

2010 Report on Queer Youth in the Syracuse City School District

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December 2010

"I'd tell him that however bad it was in high school or middle school...it gets better."

Dan Savage, author

**Why should LGBTQ students have to wait for it to get better?
We have the power to make it better now.
School should not be about survival.**

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.

December 2010

To Whom it May Concern,

In September, the United States mourned the loss of six young men who took their lives because they saw it as the only way to escape the torment they were suffering. We write this report in their honor and in the honor of all the other LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) people who have taken their lives because of the heterosexist society we live in today.

Billy Lucas, 15, hanged himself to death on September 9th.

Cody Barker, 17, took his life on September 13th.

Tyler Clementi, 18, jumped off the George Washington Bridge September 22nd.

Asher Brown, 13, shot himself in the head on September 23rd.

Seth Walsh, 13, tried to hang himself on September 19th and subsequently died on the 28th.

Raymond Chase, 19, hanged himself to death on September 29th.

As these deaths demonstrate, there is a major systemic problem in the United States' schools that creates an inequity in how non-heterosexual and non-gender conforming students are treated. It is this system of inequality that puts not only students' emotional, mental, and physical well-being at risk, but their very lives. These tragedies could have been prevented if this nation's schools were safe for *all* students, not just the heterosexuals.

In 2006 and 2008 Syracuse University students researched how LGBTQ youth were treated in schools using scholarly research and interviews conducted in local Syracuse schools. Their conclusion was that places of education, including those in Syracuse, were failing in their duty to protect all of their students. They proposed various suggestions ranging from developing school policies, personnel training, support groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances, including LGBTQ issues and people in curriculum, increased communication between students and administration, consistency in handling harassment of LGBTQ students, changing the code of conduct, and sensitivity training.

Unfortunately, this year's "Queer Youth, Straight Schools" class, taught by Professor Elizabeth Payne, has found that LGBTQ students are still not receiving sufficient support from schools in the Syracuse area. This finding is based on recent scholarly research spanning from 1998-2010 and almost twenty interviews done with local students, teachers, counselors, and administrators. We are not providing this information with the sole intention of revealing the deficits in education, but to suggest and recommend solutions for these problems. Please keep an open mind while reading this report and know that not everything is hopeless. Our schools can be improved if our teachers are trained properly, if our administration upholds district policies to respect and treat all students equally, and if we can consistently target homophobic language.

This report has critically important information that needs to be applied not just in our local schools, but to every school across the nation. This problem is not individual and it will not fade away with time. It will not "get better" simply because a student graduates or leaves high school. Many LGBTQ students drop out of high school to escape the fear and hatred they face (Wyss 2004). We can no longer wait for things to "get better." We cannot encourage LGBTQ youth to

wait for something that might never come. Help us end the waiting. You can make a difference in every student's life.

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Introduction

As with any field of study, sociology of education with a focus on queer youth utilizes very specific terminology which may not be readily understood by those outside of the field. Thus, in order for this paper to be accessible to a wide audience, this section will define a few key terms that will be used throughout the paper. The first term is “gender binary.” The gender binary is a description of how society constructs gender; there are only two genders, male or female and as denoted by the word “binary” they are in a hierarchical relationship. Therefore, one term is seen as being positive, having power, and being dominant (male), while the other term is seen as subordinate and as embodying all the negative qualities the other term does not (female). Because it is a binary only two genders and gender expressions can be included; this excludes any gender or gender performance that does not fit into male or female.

The next two terms will be explained together because it is important to understand the difference between them. Heterosexism is a learned prejudice and an institutionalized enforcement of heterosexual “normality” that is assumed by our culture (Owens 1998). Heterosexism is the cause of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity produces heterosexuality as “a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon” and is constructed as a ‘natural’ binary division of the sexes and the privileging of other-sex desire and relationships” (Wilkinson and Pearson, 2009, p. 544). As a consequence, homosexuality (portrayed as the opposite of heterosexuality) is defined as abnormal, unnatural, problematic, going against nature. In addition to this, heterosexuality, because it *is* seen as natural, is not questioned and it is implicitly assumed that everyone is heterosexual until proven otherwise. Thus, if a person is perceived as not being heterosexual, (usually because of gender non-conformity) he/she/ze will be singled out and harassed in order to try and force the person back into the zone of heterosexuality.

The final term to be defined is “gender policing.” Gender policing is a direct result of heterosexism, heteronormativity, and the gender binary. Because it is assumed that there are only two genders and each is directly associated with one sex (male/masculine, female/feminine) if a person’s gender does not conform to this standard he/she/ze will be perceived of as abnormal. Students, who are fully engaged in a heterosexist environment, in order to maintain heteronormativity, police how others perform their genders.

