

Education Equity in NYC Schools
Inclusion and Affirmation
of LGBTQ Students

Queer Youth, Straight Schools: LGBTQ Issues in Education

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I. INTRODUCTION

The topics of gender, sexuality, and school climate have been increasingly studied in the recent past, but oftentimes policies supported by research, gender theory, and the experiences of

LGBTQ youth have been overshadowed by well-intentioned but ineffective policies meant to ‘protect’ these students. This paper promotes the idea that policy aiming to prevent discrimination and support LGBTQ student educational equity should not simply adopt an approach of protecting these students when harm has already occurred, but should target changes in school environment and the preparation of school staff to promote a positive school environment for all.

This paper synthesizes a set of eight qualitative interviews that identify room for improvement in the ways that schools consider the topics of sex, gender, and sexuality and their impact on school culture and environment. The paper carefully considers the roles of the Dignity Act Coordinator, the use of professional development, and the adoption of curricular changes as three key areas where crucial change can be enacted to create a more accepting and supportive school environment for all students, with acknowledgement that LGBTQ students often face unique issues that are currently not addressed in full by existing policies.

II. METHODS

The data and analysis presented in this paper derive from a total of eight hour-long interviews that took place in-person with people who are involved in the New York City school district. These interviews were recorded with participant consent. After the interviews were completed, each interviewer transcribed 15 minutes of the interview verbatim and summarized the remaining 45, and then we produced papers on our individual interview outcomes and compiled the data that was relevant in shaping our policy recommendations. All participants were kept confidential when we shared our findings amongst peers through the use of pseudonyms, and they remain confidential when discussed in this paper. The descriptions of the eight interview participants are as follows: a high school health educator, high school social worker, three LGBTQ-identifying high school students, the mother of a gay identifying elementary school student, a middle school science teacher, and a high school teacher. To develop the protocol and questions for our interviews, we referenced portions of Patton's (2002) book “Qualitative Interviewing” to create questions that suited our individual foci and participant.

III. DIGNITY ACT

Literature Review

This section of the paper specifically discusses the training of Dignity Act Coordinators (DACs), whose role and obligations to the school are discussed further in the data section. Essentially, a Dignity Act Coordinator is a school employee who is trained in dealing with human relations issues in the school setting, particularly with regards to the areas of race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practices, disability, sexual orientation, gender or sex. To consider how best to strengthen the ability of the DAC to handle school-based discrimination, this literature review includes both specific research on the Dignity Act, as well

as broader research on professional development and school employee training that supports the suggestions for change in our policy section.

The Dignity for All Students Act is an act that seeks to create a safe and supportive environment without discrimination, intimidation, taunting, harassment, and bullying on school property, transportation, and during school functions. In 2013, there was an amendment to the Dignity Act that requires schools to have a designated Dignity Act Coordinator. The Dignity Act Coordinator is a person employed by the school district and is licensed as a classroom teacher, school counselor, school psychologist, school nurse, school social worker, school administrator or supervisor, or superintendent of schools. They will be provided with training about the social patterns of harassment, bullying and discrimination, identifying and mitigating harassment, bullying, and discrimination, and identifying exclusion, bias, and aggression. The Dignity Act Coordinator's name and contact information will be shared with school personnel, students, and persons in parental relation, and should be listed on a school website and posted in highly visible areas of the school. There should be a plain language summary of the code of conduct provided to parents once per school year, and this summary should mention the Dignity Act Coordinator's role.

Preceding the Dignity for All Students Act, New York City had already published legislation in 2007 called Respect for All (RFA). This legislation, like the Dignity Act, also aims to create a safer and more supportive learning environment that is free from discrimination. On the NYC Department of Education Website under rules and policies, there is a tab entitled Respect for All (RFA). According to the NYC Department of Education (Konstan, 2012),

It is the policy of the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) to maintain a safe and supportive learning and educational environment that is free from harassment, intimidation, and/or bullying committed by students against other students, and free from discrimination committed by students against other students on account of actual or perceived race, color, creed, ethnicity, national origin, citizenship/immigration status, religion, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, disability, or weight.

An online portal by the Department of Education is available to school professional staff to access resources. However, it is important to note that the training resources are not produced by the Department of Education themselves, and contain a disclaimer saying that the Department of Education is not responsible for the content. There are two trainings related to gender and sexuality, "Understanding the Needs of Sexual Minority and Gender Non-Conforming Youth" and "Understanding and Overcoming the Challenges Faced by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Intersex Youth in Schools and Communities."

