

Glossary

Sexual orientation: a consistent, enduring pattern of sexual desire for individuals of the same sex, the other sex, or both sexes (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2006, p. 395).

Bullying: verbal or physical attacks, threats, or insults delivered repeatedly over an extended period toward an individual by another or a group of individuals; characterized by an imbalance of power.

Heterosexism: the belief that heterosexuality is superior to other forms of sexuality, particularly homosexuality, which may lead to discrimination and prejudice against sexual minorities.

Homophobia: a pervasive and unreasonable fear, disgust, and/or mistrust of homosexual individuals, which may lead to discrimination, prejudice, and violence against homosexuals.

Classroom Practices that Promote Gay and Lesbian Students



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What is the Problem?

Throughout U.S. history, LGBT individuals have faced tremendous amounts of discrimination and prejudice due to their sexual orientation and/or gender-nonconformity. Even today with all of the progress that has been made in the struggle for civil rights, LGBT individuals still struggle for acceptance and belonging in a society dominated by homophobia and heterosexist ideologies (Kim, Sheridan, & Holcomb, 2009).

Particularly for LGBT children, schools can feel like a battlefield, with homophobic bullying as a major contributor to the ostracism, fear, and distress that many students experience (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010).

Research has shown that LGB students who are more open about their sexual orientation are more likely to be bullied by their peers, and the victimization of bullying may lead to severe psychological distress (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002).

Facts About Bullying

The 2009 National School Climate Survey by GLSEN (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010) which interviewed 7,261 LGBT students (13-21 years in age) from across the U.S. found that:

- Approximately 85% of LGBT students experienced some degree of homophobic verbal harassment in school. Approximately 40% were physically harassed and 19% were physically assaulted, respectively, within the school environment due to their sexual orientation. Students who were harassed or assaulted due to their sexual orientation were three times more likely to skip school.
- About one third of students who reported homophobic harassment or bullying to school officials stated that no action was taken to address these issues.
- Compared to the general student population, LGBT students are three times more likely to skip classes and four times more likely to skip school due to fear for their safety .
- LGBT students who experienced greater amounts of homophobic bullying by their peers, had lower grade point averages and expressed lower educational aspirations than LGBT students who experienced less victimization.
- LGBT students who were harassed and/or assaulted more often due to their sexual orientation had greater depression, greater anxiety, and lower self-esteem than LGBT students who experienced less victimization.

Resources

GLSEN - www.glsen.org – This website offers a wealth of information including latest research findings of LGBT students' experiences in school, information on locating local GSAs, surveys for assessing acceptance and tolerance in your school or community, etc.

The Safe Schools Coalition – www.safeschoolscoalition.org – This site offers resources on creating more tolerant school environments.

The Trevor Project – www.trevorproject.org – This website focuses on suicide prevention.

Gay and Lesbian National Hotline – www.glnh.org and 1-888-843-4564.

CSAP's Prevention Pathways—<http://pathwayscourses.samhsa.gov/courses.ht> - This site offers resources on preventative and intervening strategies for bullying, suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, etc.

Project 10—<http://www.project10.org/> - This site offers a number of resources for teachers, educators, and students on combating harassment in school.

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays—<http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=194>— This website contains a number of resources for individuals interested in advocating and supporting the rights of LGBT individuals.

Legal References

As educators and parents, it is important to know which federal laws require our schools to guarantee the rights of all of our children, regardless of sexual orientation, to be able to learn in a safe environment, free of harassment, discrimination, and abuse.

As cited by Callahan (2001), in accordance with federal law, Title IX, prohibits sexual harassment in schools. The law itself is not LGBT-specific but it does protect all students from any form of sexual harassment. Schools are held responsible for guaranteeing students these rights.

The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U. S. Constitution requires schools to offer the same protection against harassment and bullying to all students regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc.

As cited by Callahan (2001), in 1996 the first court case (*Nabozny v. Podlesny*) addressing anti-gay bullying was brought before the U.S. Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals. The plaintiffs successfully sued the school district and several school officials for failing to protect Nabozny from severe harassment regarding his sexual orientation, to the same extent that they had protected other non-LGBT students who also suffered harassment. The school district eventually settled on a \$900,000 payment to Nabozny. Since then, several LGBT students have successfully sued school districts for failing to respond to the perpetual victimization that they received while in school.

Currently, a new federal bill known as the Safe Schools Improvement Act, has been introduced to the Senate in August of 2010. The bill contains anti-bullying legislation for schools and includes guidelines for dealing with homophobic harassment (GLSEN, 2010).

Facts About Bullying

For LGBT students who also identify as racial and/or ethnic minorities, the school environment can be especially distressful given that bullying and harassment can be both racist and heterosexist in nature.

The 2007 National School Climate Survey by GLSEN (Diaz, & Kosciw, 2009) which included interviews from 2,130 LGBT students of color (13-21 years in age) from across the U.S. found that:

- Over one-third were physically assaulted due to their sexual orientation, compared with 19% of the general LGBT population as reported by Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, and Bartkiewicz (2010). In addition, over one-half of LGBT students of color were victimized by their peers due to their race/ethnicity.
- Students who were victimized due to both their sexual orientation and their race/ethnicity were more likely to miss school and have lower grade point averages than students who experienced high levels of only one form of harassment or low levels of both forms of harassment.