Methods

All of the articles cited in this paper are peer reviewed articles and the books used were selected by Dr. Payne. The interviews for this report were conducted by the students of CFE/QSX 300. Prior to being interviewed each subject gave written consent, which gave them strict confidentiality under the knowledge that the information taken from their interview would be used in this report. The individuals interviewed for this paper ranged from students, teachers, counselors, administrators, and other school personnel. The names of all participants and the schools have been changed in order to maintain the confidentiality promised to them.

A Double Edged Sword: The Silencing Language of Students

With the recent rash of LGBTQ suicides, many people have begun to question why queer adolescents feel so lost and hopeless. The media and news programs discuss bullying, and the LGBTQ community sets up support programs (It Gets Better and the Trevor Project). The real reason for these suicides is one that is not addressed by the media or the LGBTQ community. No matter how many anti-bullying programs are started, no matter how many support initiatives are created, and no matter what television programs are aired, the bullying will not stop until the root of the problem is dealt with. The problem is the overwhelming silence which smothers LGBTQ youth. This silence forces all non-normative, gender non-conforming and non-heterosexual adolescents into a position of non-existence. Bullying and suicide cannot be addressed until the silence is shattered and the LGBTQ youth are given a legitimate space within schools.

Individuals discriminate against LGBTQ students with derogatory language and physical violence. This discrimination is a result of heterosexism and can be seen in the school community through how students interact and the invisibility of LGBTQ students. LGBTQ youth, more often than heterosexual youth, face harassment and are victims of bullying (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009, p. 963). Social invisibility for LGBTQ students and reinforcement of heterosexuality in schools affects both heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals. As a result of heterosexism, the myth that all youths are heterosexual and only adults can be homosexual or bisexual exists and is widely accepted by the general population. This assumption has been used to deny services to this very vulnerable adolescent population and therefore reinforces the invisibility of LGBTQ youth (Owens, 1998).

Language is one of the most obvious examples of how LGBTQ youth are victimized. Schools often have the highest rates of harassment and victimization (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009, p. 963). Chesir-Teran and Hughes (2009) state, "In most settings- including schools- heterosexist regularities are maintained through subtle processes that reinforce LGBTQ invisibility and through explicit expression of anti-LGBTQ discrimination or victimization." (p. 964). Heterosexuality is viewed as better and therefore higher on the social hierarchy, giving homosexuality less power and privilege. Demeaning and lessening LGBTQ individuals and issues creates invisibility and opens the door for any form of abuse to be socially accepted and tolerated (Thurlow, 2001, p. 24). Thurlow details how others describe LGBTQ youth "as an 'invisible' minority and the most significant 'at risk' groups of adolescents...their institutional neglect 'as nothing less than State-sanctioned child abuse'" (Thurlow, 2001, p. 25).

Name-calling is one of the most common abusive practices LGBTQ youth experience in school. The adolescence social experience is explained as, "the value of peer status is at a premium...The naming of Other is an ineluctable part of social identity development." (Thurlow, 2001, p. 26). By identifying the 'other,' we are identifying the "other than heterosexuality" which again is reinforcing that heterosexuality is the norm. The verbal harassment adds to the invisibility and "...degrading homosexuality in public context serves to main the invisibility of homosexuals" (Thurlow, 2001, p. 32). Social humiliation of LGBTQ degrades homosexuality and tolerating such behavior reinforces the belittling. Thurlow's results reveal that students did not find homophobic profanities to be offensive; even when paired with the top-five taboo words (fuck, cunt, etc.) which alone were viewed as offensive homophobic profanities were still seen as inoffensive (Thurlow, 2001, p. 32-34). This is further evidence of the social invisibility from which LGBTQ students suffer.

Existing research states that hostility towards LGBTQ students and issues is normal in

most high schools in the United States (Chesir-Teran & Hughes 2009). Gender policing and the maintenance of heteronormativity in schools are accomplished partially through bullying, both verbal and physical. Students mark which peers are outsiders and punish them. Thurlow (2001) states, “language is unquestionably *complicitous* in the reproduction of social inequities and power relations” (p. 35). LGBTQ youth are trapped in the system of heteronormativity by their peers who use language to place them as inferior in the social strata and disenfranchise them. With the label of fag, dyke, gay, tranny, etc. students are no longer seen as part of the collective whole of the school. At the bottom of the social hierarchy, LGBTQ adolescents are forced into an identity of no value that is full of victimization and harassment.

The position of non-existence forced upon LGBTQ youth is epitomized by Sandra Bortolin’s (2010) findings which state, “Gay or perceived to be gay students were often ignored in conversation and excluded from social activities, such as parties” (p. 211). If school communities refuse to even allow LGBTQ youth (or those perceived to be so) to have a voice and be heard in everyday conversation, it is no surprise that LGBTQ youth feel marginalized and exiled. Without a voice, without a place, these adolescents find themselves friendless, with no allies, facing a school of people (not just students) who view their existence as illegitimate. And it is not just LGBTQ youth who are targeted. Because of their clothes, their grades, or their lack of sports participation, heterosexual males are also forced outside of the heteronormative hierarchy (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003).

