LGBTQ+ Inclusion in the School Environment

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Abstract

In this analysis, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community will be represented as the LGBTQ+, LGBTQ, or simply the queer community, as these names are all commonly used rather than listing out every sexuality or gender identity included. The plus sign in LGBTQ+ implies that there are many other sexualities and gender identities beyond those listed. Discrimination against those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer in any form has prevailed for centuries. However, with recent milestones being reached for the community, it is past time to begin looking at how non-heteronormative people are depicted in school systems, if they are represented at all. More specifically, this analysis looks at the ways in which school policies and staff respond to LGBTQ+ students, how lessons and textbooks reflect queer people, and how the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance affects the school community. Facts and statistics were pulled from various sources, all from the 2000’s in order to obtain relatively recent information. After analyzing these sources, it can be concluded with certainty that positively representing students identifying as LGBTQ+ in a school environment positively impacts the school, including those who identify as heterosexual or cisgender, meaning that their gender aligns with their sexual organs at birth. This inclusion of and appreciation for diversity is able to discourage bullying, create a safe environment, and educate on a topic where many find themselves ignorant.

LGBTQ+ Inclusion in the School Environment

The LGBTQ+ community overcame numerous obstacles in the past century. Through the publicizing of PRIDE parades, legalization of gay marriage, and even movies following a non-heteronormative love story, the LGBTQ+ narrative has become increasingly commonplace, allowing for greater overall acceptance by society. Still, the system is not perfect, and prejudices still remain. Perhaps one of the most effective ways to reduce this judgement is through education. As a future teacher, it is necessary to consider the way in which certain material is presented, as it can affect student perceptions. The following analysis argues that a positive association with people identifying as LGBTQ+ in lessons and extracurricular activities fosters a more inclusive space, allowing for a safer learning environment that creates a place promoting understanding and academic excellence.

Creating this inclusive environment begins with the staff and policies in place. The 2015 National School Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Network (GLSEN) found that supportive staff can greatly influence the experience of LGBTQ+ students (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2015). 78.7% of students with no supportive staff stated they felt unsafe in school due to the way they identified (Kosciw et al., 2015). In contrast, only 40.6% of queer students with eleven or more staff members who they deemed as supportive reported feeling unsafe at school (Kosciw et al., 2015). This disparity of nearly forty percent only begins to demonstrate the great influence staff and teachers have in creating the school environment for students. They set the tone for the classroom; if the teacher does not demonstrate respect for those who identify as LGBTQ+, how can students be expected to assign dignity to their queer counterparts? Of course, the teacher need not make a grand gesture of respect; instead, students will model their behavior and opinions based on how the teacher behaves on a day to day basis. Simply offering one’s support or not allowing derogatory language allows students to feel safer in their own skin and encourages others to follow in suit.

However, teachers can only do so much. In many schools, discriminatory policies are enforced, directly preventing staff from providing an inclusive environment. Over half of transgender students are required to use the bathroom that aligns with their sex rather than gender (Kosciw et al., 2015). How can schools create an inclusive environment when students are denied the respect that aligns with a basic human need? Policies like these not only bring emotional harm to students that identify as transgender, but potentially influence fellow students away from seeing a need for change. Especially when at a younger age, many students may just accept the word of their teachers and principals; if the staff above them cannot grant access, they may not realize the fault in the policy, as it simply is what they are exposed to. Discriminatory prevention policies extend beyond grade school, as well. In fact, as of 2012, only 13% of colleges and universities implemented non-discrimination policies that granted protections for students identifying as gay or bisexual (Windmeyer, 2012). Of that group, only 6% extended these protections to transgender students (Windmeyer, 2012). These discriminatory policies and lack of protective measures build upon each other, creating a distrust in the school system itself. Of the many LGBTQ+ students verbally or physically assaulted, 57.6% chose to not report harassment incidents to staff because they believed nothing would be done on their behalf (Kosciw et al., 2015). In most cases, they were right. Of those that did report incidents, over sixty percent reported that their school ignored the issue (Kosciw et al., 2015). Without the backing of their school staff, a student cannot feel safe in the place they spend most of their youth. An issue that seems to be based upon respect for other humans and diversity, school policies and staff seem to frequently fail in offering this. Policies, staff, and teachers set the precedent followed by many students. It is their job to foster an environment that is safe for all. They are the example.

