendship losses from open expression of their sexuality, sexual harassment and even violence (Dessel et al., 2017).

Not only do LGBTQ students often face bullying they also face a lack of support since homophobic behavior often goes unchallenged by peers and adults (Poteat & Vecho, 2016). As a result of this, LGBTQ students may develop low self-esteem, a drop in GPA, and an increase in truancy (Dessel et al., 2017). These circumstances can also have a psychological impact on the LGBTQ students; they may develop depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidality (Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). They are also at risk for engaging in risky behaviors such as substance use, unprotected sex and self-harm (Toomey et al., 2012).

Homophobic behavior can be brought on by heteronormative social expectations. One reason why LGBTQ students may face so much victimization without support is because boys and young men may fear retaliation from their peers for helping and defending the students (Poteat & Vecho, 2016). Some might even condone the biased harassment because it aligns with their own ideas of masculinity (Poteat & Vecho, 2016). This also results in young men and boys being socially conditioned to uphold and enforce homophobic masculinity norms causing both, teachers and students, to engage and condone homophobic behaviors (Poteat & Vecho, 2016).

In the research, there has been contrasting results regarding how educators felt and reacted towards biased homophobic behavior towards

LGBTQ students. In the study done by Dragowski et. al (2016), it was found that educators did believe that LGBTQ advocacy was important; they felt supported by the school and were capable of engaging in advocacy. However, in Poteat and Vecho's (2016) study, they found that educators were afraid of retaliation, indicating that they did not feel support from the school to engage in advocacy for LGBTQ students. This same study also showed that educators were willing to condone homophobic behavior for these same reasons.

Discussion of Gender and Sexuality in the Classroom

There are arguments for and against the discussion of gender and sexuality in the classroom, or more so, the inclusive discussion of gender and sexuality that goes beyond heterosexuality and the gender binary. There are as many concerns for having this discussion at all as there is support for this idea.

As mentioned before, teachers and other adults can sometimes condone or at the very least, not interfere with homophobic harassment against LGBTQ students. While there is support for an open discussion, there is more fear involved that may prevent this. Educators have expressed concerns that they may face backlash from parents and educational administrators for engaging and supporting intervention efforts (Dragowski et al., 2016). They also fear that an LGBT-inclusive sexual education may be inappropriate or too explicit (Drazenovich, 2015).

Not only is there resistance from educators, there is also resistance from parents and politically conservative groups. These groups have three large arguments against the inclusivity of gender and sexuality discussions: 1. Children may engage in non-heteronormative sexual behavior or even become gay or lesbian if they learn about such sexualities in the classroom, 2. If the children learn about these other sexualities at school then it feels like the school is forcing these ideals onto the students that go against the parent's heteronormative religious and/or political views, and 3. The teachers may act as role models for LGBTQ representation and change the sexual identity or orientation of the students (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017).

Another great concern that parents may have is that they feel that they do not have control over what their child is learning at school, and that learning about gender and sexuality may force a different view on the child that is contradictory to the parent's ideal view. (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). Parents also fear that if educators teach or expose the students to these topics, they will encourage the students to engage and practice homosexuality or bisexuality (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). Gregenfurtner & Gebhardt (2017) address these concerns in the same article, they state that the first concern is based on the assumption that sexual orientation is a choice. They have found in their research that heritability is more influential than environment in determining how people identify their sexualities and gender. Ultimately, being informed and

educated about diverse sexuality and gender will not make a person become gay, lesbian, transgender, or bisexual. (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). The benefit is that these students could then learn that sexuality and gender identity is rooted in biology, which could lead to a more accepting attitude towards gender nonconforming students (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). The second argument is based on the belief that being lesbian, gay, transgender, or bisexual is wrong or unnatural, and that children should be protected from learning about LGBTQ issues (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). Gregenfurtner & Gebhardt address the negative outcomes that a strongly heteronormative school climate has on LGBTQ students. However, educating students on the issues could lead to a positive school climate for both LGBTQ students and their peers (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). Lastly, they address the educators' issue as being similar to the aforementioned issue: that having an openly queer educators is not going to "turn" or influence students to be or feel queer/questioning. What can result is that these students may be positively influenced by having such a teacher or role model (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017).

There is also a lot of support for having this discussion to address the teachers' concerns, because the need for teachers to be informed on these issues is greater than their fears of retaliation. Being trained on LGBTQ issues can create a more welcoming school environment that includes bias intervention and ally skill development (Dessel et al., 2017).

School Support

LGBTQ students want to feel that they are safe and have a support network in school. However, this isn't always the case, and the results of a lack of support structure could have negative effects on the students. Despite the best efforts, both at the high school and middle school levels, to create and enforce policies that protect and support LGBTQ students, most students report that homophobic behavior is never addressed (Poteat & Vecho, 2016) or is even encourage by teachers and other school administrators (Dessel et al., 2017). In the study done by Dessel et al.(2017), 67% of LGBTQ students who had reported harassment to school staff rated the staff's response as "ineffective" and 61.6% of LGBTQ students reported that the staff did nothing. Another study by Dragowski et al. (2016) found that 57% of LGBTQ students who were harassed never reported because they did not feel anything would be done about it.

It has also been found that school climate, including its policies and practices, reinforce heteronormativity in the spoken language and in the curriculum (Dessel et al., 2017). As a result, LGBTQ students have reported a poorer school climate and a lower sense of belonging as compared to heterosexual students (Dessel et al., 2017). In cases of biased harassment against LGBTQ students, other students have reported wanting to help and intervene, but felt they were not adequately equipped to handle the situation (Poteat & Vecho, 2016). A national report, by Russell et al. (2016), found that

89.9% LGBTQ students reported that they do not have access to resources related to sexual orientation and gender identity. These obstacles that LGBTQ students face make it difficult for them to succeed in a school setting.