Male students targeted by homophobic remarks are liable to suffer from increased anxiety, depression, personal distress, and feel as though they do not belong at school, while targeted females are more likely to withdraw due to an assumed rejection by peers (Poteat & Espelage 2007). Wyss (2004) states that abuse can “lead to low self-esteem, anxiety, rage, social withdrawal and depression...self-destructive behaviors...the abuse of prescription or illegal drugs, dropping out of school, unsafe sex and suicide” (p. 718). The media ignores heteronormativity and the links between gender, sexuality, and bullying. Anti-bullying programs are established that have little to no effect, as they do not address how society portrays heterosexuality as the only valued option.

In the interviews conducted with members of local school communities, results parallel with the research stated above. Eric, a queer student from Syosset High School explained, “I’ve heard slurs in the hallway before, but my only actual experience with homophobic behavior was with a bus driver sophomore year.” He described the bus driver as an older man who often yelled at the students on the bus. Eric explained: “Another openly gay student was just getting off the bus and as soon as he was crossing the street a student in the front of the bus said, ‘I’ll give you fifty dollars to hit him’ and the older, male driver responded, ‘for fifty bucks, sure’ ” (E. Smith, personal communication, November 18, 2010). Although Eric did not experience this homophobia directly, he discussed that it is something which needs to be resolved and if he ever experienced homophobia, he would not know how to handle himself.

Robyn, a student teacher in the Syracuse City School District, says she sees “lots of bullying, calling each other fat...derogatory slang words to mean homosexual and different racial slurs, ‘you’re so gay’ you hear a lot and ‘you so gay’ ”. She found when students used homophobic pejoratives they had no relation to sexuality. Students are unaware of the words implications and connotations. A class discussion took place but the problem did not seem to change. “You’re so gay” continued to be the most common phrase used amongst students.

The Enclosing Structure: Institutional Policies

The Gay/Straight Alliance at Roosevelt High School has a variety of members. In describing the student membership of the club, the GSA advisor, Susan White says,

We have allies. We have students who are very outwardly gay. We have students who are gay and look like everybody else. A lot of our membership is silent. They will speak to advisors in private, but they don't want the stigma of going to the meeting.

A student at the same high school said, "It's basically girls. There's a couple boys, but they rarely go." These quotes reveal that students do not always feel completely comfortable going to GSA meetings. This discomfort makes it more difficult for these students to form and express their identities, and also reduces the level of safety that they feel. This is a direct result of the heteronormative structure of the school and lack of proper knowledge (Lee, 2002).

White continues, "It can be a different group depending on the week and the availability of students." She describes the recent school-wide scheduling change, explaining that up until two years ago, the school day ended at 2:10pm, followed by a time designated for extracurricular clubs and advising time. Last year, that block was removed and replaced with more academic class time. She says, "There was a little bit of an uprising from parents and students because there was no other time to be involved in the clubs they wanted to be in." Having the clubs meet at the end of the newly scheduled day is not an option. "Anybody can have a club after school. I think our students have so many other responsibilities that we can't ask them to stay after school."

The GSA at Roosevelt High School is held back by these scheduling changes. White thinks, "It's horrible. I think in the education system we need to try to meet the needs of students academically, emotionally, physically, and behaviorally." White arranged it so the GSA is able to meet once every several days during the last class of the day. "If the students have an available 5th block, day 3, they can come to the meeting. It's restrictive because some students have class." Although this system is not ideal, it seems as though White is taking active strides to better serve the needs of the students in her school. A strong GSA advisor who actively advocates for the students will enhance the ability for that club to improve the lives of all students.

Through the personal interviews with members of the local Syracuse area school districts, we've been introduced to several common plights of GSAs experienced by both faculty and students. While there has not been a lot of critical research on the GSA and its impact in schools, we can synthesize what has been written with complaints we have drawn from interviews with students and faculty in order to address fundamental problems with GSAs in Syracuse area schools.

One issue with Syracuse area GSAs is their insistence on providing a "safe space" for youth – without actually improving the overall climate of the entire school. In an interview with a guidance counselor at Syosset High School, Zack noted that the members of the school's GSA want more than just a specified "safe space". "I think [the GSA] is...a place of comfort. [The club members] would like to be more activist. It's discussed a lot about what could we do as in terms of activism" (Z. Beal, personal communication, November 17, 2010). In the larger sense, a "safe space" identifies the rest of the school as unsafe:

Having safe spaces on campus where students feel that they can have a temporary reprieve from harassment is important...but the establishment of these spaces, rather than being an answer to the problem...only make the problem more apparent. The larger problem is...that students do not experience the entirety of their school as “safe” and therefore require these zones. (Payne & Smith, 2010, p. 16)

Although designated safe spaces bring about queer visibility and give queer kids a sense of safety, the larger problem of the overall “unsafe space” of the schools needs to be addressed and dealt with effectively.

