

## Chapter 5

# K–12 Students in Schools

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*K–12 students regularly experience homophobia and heterosexism in schools. This chapter attends to LGBTQ K–12 students in particular, focusing on the contexts, curricula, and policies that shape the school experiences of these students. LGBTQ students are at risk for many problems, including expulsion from schools, not because of their individual traits but because of the homophobia, heteronormativity, and transphobia that permeate educational environments. Extracurricular initiatives, staff engagement, curriculum, and pedagogy are all identified as important factors in the school context for LGBTQ youth. Both formal and informal policy reforms are necessary to improve school context for LGBTQ youth, as is more information to fill existing gaps in research.*

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All K–12 students regularly experience homophobia and heterosexism in schools, in different ways and to various degrees. Although these experiences are not limited to LGBTQ youth, they impact these young people, as well as those perceived to be LGBTQ, most detrimentally. Therefore, this chapter attends to LGBTQ K–12 students, in particular, focusing on the contexts, curricula, and policies that shape the school experiences of these students. Regarding school context, we acknowledge that LGBTQ students are at risk for many problems, including expulsion from schools, not because of their individual traits but because of the homophobia and heteronormativity that permeate educational environments. We also address extracurricular initiatives, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, and supportive staff who positively influence them. Regarding curriculum and pedagogy, we first discuss related needs and problems and then explore LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, anti-bias curriculum, and queer pedagogies as possible solutions to these problems. Finally, we turn our attention to policies and programs, considering both formal and informal ones and noting the significance of comprehensive policies with enumerated language. In each of these sections we discuss not only what we know but also what we need to know, by concluding each section with suggestions for future research.

## School Context

### *Impact of Heteronormativity*

LGBTQ youth are not “at risk” simply because of individual-level variables but because of the heteronormativity and homophobia in the environments where they live and grow (Horn, Kosciw, & Russell, 2009). That is, what shapes LGBTQ young people’s chances in life and their educational outcomes, among other things, is not just individual traits but the larger contexts in which they live, including peer cultures (e.g., Poteat, 2008; Poteat, Aragon, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Wichstrom & Hegna, 2003) and school environments (e.g., Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Chesir-Teran, 2003; Szalacha, 2001). In general, the climates of U.S. middle and high schools are unsupportive and unsafe for LGBTQ youth (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). School climate is a product of multiple factors, including incidents of bullying and harassment, formal and informal acts of discrimination, structural accommodations (gendered bathrooms and locker rooms, for example), and policies (anti-bullying, nondiscrimination, etc.). In this section, we discuss homophobia and heteronormativity in schools, ways of improving school contexts, and suggestions for future research.

Like many institutions and organizations in the United States, schools are homophobic and heteronormative, with very few exceptions. The concept of heteronormativity refers to ideologies, practices, and policies that position heterosexuality, heterosexual identity, and heterosexual sexual practices as normal, natural, and desirable (Rodriguez, 2010). Homophobia is the more explicit form of oppression related to LGBTQ youth in schools. Both homophobia and heteronormativity negatively impact the well-being of LGTBQ youth.

LGBTQ youth often report experiencing harassment, discrimination, and other negative events in school, often specifically related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or how they express their gender. As Wilkinson (2010) points out, such experiences include high levels of homophobic name-calling (Poteat, 2008), verbal and physical harassment (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Fineran, 2001; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995), assault (Bontempo, 2002; D’Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006), and social exclusion and other interpersonal problems with peers (Pearson, Muller & Wilkinson, 2007; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001).

