

# **2008 Report on LGBTQ Youth in the Syracuse City School District**

Compiled by Students in CFE/QSX 300

Syracuse University

Under the direction of  
Elizabeth Payne, PhD

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*“Communication leads to community, that is, to understanding, intimacy and mutual valuing.”*

Rollo May, author, psychologist

The mission of the Syracuse City School District is to ensure that all students demonstrate mastery of defined skills and knowledge, appreciation of diversity, and development of character which will enable them to become productive, responsible citizens who can succeed in a rapidly changing world; this is accomplished, in partnership with our community, by transforming our educational system to respond to the unique needs of each student through excellence in teaching and learning.

To Whom It May Concern:

Two years ago a report was compiled by Syracuse University students proposing ways in which LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer) related issues could be improved on within the Syracuse City School District. Their findings, based off of scholarly research as well as interviews supported the need for change within the schools in the form of policy, personnel training, and increased support for students surrounding LGBT issues.

The following report, also compiled by Syracuse University students from the same “Queer Youth, Straight Schools” class under the direction of Dr. Elizabeth Payne, will bridge the 2006 report with the current climate concerning LGBTQ issues in the Syracuse City School District. The research, drawn from ten interviews, scholarly research, and the 2006 report, will be used to offer recommendations to the Syracuse City School District. Our recommendations are centered on the need for greater communication and consistency throughout the entire system, raising awareness about the discrimination that LGBTQ students experience, and opportunities for change. From students to administrators, the need for dialogue around LGBTQ issues is imperative.

- 86.2% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 44.1% reported being physically harassed and 22.1% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation.
- 73.6% heard derogatory remarks such as “faggot” or “dyke” frequently or often at school.
- More than half (60.8%) of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and more than a third (38.4%) felt unsafe because of their gender expression.

*-GLSEN 2007 National School Climate Survey*

With staggering statistics like these it is clear that much work still needs to be done to make school a better place not only for the LGBTQ youth population but for everyone that teaches, learns, and works within the walls of all schools across the country.

We hope that the information offered in the 2008 report will spur the need for change and provide ways in which this change can be implemented.

Jesika Anthony

Lauren Hannahs

Amanda Bates

Thomas Richard

Jessica Bickford

Sydney Ruff

Krychelle Davis

Alex Ward

Jennifer Freeman

## **Introduction and Methods**

For this report, individual LGBTQ students were interviewed and asked to give their opinions and perceptions of their daily experiences on life within their SCSD high school. Also interviewed were several counselors, teachers, as well as administration staff, some of whom identify as LGBTQ, some as ally, and some who choose to not identify themselves or their beliefs at all. Interviews were conducted by student researchers in the form of open-ended questions and were audio taped with written consent to ensure proper use of material gathered. Interview questions were designed using information received through several scholarly works read throughout the semester preceding the hands-on research within SCSD. Several schools within SCSD were involved in the research. All high schools within SCSD were contacted in attempts to gain information for *that* specific site.

*To protect the identity of those involved, pseudonyms were used and where relevant, school names have been changed. All schools, students, and others interviewed were within Syracuse City School District*

## **Curricular Silence**

In history class LGBTQ students most likely hear lessons about famous heroes of times past that win battles and conquer territory such as Alexander the Great. However, the students hardly ever hear about Alexander's sexual identity and the importance of male lovers to him (Sears, 1998). Students can learn about lascivious topics like adultery in history but only within the constraints of a heterosexual framework (Hirschfeld, 2003). Only certain LGBTQ related

issues may be brought up for discussion such as the Gay Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s and HIV/AIDS, but both are often shrouded by negative stereotypes (Hirschfeld, 2003).

The effects of silencing queer history can leave students feeling disconnected from a commonly shared experience. For other minorities a common history can be the bridge to connect people across time and space. A lot of LGBTQ youth struggle with their sexuality because they believe they are the only ones who have ever gone through it. However, as history points out, there are many of instances in which people have felt same-sex attraction or crossed gender boundaries (Hirschfeld, 2003). The lack of recorded achievements of LGBTQ people in history can leave youth feeling incapable of accomplishing goals (MacAnGhail, 1991).