Another main concern of the high school GSA is that it becomes an arena for mostly white students, excluding and alienating students of color. In describing the participation of students of color in high school GSAs, Lance T. McCready (2004) writes that it is “more difficult for guys...of color to come out and feel comfortable attending a queer support group,” especially one made up of “the...4 or 5...white female students who participated in [a GSA]” (p. 139). Schools need to make sure that their GSAs are inclusive and that all people, regardless of identity, feel comfortable attending.

The title of a GSA can speak volumes about its function within a school. A faculty member at Northern Pine High expressed confusion about his school’s GSA based on its title. “It’s called ‘Alphabet Soup,’” he exclaimed, “which is kind of a strange group if you ask me...It’s kind of a very childish name.” When allocating a name for a queer student group, there needs to be a balance between being informative and inclusive. Simply calling a club a Gay-Straight Alliance is, in some ways, counterproductive, as it separates queer youth from the rest of the school into a specified space. It also implies that there are two contrasting sexualities, gay and straight, and that this club is the one opportunity for them to bridge their differences. Thirdly, it reinforces the space as “white” by alluding toward the word “gay”, which has traditionally been associated with white, middle class, men. These ideas need to be taken into consideration when creating a name for a school’s queer student group.

Although the name “Alphabet Soup” is admirable in trying to separate from the above stigmas, this name does not fully succeed because it can be seen as childish and does not promote the club’s aims and goals. It is crucial for schools to be aware of the problematic nature of various name options, and work to create a name that is both sensitive and informative of all identities.

The faculty and administrative involvement, or lack thereof, has become a major reason why the LGBTQ community has been silenced within schools. Teachers have made queer students feel “Othered” or “different” by not addressing the instances of harassment that they witness. The ignorance of the faculty and staff has become a major issue in Syracuse area schools that administration has yet to correct.

Teachers have become a major influence in the abuse of queer students. In many situations, teachers will hear or see a student harassing an LGBTQ student, such as through phrases like, “I hope you get AIDS and die slowly”, and will neither do nor say anything (C. Davis, personal communication, November 14, 2010). In addition, teachers have the tendency to put the blame for these incidents on the students who are getting harassed.

Because teacher’s aren’t stepping in to help the students, queer kids end up having to stick up for each other. When talking about instances of harassment in school, a current student in Roosevelt High School said,

I almost got into a fight with this one kid cause he was messing with this kid. He was gay... I stepped to him and was like, 'you need to leave him alone, there's no reason for you to be doing this' and he was just like 'oh, you wanna start, too?'. I had to let that one go. I took the kid with me and was just like, 'We're gonna let this one go.' Cause I don't play like that. (J. Jackson, personal communication, November 14, 2010)

Kids should not have to rely on each other for protection. The faculty and staff of schools have an obligation to keep kids safe, and they are clearly not doing that if kids are the only ones stepping in to protect each other from harassment.

Negativity and Exclusion: One Time Lessons + No Lessons = Curricular Silence

Within the American school system, LGBTQ issues are rarely discussed. Instead of making queer issues visible within the school curriculum, heterosexism is consistently reinforced and reproduced in schools through images, coursework, and general discussions in the classroom. One study, which shows the teachers' level of comfort in teaching LGBTQ issues, states that "46 percent of health teachers in one random sample indicate they formally taught about homosexuality. Of those, 48 percent spent less than a class period on it and 43 percent spent 1 to 2 periods" (Lipkin, 2000, p. 343). By omitting information on homosexuality, schools inhibit understanding of non-normative sexualities for both homosexual and heterosexual students. The lack of homosexuality and the omnipresent heterosexism in high school curriculum makes the identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth illegitimate. In addition it restricts the development and acceptance of non-normative sexualities in today's schools.

Sex education has been a controversial issue for many years and often makes queer experiences invisible. When looking at the sex education debate around the U.S., the Sexuality Information and Education Counsel of the U.S. has found that schools are "for the most part, silent about same-sex attractions or LGBTQ identities" (Fisher, 2009, p. 63). Within these debates, many schools have adopted an abstinence-only approach. The problem with abstinence-only education is that it is "unlikely to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth, as they largely ignore issues surrounding homosexuality (except when discussing transmission of HIV/AIDS), and often stigmatize homosexuality as deviant and unnatural behavior" (Fisher, 2009, p. 62). Also, many schools teach students to abstain from having sex with their partners until after they are married. This becomes particularly problematic with LGBTQ students who cannot legally marry in many areas of the U.S. The assumption is that they can never, and should never, become sexually active.