The RFA legislation also includes a policy called Chancellor's Regulation A-830, which directly discusses gender and sexuality discrimination. According to the NYC Department of Education website,

Chancellor's Regulation A-830 prohibits NYC DOE staff members from discriminating against or creating a hostile school environment for a student by conduct and/or verbal or written acts on school property, or at a school function, and sets forth the procedures for reporting and filing complaints.

Its purpose is to protect students from discrimination, and any staff members that witness discrimination as defined by the document are required to report it to the principal or designee within one day orally, and file an A-830 written report no more than two days later. The policy contains a summary of prohibited discrimination, where it defines important terms relating to the DOE's definition of discrimination. The two terms related to gender and sexuality as defined in the Chancellor's Regulation are as following:

Gender (Sex): actual or perceived gender (sex), pregnancy, or conditions related to pregnancy or childbirth. The prohibition against gender discrimination includes sexual harassment.

The term "gender" shall also include a person's gender identity, self-image, appearance, behavior or expression, whether or not that gender identity, self-image, appearance, behavior or expression is different from that traditionally associated with the legal sex assigned to that person at birth.

Sexual Orientation: actual or perceived sexual orientation. The term sexual orientation means heterosexuality, homosexuality or bisexuality.

Since this section of the paper discusses Dignity Act Coordinator training, the priorly discussed sections of policy are the most relevant, on the state and city-wide level, to the development of a training program that better prepares DA Coordinators to handle discrimination issues relating to gender and sexuality. To continue, the following is a review of the existing research on professional development on discrimination that we feel can be used to make empirically-supported policy recommendations on how to change current DAC training requirements.

In, "The Big Freak Out: Educator Fear in Response to the Presence of Transgender Elementary School Students," "Schools of education's failure to provide adequate training on meeting the needs of LGBTQ students is well-documented" (Payne & Smith, 2014). Many of the participants of this study claimed they were not educated in undergraduate and graduate school about transgender students, there was no mention of transgender students at any age in their professional training programs. "They had not been trained on how to work with these students,

and this lack of training left the participants feeling stressed, anxious and incompetent when faced with “the problem” of creating accommodations for a transgender child” (Payne & Smith, 2014). Most of the staff did not know what were the “right” ways to handle these situations. “As school professionals tried to make decisions to accommodate transitioning children, the lack of policy and protocol repeatedly heightened their anxiety and concern over doing the “right” thing” (Payne & Smith, 2014).

One teacher felt it was her personal experience outside of school, not her training, which allowed her to support a transitioning student. This may be true for those who have had their own personal experiences, but for those who do not, the proper training is the next best option. “The presence of non-normative gender expressions and sexualities shakes what people “know” about sex, gender and sexuality” (Payne & Smith, 2014). If the comfort zone is at what they “know,” they should be trained to know more and deal with different gender situations.

Data/Findings

The Dignity Act (DA), effective as of July 1st, 2012, mandates a public school environment to be free of discrimination and harassment. While the Dignity Act is a New York State legislation, there are various New York City Department of Education Chancellor's Regulations that hold schools accountable to the DA, including but not limited to:

- A-830 - Filing Internal Complaints of Discrimination
- A-832 - Student-To-Student Bias-Based Harassment, Intimidation, and/or Bullying
- A-831 - Peer Sexual Harassment
- A-420 - Pupil Behavior and Discipline - Corporal Punishment
- A-421 - Verbal Abuse

The Dignity Act, along with the Commissioner Regulations, guides schools on how to implement the DA and calls for increased training of school employees in dealing with human relations issues in the school setting. It does so by requiring that each school identify at least one staff member to be the Dignity Act Coordinator (DAC). The DAC is thoroughly trained in methods to respond to human relations in the areas of race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practices, disability, sexual orientation, gender or sex. In New York City public schools, Respect For All (RFA) legislation, which preceded the creation of the Dignity Act, already required the presence of an RFA Liaison. In accordance with the DA, RFA Liaisons will serve as DAC as well.

The DA also requires that schools provide training to all school employees, including non-instructional staff, to raise awareness and sensitivity to potential acts of discrimination or harassment directed at students that are committed by students or school employees on school property or at school functions, including, but not limited to, discrimination or harassment based

on a person's actual or perceived race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practices, disability, sexual orientation, gender or sex; and enable employees to prevent and respond to incidents of discrimination and harassment. Staff training must be completed by October 31st of each school year.

Furthermore, the DA also requires that schools provide students with instruction that supports the development of a school environment free of discrimination and harassment. However, based off of the results of our interviews and for the sake of creating recommendations that target specific areas of change, this paper focuses on the role of the DAC, and how they can be better trained to promote a more inclusive school environment for all students, and specifically how we can improve DAC training in a way that targets problems LGBTQ students face in the education system in ways that are supported by empirical evidence. Additionally, the Dignity Act requires that the Department of Education annually report material incidents of harassment and discrimination to the New York State Education Department.