Heteronormativity goes basically unchallenged in teaching materials for K-12 social studies. Unless children are raised in a limited number of locales or have teachers who go beyond what the textbook provides, they may graduate from high school being none the wiser that heteronormativity paints an inaccurate picture of social life and perpetuates intolerance, sometimes with tangibly destructive consequences such as harassment and physical violence...The social studies curriculum, because it must make some attempt at describing the world as it is, has always dealt with 'difference'...The common failure even to mention the existence of lesbians and gay men (let alone bisexual and transgender persons) clearly clashes with gay matters today being a visible part of the public landscape in most of America.

Like history, there is a de-sexualization of queer figures in literature and poetry. Faculties find it acceptable to read The Scarlet Letter but not The Picture of Dorian Gray. It is ok to glorify Walt Whitman's views on America and democracy, but to mention his love of male romantic friendships would be blasphemous (Hirschfeld, 2003). Too often, queer youth have no idea that

many of the poems and books they read actually have threads of LGBT content relevant to their lives and experiences.

Once again, the effects of silencing queer identities in literature can disjoint LGBTQ youth from the larger culture. It gives a false impression that all eloquent writing, especially romantic writing, deals specifically with heterosexual people and their desires. It too denies heterosexual students the truth about what they are reading. To think Sappho was writing about cordial relationships with women does both the student and the artist an injustice. Diversity in literature is what makes it a unique experience for the reader and enlightens them to new ideas.

Curricular silence takes place in many different subject areas. One of the most important areas is in sex education classes. Mac An Ghail (1991) writes, “Students enter schools as sexual and gendered beings, having experienced wider formal and informal learning networks.” The sex education students receive outside the classroom is often strictly biological and reflects a heteronormative and masculine-dominated view (MacAnGhail, 1991). Students may learn about how sex can lead to pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted diseases, but there is rarely a lesson on thinking about sex/sexuality/gender critically (Sears, 1998). Students do not learn why they have the feelings they might be having, only that these feelings, in the best interest of one's future and health, should be ignored (MacAnGhail, 1991). Without being able to think critically about sexuality, the discourse will never change (Sears, 1998).

When any student enters a sex education class they are filled with questions, but LGBTQ students have expressed that the information provided them with inadequate information. A gay male SCSD high school student described his experience in his sex education class, “The sex education teachers hardly say or teach anything about LGBTQ related things.” When asked the

same question to a bisexual female student she responded, “No, the sex ed. class really didn't help with LGBT sex ed. in real life, they won't take you seriously if [students] asked a question.” The disgruntlement of these two students conflicts with sex education teacher's views when she responds,

We try to make every student in our classroom regardless of their sexual preference feel comfortable feel welcomed and feel that they will always have the opportunity to ask any questions . SCSD Sex Education Teacher

Although these two LGBTQ students and the sex education teacher have two different views of the content of sex education class, this particular liberal teacher may be unique in addressing LGBTQ issues at all. “Established in 1987 by the New York State Education Commissioner, the HIV/AIDS mandate requires schools to provide age-appropriate instruction on HIV/AIDS...” (Sex Education, 2004, p.7). Since HIV/AIDS is the only lesson mandated in the state of New York, this sex education teacher may be unique in the way she teaches her class. It is up to the discretion of the teacher to incorporate LGBTQ topics and discussions into the curriculum. If a teacher chooses not to include common LGBTQ issues, it is these students whose questions go unasked and are in the dark about their own bodies, experiences, and safe practices. It is the understanding between both the students and the teachers that the students will learn about healthy sexual practices and their own bodies. By not acknowledging the LGBTQ health issues, students are left unprepared to meet the challenges they may meet in their adulthood. LGBTQ people may be mentioned in the context of topics like HIV, often creating the impression that only homosexuals can contract the disease (Hirschfeld, 2003). This not only misleads LGBT youth but the straight population as well. Not giving discussion to the

development of sexual identities in people can lead queer youth to continue to ponder their place in society and perpetuate the isolation being a 'sexual minority' can foster low self esteem (Sears, 1998).