When homosexuality is discussed in curriculum, particularly in the context of sex education, it is usually in relation to HIV and AIDS. In mentioning homosexuality only in the context of HIV and AIDS, it, "explicitly or implicitly links homosexuality with a life threatening disease" (Bortolin, 2010, p. 215). Furthering this, as Friend (1993) writes,

When discussions regarding homosexuality do occur, they are consistently placed in a negative context. This results in the systematic inclusion of conversations about homosexuality only as pathology, only in regard to sexual behavior and/or framed as dangerous. (Macgillivray, 2000, p. 311)

By only discussing queer issues in terms of HIV/AIDS, it pathologizes queerness, makes queer

equivalent only to disease. It also places a very negative stigma on queer kids; the association of queer people and disease becomes translated and generalized into queerness being a disease in itself. It is highly problematic that the few times that queer is made visible, it is through disease.

Queer identities and issues are often left out in the context of history. The queer identity of a historical figure is virtually eliminated upon death. It is assured that there are historical figures that were queer, but unlike when heterosexual partners and their families are included in a person's historical biography, a queer person's family is never mentioned. Children of queer historical figures are rarely mentioned, and it is even rarer that a same-sex or same-gender partner is included. As a young man recounts of his high school experience,

When I was in history class, I'd be learning all this history, and I almost felt like it didn't even apply to me because I didn't relate to it; it wasn't about my people...there would be times when I'd know a certain person in history was gay, and they'd make them out to be straight in this history book. That really bothered me a lot; it made the kind of people that I could relate to invisible, so I couldn't relate at all." (Wiley, 1999, p. 83)

By not naming the queer identities of prominent historical figures, it sends a message to queer students that their identities are not worth mentioning. By naming the queer identities of these historical figures, it will demonstrate that LGBTQ persons have made positive contributions to the world, that their successes are worthy of inclusion, and that their identities as queer people they are recognized and respected. If their successes are named but their queer identity is not, it further silences and stigmatizes the lives of queer people.

In addition to LGBTQ historical figures and issues being left out of history classes, LGBTQ writers, and queer books are left out of school libraries or cached away out of sight. "If the school library does have any books on homosexuality, they are frequently kept behind the reference desk [thereby making the information inaccessible to the teenage who fears disclosing her sexual orientation]" (Macgillivray, 2000, p. 311). Recently, three of the most notorious books banned from school classrooms and libraries were, *And Tango Makes Three*, *Holly's Secret*, and *GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer and Questioning Teens*, due to the fact that each book contains some mention or allusion to homosexuality (E. Payne, "LGBT Youth and Suicide..." presentation, October 6, 2010). The prohibition of books and materials addressing homosexuality or homosexuals from today's schools has many negative consequences.

The inability and negligence of most schools to educate and provide information on non-normative sexualities and genders leaves students with a serious lack of knowledge regarding homosexuality. In banning books that discuss homosexuals and homosexuality, schools cut off one more resource where kids can seek guidance and information. In forbidding information on homosexuality, schools also perpetuate a heteronormative environment, where heterosexuality is the only sexuality displayed and recognized. As well as implicitly reifying heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexuality, publicly banning books with homosexual content from schools explicitly stigmatizes and denounces homosexuality. In publicly forbidding books containing homosexuality from being utilized in classrooms, schools make homosexuality illegitimate, which sends a message of exclusion to many students who are either queer or questioning their sexual orientation. Many of these students internalize this feeling of "not belonging" which can lead to future problems such as low self-esteem, drug abuse, or unsafe sexual behavior (MacDonald, 2006, p. 187).

When discussing families, "classes rarely discuss gay and lesbian families as viable

options” (Temple, 2005, p. 275). In failing to discuss same-sex parents, the curriculum not only alienates students with gay and lesbian parents, but also alienates students who identify as queer or are questioning their sexuality. It is just another way to eliminate queer identities from the curriculum, and perpetuate heterosexual couples as the only acceptable type of relationship. It further silences queer kids and gives them a sense of being Other.

When queer issues are incorporated into textbooks, often times it is only presented in specially designated segments, and queer inclusion is not kept consistently incorporated throughout all areas of the course material (Bay-Cheng, 2001, p. 247-48). Although these sections may or may not put a positive light on non-normative sexualities, the fact that they are placed separate from the rest of the curriculum furthers the heteronormativity in schools as it again places non-normative sexuality as Other. For queer kids, the silence and invisibility in school curriculum can have detrimental effects. By not being mentioned in the classroom, queer kids learn that their lives are insignificant and not worth mentioning (Robinson, 2002, p. 427).