In an interview with a LGBTQ identifying teacher who is a GSA coordinator, it can be concluded that upon request, there are not any immediate available resources for the faculty in the school if they were to ask for instances that addressed topics of the broad spectrum of sex, gender and sexuality.

“It’s really up to the GSA, I mean I don’t ever feel like as a club we’d be discriminated against and not given resources if asked for, but they’re not... I don’t think anything is readily available you have to go and get them, I mean people don’t just come up to you ‘like, hey, would you like these resources for free...They won’t prevent us from getting them. They’re not against us, but I mean, there’s a million and one things that go on in school, I guess we haven’t asked for all these resources. Everything we have asked, the principal has been a thousand and one percent ok with it. I don’t wanna say they don’t give us resources, we just don’t ask for them. I don’t think we’re at a point to gather all these resources. Even me and the other staff member, we’re like, we don’t really know what to do sometimes. This is our first year doing it.”

Even if there were such resources, it is important to know how to use them to its fullest potential in which teachers feel that it is still not enough to let students know all that there is to know about their sexuality as an example. It is hard to say that albeit faculty undergo training by the DA would benefit students that come to them with instances regarding sex, gender or sexuality because the faculty themselves would need to figure out how they would utilize the resources that they already have. If the resources are not available, they would need to know where to begin looking and what would deem fit for the situations they may have in front of them. Even if such resources were available, teachers do not feel completely confident in handling broad areas in the LGBTQ community because it is still fairly new to them.

Professional development is required annually by the DA and is supposed to provide additional training if needed. More training would be beneficially and should be provided more than that one mandated time in schools so that faculty members, especially teachers can be fully adaptive to their students' needs. Although it is required that faculty members are to be properly trained under the Dignity Act to help with raising awareness and sensitivity, without having enough training, teachers may lack confidence in speaking to students on such topic areas. The role of DAC would help faculty members in instances such as in the aforementioned.

Policy Implications

The Dignity Act and Implementing Commissioner Regulations require schools to “identify at least one staff member to be the Dignity Act Coordinator who is thoroughly trained in methods to respond to human relations” and “provide training to all school employees, including non-instructional staff, to raise awareness and sensitivity to potential acts of discrimination or harassment.” (Konstan, 2012) The policy implication being proposed requires the Dignity Act Coordinator to train all staff members within the school district with some modifications.

In addition to the diversity training already given by the Dignity Act Coordinator, we are proposing an added hour devoted to LGBTQ issues. This training is a responsibility of the Dignity Act Coordinator. It is up to them to find the resources to be educated properly to teach others. The Dignity Act Coordinator is also responsible for making themselves known to each staff members.

In order to measure impact, the Dignity Act Coordinator will seek out feedback from students at the end of each term that address quality, openness, and diversity of each teacher. The Dignity Act Coordinator will conduct these sessions in person. The conversations will be anonymous, that way the student can voice their true opinion whether it is negative or positive. If negative feedback is given, the Dignity Act Coordinator can recommend more training for that specific teacher. This is a way for the Dignity Act Coordinator to address teacher bias.

IV. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Literature Review

Schools are idealized as the second home of every child, where they can grow and learn in an environment free from discrimination. However, if the school becomes a place where children with gender or sexual identities outside of those defined by heteronormative values cannot find acceptance, then the school had fallen short of its job.

“Most schools, in fact, hold up safety and security as their primary goals along with academic achievement. When it comes to the well being of their LGBT students and families, though, too many schools fall short of the mark” (Hirshfeld, 2001). It is the responsibility the educators and the staff of the school to be open to all students. people work in the school must leave all bias and judgments outside of the school doors. when educators pledge to work in a school setting they must remember they are now responsible to treat all students equally (Hirshfeld, 2001).

“Professional Development workshops and seminars become the tools to increase teacher competence around educational issues” (Smith & Payne 2011). Professional development training is supposed to aide teachers to be well rounded in the classroom, whether it be for educational or social purposes. However, if teachers are allowed to pick and choose what professional development they wish to attend trainings centered on topics such as increasing equity for LGBTQ students may be overlooked. For example Smith and Payne discuss in Syracuse New York there was LGBTQ workshops for the teachers, but this workshop was scheduled on Saturday. Having a training like this on a Saturday, displays that it is not mandatory. Only educators who are already invested in LGBTQ issues will attend a Saturday workshop (Smith & Payne, 2011).

