Creating Ways to Include LGBTQ Students: Everyone Deserves an Education

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Abstract

When asked, most educators would agree that a safe and supportive school environment is an absolute must for effective teaching and learning. However, school can be dangerous for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students. How can educators guarantee that LGBTQ students feel safe enough to learn effectively? Creative suggestions for an inclusive school environment by promoting awareness and by providing inclusive activities and strategies that are specific to LGBTQ students are included in this paper.

Introduction

In the past year, mainstream news stories have brought attention to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) population. For instance, in April, 2015, Bruce Jenner revealed that he was transforming into Caitlyn Jenner. A few months later, the United States Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage was legal nationwide in the United States. Serious conversations have been generated by these events, a public gender transformation and lawful same-sex marriages. Students, both those who can identify with these issues and those who are just curious, have questions about these events and LGBTQ topics in general. For example, many parents, as well as teachers, were faced with difficult questions by students of all ages trying to understand complex issues like gender when Bruce Jenner became Caitlyn Jenner: "How can a boy become a girl?", "Is he only dressing like a girl, but he's still a boy?", "Is she a real girl just like my sister?", and, "Can I be either a girl or boy if I want to?". This questioning often did not stop with gender, but also included identity, sexuality, and marriage, too.

On the other hand, these events, the introduction of Caitlyn Jenner and the legalization of same-sex marriage, evoked many jokes, memes, and trash-talk. This negative discussion became mainstream through social media, late night talk shows, and Internet video clips, many of which were repeated and distributed in classrooms – ostracizing any students who may be LGBTQ. How do educators ensure these students are not belittled, marginalized, or made to feel insignificant and worthless? How do educators guarantee that all students, including those who are LGBTQ, feel safe to learn and grow in schools?

Challenges LGBTQ Students Face

If a student is not of heterosexual orientation or has a gender variation of that other than his or her biological sex, schools are a dangerous place (Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin, & Drechsler, 2012; Ressler & Chase, 2009; Sears, 2005; Singh, 2013). It is no wonder that these types of students feel unsafe in schools since they face, almost on a daily basis, derogatory remarks (i.e., "faggot" or "dyke"), harassment (both verbally and physically), physical assault and/or injury, and/or threatening, perhaps even threatening with a weapon (Ressler & Chase, 2009). Furthermore, because school is an unsafe and an intimidating environment, LGBTQ students often abandon school by being absent, dropping out, and/or becoming less likely to pursue a post-secondary education (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2012; Peters, 2003). It is not surprising that these students would lose hope when it is the people who are supposed to secure the safety of all students (i.e., principals, teachers, resource officers, staff) that are the very people creating the hostile environment. Sometimes, even well meaning employees can unintentionally marginalize and exclude LGBTQ students (Beemyn, 2005; Fish & Jeltova, 2005; Ressler & Chase, 2009).

Most educators claim that they have a safe and supportive school climate that is effective for teaching and learning. The reality is that this is simply not true. For example, even students who are heterosexual and fit into the

male-female gender system can face five times more antigay harassment than LGBTQ students (Ressler & Chase, 2009). Moreover, some zero-tolerance policies – even those designed to protect LGBTQ students – can perpetuate the cycles of fear, hatred, and violence because victims, alongside the perpetrators, are punished. Marginalizing and excluding these students from regular student activities, even in for the purposes of protecting them is counterproductive. Norton & Herek (2013) suggest that a person's prejudice is reduced when interacting with a member of a stigmatized group; therefore, any separation and isolation maintains ignorance of the similarities as well as misunderstanding of the differences between diverse groups of students.

Advice for Educators

More recently, schools have begun to realize that policies based on a binary male-female gender classification system are no longer considered effective (Beemyn, 2005). For instance, some schools that were built with male/female bathrooms and locker rooms are now sensitive to students that are gender variant or transgender. They are trying to accommodate these students so they are not marginalized or excluded from the general population of students. Although, schools are trying to design inclusive policies and to educate their employees about diverse students, such as LGBTQ individuals, the lack of a widely accepted vocabulary and language is a hindrance. Without proper terminology that captures the complexities of gender and sexuality, there can be little discussion and understanding of LGBTQ students (Beemyn, 2005; Norton & Herek, 2013; Ressler & Chase, 2009). Nevertheless, educators can still improve the school environment for LGBTQ individuals (i.e., students, parents, peers) by learning about this type of diversity and by providing an inclusive education (Beemyn, 2005). For example, teachers unaware of LGBTQ diversity often assume that everyone is heterosexual unless told otherwise; whereas, teachers who are aware of LGTBQ diversity may not try to fit their students into strictly defined categories (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). Subsequently, these aware educators may use inclusive language, posters and signs, guest speakers, and group collaborators. Additionally, these aware educators may even protect LGBTQ students by stopping homophobic language and name-calling in their presence. These aware educators may petition their schools to allow for the use of an LGBTQ inclusive curriculum, the formation of a gay-straight alliance and/or support group for LGBTQ students, and, perhaps, even create an LGBTQ awareness day (Beemyn, 2005; Lipkin, 1999; Lucas, 2002).