According to *The 2009 National School Climate Survey* by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], “LGBT students who were more frequently harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression had grade point averages almost half a grade lower than for students who were less often harassed (2.7 vs. 3.1)”, “LGBT students who experienced high levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation or gender expression had higher levels of depression and anxiety...also related to lower levels of self-esteem”, and “[s]tudents were 3+ times likelier to have missed classes (29.1% vs. 8.0%) and 4+ times likelier to have missed at least one day of school (30.0% vs. 6.7%) in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, when compared to the general population of secondary school students”, just to name a few (Kosciw et al., 2010, p. xvii). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, queer youth are two to three times more likely to commit suicide relative to their heterosexual peers and approximately 28% of LGBT youth in America end up dropping out of school (Lindley & Reininger, 2001, p. 17). All of these very disheartening statistics are a result of the silence and lack of legitimacy awarded to non-heterosexuality in schools. As Mac An Ghail (1991) writes, “The students emphasized the personal isolation, confusion, marginalization and alienation that this engendered. Most significantly, without a positive reference group, they tended to internalise ambivalent negative messages about themselves” (Sexual Structuring-Sexual Stereotyping: ‘the enemy within’ section, para. 5).

Due to the overall curricular silence and the overrepresentation of negative messages regarding queer identities (in comparison to positive ones), queer students begin to internalize the negative messages, with severe repercussions. We need positive messages to counteract the negativity and silence that is omnipresent in schools today. Things need to change, for the sake of our kids.

It’s Always Darkest Before Dawn: Recommendations

Social Solutions

Teachers play an important role in preventing violence against LGBTQ students, especially when it comes to monitoring language and diction in and outside the classroom. However, preventing and addressing anti-LGBT remarks should be done in a tactful manner because it has the potential to backfire. Constant policing of certain words may show those

students who use those words that it is still acceptable to use homophobic slurs, but they just can't use those words around a certain group or person. In result, this only allows temporary comfort and solutions in a school setting.

One way teachers can address the usage of anti-LGBT slurs is to have better support and communication from the school officials, both administrators and colleagues. There needs to be intervention and prevention on a wide scale in the school atmosphere, not just exertion from one teacher. Often times some teachers may be seen as having a defeatist attitude because of the lack of ability to control the environment of their classroom when in actuality, those teachers may not have the right support from administrators, other teachers, and parents on how to handle LGBT related situations.

There are also some teachers who will not fully follow an anti-discriminatory policy because it might "conflict" with societal or their personal beliefs. While teachers are entitled to have their own beliefs, they are not entitled to act upon them. They are not entitled to directly create or indirectly create (by ignoring or not addressing problems) a hostile environment. As educators, teachers should be aware that every student is entitled to have an equal playing, or in this case learning, field.

While this report recommends that educators provide visibility and inclusion for LGBTQ youth in every aspect of school from support groups such as GSA's and curricular inclusion, it is important that this visibility and inclusion be positive. It is a common cliché that "there's no such thing as bad publicity," but for students from elementary school to high school this is not necessarily true. Some people may hope that because terms like "fag" and "gay" are being overused that they will lose their negativity and become "empty" or "neutral." This is highly unlikely to happen as explained by the previous section in the report which demonstrated how the use of terms like "fag" and phrases such as "that's so gay" are harmful not just to LGBTQ students, but to the entire school's population. In this vein, though it is good that some schools are beginning to support their LGBTQ community by allowing students to engage in activities for events such as the Day of Silence, Transgender Day of Remembrance, and World AIDS Day, it is important to look at the message that is sent to the students.

This subject is taken up by Payne and Smith in an unpublished article they are working on which critiques the use of "gay days" to commemorate LGBTQ students. In this article the authors assess the portrayal of LGBTQ students as victims in need of protection and how the dialogue involving LGBTQ youth is one of "safety" (2010). This can also be viewed in "From Survival to Success," the first report submitted by a "Queer Students, Straight Schools" class, that suggested the Syracuse School District train school personnel in violence and suicide prevention. Payne and Smith point out that instead of celebrating positive events in LGBTQ history or well known LGBTQ historical figures, schools "mark their 'progressiveness' and commitment to diversity through one-time visibility events commemorating the violence experienced by LGBTQ youth" (2010, p.18). This connection, they go on to argue, of LGBTQ persons with "school harassment and invisibility, disease, death and murder" continually reinforces their identity as victims and socially unacceptable" (ibid). Although it is definitely a step in the right direction to be acknowledging LGBTQ youth and struggles and adversity they face, only highlighting the negative experiences of LGBTQ people continually marks them as deviant and unaccepted.