“..moving away from activist driven programming outside the school to an educator – to educator program inside the school to an educator –to educator program inside the school would create opportunities to share knowledge and tools with greater number of educators – many of whom might not know (or want to know) anything about LGBTQ students’ school experiences” (Smith & Payne 2011). Teachers don’t want professional development coming from an activist standpoint. They rather information come from one of their own to help rather than outside organizations. The programs must be made mandatory, reach all educators, and must have enough allotted time for all material and discussion to take place. these programs must be able to be improve every year, based on research gathered.

Educators lack the knowledge to decrease the marginalization of the LGBTQ student community (Hirshfeld, 2001). Additionally, research indicates that educators’ perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs influence their teaching practices. Some educators are hesitant to address their multiple biases which contributes to the marginalization of certain populations of students. In many cases they are not aware, or reluctant to accept, the fact that they are actively contributing to a negative school climate. Little is done to address educator biases in preservice or inservice programs (Geneva, 2010). Additionally, educators must work to address their biases through inservice development programs. This will reveal to educators the marginalizing beliefs they are perpetuating through their practices, which is essential (Geneva, 2010).

Collier, Boss, and Sandfort (2014) found that the factors that influence teacher intervention in instances of LGBT marginalization in addition to their own personal beliefs and

attitudes, include the lack of existing institutional supports such as policy, as well perceived lack of support from other professionals, including educators and administrators, around them. This is significant because it is believed that specific teacher behaviors and practices have the power to disrupt or maintain elements of culture that are reproduced in schools. However, due to the perceived obstacles that face partaking in these practices, school professionals are hesitant to integrate these behaviors and practices. This demonstrates how educational institutions, through both covert and overt measures, allow cultural bias in teaching to exist across domains.

Data/Findings

In the interviews conducted with members of local school communities, results corresponded with the research previously indicated. In an interview with a high school social worker, the need for an improvement in the classroom was acknowledged. She suggested that the school have a staff meeting on how to support LGBTQ kids. This proposes a minimal amount of attention to the issue. What should be expected and already happening in schools, is not, and even with certain policies already in place, implementation is seriously lacking.

When discussing what exactly needs to be improved, the interview participant mentioned how as a social worker for the school, she has time to learn about LGBTQ students and their needs, whereas regular classroom teachers and other staff are not taking the necessary steps in educating themselves on the matter. “It’s anyone going to become a teacher. It’s every teacher that comes out. A little isn’t enough”. She stressed the importance of understanding other ways of assessing and dealing with non-curricular lessons that come up in the classroom through a non-biased, accurate response to questions and comments regarding the LGBTQ community in and out of schools.

With proper professional development in place, staff and faculty bias would be unacceptable. By acknowledging and addressing bias outside of school, educators and other staff are more prepared to offer a strong support for non-conforming students. In an interview with a lesbian high school senior, a few staff came to mind when asked about adult support in the school. She spoke highly about the faculty advisor for the school’s GSA. The advisor runs all the diversity clubs and offers his support to all of the students individually. The participant mentioned that if there were to be any issues or threat to the GSA, the faculty advisor was willing to take initiative and “does a lot of standing up for diversity and equality in the school”. Another notable staff mentioned was this student’s guidance counselor.

“So, she’s really awesome. I started going to her office just in freshmann year, when I started going through my—I call it my ‘identity crisis phase’ [laughs]—so um yeah, that was the spring of my freshman year and you know I was just really questioning myself and like if I should be out to people and who I was—and um so I went to her office sometimes just to kind of give me a place to relax and just kind of be myself because she

doesn't really care. So that was nice. And so and then (sic), ever since then we've been close and I can really talk to her about anything—so she's a really great, you know, adult support figure.”

This same guidance counselor was also mentioned later in the interview when discussing prom and what the participant was planning on wearing. The participant brought up another student whom also shares this guidance counselor. Both students were in the guidance counselors' office getting assistance from the guidance counselor in buying a suit for the participants' peer, another female student, for prom. By supporting and encouraging students to embrace diversity and non-conformity, this guidance counselor makes an example of what the experience of students' can be like when it is free of school professional bias, and when school professionals are competent in mitigating issues specific to LGBTQ students. .

As previously mentioned, the role of staff and faculty is huge in school culture and standards. Teachers and other adult figures in the school need more effective professional development programs that make them more aware of the LGBTQ community whether it is present in the school curriculum and culture or not.

Policy Implications

The policy implications focus on teachers, guidance counselors, administration, social workers, and general student staff in New York City School Districts. The goals would include enhancing content knowledge and the competency to produce more affirming schools, to encouraging better understanding and communication between students and faculty, and developing a safe and secure space for all students. “Research indicates that educators regularly fail to take action in the face of anti-LGBT bias and are often not equipped to address these issues” (Greytak, 2013).