Another creative strategy for inclusion of LGBTQ students is to be able to relate to, or see others like them, in what they are studying. Every student, regardless of his or her gender or sexual orientation, needs a role model, guide, or mentor. Those students who may be marginalized or excluded especially need to identify with someone in the school or the curriculum (NEA, 1991). Therefore, having LGBTQ literature on the shelves of school libraries, identifying LGBTQ individuals who influenced specific subjects (i.e., science, math, English, poetry, technology), and perhaps identifying LGBTQ diversity within contextual learning is inclusive techniques for making LGBTQ students feel safe and accepted. Additionally, positive interactions with this type of diversity can reduce a person's prejudice through the realization that there is nothing to fear and that there is nothing wrong with this type of diversity (Norton & Herek, 2013). See Appendix A for some general literature choices that feature LGBTQ issues and characters.

Additionally, several suggestions for educators on how to develop an inclusive school environment by promoting awareness and by providing inclusive activities and strategies that are specific to LGBTQ students are provided (Bailey, 2003; Justice & Hooker, in press; Sapon-Shevin, 2008). First, educators should investigate the school's policies. Knowing how the school defines diversity, especially LGBTQ issues, harassment, and punishment will help any educator determine school approved support systems and inclusiveness. Also, knowing policies and procedures helps an educator determine who to speak to when there is a need for issues to move upward through the chain of command. Educators should also inspect their libraries and counselors' offices for LGBTQ materials. Not only should there be inclusiveness in general literature and curriculum-specific activities, there should be information on the health and well being of students who are LGBTQ, especially the Questioning group. For example, many counselors are concerned about the health and mental health of students in general. They have many pamphlets and other informational materials on depression, body shape (i.e., thin/large, severe weight loss/gain), abuse, disabilities, and so on. There should be information pertaining to LGBTQ health issues, gender identity, and sexual identity as well for those students who are LGBTQ or who have parents, guardians, or peers that are LGBTQ.

For those educators who are in a position to do so, they should create a safe space for LGBTQ students. This learning space should be gender neutral (Steensma, 2013). For example, there should not be separate toys for girls and for boys. Or, pink items (i.e., pencils, paper, blankets, chairs) for girls and blue ones for boys. Encouragement of certain jobs should not be gender specific, like nurses should be girls and doctors should be boys. When choosing avatars in virtual spaces or school-supported software, educators should accept a student's avatar choices regardless

of the student's biological gender (i.e., a boy choosing a girl avatar or a girl choosing a boy avatar). Neutralizing these forms of stereotyping may stop gender identity confusion which could potentially marginalize and embarrass students. Additionally, educators should not assume heterosexuality at any age. For example, people will often ask about or tease a girl about her boyfriend or a boy about his girlfriend. Although this type of dialog may be meant good-naturedly, assuming heterosexuality, even at a young age, can confuse a child. A child continuously exposed to this assumption may believe everyone is supposed to be heterosexual so there must be something wrong with anyone who is not. A misconception such as this could prompt children to have a lower tolerance for anyone that is not heterosexual, including themselves. Educators should be a role model of acceptance for their students. For instance, educators can adopt a zero-indifference policy by stopping name-calling and harassment, not assuming heterosexuality, and maintaining and supporting open-mindedness in the presence, educators show students how to accept and include everyone. Punishment is not always necessary, especially when the situation can become a teachable moment. Moreover, educators can proactively teach positive social skills such as how to make friends, give compliments, and how to handle teasing and/or hurt feelings. Additionally, by having students work together, they learn more about their own similarities and differences which can reduce prejudices.