By suppressing information, schools are continuing the heteronormative structure that society functions under. "The queer body is a socialized and political misfit known only through, and in, its Otherness" (Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh, p.153, 2004). In order to break oppressed groups' silence and not perpetuate heteronormativity, actions must begin in public schools. Education should include LGBTQ histories and allow a standing chance for queer adolescents to feel included.

### **Institutional Silence**

The United States schools, as a whole, can be considered an institution primarily due to the organizational structure. U.S. schools have very strict and structured way of implementing teaching based on the idea of giving all students fair and equal educational opportunities. The hope is to produce well-rounded and educated individuals who are prepared to enter the work or higher education field. However, there are many flaws within the set of expectations that when applied, students are not given a well-rounded education.

Teachers and administrators of schools would have you believe that schools teach in the classrooms, while students will quickly inform you the most important lessons are learned in lunchroom, the hallways between classes, and those few fleeting moments before class begins and the teacher has yet to arrive. LGBTQ students have identified teachers and school administrators as a constant source of negligence and ignorance through their inability to identify



their needs. Many LGBTQ students spend their time in school not gaining an education but quite literally learning to survive. LGBTQ students have been identified as being at risk for “self-destructive behaviors such as declining grades, cutting classes, skipping school, dropping out, unsafe sex, drug and alcohol abuse, depression and suicide” (Wyss, 2004, p.710). It should be the leaders of the schools and in the classrooms – administrators and teachers - leading the schooling systems to better programming and training to ensure a more welcoming environment for LGBTQ students in this pivotal time of their lives - however, when examining the limited LGBTQ research, it is quickly identified this is not the case.

Public high school means “ridicule from teachers, violent harassment from fellow students, and refusals from administrators to punish verbal and physical attacks upon these youth” (Wormer & McKinney, 2003, p.411). The reluctance of school officials to protect gay students and to punish perpetrators of harassment shows, at the very least, their tacit acceptance of homophobia. By not addressing the issue, it simply grows in number of students being affected, making it increasingly difficult to “sweep it under the rug.” By not correcting the actions of the students who originate homophobic jokes, comments, and slander, the teachers are portraying that their actions do not cause any harm or disruption within the classroom. “Many teachers and school staff refuse to intervene, sometimes claiming that queer teens bring this harassment on themselves” (Wyss, p.710, 2004). Teachers in this instance are not only placing the educational needs and support of their students last, but also their safety by not reacting to the harassment LGBTQ students face daily. This is also an example of how teachers cast their personal beliefs onto their students, creating and (re)producing the stigma the LGBTQ students face with their identity. The LGBTQ student is silenced and their needs are not met. When LGBTQ students were asked why they thought teachers had stereotypes of LGBTQ students,

they replied stating that “the teachers wanted control over the students and to control their behavior. So they label us as bad and themselves as good” (Mac an Ghaill, 1991). A number of LGBTQ students stated that they were particularly concerned about teachers at school finding out about their sexuality for fear of unfair treatment (Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, Rounds, 2002, p.57).

### **School Climate Discrepancy in Perceptions:**

In interviewing a local high school guidance counselor, it instantly becomes clear that she truly believes she is helping the students meet their needs and feels fairly accurate in her assessments. Being located within this specific SCSD high school for over five years, a local high school guidance counselor describes the school as very diverse and because of this diversity, very accommodating and accepting of its students.

Ravenwood (high school pseudonym) is extremely unique...um...in a couple ways. For one, it is so diverse that you do not see some of the rivalries and problems with diversity that you may see in other schools. Um...I'm not saying that there aren't problems, um...there is definitely gang problems that are happening in the city...but overall because of the tremendous amounts of diversity here, upwards of 20 different languages, there are kids here who I truly believe would not be comfortable in any other setting because our kids are so used to seeing diversity ranging from kids with special needs, we have had transsexuals who were very open and the kids accepted them for who they were.