The first part of our policy proposals would be requiring current teachers, administration and all other staff member's attendance for 240 minutes of LGBTQ training each academic year. Training would consist of a presentation by the Dignity Act Coordinator that covers LGBTQ basics and terminology with positive correlation as well as addressing the possible issues that may. Training would took place every three months, which would allow the staff to become more familiar with LGBTQ and more prepared to handle situations if necessary.

Following the presentation there would be diversity training that includes mock-ups of different situations that a school staff member may come across. This is a way for the staff member to show what they have learned and if they are able to handle it. After each person handles their simulation, the Dignity Act Coordinator will give feedback and will address all the other possible ways of handling the situation.

After both parts of training are complete, there would time available to meet with the Dignity Act Coordinator to discuss any questions or concerns.

The New York City Council and the Department of Education can take both immediate and gradual steps to create a more inclusive and affirming New York City, not only for its LGBTQ students, but each and every one of its students. Foremost, the DOE should adopt a LGBTQ policy similar to that of Children's Services (Perry & Green, 2014). This policy would require all school professional staff to seek professional development trainings to help increase their level of cultural competency for working with LGBTQ youth and families. Staff should know who their Diversity Act Coordinator is.

V. CURRICULUM

LITERATURE REVIEW

Robinson (2002) argued for the inclusion of sexual differences in school curriculum after reviewing data gained from early childhood educators (Robinson, 2002). Her findings indicate the following: sexuality is viewed as irrelevant to children, and that the dominant discourses of childhood and sexuality assume the prevalence of heterosexuality and the absence of homosexuality (Robinson, 2002, p. 416). Sexuality and sexual orientation, according to Robinson, are controversial issues deeply embedded with religious attitudes about rightness/wrongness; consequently, they have "been culturally and historically defined as the exclusive realm of adults" (Robinson, 2002, p. 419). Since the inclusion of gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues is looked at as a cultural taboo, discussions pertaining to these identities are either silenced, trivialized, and/or severely restricted in terms of their dialogue and representation (Robinson, 2002, p. 416).

Sherwin and Jennings (2006) examined the coverage of sexual orientation topics within 77 public university secondary teacher preparation programs across seven U.S. states (Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). They underscore that United States public schools have a responsibility to create learning environments that are safe and comfortable for the entire student body, including LGBT-identifying students. However, participating coordinators in Sherwin and Jennings's (2006) study indicated a huge roadblock in terms of curriculum inclusion: "more attention was focused on how sexual minority issues conflict with heterosexism rather than attention being given to the etiology of homosexuality or the myriad contributions of gay people" (Sherwin & Jennings, 2006, p. 214). Their examination also reported: "72.5 percent of programs consider sexual orientation as either the lowest priority (by a striking difference) or ignored the topic all together" (Sherwin & Jennings, 2006, p. 212). The evidence here clearly demonstrates a desperate need for readjustment among the attitudes, outlooks, and certainly standards pertaining to both the coverage of sexual orientation diversity in curriculum and protection of sexually-minority students within schools.

As diversity increases in student populations, the representation of diverse identities in curriculum is becoming an increasingly prominent feature of education programs, particularly as a means of closing the opportunity gap. These pedagogies recognize the importance of placing learning into a meaningful context for students and attempt to foster engagement by incorporating their diverse identities and experiences into the content of the classroom (Christensen, 2009). Despite this acknowledgement, diversity in representation often times does not extend to include diverse representations of gender or sexuality (Sherwin & Jennings, 2006).

Research indicates that many preservice teachers exhibit bias when it comes to the incorporation of diverse representations of gender and sexuality into their classrooms. They neither see the relevance of incorporating LGBTQ affirming content into their classrooms, nor do they believe that doing so would be appropriate. Additionally, because in many cases LGBTQ content inclusion is not covered in preservice teacher education programs, many potential teacher allies do not feel supported or prepared to incorporate it (Ferfolja & Robinson, 2002).

Research also shows that educators often exhibit bias in content choices. Even in multicultural or social justice based practices, inclusion of diverse genders and sexualities is deprioritized. In many cases, educators are unaware or fail to see the negative impact that their personal beliefs and attitudes, which sometimes manifest through omission or silence towards LGBTQ issues, have on students (Gay, 2010, Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2013). These representations are pathologizing, and often associate LGBTQ identities with death and disease. This is an effect of the larger issue of heterosexism, under which identities deviating from the heteronormative norms for gender and sexuality are stigmatized (Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2013).