LGBTQ inclusion goes deeper than the school environment and into the lessons taught there. As a teacher, one must consider a few key questions when it comes to diversity. The first one, and perhaps the most important, is asking if the lesson represents diversity in a positive light, or whether it includes diversity at all. LGBTQ+ students are the focus of this research, so more specifically, how are students of varying sexual and gender identities represented? Only 22.4% of surveyed queer students reported lessons that included positive representations of the LGBTQ community, and 17.9% saw the community represented in negative context in lessons (Kosciw et al., 2015). Not only are less than half of students being exposed to inclusive lessons, but there are almost as many negative connotations being made as there are positive. How can non-heteronormative students be expected to feel comfortable with themselves when they are in an environment that paints the way they identify in a negative light? This is most commonly seen in physical education and health classes, where references made to homosexual relations are often in conjunction with sexually transmitted diseases and prostitution (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008; Burdge, Sinclair, Laub, & Russell, 2012). Whether knowingly or unknowingly, teachers can greatly impact the way students see themselves and one another. It is important to consider the way one’s lesson portrays those in the queer community. The opposite of these harmful lessons is most commonly seen in English and social studies classrooms, followed by classes involving the arts (Burdge et al., 2012). Between those subjects, more students report feeling cared about by adults, a sense of belonging in the school community, an increased sense of safety; they also obtain higher grade point averages (Burdge et al., 2012). Simply including LGBTQ+ elements in a positive context allows students to view themselves and others in a more educated, kinder light. It fosters a community of acceptance. Unfortunately, just changing some content in lessons is not enough.

A question is extended to the reader: in school-mandated novels, how many characters were explicitly stated as homosexual or in a homosexual relationship? Compare this to the amount of characters explicitly stated as heterosexual or in a heterosexual relationship. In textbooks, how frequently were LGBTQ+ relationships mentioned in a positive way? A 2005 entry into the Canadian Journal of Education shares the findings of a study of high school textbooks and the mention of sexuality. Spanning across the categories of “personal and social education, moral education, family economics, human biology, and Catholic moral and religious education,” the researcher found that 95% of the 610 pages analyzed held no reference to same sex romantic relations (Temple, 2005). Furthermore, 133 of those pages “explicitly defined sexuality as heterosexuality” (Temple, 2005). With this information considered, one must realize the potential oppressive nature involved with this failure to consider homosexual relationships. High school is often a time where people may question their sexuality or gender identity, but without an understanding of the spectrum of sexuality and gender, it may be difficult to place oneself in a category that is comfortable. While the information can be obtained outside of school, it is unfiltered and may still be difficult to understand outside of text. The struggle to find oneself may be further complicated through current textbooks when only thirty pages of those analyzed mentioned same sex relationships in any way, 80% of those mentions being in a negative context (Temple, 2005).

When a school cannot offer academic inclusion, let alone approval, students may experience feelings of exclusion or discomfort. For students not identifying as queer, this failure to positively include queer-related text creates an atmosphere of disapproval bred from ignorance. This most commonly manifests itself through the use of derogatory language such as calling others “fag” or referring to an unfavorable item or circumstance as “gay,” but physical and verbal abuse of openly LGBTQ+ students also surfaces. In an article published with the Huffington Post, GLSEN Student Ambassador Mark Pino (2015) argues that, in order to combat this harmful ignorance, “Students need to be taught about the accomplishments of LGBT men, women, and gender nonconformists of the past and present.” His words seem to ring true: 98.1% of queer students heard “gay” used in a negative way (Kosciw et al., 2015). However, in schools where an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum was in place, nearly fifty percent of students reported a decrease in derogatory use of the term “gay” (Kosciw et al., 2015). This demonstrates that when students are able to categorize names, faces, and lives under a certain topic, such as sexuality or gender identity, they are more capable of humanizing the term. Furthermore, if students become familiar with the oppression this group has faced and in some ways overcome, more respect can be associated with the title. In 2012, California passed the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act, which updated the state Education Code “…to integrate age-appropriate, factual information about the roles and contributions…” of people that identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender into social studies lessons (Burdge et al., 2012). This could certainly be considered a huge step forward for the queer community, especially in contrast to the lack of protection policies for LGBTQ students on college campuses. Building an understanding of LGBTQ+ people and history provides unaware students with the chance to overcome their own prejudice from ignorance. Most importantly, though, is how the inclusivity of lessons affects students under the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Under an inclusive curriculum, 62.6% of LGBTQ+ students reported that they were less likely to feel unsafe at school (Kosciw et al., 2015). Knowledge breeds understanding and sympathizing. This knowledge is what can keep students from acting cruelly towards those whose sexuality or gender they were previously confused about. With education comes a degree of respect that is shown to bring in more consideration towards bullying, such as bringing physical harm or using “gay” as an insult. With reductions in harmful language and physical harassment, queer students are more comfortable being open with who they are and interacting with other students.