Heteronormativity can be relatively subtle, conveyed by pervasive symbols of appropriate gender and sexual relations displayed in classrooms, by peer groups, and in extracurricular activities (Barron & Bradford, 2007; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Pascoe, 2007). School rituals, formal and informal school

rules, and activities such as sports, pedagogical practices, and interactional practices in schools all enforce heteronormativity (Pascoe, 2007). It can be embedded in the physical environment of a school, in school policy, and in the social organization of the school (Chesir-Teran, 2003). The heteronormative environments of most schools are stigmatizing for LGBTQ young people (Goffman, 1963; Herek, 1998). Wilkinson (2010) argues that these contexts can lead to decreased social-emotional well-being (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Rostosky, Owens, Zimmerman, & Riggle, 2003) and increased externalizing problem behaviors such as fighting (Savin-Williams, 2001) and academic failure (Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). Same-sex-attracted adolescents' risk of emotional distress and problem behaviors depends in part on the level of heteronormativity in their high school (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). Therefore, the educational environment for many queer youth is a context of fear and harassment, often linked to heightened rates of substance abuse and mental health problems—all of which are associated with higher suicide risks.

### *Schools as Affirming Spaces for LGBTQ Youth*

However, schools are not uniformly negative spaces for LGBTQ youth (Wilkinson, 2010). School cultures vary, and how a school's culture matters in a given student's life varies as well (Wilkinson, 2010). Educational contexts are often unique to each school and its surrounding community; thus the pervasiveness of heteronormativity within a school may vary (Chesir-Teran, 2003; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006). Same-sex attraction is stigmatized in some schools, while other schools actively support sexual diversity. For example, attending a school in an urban location appears to buffer the negative effect of same-sex attraction on well-being for adolescent boys (Wilkinson, 2010). In addition, same-sex-attracted girls are more likely than other-sex-attracted girls to fail a course in schools with more religious student bodies as well as in schools where football has a stronger presence (Wilkinson, 2010). Such findings suggest that the high school performance and long-term educational attainment of same-sex-attracted youth may depend on the type of school they attend (Wilkinson, 2010).

Research suggests that a number of variables make for a more hospitable environment for LGBTQ youth on K-12 campuses. Among these are Gay-Straight Alliance clubs (GSAs) and supportive teachers, as well as curricular inclusion, which we discuss in the next section of this chapter.

Student-centered organizations such as GSAs facilitate LGBTQ-identified youth's well-being, civic engagement, and academic success (see, e.g., Russell, Muraco, Subramanian, & Laub, 2009). GSAs are extracurricular student-led

clubs that often advocate for improved school climate, educate the larger school community about issues pertinent to LGBTQ people, and support LGBTQ students and their allies (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2003; Russell, 2002). The presence of GSAs or similar student clubs has been found to be related to less hostile experiences for LGBTQ youth, including less victimization, greater safety, and greater school connectedness (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Kosciw, et al., 2012; Lee, 2002; O'Shaughnessy, Russell, Heck, Calhoun, & Laub, 2004; Szalacha, 2003). GSAs serve several purposes for students: education and safety, interpersonal support, and recreation (Griffin et al., 2003). Like other student clubs, they are social spaces where social isolation is reduced in a normative context (Herdt, Russell, Sweat, & Marzullo, 2007). Through GSAs, students create a context for developing positive attitudes toward themselves and others (Herdt et al., 2007), where marginalized youth are empowered to critique and challenge dominant norms for gender and sexuality (Russell et al., 2009). Variations in political climate and locality affect the likelihood of the presence or absence of a GSA in a given school. GSAs are more likely to be found in suburban and urban schools, in schools located in liberal political areas (such as the West and Northeast), and in wealthier schools (Fetner & Kush, 2007). They are also more likely to be found in states with antidiscrimination laws and with supportive LGBTQ organizations (Fetner & Kush 2007).

GSAs also affect the school context. Students in schools with GSAs report fewer homophobic remarks and less harassment and bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity. They are less likely to miss school because of feeling unsafe and more likely to feel a sense of belonging to their school environment (Kosciw et al., 2012). Further, although only a minority of students participate in GSAs in most schools, several studies have shown that the mere presence of a GSA—not necessarily participation in it—is associated with general school safety (Goodenow et al., 2006; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Szalacha, 2003). One reason that GSAs may make a difference is that they become a source of LGBTQ-related resources and support for students at school (Russell, 2010). In 1999 there were fewer than 1,000 GSAs across the country. The number grew to over 4,000 in 2009 (Kosciw, 2010), and has continued to increase more recently (Kosciw et al., 2012). The growing number of schools with GSAs is indicative of the changing school environments in which LGBTQ students learn.