The instructional practices, activities, and materials of school educators and administrators often highlight, reflect, and serve mainstream cultural values (Perry & Delpit, 1998). Loewen (2007) indicates that many elementary and secondary U.S. history textbooks offer a skewed depiction of the experiences of minority groups (i.e., Native Americans and Africans) which mainly serves to strengthen the position and image of the majority group (White, Caucasian, or European American). Furthermore, he also suggests that these texts simultaneously trivialize the accomplishments of minority groups. Cultural bias extends beyond curricula, however. Towery (2007) asserts that teachers frequently assume that their students are heterosexual and cisgender. This assumption absolves them of the need to address LGBTQ topics in their classrooms.

FINDINGS/DATA

The absence of homosexuality and the inescapable heterosexism in school curriculum makes the identities of LGBTQ youth illegitimate. It also confines the development and acknowledgement of non-normative genders and sexualities in today's schools. Within our

interviews, the participants noted that curriculum inclusion isn't only on the district, and that all educators and other staff need to include diversity in the students' lessons and environment, not just give lessons on diversity. In an interview with a school social worker and guidance counselor, there was attention brought to what the classroom looks like. She wondered if the history textbook had anything to include about LGBTQ individuals or movements, or if classrooms had images depicting both sexual orientation and racial diversity. She states that history lessons are often "very white...and male, and heterosexual", when this is simply not true.

Like in history, there is a lack of acknowledgement within other areas of school curriculum. When a student begins a sex education class they are filled with questions and often times LGBTQ students don't get their questions answered. In an interview with a district school teen, we asked what she thinks the Department of Education needs to understand about queer teens.

...[W]e need sex education, that we need it and we need it now, because there will be people who have sex and not know they even had sex, there will be people who have no idea how to do pre care, after care after sex like especially if you're a guy, especially if you're a girl, like half of the girls like, I would say 60% of the girls in my grade have no idea how a woman has sex with other women. The NYCDOE currently doesn't have a policy for teaching about any other sexuality rather than bi and gay, no others, there's no health, mental health, so important for like trans teens who have a 40% rate of suicide, it's so important to like educate so the person doesn't feel like they're in the wrong body their entire lives, we need education.

The participant makes the point that it's not only important for queer teens, but all teens, to learn about what to expect during sex and gain an awareness of their own sexual health. In addition to the importance of having an awareness of their own sexual health.. By incorporating LGBTQ inclusive content into sex education in ways that are not stigmatizing, such as only in conjunction with mentions of HIV/AIDS and disease, the straight population will be less easily misled about LGBTQ identities and lifestyles..

In an interview with a LGBTQ identifying student, she discloses that there are barely any available classes for students to take that would help with bettering their knowledge on sex, gender, and sexuality. The school focuses on curriculum that would benefit students' grades on tests. This demonstrates that the school is predominantly concerned with their students' academic achievements. The higher the test scores, the better the reputation of the school. If materials on sex, gender, and sexuality are not assessed on standardized exams such as the Regents, they are unlikely to be covered in the school's curriculum. Time spent in school will only focus on curriculum that is relevant to tests.

In a separate interview with another LGBTQ identified student, the student discussed various difficulties of incorporating LGBTQ content.

Um in gym class, just to be safe. Gym and health really talk about HIV and stuff because it's like a scary sickness or virus. Actually health class talks about sex.. but like with a boy and a girl. Not like a boy and boy or girl and girl, just boy and girl. I think because it's the way the world was made. It's still all new, this LGBT stuff is still new to them, so they're starting to support it.

The student acknowledges that since the school is still new in supporting the LGBTQ community this could be the reason why the school has not made any changes in their curriculum. The curriculum in her school does touch base on some areas pertaining to sex, gender, and sexuality. The only kind of sex related content that is being taught in health, gym, and living environment is in regards to procreation, sex between male and female. The student clarifies that these classes neither mention sex between two men nor two women, or any other representations falling outside the heteronormative assumptions.. In addition to discussions of procreation,, gym and health classes address the consequences of having sex: having a baby, and sexually-transmitted infections and viruses. She mentions that HIV is covered in many gym and health classes. Her knowledge on this topic shows that the school has successfully addressed the possible negative effects of having sex.

The student also notes the fact that in more creative subjects, like art, students are allowed to express themselves in their work however they would like, allowing for more fluidity between sex, gender, and sexuality, even if it is not covered in the curriculum. The teacher allows for exploration, but does not address these topics.