Educators can create an inclusive environment for LGBTQ students, a group of students who are regularly marginalized and face the consequences of this isolation. These marginalized students often feel as if they are being constantly judged by every person they meet (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006). For example, Peters (2003) suggests that many LGBTQ students have had to grow up in environments that teach them to hate themselves, which can result in substance abuse, sexual risk-taking, dropping out, and increased suicide risk. Norton & Herek (2013) suggest that increasing positive interactions within safe spaces may promote positive interactions between marginalized students and non-marginalized students; therefore, the creation of safe learning spaces may increase positive interaction between LGBTQ students and heterosexual students. By incorporating this group of individuals into the whole student population, perhaps the cycle of ridicule, criticism, threatening behavior, and harassment can be stopped. All students deserve the right to feel safe in schools to learn and grow. Only inclusion will eliminate fear and intimidation for this, or any, marginalized group.

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Appendix A – Books with Gender Variant Characters

The following list includes books about those who are transgender, gender fluid, or gender variant. Teachers could use these books in their curricula to teach about nonconforming gender issues and the challenges involved with these issues.

Author	Title	Synopsis
Cris Beam	*I am J*	J has always known that he was a boy who happened to be born into a girl's body by mistake. Now he just has to convince everyone else.
Laney Cairo	*Circle of Change*	(e-book) This is the story of a romance between Kim, a teenager trans man, and Dash a gay college student, who initially rejects Kim but ultimately falls in love with him.
Kirstin Cronn-Mills	*Beautiful Music for Ugly Children*	Gabe, who was born Elizabeth, hosts a popular weekly radio show called "Beautiful Music for Ugly Children." He is not out at school and is still living as Elizabeth, but when someone discovers his secret he must figure out how to live an honest life and still stay safe.
Tanita S. Davis	*Happy Families*	When Emily, who was born as Christopher, tells her parents about her desire to live as a women, they send her into therapy, convinced she is ill. She is able to rely on her girlfriend and a few others in her life to help her through these family issues.
Rachel Gold	*Being Emily*	When Emily, who was born as Christopher, tells her parents about her desire to live as a women, they send her into therapy, convinced she is ill. She is able to rely on her girlfriend and a few others in her life to help her through these family issues.
Brian Katcher	*Almost Perfect*	When Logan meets Sage he is instantly attracted to her but how will he react when he learns that Sage was born male.
Julie Ann Peters	*Luna*	Regan is an average sixteen year old that is keeping secret the fact that her brother Liam is really a transgender girl named Luna
Ellen Wittlinger	*Parrotfish*	Just like the parrotfish that is born female but becomes male later in life, teenager Grady knows that even though he was born Angela, on the inside he is a boy. He is happy, but not everyone else is, especially his family, and he must rely on the people in his life who support him to move forward.

To truly support LGBTQ students, schools must radically rethink how to provide an educational experience that is not only safe but that overtly advocates for acceptance — an ideal environment for students' social-emotional development and academic success. Characteristics of an accepting school. Sadowski, along with Harvard Graduate School of Education doctoral candidate Tina Owen-Moore, paint a picture of what an ideal school experience for LGBTQ would look like. Sadowski observed these traits at schools around the country while researching his book, and Owen-Moore has implemented many of them at The Alliance School, a Milwaukee charter she founded with the explicit mission of providing an LGBTQ-friendly environment. Download Citation | Creating Ways to Include LGBTQ Students: Everyone Deserves an Education | When asked, most educators would agree that a safe and supportive school environment is an absolute must for effective teaching and learning. | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. Our analysis of the responses indicated that students did improve as LGBT allies in ways similar to those reported in the 2009 study. The findings suggest that the course could be disseminated [Show full abstract] provided that instructors actively encouraged students to engage in experiences that develop their LGBT ally identities. Many LGBTQ students identify school counselors as the one school staff member to whom they are most likely to disclose concerns related to their sexual and gender identity. Given this reality, school counselors are uniquely positioned to address myths about LGBTQ youth, to advocate for these students and to effect change. Dispelling myths. Let's begin by examining five myths that can have an impact on the identity, safety and well-being of LGBTQ youth. We'll also look at specific strategies and interventions that counselors can use to address these myths and increase the safety of LGBTQ students. Myth #1: Parents must be informed of their child's sexual and gender identity. A 10th-grader discloses to her high school counselor that she identifies as a lesbian. In terms of international education, LGBT students face a whole host unique challenges, uncertainties, and questions when contemplating study abroad. They may ask themselves any one of the following questions, among hundreds of others: • Will I be accepted? • Will I be safe? • Will I be able to express myself? • Will I feel comfortable with my housing? • Will I experience discrimination? • Will I have trouble in transit?