In addition to GSAs, staff and faculty allies also make a difference. LGBTQ youth who have support from teachers and other staff report feeling safer while at school and are less likely to be absent or have other school troubles

than students without support from staff (Kosciw et al., 2012; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). Youth who have supportive school personnel also experience greater school connectedness (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2012; Murdock & Bolch, 2005). Most of the LGBTQ youth in the National School Climate Survey reported that they knew of at least one school staff member who was supportive of LGBTQ youth; about half knew of six or more (Kosciw et al., 2012). Professional development interventions to increase the supportiveness of school personnel of LGBTQ youth demonstrate promise in improving school climate (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010). Moreover, staff and faculty are yet another way, in addition to GSAs, that students can access LGBTQ resources. This is important because when students report that they know where to go at school for information and support about LGBTQ issues, they also feel safer personally, and they perceive that their schools are safer for LGBTQ and gender-nonconforming students (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004). With this in mind, offering such support should be part of the performance evaluations of school personnel of all sorts.

To meet the needs of LGBTQ youth, larger scale and more rigorous studies need to be done, providing evidence for the variables that positively or negatively affect LGBTQ youth's educational environments. Currently, there are few large-scale studies that assess school climate for LGBTQ students specifically, apart from GLSEN's National School Climate Surveys (i.e., Kosciw, 2010). Few states or localities have such data and no federal government surveys address school climate for LGBTQ students (Kosciw, 2010). In addition, the methodology of studies on LGBTQ youth in school needs to be more rigorous (Kosciw, 2010). While they sometimes follow best practices for research design, they are not intended for distribution beyond a specific campus or for contributing to "general knowledge" (Kosciw, 2010). The results are data that may be useful locally, at a particular time, but are unreliable for assembling anything like a regional or national picture of campus climate for LGBTQ students (Kosciw, 2010). Finally, a variety of topics are not yet covered by large-scale studies (Kosciw, 2010). For example, few large-scale population studies ask about sexual orientation, and none ask about transgender status. (See chapter 10 of the present report for a discussion of what we know from some of the large-scale surveys on issues that could pertain to LGBTQ youth, and the limitations of these instruments.)

We have much to learn about populations within LGBTQ communities. Little research exists on the experiences of youth in rural areas (Kosciw, 2010). A very limited body of research on elementary schools and young children's experiences in educational contexts focuses on gender, gender nonconformity, and family diversity but until recently not on LGBTQ identity (GLSEN

& Harris Interactive, 2012; Kosciw, 2010). More research is needed on the intersections among race, gender, class, and sexuality (Kosciw, 2010), particularly with respect to GSAs, which, at least in some contexts, seem to serve primarily White girls (Poteat, Aragon, et al., 2009). Finally, research on the variables that encourage the success of LGBTQ students is lacking as well.

## Curricula and Pedagogy

GLSEN's National School Climate Survey has repeatedly found that schools with inclusive curricula are less hostile toward LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2012). It is not known whether inclusive curricula work against hostile climates or less hostile climates allow for inclusive curricula, but there is likely a symbiotic relationship between climate and curriculum. Thus, the issues discussed in the previous section on climate and in this section on curriculum are understood as intricately intertwined, even though the sections are separated here for the sake of clarity. Having discussed the importance of climate, above, we now turn our attention to the importance of curricula.