Taking this into consideration, the recommendation we would like to put forth would be not to stop the visibility of LGBTQ youth by not allowing them to sponsor or host events such as Day of Silence or World AIDS day, but to encourage more positive events. October is National

Gay History Month so why not put up posters or have a table to celebrate all of the LGBTQ historical figures who have helped shaped this world. This would give LGBTQ students the chance to see that they are not alone and show straight students that LGBTQ individuals have contributed a lot to their lives. Another suggestion might be to celebrate the day the first state recognized same sex marriage, or the March for Equality. There are very many positive aspects to LGBTQ history, culture, and life, but because of the association with hate crimes, AIDS, and death it is easy to forget this. But it is imperative that when celebrating LGBTQ history and culture that it is inclusive of race, nationality, and class because the LGBTQ community cuts across all races, genders, sexes, nationalities, classes, and abilities.

Institutional Solutions

Although the concept of a GSA may sound like a great move towards making queer youth visible in high schools and possibly help reduce the frequency of harassment, bullying, and violence revolving around sexuality, there are also many problems surrounding GSA's. Problems including the way they are structured, their exclusivity, and creation of "safe" and "(un)safe" spaces within the school building. Individual schools are responsible for examining the structure of their own GSA, in order to promote a healthy school environment for all students, including those who identify as queer.

We propose that the goal of a school's GSA is to do more than simply put "safe space" stickers on classroom doors in order to produce a surface level of tolerance and support. The concept of a "safe space" inherently establishes "unsafe spaces", which for queer youth, is highly detrimental to their educational process. As opposed to establishing GSAs as "safe spaces" for LGBTQ students, high schools would be better off instituting a zero tolerance policy that cracked down on harassment, bullying, and violence and worked to define the entire school as a safe place. School should not be a place students need sanctuary from; it should be structured in a way that creates an open and rich environment for all students to thrive in. A zero tolerance policy would leave no room for harassment of any kind, particularly harassment based on a student's sex, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation.

As previously mentioned, the idea of having a GSA present in a high school is a noble idea, but there are certain fundamental aspects of traditional GSA's that prevent them from serving their full purpose. A key aspect in the implementation of a GSA is its name. Rather than referring to the club as a "GSA" which insinuates that there are only two sexualities in existence, "gay" and "straight," a more appropriate and inclusive name would be beneficial for the organization. Sexuality and gender are exhibited by everyone, regardless of which sexualities and genders they identify with. By simply using words like "sexuality" and "gender" in the name of the group, rather than "gay" and "straight" would prove to be more inclusive and less of a binary reinforcement. Another benefit of trading in the term "gay" for a more general, umbrella term for all sexualities is the absence of the "white male" stigma attached to the label "gay." Queer students of color, particularly queer male students of color, may be more inclined to participate in the club meetings and events with a more inclusive title. There are many other things that are necessary for the success of GSA's in high schools including, but are not limited to funding and support from faculty, students, and parents. The question is how do you increase faculty, student, and parental support?

There are a number of ways to bring about a more inclusive space for all people. One way is to establish gender-neutral bathrooms. Traditional restrooms that are labeled "men" and

“women”- with accompanying universal gender symbols- reinforce the gender binary, implying that there are only two genders in existence. Separate bathrooms for men and women are problematic for trans students, gender-nonconforming students, and students whose gender doesn't parallel their physical anatomy. The same issue can be seen in gender-specific locker rooms, gym classes, and sports teams. To eliminate this problem, it is not necessary to eliminate all gendered bathrooms. Rather, schools should create an additional bathroom that does not restrict by gender. A gender-neutral bathroom can be big enough for multi-person use, but most gender-neutral restrooms currently in existence are single person use only.

Another way to make schools more inclusive of all people, regardless of gender identity and expression, is to revise current dress codes in schools. Rather than have separate guidelines for “men” and “women”, dress codes should become universal. For instance, instead of stating that: “All girls should not have skirts higher than four inches above their knees,” the dress code should state “All students should not have skirts higher than four inches above their knees”. That way, students will not feel restricted to gender-conform and will be freer to express themselves. This would rely on school protection so that gender non-conforming students will not be harassed.

Teachers and school staff need to understand that the presence of derogatory speech is a key indicator to the safety and well-being of the students within the school. It is even more important for our teachers and administration to be aware that this harassment and labeling is affecting not only the LGBTQ students, but all students regardless of sexual orientation.

Teachers need to be provided with personal protections so that they can protect and promote equality for all students within a school. A teacher should not feel silenced or helpless in protecting LGBTQ students in the classroom, as is currently the case. Dialogue needs to be opened between students, faculty, and staff. Harassment should be disciplined in the same way other discriminating harassment is within the school. In addition, it is essential that teachers are trained to avoid “silencing” these acts of hatred involving homophobic language. To do this, there should be trainings for teachers, discussing how to combat homophobia and increase queer inclusion in the classroom, making sure that these are done in a way that students do not feel “Othered”.