These results clearly demonstrate that for many LGBT students of color, harassment can be a double-edged sword, with many students not only being forced to suffer verbal and physical attacks due to their sexual orientation, but also due to their racial/ethnic minority status.

How Can We Help?

Given the risk of victimization that many LGBT students face and the consequences (e.g., academic, psychological, social) that may result, what can school officials do to transform our schools into safe learning environments that support the needs of these students?

Unfortunately, many teachers, school counselors, and other school officials lack professional or sensitivity training in handling LGBT issues, resulting in many of these individuals feeling inadequate in their ability to address the needs of their LGBT students (Callahan, 2001; Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, & Watson, 2009; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003).

However, there are a number of research-based strategies that schools have successfully implemented in order to aid educators in their efforts. These strategies will be discussed in further detail in the next few sections.

Common Barriers

According to Lugg (as cited by Kim, Sheridan, & Holcomb, 2009), the historical context in which sexual minorities have been viewed is a major barrier that educators, students, political leaders, and parents continually have to face when attempting to implement and enforce anti-homophobic policies and interventions within their school districts:

1. Until 1973, homosexuality was included in the DSM as a mental illness.
2. Same-sex sexual contact was illegal in many states until 2003, when the Supreme Court nullified all laws pertaining to this conduct. Currently, same-sex marriage is still prohibited by the majority of states.
3. Traditional religious institutions have historically viewed and, for many, continue to view homosexuality as a sinful and condemning lifestyle.

These prejudicial preconceptions that the dominant, heterosexist culture of the U.S. perpetuates, is the largest barrier to addressing the needs of LGBT individuals.

Programs That Work

Henning-Stout, James, & Macintosh (2000) described two LGBT programs implemented within schools that were found to be highly effective in promoting tolerance and diversity among the school population:

- **Project 10:** Implemented in California to reduce truancy and high school drop-out, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and suicide among sexual minority youth. Support groups, counseling, and educational workshops comprise the foundation of this program.
- **Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students (SSP):** Created by the Massachusetts Board of Education to promote the rights and development of LGBT youth within the state, the SSP focuses on promoting education for students and school faculty, organizing GSAs, and providing counseling services for students (Szalacha, 2003).

Diversity Training

One method of providing teachers with the tools and skills to promote LGBT interests within their classrooms is to provide diversity courses and trainings which incorporate LGBT topics directly within the curriculum (Mathison, 1998).

Athanases and Larrabee (2003) offered a diversity course to undergraduates seeking a minor in education or a teaching accreditation. The course incorporated: 1) articles written by LG individuals focusing on the struggles and challenges that they have faced, 2) exposure to media chronicling the historical struggles of LG individuals, 3) guest speakers, and 4) personal student reflections to the LG literature. Upon completion of the course, the students expressed greater knowledge and sensitivity toward LG interests and devised useful strategies to advocate for LG youth, which they planned to implement in their own classrooms when they became teachers themselves.

Studies such as the Athanases and Larrabee (2003) experiment, demonstrate that required training and exposure to LGBT interests can aid teachers in their efforts to incorporate greater cultural diversity into their curriculums and/or to promote greater tolerance and acceptance for LGBT youth within their classrooms.

Strategies That Help

Just as teachers are recommended to enroll in diversity courses or training programs in order to facilitate their confidence in promoting LGBT interests within their classrooms, Callahan (2001) offers strategies to school counselors to help them meet the needs of this diverse population of students. She recommends:

- School counselors need to enroll in courses or training programs which focus on how homophobia and heterosexism affect a wide range of functional outcomes for children and youth (e.g., physical health, academic achievement, social functioning, psychological health, etc.).
- School counselors should advocate that LGBT content be incorporated into both the school curriculum and the school library. Nichols (1999) also suggested creating a diversity room to operate as an educational resource for teachers, students, and counselors as well as a safe haven for LGBT youth and other minorities.
- School counselors should advocate for the creation and/or promotion of school-wide anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies.
- School counselors should be open to counseling LGBT students about stressful events and influences in their lives.

By following these guidelines, school counselors may be better prepared to serve the needs of their LGBT students, as well as helping to instill greater feelings of acceptance and community-belonging in these students. Just the presence of one supportive adult can greatly impact the life of a child in a very positive way.

Strategies That Help

Other research-based strategies that have been shown to be effective when implemented within schools:

1. **Schools should incorporate LGBT interests directly within school curricula**, such as focusing on important LGBT historical figures and the struggles that LGBT individuals faced and continue to face today (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). LGBT students attending schools that incorporated an inclusive curriculum felt safer, missed less school, and had more tolerant classmates than LGBT students attending schools with less inclusive curriculums (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010).
2. **Creating GSAs (gay-straight alliances) to facilitate active student participation** in promoting tolerance and diversity throughout the school (Szalacha, 2003). LGBT youth who attended a school with an active GSA experienced less harassment and felt safer in school than LGBT youth attending schools with no active GSA (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010).
3. **Implementing school-wide anti-bullying policies to reduce/eliminate harassment** (Callahan, 2001). LGBT students attending schools that had school-wide anti-bullying policies witnessed fewer homophobic statements being emitted by their peers and also witnessed greater intervention by school faculty/staff when a homophobic incident occurred, in comparison with LGBT students attending schools that lacked these policies (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010).

Incorporating these strategies into your schools may help create a more tolerant and accepting environment for sexual minority students.