### *LGBTQ-Inclusive Curricula*

A wide array of scholars (e.g., Graves, 2010; Kosciw, 2010; Rodrigues, 2010) call for curricula that include positive representations of LGBTQ people and related history and events, and that promote increased awareness of LGBTQ-related issues and a general tone of acceptance of LGBTQ people. There are examples of such curricular innovations in elementary school (Cohen & Chasnoff, 1996; Epstein, 2001; Hall, 2010; Letts & Sears, 1998; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003), middle school (Cohen & Chasnoff, 1996; Hamilton, 1998), and high school (Athanases, 1996; Crocco, 2001; Gonzalez, 2010; Greenbaum, 1994; Hoffman, 1993; Kenney, 2010; Schey & Uppstrom, 2010; Smith, 2010; Russell, 2010).

Students who reported that they had been taught about LGBTQ issues at school said that their school was safer (as compared with the levels of safety reported by students who had not been taught about such topics) and had less social bullying (e.g., in the form of unkind rumors, lies, or ridicule) and less LGBTQ bullying (Russell, Kostroski, McGuire, Laub, & Manke, 2006). As was found with respect to the presence of GSAs in schools, students in a national study who reported having been taught about LGBTQ issues at school reported fewer LGBTQ slurs, fewer incidents of LGBTQ victimization, more safety, and more supportive conversations with teachers at school (Kosciw et al., 2012). Finally, one study showed that teacher sensitivity to LGBTQ issues in HIV education was linked to lower sexual risk-taking for gay males (Blake

et al., 2001). Among the safe schools strategies, curricular inclusion is linked not only to student well-being but also to school climate indicators (Russell et al., 2006; Szalacha, 2003).

Moreover, curricular inclusion can be understood as advantageous because it “prepares students for contemporary democratic society, teaches about a topic that . . . is of interest and importance to many students, and . . . is personally meaningful and potentially health-promoting for LGBTQ students, as well as their heterosexual peers” (Lipkin, 2004). And, as Style (1988) argues,

education needs to enable the student to look through window frames in order to see the realities of others and into mirrors in order to see her/his own reality reflected. Knowledge of both types of framing is basic to a balanced education which is committed to affirming the essential dialectic between the self and the world. (p. 35)

In other words, including LGBTQ topics and people in curricula allows people who are not LGBTQ to see these topics and people as if through a window, and allows people who are LGBTQ to see topics pertinent to, and people similar to, themselves, as if in a mirror.

Still, few LGBTQ students (16.8%) indicate that they are exposed to positive representations of LGBTQ people, history, or events in their school curricula (Kosciw et al., 2012). This gap between what is called for and what is provided is a result of intense fear of divergent sexualities and genders—homophobia and transphobia—and the related surveillance of classrooms and curricula by people who position themselves as protectors of “innocent” children from anything and anyone beyond heteronormative parameters (Blount, 2010; Kosciw, 2010). Letts and Sears (1999) specifically indicate that heteronormativity is embedded in the very curriculum of school, reinforced by the fact that teachers themselves often operate within heteronormative frameworks (Bower & Klecka, 2009). Sex education curricula in particular, but also curricula more generally, maintain and reproduce gendered, sexualized, raced, and classed inequality (Connell & Elliot, 2009). Scholars recognize three approaches for disrupting such problematic, heteronormative curricula: LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, anti-bias curricula, and queer pedagogy.

The LGBTQ-inclusive approach is the one referenced above. The idea is to teach and learn about significant events in LGBTQ history in social studies, read literature by and about LGBTQ people in language arts classes, and recognize important LGBTQ mathematicians and scientists in those classes. In elementary school classrooms, the idea is to talk about families with same-sex parents in curricular units on families, for example. This approach reflects positivist, essentialist, and even assimilationist paradigms. That is, undergirding

the LGBTQ-inclusive approach are beliefs that there is a set body of knowledge out in the world about people who essentially are (or are not) lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight, and/or transgender, and that if accessed, this knowledge would offer a solution to the problem of rejection of LGBTQ people from the mainstream. Although this approach has limitations, it does important work in terms of acknowledging a population that traditionally has been ignored and attending to the material realities of this population.