Furthermore, for students that do want to learn more about sex and how to have safe sex, there is a program in the school which distributes that knowledge. It accommodates heteronormative assumptions of sex and therefore preventing pregnancy and illness, so different kinds of birth control can be found and are accessible to students. Such program takes place outside of the classroom and requires students to make an effort on their own time. The information provided in this program cannot be found in the school's curriculum. Teachers are not expected to provide this kind of information to students.

Beyond sex education, LGBTQ curriculum needs to be picked up. When asked if there are any LGBTQ narratives in the curriculum, a high school teacher responded:

Oh no, definitely not, of course not! No. I actually did speak about Turning, he's a mathematician, philosopher, absolute genius, also gay...forced to commit suicide...he created the idea of function that with input, there should be output...um, but there aren't anything (sic) in the curriculum, why would there be and [I] say why would there be, not that I'm against it, but what politician is gonna say 'hey let's put this in the curriculum,

let's talk about how all these gay people were amazing for our society'...um, maybe they read an English book, maybe, at most...

The way this teacher responded with an immediate 'no', makes it clear that LGBTQ topics are foreign in the formal curriculum. Even for educators who wish to include this group, there are few to no guidelines or suggested supplemental materials to use, leaving it up to each individual teachers to initiate lessons and conversations surrounding the matter. By suppressing information of the LGBTQ community, schools remain under the same heteronormative construction that society functions under.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Various best practice models and recommendations exist to not only redress existing bias and lack of diversity in curriculum, but to also proactively cultivate inclusive and supportive school cultures and climates conducive to student learning and success. The policy implications focus on the integration of affirmative and diverse representations of gender and sexuality in curriculum in the New York City School District. These implications aim to increase equity and foster positive school climates and therefore experiences and supportive communities for all students in school environments across New York City. These implications are relevant to individual educators and administrators employed by the New York City Department of Education as they contain specific guidelines and requirements for implementation.

The **first policy** proposal requires consistent integration of diverse, accurate, and affirmative representations of gender and sexuality in multiple formats across content areas from Pre-Kindergarten on. This should include, but is not limited to the inclusion of textbooks, literature, and historical events. This content should be taught in relevant contexts in conjunction with other content, rather than as an isolated subject. The **second** policy proposal prohibits the inclusion of content that is inaccurate, stigmatizing, or pathologizing to any gender or sexuality across content areas. The **third** policy proposal requires the integration of content which fosters critical inquiry around the larger hegemonic "sociopolitical contexts" of values and norms (Gorski & Davis & Reiter, 2013). This can be instituted through a critical approach to multicultural education. The **fourth** policy proposal requires both individual schools and the New York City School District to make students aware of their rights to an affirmative and diverse curriculum through inclusion of major policy points in accessible terms in school handbooks and on school websites.

The National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) encourages the implementation of LGBTQ themes in the classroom, noting the benefits of inclusion, basic LGBTQ-related historical content, as well as strategies for the implementation of inclusion. If the effort is made to implement the following policy suggestions, the school culture/environment moves towards becoming inclusive, multicultural, higher performing and safe. Curriculum

representation is a component factored into measuring climate in GLSEN's national climate survey. GLSEN's findings (2013) indicate that positive representation of LGBTQ identities in curriculum has a positive impact on school climate and overall experience of LGBTQ students. This is further demonstrated through LGBTQ students reported experience of a greater connection with their school community in settings with LGBTQ inclusive and affirmative curriculum (GLSEN, 2013).

Where NAME's suggestions for multicultural curriculum wasn't implemented, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) stepped in to take action against certain school districts who did not include LGBTQ sensitivity lessons in their curriculum. This ended with mandatory training for educators. While organizing curriculum around multicultural education and sexual orientation is important, certain methods such as "sensitivity lessons" and teacher training surrounding a basis of harassment will only further stigmatize the issue. LGBTQ-themed popular culture is better at intertwining the lives of LGBTQ individuals into society than schools are into their curriculum. By including LGBTQ individuals in the context of a larger picture, such as a history lesson on social movements, it groups LGBTQ groups with others rather than as "The Other". By having informal discussions with students to break concepts and myths of LGBTQ people and culture, it creates potential for a positive and affirmative conversation rather than a threatening one. Another suggestion is making sex-education all inclusive and not geared toward a specific sexual orientation. By giving an option for what lessons students will take away from sex-education, it releases a target on a particular group and allows for various questions and comments.

In some states, LGBT curriculum inclusion has been addressed by legislation. California's Senate Bill (SB) 48, the Fair Education Act, mandates the inclusion of affirming and accurate LGBT representation in social studies curriculums, specifically in textbooks. Textbook materials distributed in California will incorporate affirmative representations of LGBT persons that made a mark in United States history. Affirmative inclusion of LGBT lives in California's curriculum is intended to "ensure that students get a fair and accurate picture of the people and events that have shaped [LGBTQ] society, and that fair and accurate portrayals of LGBT people are no longer excluded from classroom discussions" (Sawaske, 2010).