While this local high school guidance counselor understands that the school is diverse, the question of whether or not the school is a safe space for students who are diverse is another discussion. When asked about the LGBTQ climate on campus,

Not at this time, no. I have never found a problem here. We had a transsexual that...um...they [students] knew and they called him by...like, I have one young man in particular that comes to my head where they called him “ Kim” ya know? And that was the name he preferred and he would still answer when they were taking attendance but the kids all knew `oh no, he is a girl, but he is really a boy.’ Ya know? So, yea, they never had a problem with it. I think the kids I have worked with that comment on coming out, it's more of a personal struggle, rather than not being accepted. They say `I know I'll be accepted here, but I don't...it's an inner struggle. They comment about their ability to be comfortable coming out to their family. They are more nervous about their family than they are about their friends and peers. So, that has always been...it hasn't been related to the school- about whether or not they would be accepted here.

This counselor's view of school climate is revealing for several reasons. First, this local high school guidance counselor denies that there are any LGBTQ “problems” on campus, an issue which shows a lack of awareness of the experiences of these students and holds this school up as an exemplar given the research nationally previously mentioned, and given student interview responses specific to the SCSD, we can fairly assess that this specific high school and the SCSD is not an anomaly, but rather that this is an example of discrepancy between the students' understanding and the faculty's understanding of the LGBTQ issues within the high school climate. Faculty fail to recognize there is an issue, and therefore clearly lack in resolving and correcting this said issue.

The counselor believes that the students “They come to see me for everything... the kids have just that kind of relationship with [ the counselors]....”

She describes a world within high schools where students are actively seeking out her advice and support every time when needed or felt and believes that students, including LGBT students would feel comfortable seeking out this assistance. “Our students have all sorts of problems that are taking place in their lives that we need to assist them with and in some cases we are the only consistency these kids have.”

The counselor recognizes that students do have issues (although she mostly describes issues specific to situations within the homes) and that it is the school's responsibility to assist the students in their areas of concern. The counselor identifies the school, and its staff as possibly the only consistency some students may have to highlight how important the presence of school is. It then becomes an issue that this constant form in students' lives is not meeting, much less even recognizing the problems within its very walls. A local high school guidance counselor seems as if she wants to “help these kids” but simply is not effectively assessing their needs.

In an attempt to gain specific examples of LGBTQ issues or areas of concern, hate crimes and acts of violence, a proven common occurrence within the high school climate, were asked to be examined by a SCSD guidance counselor and reflected upon in her understanding.

No. No acts of violence have happened here that I can think of. Do I think that kids still use terminology [derogatory comments about LGBT people]? Sure. Sometimes I don't think that it is in an angry manner, but you do still hear [it]... Absolutely, but I don't think it's in a vindictive way that the kids don't use the terminology like they did ten years ago and it was an outrage. But, because of the diversity here, hate crimes here against one another are simply not the case.

In this discussion, a local SCSD high school guidance counselor for the first time describes instances where students are using language to recreate and perpetuate heteronormativity and marginalizing homosexuality, but fails to recognize its significance by downplaying the student's reaction and response. This local high school guidance counselor is acknowledging the act but denying the rationale behind the words. She refuses to acknowledge the institution within the words of the student, again coming back to her statement that this high school has no LGBTQ issues, and denies any acts of specific hate or discrimination by both the students and the faculty.

Ricky, a recent graduate of SCSD and an former student of this same high school looked at the interview transcript of this school counselor and compared her beliefs about the school's climate to his own student experiences:

Well, I guess I will start by saying that whoever this counselor is thinks very highly of her workplace for whatever reason. It also seemed to me that she was taking the struggles that society places on LGBTQ people/youth and making it seem to just be an "internal struggle" and that's it and personally I am tired of the ignorance that people have, people need to stop passing "the buck" around and take responsibility for what goes on within the schools, not just Ravenwood High School, but in order to take responsibility they need to get out of their denial and open their eyes and ears but the most crucial thing they need to open is their minds. The reason why we have such an internal struggle is because of the hostility in our everyday lives especially within our schools.

Through an interview with Clara Edwards, a social work graduate student, a very strong communication barrier seems to be pervasive at Mayberry High School.