### *Anti-Bias Approach*

The anti-bias approach comes out of the field of multicultural education and is grounded in sociopolitical and critical paradigms, that is, mind-sets in which identities and behaviors are understood as being shaped in and by social, cultural, and political contexts, not passively, but in collaboration and sometimes in tension with agentive individuals. The aim of this approach is to reduce homophobia and heterosexism by directly addressing it rather than by just incorporating the experiences of LGBTQ people. Such curricula might look much like LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, but they focus on the struggle of LGBTQ people to negotiate the constraints imposed by a heteronormative environment (Asher, 2005).

### *Queer Approach*

Distinct from both LGBTQ-inclusive and anti-bias curricula is the approach of queer pedagogy. This approach comes from critical and poststructural paradigms in which beliefs in any set body of knowledge or essential identities are called into question. Scholars with a queering perspective believe that knowledge and identities are constructed in social, cultural, and political contexts and are therefore always changing. They reject the idea that being outside the mainstream is a problem and instead argue that being pigeonholed by the mainstream into categories, such as L, G, B, and T, is the problem. Therefore, scholars coming from this perspective value the suspension of such classifications. As Sears (2010) points out, “Although there is an extensive amount of scholarship regarding queer pedagogy, how to teach queerly on subjects ranging from art and history to science and biology at the K-12 level, *and* the impact of such pedagogy has been poorly documented” (p. xxiv). Still, this approach theorizes related power dynamics in sophisticated ways and challenges educators to do the same.

Although these three approaches are promising, scholars point to areas where more research is needed. Russell (2010) asked, What is it about curricular inclusion that is important? Is it the context or setting in which LGBTQ issues are learned about (such as formal classroom subject-matter instruction, school-

wide programming, visual materials, or informal teacher-student interactions)? Or is the content more important (e.g., lessons in history or English, diversity trainings, school policy programming)? Many scholars underscore the importance of intersecting identities, including but not limited to those shaped by race, class, gender, geographic location, religion, and nationality. Coloma (2010) reminded us to consider how our intellectual, political, and pedagogical interventions and advocacies might not reinforce normalized Western concepts and understandings. Beemyn (2010) and Rodriguez (2010) reminded us to attend to the needs of transgender and genderqueer students. Rodriguez also suggested that popular culture plays a significant role in issues related to identity formation, the construction of consciousness, and knowledge production about LGBTQ youth and is therefore important to address. Answers to these questions and explorations of these topics will help stakeholders in schools focus planning and resources in efforts to craft curricula that will improve school climates for LGBTQ and all students.

### School Policies and Programs

Certain policies have very strong evidence (from multiple studies, multiple methods, multiple study settings, and multiple academic disciplines) documenting specific institutional strategies that promote well-being at school for LGBTQ (and all) students. Anti-bullying policies, nondiscrimination policies, and personnel training are among the programs that make a difference in the lives of LGBTQ youth.

Inclusive, enumerated nondiscrimination and anti-bullying policies provide the institutional context for proactive efforts to support LGBTQ students and the institutional backing for school personnel (administrators, staff, and teachers) to create and enforce nondiscrimination and anti-bullying measures in protection of these youth (Russell & McGuire, 2008). Comprehensive policies about bullying and discrimination are ones that explicitly state protection based on enumerated personal characteristics, including sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, among others (Kosciw et al., 2012). Research suggests that comprehensive laws and policies are more effective than “generic” laws and policies, that is, those that do not enumerate specific characteristics such as sexual orientation and/or forms of gender identity/expression (Kosciw et al., 2012). When students report that their schools have inclusive policies, they feel safer at school, experience less anti-LGBTQ harassment, and report higher levels of “resilience” (Russell, 2010). These results hold for both LGBTQ and heterosexual students, but the differences are particularly pronounced for LGBTQ students (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008; O’Shaughnessy

et al., 2004; Szalacha, 2003). One study even found that students in schools with comprehensive policies report fewer suicide attempts (Goodenow et al., 2006).