It is noteworthy that, unlike other programs with affirmative LGBTQ representation, SB 48 does not offer students or their guardians the option to "opt out" of learning this content. While the bill is statewide, specific methods of implementation are determined at the local level by individual districts or teachers. SB 48 is broken down into three parts. The Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education action is a bill that will allow the California school curriculum to be inclusive to LGBTQ history. In addition conjunction with fostering a greater sense of connectedness to school among LGBTQ students, the incorporation of LGBTQ content will allow for the schools to decrease rates of of bullying, and increase school safety. (Sawaske 2010).

One suggested method is increased familiarity and understanding of LGBTQ issues and history through literature both in the library and formal curriculum. Many people believe that education about LGBTQ identities is about the sexual behavior of LGBTQ people (Flores 2012). What this education actually does is focus on understanding and appreciate issues of differences including gender and sexuality. Without knowledge or appreciation of these differences, most students are complicit in the perpetuation of the marginalizing values of heteronormativity, which is the product of the heterosexist culture that surrounds them. The values and norms of the heterosexist culture are present in families, communities, religions and media representations/coverage, which poses challenges to re-introducing sexuality and gender in new ways.

The New York City Council and the Department of Education can take both immediate and gradual steps to create a more inclusive and affirming New York City, not only for its LGBTQ students, but each and every one of its students. Teachers should refer to students based on their preferred name and pronoun and supporting their expression of their gender identity through clothing, hairstyles, and mannerisms. Teachers should attend mandatory LGBTQ trainings held multiple times per year for students, professional staff, and parents/guardians. The policy also instructs professional staff to avoid using personal, organizational, and/or religious beliefs to justify discrimination, harassment, or disrespectful treatment of LGBTQ student gender identity and gender expression. Educators are not to bargain with LGBTQ students to reject or modify their self-determined gender identity or gender expression as a means to limit or reduce harassment, as well as not engage, encourage, or ignore discrimination, harassment, or disrespectful treatment of non-cisgender and gender non-conforming students.

Cris Mayo (2014) encourages that educators boys and girls be given freedom to occupy one another's normative roles. Drawing from Borstein (1994), Mayo encourages better understanding of relationally in identity and common struggles with sexism, racism, and other forms of bias. Educators should understand LGBTQ identities as intersectional, as defined by race and sexuality and think of gender and sexual identity as less defined and more fluid. Professional staff should indicate to parents a willingness to work and learn together on how to rethink gender and gender identity norms. Mayo cautions against having homophobia define how and why lessons on sexual minorities are included in school, frame LGBTQ issues as only risk or deficit ones, and limiting discourse on sexual orientation and sexuality.

VII. CONCLUSION

To incorporate the topics of gender, sexuality, and school climate into current discourse about education, it is imperative that we take a multi-faceted approach that considers various aspects of the educational system and where room for collaborative change exists. As a class, we

tackled three areas for policy change that we felt were crucial in order to reduce discrimination and create a more positive school environment.

Curriculum inclusion means incorporating discussions that delve deeper than just surface-level differences and creating a dialogue about sexuality and gender within school curriculums that allows students to gain an understanding and appreciation of those topics. We need to challenge the dominance of heteronormativity in classrooms so that we can increase familiarity and understating of the idea of deviance. We need to intertwine LGBTQ issues and history in the formal curriculum of a school in order to work towards creating a more positive climate and experience for all students.

Professional Development for all school staff and faculty can transform the classroom and hallways into supportive spaces for all students. By requiring staff to educate themselves on LGBTQ topics, they will have a better ability to reach out to students than if the conversation about non-normative sexuality and gender were entirely student-driven. Through professional development, educators become aware of their biases and are able to objectively address any issues and questions on LGBTQ matters.

DAC training is essential in creating an equal environment for all students in New York City public schools. It is the DA Coordinator's responsibility to provide and make sure that all school professionals are to be well equipped with awareness and sensitivity when it comes to discrimination and harassment. To protect students' well-being in a safe learning environment, these school professionals will have to serve an additional hour of training in regards of LGBTQ issues. This will raise awareness and sensitivity not only with school professionals but to students as well when issues arise. We hope that by opening discussion in these three areas of education and pinpointing realistic measures for change, school staff, education officials, and policymakers alike will consider our recommendations and their implications on creating a warmer school environment for all students.

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