School Environment for LGBTQ/Sexual Minority Youth

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Abstract

There has been growing attention in the last decade to the school experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) or sexual minority youth. Unlike youth of prior generations, contemporary LGBTQ youth have opportunities to 'come out' in their families, communities, and schools, a factor that has changed the climate at school for all students. This article provides an overview of homophobia and bullying at school. Consistent with recent research in this area, it considers both individual student experiences as well as broader questions about school climates of safety and support for LGBTQ students and their heterosexual allies. A number of strategies to promote positive school climates for LGBTQ and all students have been proposed in recent years, and are reviewed: nondiscrimination and antibullying laws and policies, curricular inclusion, and school-based clubs such as gay-straight alliances. In closing, implications are considered for future research, policies, and programs to support the health and development of LGBTQ youth in schools.

In recent years there has been growing public awareness of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) or sexual minority youth and their experiences at school. News reports of the deaths by suicide of gay boys following chronic harassment at school brought unprecedented attention to the issue of homophobic school bullying, as well as to the broader issue of the degree to which school climates are safe and supportive of LGBTQ students. In the same period there have been controversies in many communities, also played out in news media, about challenges to long-standing heteronormative practices of schools: whether students can take same-sex dates to the prom; whether a boy can be a homecoming queen; and whether students can choose their gender presentation in senior class portraits. This public attention is in stark contrast to the silence that many LGBTQ students in prior cohorts experienced at school: For many generations they were simply invisible.

This growing public awareness and understanding of LGBTQ students and their experiences at school has emerged in part because LGBTQ youth are 'coming out' (acknowledging and disclosing their sexual and gender identities to others) at younger ages. Broad social acceptance has shifted during this period, as evidenced by multiple factors, most notably the growing public affirmation of marriage for same-sex couples. Yet for youth there is a tension between growing social acceptance on one hand, and the persistent heteronormativity of schools on the other. Thus, even as acceptance grows for LGBTQ individuals, schools remain places where homophobia, heterosexism, and discrimination continue to exist. The norms, beliefs, and attitudes held by peers, teachers, and administrators shape a school's climate. A growing body of literature has demonstrated that positive school climate supports positive development (Birkett et al., 2009). However, numerous studies have indicated that the climate of schools in the United States is hostile and unsafe for many LGBTQ youth.

We consider the lives of contemporary LGBTQ youth: their coming out in today's context, and their experiences at school. After providing an overview of homophobia and bullying at school, we shift from a focus on individual student experiences to consider broader questions about school climates of safety and support for LGBTQ students and their heterosexual allies. A number of strategies to promote positive school climates for LGBTQ and all students have been proposed in recent years: nondiscrimination and antibullying laws and policies, curricular inclusion, and school-based clubs such as gay-straight alliances (GSA). Finally, we consider implications for future research, policies, and programs to support the health and development of LGBTQ youth in schools.

Contemporary LGBTQ Youth

There have been dramatic social changes in attitudes toward homosexuality during recent decades, propelled in part by a growing number of positive LGBTQ role models, including positive portrayals of LGBTQ individuals and families in television, film, and literature. At the same time there has been growing advocacy and legislation related to LGBTQ people and their lives, most notably related to marriage, which is now legal for same-sex couples in multiple states of the United States and countries around the world (Loftus, 2001). Parallel to increasing social acceptance, LGBTQ adolescents come out at earlier ages compared to youth in prior decades, and many disclose their sexual identities in the context of supportive environments (rather than in the context of alienation and shame, as was often the case for prior cohorts). Recent young adult cohorts report coming out between ages 16 and 17 compared to older adult cohorts who report having come out between the ages of 24 and 27 (Grov et al., 2006); notably, patterns of sexual identity and behavior, as well as development of sexual identity milestones such as coming out, show few differences across racial/ethnic groups (Rosario et al., 2004). Some studies show that youth are coming out at even younger ages, including during middle school (Poteat and Anderson, 2012).

At the same time, youth generally report stronger prejudice and more engagement in social exclusion at younger ages. These trends in prejudice and social exclusion may have multiple origins. On one hand there are significant cognitive and developmental changes during adolescence that enable teens to evaluate human rights, fairness, and prejudice with more sophistication as they age. Other explanations emphasize self-consciousness and peer regulation that are heightened during the early adolescent years. Whether explained by cognitive, interpersonal, or social developmental factors,

compared to their older counterparts, younger adolescents are less adept at navigating social differences that may involve stigma or prejudice. Thus, as youth have begun to come out at younger ages across recent years, this downward trend in age at coming out collides with age-related trends in homophobia. Considering these two competing patterns – the historical trend that LGBTQ youth are coming out at younger ages and the developmental course of prejudicial attitudes and behaviors – it is likely that contemporary youth's school experiences may be more characterized by homophobia and prejudice than was true for prior cohorts, despite the broad trends in social acceptance of LGBTQ people and issues (Poteat and Russell, 2013).