When considering interactions with other students, one must also consider the inclusion of LGBTQ+ students in the extracurricular community. Of course, students under this label should not be barred from clubs and sports, and very little research supports that they face discrimination in this matter. When speaking on the subject of after-school organizations, it is in reference to the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance, abbreviated as a GSA. A club in which students from all sexual orientations and backgrounds may come together, GSA’s often have the mission of creating a safer environment for all students and building a sense of community. The club meetings often serve as a safe haven when students feel uncomfortable in school. As of 2015, over half of all students in the National School Climate Survey reported that their school had a GSA or similar organization (Kosciw et al., 2015). When digging further into the establishment of the organization, one can clearly see the benefits. In schools where a Gay-Straight Alliance was in place, only 59.3% of students reported hearing “gay” used in a derogatory text, as opposed to 77.1% in schools without the organization (Kosciw et al., 2015). When considered alongside the effects of LGBTQ+ education with the use of labels, it appears that instituting inclusion in both lessons and clubs could greatly shape student perception of those in the community. The lack of derogatory language fosters a more supportive environment, even to the point where staff is more engaged. As opposed to the 12% in schools without an inclusive organization, 20.6% of students reported that staff in schools with a GSA intervene most of the time or always when hearing homophobic remarks (Kosciw et al., 2015). The derogatory language decreased, as did the “levels of victimization,” ultimately allowing for a safer place for self-expression (Kosciw et al., 2015). When the levels of pressure due to sexual orientation or gender identity decrease, those students are able to focus less on protecting themselves and more on their academics and involvement in the school community. This allows for school to be a more enjoyable, nurturing experience that fosters growth rather than pushing a student to be as small as possible to avoid ridicule.

While some of the information reported seems promising- such as the majority of schools with GSA’s, the FAIR Education Act in California, and the effects of LGBTQ positive lessons- one must recognize that the school system is not near perfect when it comes to including LGBTQ+ students in the school environment. While the three components of policy and staff, texts and lessons, and extracurricular activities seems easy to accomplish, efforts to create a safe space are met with backlash. Not every person is of the opinion that “gay is okay,” such as certain Christian fundamentalist groups advocating for “No Promo Homo Laws” (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). While acts such as those have not been passed, they do create “…a climate of fear and intimidation that prevents teachers from including or affirming LGBT youth and families” in school (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). When the fear is instilled, it becomes increasingly difficult for schools, teachers, and students to push for an acceptance of diversity. Unfortunately, a school system cannot be reformed in a single day, week, or month, but continuing efforts of school communities can continue raising the statistics on safe school environments and inclusive lessons, while lowering the numbers in the use of derogatory terms and inaction on the schools’ part.

When considering school policies, staff, lessons, textbooks, and clubs in relation to students in the LGBTQ+ community, one goal should be clear: ensure that the environment schools are creating do not push students into the closet. Years spent in an education atmosphere are incredibly formative, and the way in which information is presented can influence perceptions of oneself and others. This is not an argument to make school queer-centric; this is simply in support of the principles of equity and diversity, allowing the needs of each individual student to be met in order to enable their growth and success as both a learner and person.

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