As Edwards, who is currently completing her internship placement at Mayberry High School, makes clear that she is only making observations and examinations, and not placing blame on any one entity:

The dynamic of the school is very much like the administration doesn't really listen to the students anymore...almost seems like a burnout...they're just not being heard. It doesn't really seem like people really take a minute to talk to them and not just assume they are doing something wrong. I really don't think the kids get heard in that way.

A possible reasoning for why the administration is so “burnt out” could be, as Edwards describes, they feel they “have lots of things to do” and are “maybe annoyed with the fact that they were trying to do all these things for the students and students didn't really care.” In contrast, the students may not acknowledge that the administration is making an attempt at compassion because they feel as though the things that are a priority to them are overlooked.

One of the priority issues that students at Mayberry High School feel are being overlooked is creating a safe space to talk about sexuality by having a GSA. According to Edwards, Mayberry High School made an attempt to start a GSA last year, but it failed to become a permanent club. Edwards said the other social worker in the building told her that the last time they tried to create a GSA, “they thought it was the maturity level of the students that made it difficult to keep the group running.” But students that Edwards spoke with offered a differing viewpoint. “I know the students, from what they told me, they were really excited about it, and they didn't know what happened. They were like `Yeah, we're very interested in it and it just stopped.” Edwards added, “Usually in the high schools, the biggest thing about getting a

group started is having students that want to go. But these students that I spoke with, they wanted to do it, and they're willing to stay after school.”

A potential reason for why there is a lack of sufficient communication between the students and the administration at Mayberry High School could be because it is a city school and there are a lot more students than staff to help supervise the students or just convey to the students that the administration does "care" about them. Edwards expresses this point in saying, “the kids can walk out of the school and go home if they want. There's no physical person that calls home if kids don't come to school, so the kids might not feel they have many people looking out for them at school.” There seems to be very different perceptions to the barriers to starting a GSA at Mayberry – the staff thinks one thing, the students think something else. Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) have been shown to have a positive impact on LGBT students and to help them stay in school, improve their grades, and feel safe. One important thing they accomplish is providing a space for communication.

### **Bullying/Harassment**

Some verbal harassment related to LGBTQ students at Glendale High School is not dealt with in the same ways as other, say racial, harassment. Teachers may not treat one student being called a slur related to sexuality in the same way as if the student was being called a slur related to their skin color. A teacher, Ms. Smith, was quick to point out that the teachers who usually do not address these problems are older and may have not been taught about the issues or still hold prejudicial beliefs. She reports that when asked about their views on sexuality, most of the older teachers will not claim to have prejudices against LGBTQ people but will not acknowledge sexuality-based harassment in the same ways as race, gender, etc.

The consequences for repeated bullying or harassment at Glendale involve having conferences with an administrator, having parents called, and eventually suspension from school. However, no teacher sees a student 24 hours a day and bullying can occur outside of the school. Sadly, students being harassed may not bring it to the attention of a teacher or administrator.

Unfortunately, if the kid doesn't feel comfortable coming to us, there's a much greater chance they're going to drop out or miss the class. So, if I start to see the behavior going on I will follow up by asking the guidance counselor to switch the kid's [either the bully or student being bullied] section. Ms. Smith – Teacher SCSD

Ricky, a recent SCSD graduate and transgendered person experienced frequent harassment and felt that no one listened to him. He says:

There was an incident one afternoon while riding the bus home where I was sitting all the way in the rear of the bus corner so that I could view the whole bus because I didn't trust a single person on it. A person that knew me from when I was younger started talking to me, and I found it odd because I had seen her a few times previously in school alone and she had never spoken to me so I barely spoke to her because I assumed it was for some other reason other than being nice and conversating [sic] and then out of the blue she loudly asked me why I looked like a dude. I decided not to react to the things that she said. Of course with how loud she asked me it turned a few heads and someone said "What?!", and she turned to about six other people she knew and said "That is a girl." And they were freaking out, getting loud and some of them didn't believe her and all turned to me - some of whom came closer basically cornering me and were all questioning me, laughing, as they were basically referring to me more like an object than



a person (like "it", "that", "freak", "thing") and then because they didn't know what to think, they suggested and threatened to shove a handful of pencils that one person had grasped in their hand between my legs to find out "what I was."