In terms of policing and reprimanding students for homophobic language such as “fag,” a standard and consistent approach must be taught to the faculty and staff of schools, and make sure that the reprimands are consistently implemented. Just as there is a standard, concrete consequence for students who cheat or plagiarize their work, there should be an established rule for students who discriminate and/or harass other students. This rule must state that it is completely unacceptable to discriminate against students for any reason, including the use of homophobic slurs or bullying based on gender performance and sexual orientation. By silencing or ignoring these slurs, we continue to support the silencing of these harmful doings when great change is needed. And with that change comes the courage to stand up and speak out.

Curricular Solutions

As one potential reason for the lack of teachings on homosexuality, many parents' views on queerness are that it is an “adult only” topic, and that it is inappropriate for their innocent children (Robinson, 2002, p. 418). In essence, they see queerness only on the basis of sex, and kids should not be taught about sex. However, LGBTQ individuals are more than just sexual beings. Incorporating them into curriculum does not mean that children will be taught the

mechanics of certain sexual acts. Rather, it will bring to light the normalcy of queer people, rendering their lives and identities more acceptable.

In general, queer issues need to be increasingly incorporated into the curriculum of schools. In terms of libraries, there should be more books discussing queer issues, books by recognized queer authors, and novels incorporating queer characters and queer content. Further, these books should not be hidden behind a desk. By making queer books available and easily attainable, queer lives and experiences will become much more visible alongside heterosexual lives. This will show all students that queerness is acceptable and worthy of being discussed, rather than hidden and shamed.

There are many possible solutions to improve the curricular absence of queerness, and help LGBTQ students feel more accepted. Social studies courses (history, political science, sociology, psychology, etc.) have a lot of potential to include LGBTQ topics. There are many historical figures throughout history that were queer (such as James Baldwin, Gertrude Stein, Walt Whitman, Virginia Wolfe, and Eleanor Roosevelt) and made significant contributions to history throughout the world. There are also historical figures that were openly homophobic, such as Adolph Hitler, and this should also be mentioned and discussed. Suggested ways to include LGBTQ into the social studies curriculum are “cross-cultural and trans-historical understandings and representations of same-gender sexuality, the importance of certain homosexual people in various eras, the evolution of modern gay identity, and current gay issues, including legal rights, medicine, activism, and politics” (Lipkin, 2000, p. 345). It is essential that the lives and histories of queer people be discussed in the classroom.

Sex education curriculum needs to include aspects of desire, and not focus solely on reproduction. Queer students should be able to feel comfortable with their sexual desires and behavior, even if they do not result in procreation. Some suggested topics that could be integrated into the curriculum include learning “about the Kinsey scale, the difference between homosexual acts and gay identity, the history of antigay prejudice and discrimination, and the theories of causation” (Lipkin, 2000, p. 344). These types of lessons can give insight into the wide range of sexual desires, and should promote all of them as normal and acceptable desires and types of relationships.

It is also imperative to discuss types of contraception for all types of sexual activity. Most teachings on contraception (when contraceptive forms are taught) are based only on sexual acts between heterosexual couples, as a way to prevent pregnancy. Teachings about safe sex need to be expanded to include non-procreative practices. These teachings should include the use of dental dams for oral sex on a female and condom use for anal sex and oral sex on a male. This information would benefit both heterosexual and same-sex couples because both types of couples partake in these sexual acts. By discussing the various ways to engage in safe sex, all students will be included and will become more knowledgeable. Because of this, safe sex practices will increase, and the sexual health of students will improve.

Through a recent interview, a local sexual education teacher described how she incorporates homosexuality in her curriculum throughout the semester, rather than mentioning it solely in one lesson. She explained, “When I discuss the dental dam, I will say ‘this is used when a guy or a girl performs oral sex on a girl’...I try and make sure that I include every possible situation”. This teacher recognized that LGBTQ students are present in the school and need to be incorporated into the curriculum. When explaining the use of the dental dam, she made homosexuality visible, neither over-emphasizing it nor demonizing it. In this simple way, she legitimizes homosexuality as equal alongside heterosexuality.

This teaching method is beneficial in that it incorporates queerness throughout everyday lessons, instead of devoting one day to queer issues (which singles out and distinctly marks queer as Other). This method, as previously examined in a sexual education classroom, can also be utilized by teachers in all other courses. For instance, in math lessons, there can be problems that read “Tyler’s two dads had ten apples and sold three...” along with word problems that read “Jane’s mom and dad...”. It is imperative that homosexuality be conspicuous as equal to heterosexuality in students’ everyday learning.

Conclusion

Through the research and interviews conducted, it’s evident that queer issues and identities within Syracuse area high schools need to be actively addressed. Considering the problems and resolutions discussed in this report, it’s the responsibility of Syracuse area school officials and faculty members to take the appropriate and necessary steps to establishing a truly safe, equal, productive, and inclusive school environment.

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