Homophobia and Bullying

There is a broad discourse regarding homophobia and bullying; in the research literature studies have considered multiple relevant dimensions: homophobic epithets (name-calling; use of the phrase 'that's so gay'), perceptions of safety and belonging, physical and verbal harassment, and bullying and cyberbullying in schools. Homophobic epithets are ubiquitous in US high schools. According to a report by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN; Kosciw et al., 2012), "84.9% of students heard 'gay' used in a negative way (e.g., 'that's so gay') frequently or often, and 91.4% reported that they felt distressed because of this language" (p. xiv). In addition, over two-thirds heard other homophobic remarks (e.g., 'dyke' or 'faggot') frequently or often while 61.4% heard negative remarks about gender nonconformity. Students report homophobic language in school not only from peers, but from educators as well: Over half of students reported hearing negative remarks about sexual orientation and gender nonconformity from teachers or other school staff.

From the perspective of many youth, the phrase 'that's so gay' is not discriminatory but is understood as a general put-down; this perspective has been acknowledged by scholars (e.g., McCormack, 2012). Yet perspective and perception matters; there is clear evidence that for LGBTQ young people, 'that's so gay' is interpreted as personally undermining or distressing (Kosciw et al., 2012). The GLSEN report documents a slow but steady decline in the frequency of expressions such as 'that's so gay' since 2001 (Kosciw et al., 2012). This result comes from a large nationwide study of LGBTQ students, and is the first empirical indication that this form of homophobia in schools may be on the decline. Although the use of this phrase seems to be declining, the same study showed that negative remarks about gender nonconformity have changed very little. Thus, although there may be increasing understanding that the use of the word 'gay' as a put-down is problematic, a trend which follows the growing social acceptance of LGBTQ people and issues, there appears to be little change in adolescents' sensitivity to negative remarks regarding conformity to the boundaries of masculinity and femininity.

Homophobic language at school contributes to school climates that may be unsafe for LGBTQ students. In fact, feeling unsafe at school is a critical issue for many sexual and gender minority students: 63.5% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation, and 43.9% because of their gender expression. More than one-third (38.3%) were physically harassed in the past year because of their sexual orientation, and 27.1% because of their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2012). This leads to multiple negative outcomes for sexual and gender minority students: Sexual minority students who experience high levels of victimization are more likely to skip school because they fear for their safety, smoke cigarettes, drink and use substances more often, and engage in suicidal behavior compared to nonsexual minority students (Bontempo and D'Augelli, 2002). Further, LGBTQ youth who are gender nonconforming are at risk for depression and life dissatisfaction due to LGBT-specific harassment (Toomey et al., 2010).

LGBTQ youth are frequently victims of harassment, discrimination, and violence within schools. This harassment takes on many forms in addition to bias-based language, including verbal teasing, bullying, and physical aggression (Russell et al., 2010). GLSEN reported that over 50% of LGBTQ students were verbally harassed and over 25% were physically harassed (Kosciw et al., 2012). However, there are group differences between sexual and racial/ethnic minorities: Bisexuals experience higher levels of victimization than other sexual minority groups and white and Latino adolescents experience higher levels of victimization than Black and Asian adolescents (Russell et al., in press). In a study of California schools, white students reported more sexual identity-based victimization than students of color (Russell et al., 2009). Similar patterns of victimization have been found in school samples in other countries. For example, homophobic behaviors are reported to be widespread among Italian students, with verbal and physical abuse being commonplace within schools (Prati et al., 2011).

Constant exposure to these conditions has been shown to have negative consequences, as discrimination and stigmatization within schools can have a negative impact on the mental health of youth. A number of studies have documented associations between school bullying, victimization, and abuse and compromised mental health among LGBTQ youth. In particular, D'Augelli and colleagues (2002) found that youth who were verbally abused in school were likely to experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances. Similarly, reports by GLSEN show associations between severe victimization and lower self-esteem as well as higher levels of depression (Kosciw et al., 2012, 2013). Other research shows that depression and suicidal feelings were low for all students, regardless of sexual orientation, when they attended a school with a positive climate (Birkett et al., 2009).

Although more attention has focused on the link between homophobia and bullying at school and compromised mental and behavioral health, some studies have examined links with education attainment and academic outcomes. There is evidence to suggest an association between bias-based harassment and academic achievement or grade-point average (Kosciw et al., 2012, 2013; Russell et al., 2001). Victimization and feeling unsafe and unwelcome in schools can also lead to missing school and negative attitudes toward school (Espelage et al., 2008; Kosciw et al., 2012; Birkett et al., 2009).

Finally, recent studies have begun to document the impact of discriminatory bullying in comparison to bullying that is not due to discrimination or prejudice. This growing body of