It has been found that having a positive and supportive school environment for these students results in them being less truant, experiencing less teasing, and a decrease in marijuana and alcohol use (Dessel et al., 2017). LGBTQ students feeling safe at schools and the enforcement of an anti-bullying policy lead to greater sense of school belonging (Dessel et al., 2017). Having such policies has been linked to LGBTQ students having a higher self-esteem and making them be less likely to commit suicide (Dessel et al., 2017). While LGBTQ students may continue to experience harassment, feeling that they are well supported by their schools increases their feelings of safety (Graybill & Proctor, 2016).

In the study "Are school policies focused on sexual orientation and gender identity associated with less bullying? Teachers' perspectives" by Stephen T. Russell et al. (2016), a connection between school safety and bullying was found, as illustrated by this figure:
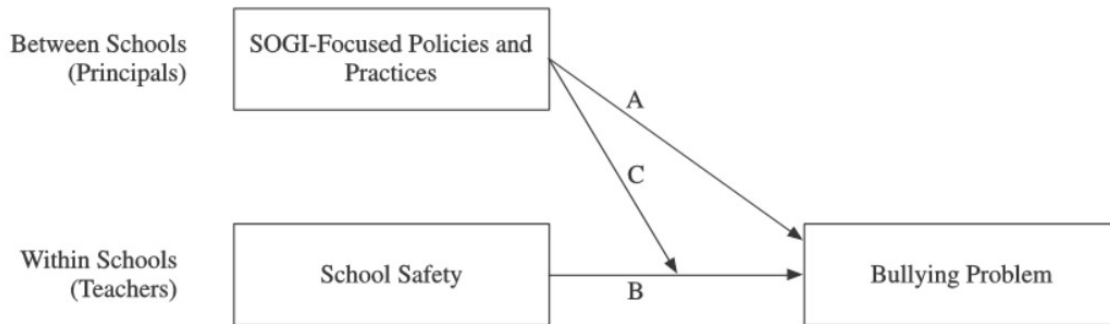
Fig. 1. Conceptual model illustrating moderation of school safety by SOGI-focused policies and practices.

They found that having anti-bullying policies, represented by A, and enforcing school safety, represented by B, should be associated with fewer bullying problems. It was found that students in schools with these policies felt safer, had a stronger connection to the school and experienced less bullying and harassment (Russell et al., 2016).

Having the support of heterosexual teachers can also be very beneficial to LGBTQ students. These teachers can be allies for these students by modeling supportive behavior for heterosexual and cis students that are likely to respond to these teachers (Dessel et al., 2017). It has been reported that students who feel that their teachers are supportive feel less victimized, have higher self-esteem and grades, and better attendance (Dessel et al., 2017). Also, having support groups, such as a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), that have teacher sponsors is also associated with a decrease in victimization, better educational performance and mental health for all students (Dessel et al., 2017). It was also shown in Twiladawn Stonefish and

Kathryn D. Lafreniere's research, titled "Embracing Diversity: The Dual Role of Gay–Straight Alliances" (2015), that having GSAs in schools can result in non-LGBTQ students educating their peers and sharing information with their families, schools, school boards, and larger community (Stonefish & Lafreniere, 2015). It has been reported that students in schools with these programs hear fewer homophobic remarks, experience less harassment based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and are less likely to be truant because they feel unsafe, and they have a better sense of belonging at the school (Russell et al., 2016). It has also been found that having these safe spaces for LGBTQ students results in fewer reports by teachers of bullying (Russell et al., 2016).

Conclusion

Based on my findings, it is clear that LGBTQ students face greater harassment from their peers than other groups; they are a minority group as a whole. Heteronormativity has made it so that students are afraid to help their LGBTQ friends and leads them to encourage such behavior, thus perpetuating this behavior. In the end, LGBTQ students are the victims. They do not feel safe at school and for many, it may be the last place they look towards for a safe haven if their families do not support them.

They feel isolated, scared, unsafe, and as if they do not have the support of their teachers or the school. The result of these factors include poor mental health for this group of students; they may develop suicidal

thoughts, indulge in alcohol and drugs, become truant and focus less on school. This is not the fault of the LGBTQ group or of most educators or non-LGBTQ students. It has been shown that educators and friends want to help and stop this biased harassment, but that fear of retaliation stops them. What seems to be the best solution is to have more inclusive discussions of LGBTQ themes in the classroom in order to educate the students, make classrooms more inclusive learning environments, and decrease harassment.

While the research that was used for this literature review was very informative, during my search for literature, it was apparent that there is not enough research within the last five years on inclusive discussion in the classroom or LGBTQ issues in the school setting. This very issue was brought up by Dorothy L. Espelage in her commentary, "Sexual orientation and gender identity in schools: A call for more research in school psychology—No more excuses" (2016). She found that of the articles and research published between the years 2000 to 2014 in school counseling, school psychology, and social work journals, less than 5% were either about LGBTQ issues or merely mentioned it as part of a larger study (Espelage, 2016). In the end, there simply is not enough research done on this demographic and any research that has been done either compliments or supports previous research that was done before.

With all this research on how negatively LGBTQ students are affected and what can be done, there is still too little research. While LGBTQ research

is needed, what is needed even more so is research on race and ethnicity.

Most of the research found does not state the ethnicity of the students;

intersectionality of sexual orientation and race can also affect how these

students are being bullied. It would not be so unreasonable to believe that

LGBTQ students of color are the most impacted minority. Espelage (2016)

even calls for more research on the intersectionality of race and sexual

orientation in her commentary. It can be very important to see what role

being part of the LGBTQ community plays in relation to a student's race, in

regards to both school and homelife, and whether non-white LGBTQ students

are at an even greater risk than white LGBTQ students.

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