This recent graduate from Ravenwood High School describes this painful incident that occurred while on a school bus where his gender and sexual performance are called into question still with much emotion. In attempts to get help dealing with his harassment and the threat of violence, Ricky discussed the events with a high school guidance counselor within the school.

I went and spoke with a counselor at Ravenwood who had been there years and years and seemed like a friendly guy. I sat down with him and told him what happened to me on the bus and the things that were going on in school and the hallways, classrooms, gym locker rooms and he just stayed relaxed back in his chair and basically stated that I got all of what I received because of the way I look. If I didn't choose to dress this way (masculine) it wouldn't happen. And he proceeded to ask questions about lesbians (at the time I identified as lesbian I was 14), and he stated in a question form, "Well, don't all lesbians dress like men?" and I uncomfortably said no...they don't. I know many lesbians who don't. He basically said there is nothing he can do for me and I was getting what I was getting because I choose to. So I just left the room.

Another main issue with the lack of LGBTQ representation in schools is by not teaching about these differences, it is perpetuating violence. A 1997 Iowa study found that on average every high school student hears 25 antigay remarks each day (Cianciotto, 2007). When issues like this go unchecked, student harassment and violence increase dramatically. Violence should not be tolerated at any level, but especially not in school. Students should feel comfortable being

themselves in school, but if they are constantly being harassed or picked on, learning becomes difficult because a student becomes more aware of protecting him or herself than being comfortable.

Recently, Syracuse laid witness to the murder of a transgender woman. Moses "Teish" Cannon, 22, was shot and killed by Dwight DeLee, within a one mile radius from the high school an area counselor describes as "having no LGBTQ issues and as highly accepting because of its diversity." Cannon was shot because of hir believed sexual orientation as well as hir gender performance, often dressing as female, as ze was the night ze was shot. As the case continues, it is unknown if this act will be characterized as a "hate crime." Given the location and ages of those involved, it is extremely disturbing that the area high school can comfortably take the stance in not recognizing a problem in LGBTQ issues within the high school. The victim was no more than two years out of high school and had dropped out of high school due to LGBTQ violence and harassment faced on a daily basis.

Ricky, also a friend to Teish comments on the homicide and violence LGBTQ people, especially transgender people, face on a daily basis:

To comment on what happened over the weekend I did know the individual that was murdered, and I just think it is disgusting that we (people who are transgendered/transsexual) have to fear for our lives and our families lives every time we go outside of our homes, whether we are going to school, work, or out to dinner or in this case, a party.

*Ze, hir: gender neutral pronouns*

## **Gay-Straight Alliances**

While some high schools in the country are working to improve their LGBTQ support and education for its students, one specific establishment has been identified as a leading spark in the establishment of such undertakings. In the last five to ten years hundreds of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) have been established nationwide and have become one of the most visible and widely adopted strategies for calling attention to and addressing the need to LGBTQ students. GSAs provide support for students and call attention to previously ignored issues of school harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender expression. The programs and activities of GSAs are often the catalyst and vehicle for an infusion of new information and perspectives for students, educators, and administrators. GSAs work best to pique the interest and involvement of a range of students in learning about cultural and social issues related to sexual orientation.

The presence of a GSA increases visibility of the LGBTQ community and promotes awareness and acceptance to the entire student body, not only as a support system to those students who identify as LGBTQ. The ways in which this awareness plays out varies. It could be something like the ever present rainbow ally pin being proudly display on bags throughout the hallways, to the direct combating of homophobic language that is usually permitted in the classroom. In his role as teacher, Mr. Jones – a teacher at Henninger ( the only SCSD school with a GSA and therefore identified in this report) - discusses the ways in which he approaches the homophobia and heteronormativity that plays throughout the course of the school day. In reference to the over usage of pejoratives like “That's so gay” and “faggots” he says,

I put a stop to it as soon as I can. From day one I tell all my students, all my classes, um, it just won't be tolerated. And then I go over other words like retarded is not tolerated,

nigger is not tolerated, um, queer, faggot, whatever, um. I have less tolerance for those than other words than I do any curse words that I would use, and I remind them and we hear, “this is so gay”, alright, let's choose a different word. And this year I've had great response, I've had people that will quickly change their wording and I'll have other students that will kind of step up for me before I get a chance to say anything.