State laws about sodomy and the discussion of sexuality in the classroom continue to affect queer administrators, educators, and students adversely (Lugg, 2006). Twenty-one states ban employment discrimination based on sexual orientation; of those, 13 also ban employment discrimination based on gender identity and expression (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2009). No federal law protects employees or students from discrimination based on actual or perceived gender identity or sexual orientation (North, 2010). But the legal environment is rapidly changing as sodomy laws have been struck down at the federal level and legislation such as the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (which would prohibit discrimination based on sexual or gender identity) wind their way through the legislative process.

School, district, state, and federal antidiscriminatory policies that explicitly include sexual orientation, gender expression, and gender identity, such as the proposed federal Safe Schools Improvement Act, are needed (Meyer, 2009). Many states and school districts in the United States have nonenumerated policies, and further research is needed to demonstrate whether indeed they are less effective for establishing school climates free of stigma, discrimination, and harassment on the basis of students' race, ethnicity, immigrant status, or actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity (North, 2010). We need more research to address the question of why and how enumeration matters (North, 2010), a need primarily addressed only by GLSEN's National School Climate Surveys.

With inclusive policies as a backdrop, the second school safety strategy involves school personnel training. Teachers play an important role in the lives of vulnerable students, including sexual minority students (Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). Teacher intervention in abuse is particularly important. Students feel safer when they report that their teachers intervene to stop harassment (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004). Further, a statewide study in Massachusetts showed that students reported a safer diversity climate in schools where teachers were trained in violence and suicide prevention related to the experiences of LGBTQ youth (Szalacha, 2003). Although effective staff intervention to counter LGBTQ bias has been found to be related to reduced bullying and harassment of LGBTQ students, research indicates that teachers and staff do not often intervene when hearing homophobic remarks or negative remarks about gender expression, and even remain silent in the face of actual harassment and assault of LGBTQ students (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Kosciw et al., 2012; Sears, 1992; Smith & Smith, 1998). Given the important role of teachers,

more comprehensive sex education programs and teacher education programs that are relevant to LGBTQ people are needed (Fields, 2008; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Jackson, in press).

Future research on educational policy regarding LGBTQ students needs to address policy implementation and the effectiveness of policy interventions. Regarding legislation, investigation is needed of how states, particularly those with generic legislation, implement programmatic components of their laws and how they examine how local districts are implementing any changes that would include protections regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. In addition, research is needed to explore the ways that policies are established and enacted in educational settings. What is effective in terms of collaboration, communications, or legislative policy for developing support for inclusive, enumerated policies? Given the variability in state and local legislation and policy regarding LGBTQ school safety in the United States, a better understanding of the strategies that work in different policy settings is needed, along with knowledge of the most effective strategies for working with decision makers in these different contexts.

### Conclusion

We know that homophobia and heteronormativity in schools create oppressive situations for K-12 LGBTQ students. We know too that GSAs and supportive teachers can interrupt such oppression and thus alleviate the burden of negative contexts. LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, anti-bias curricula, and queer pedagogy can also interrupt homophobic and heteronormative oppression and make schools better places for LGBTQ students. Moreover, comprehensive policies with enumerated language can contribute to creating more positive experiences for LGBTQ students and those perceived to be LGBTQ. Still, we need to know more. We need to continue and extend rigorous research efforts to include intersectional identities, such as the ways that race, class, religion, nationality, and geography intersect with gender and sexuality, as well the experiences of students in the primary grades. We also need to understand better the obstacles to implementation and ways of overcoming them. In other words, we know how to make schools better for LGBTQ students. Some schools are making related changes, but many are not. We need to understand why and find out what we can do, within and against existing confines, so that schools can become positive places for LGBTQ youth.

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