The two disruptions of heteronormativity that Mr. Jones speaks of are generated out of this awareness and presence the GSA has on Henninger. Mr. Jones, serving as one of three GSA advisors in addition to his teaching responsibilities, recognizes the need to actively work against the social practices of “othering” students by using homophobic language. The “stepping up” of students that Jones discusses is another way in which the status quo is being challenged. Many articles are published citing the over usage of anti-gay pejoratives, reiterating the theme that calling others out as gay is a normal social practice in high schools. By creating an atmosphere in which students feel strong and supported enough, gay or straight, to break the perpetuating discourse of adolescent othering can be linked back to the presence of the GSA. Regardless as to whether or not those students who are “stepping up” are active in the group or not, the mere presence of the group and the ways in which it promotes acceptance by all and for all is being played out in very positive ways.

This “stepping up” is also necessary by those who sit at the top of the food chain within the education system. The quality of the experience LGBTQ students have in school depends on the administrators, faculty, and staff support and their ability to deal with issues that come up. Jones supports the claim that the GSA is a big reason why he finds Henninger to be an arguably safe (r) place for LGBTQ students:

I think, um, with the GSA presence, definitely helps out. We have very supportive staff, administrators. There is an awareness and administrators do deal with problems like that, so I do think that because of the group and because, of the support, um, it's not as bad as it may be in other schools. Because I know we are the only school with a GSA in the area.

While it is impossible for teachers and staff to address every single instance of homophobia throughout the school day, when the standards are set from the very beginning and reinforced with consistency, then there is no grey area. Students know what is tolerated and what is expected of them. Teachers, in turn, are able to be more efficient when the process of student self-regulation takes place. Self-regulation translates into practice, and then into a way of thinking and living. The importance of character building in high school comes from the teachers that reinforce much more than the tests and papers but the life skills needed to be successful in this world. And for queer youth and their allies, the importance of queer teachers and support systems like GSA's are invaluable. Although there is a subtle or not so subtle, depending on how you frame it, difference between the way the personal lives of teachers are disclosed or revealed, there seems to be one constant within the walls of Henninger. The presence of the GSA is extremely powerful, not only for students but also for faculty, staff, parents, and administrators. The existence of a GSA creates an amplifier for a voice that is and has been silenced. But once that voice has been heard, it is hard to silence it again, the message spreads. And hopefully the strength of Henninger's GSA will be carried over into the other three high schools, so that the entire SCSD student population can benefit from awareness and understanding of people's differences.

The only one of its kind in the district, Henninger's GSA is a positive outlet for students to express their feelings and support one another. GSAs can have a profound impact on how students view themselves in relation to the larger society including a more positive self-image, improvement in grades, and an empowerment to be more involved in both the school and community (Lee, 2002, p. 24). Nevertheless, not all students are comfortable joining a GSA. A teacher at Henninger High School, speaks to the reason for the discomfort,

I have a student right now who is gay but not out to anybody except for myself and another teacher...I know that he won't join, and I know that there's a couple of guys that he knows that won't join. They're just afraid of being called out. They don't want to be singled out.

There is still work to be done at Henninger as well. But they are trying, and there is clear improvement in their school climate from the 2006 report.

## **Recommendations**

Communication is critical to our society. As the high school environment is a magnifying glass on society in more aspects than one, communication, particularly between students and the administration is vital to the overall quality of the high school experience. Good communication is exhibited when the administration is forthcoming in addressing various concerns that either the student population as a whole or any one particular student may feel is a priority.

A key component in communication is the opportunity to provide and receive feedback. If this element is absent, a communication barrier is created. When this barrier is present, it has a direct negative correlation on future communication efforts as a lack of feedback is automatically

perceived as a negative response. When the lack of feedback is internalized as indifference, the communication barrier is reinforced.

It is clear that sexuality is one of those priority issues that the administration needs to address in order for students to feel comfortable to talk about this pivotal and confusing aspect of being a teenager. Edwards confirms this by saying:

I think a lot of students at that age don't really talk about things if they don't think anyone will understand where they're coming from, or that it's happening to other people, and I think it's the adults' responsibility to kind of let students know that they are aware of different things, whether it's sexuality or bullying or anything. If the adults and the staff aren't addressing it, a lot of the time, the kids aren't going to feel comfortable to go forth and say that this is what they're going through. They kind of want you to pull it out of them.

Six percent of U.S. youth in schools report same-sex attraction or can identify themselves as LGBT (Cianciotto, 2007, p. 2). “The challenges unique to lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths are mostly caused by cultural and institutional victimization as well as direct attacks. Both systematic victimization and direct attacks must be eliminated” (Dworkin, 2003, p. 270). Failure to maintain gender norms as a young person is, often times, detrimental to one's existence in school. Being a heterosexual person, in high school, is the expected role for most students, but more LGBT students are becoming more aware of their own sexualities in high school. Edwards is trying to create a space that allows students the opportunity to talk about their experiences and thoughts about sexuality by attempting to create a GSA at Mayberry HS for the second time. Edwards spoke to two students who expressed that they “really wanted a group,” and that they

“really wanted the chance to get together with a group of people that have similar experiences.” As Edwards wants the group to be “open to anybody” and “everyone to feel welcomed to go,” one of her biggest goals of starting the GSA is, “to have it stay there without even having me there to facilitate it for years to come.”

Another primary goal of Edwards's is to have resources available to students to help them navigate through this tough and confusing point in their lives. She says “ I think there is going to be a lot of students that feel uncomfortable talking about it, and that's okay. But I think it's important to have a group there in case they do want to go to a group. Not necessarily that everybody should go and address anything that is going on with their sexuality, but I think it would be a good thing just to have.”

It is student advocates like Edwards who work and allow for students to talk in a safe and open environment that will promote the overall culture of the high school.

As it has been established that communication is a cornerstone of overall performance, if the school administration does not open the door of communication about LGBTQ issues (such as having a GSA within the high school and clear policies on harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity), LGBTQ students will not know where to turn. Because many students who are struggling with sexuality or sexual identity feel as though they are the only ones who are, those students will not be able to seek out peer support. The administration could facilitate these conversations and possibly answer questions about general LGBTQ issues that the students may not be able to answer themselves or with each other. At the very least, students could meet other peers with same or similar thoughts and feelings, as well as be able to know



which of the staff members at their school are “safe” to confide in, whether it be in the context of a GSA or throughout the school day.

When students feel comfortable talking about themselves and their current struggles, there is a window of opportunity for personal growth. This may not happen if the students do not feel comfortable in their environment. Edwards states,

I think it's important to have things open for students, and students should be aware that there are other adults that are aware of these situations whether the students want to come forth to talk about it. I think it's important to not just assume that because nobody came to you and said anything that it's just not there, and that they don't need somebody who might have either experience or just somebody to talk to, something like that. I think it's important to have that in high schools.

Glendale High School, while having made excellent strides in providing a comfortable and safe environment for LGBTQ students, still has work to do. Consistency in handling harassment needs to be addressed so that all students will learn that LGBTQ harassment is as serious as race or gender harassment.

When asked what the district needed to do to move towards a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ students, Ms. Smith said,

I think a public acknowledgement that we have a no-tolerance policy for harassment of any of our gay or questioning youth. The district coming out with a positive, reaffirming policy about harassment, especially around sexual issues, I think would go a long way because it would give us [the teachers] a leg to stand on when something like that

[harassment] happened. Right now it is pretty individual, like our principals are really good, but the principal we had before, not so much. Right now we are dependent on whoever's in power, and a district-wide policy would give us consistency.

In summary, we suggest the following recommendations:

- Change SCSD Code of Conduct to include protection of sexual orientation and gender expression.
- Required teacher/faculty/staff education and sensitivity training concerning LGBTQ issues.
- Having a GSA in each Syracuse City High School a priority.
- Inclusion of LGBTQ issues and history in curriculum.

Change is possible.

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