

LGBTQ Youth Experience in Schools:

A Review of the Literature

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Fall 2011

ABSTRACT

LGBTQ youth experience secondary school differently because of their sexual orientation and gender identity. These students face greater risk for mental health issues, and can struggle to succeed personally and academically as they face bullying and harassment from peers and mistreatment and non-responsiveness from teachers and administrators. This review of the literature on research on LGBTQ students traces the branches of this very young branch of academic interest. The research has grown from focusing on the role of adults in the education of young LGBTQ people to including and eventually centering student experience. Many researchers focus on mental health, bullying, and academic issues. Few studies adequately address intersectionality, and work must still be taken in fully conceptualizing the sociological dynamics within a school setting. Researchers must continually readdress issues as the sociopolitical context changes, and they must pioneer new ways of thinking about school youth that emphasize students as experts on the interactional aspects of the education system. Researchers repeatedly assume that young people only have basic insight about their experiences, but in order to call for policy changes, researchers must acknowledge and solicit the considerable policy insight that LGBTQ students have.

INTRODUCTION

This literature review surveys and organizes the literature on how school climate and interactions shape the experience of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students.¹ While psychological and mental health factors greatly affect the experience of LGBTQ youth, I will focus on school-based social interactions and performance. Especially in regards to academic performance, psychological factors—loosely constructed as mental state, suicide risk, and propensity towards drugs and alcohol—cannot be entirely disentwined from the social experiences on which I am focusing. Similarly, community and family-based interactions can be central to a LGBTQ student’s life, but I will be focusing only on school-based experiences. Furthermore, while the literature on LGBTQ university students is vast and important, I will focus only on students in secondary school.

Sexual orientation minority groups are among the most at-risk population of young people for being bullied (GLSEN 2009). The personal discomfort and harassment they

¹ Constructing same-sex attracted and transgender students as “LGBTQ” represents an intentional choice. To some extent, this choice reflects the trend of much of the literature used, which most often categorizes students as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or same-sex attracted. On a potentially more significant level, though, drawing on LGBT literature rather than queer literature is a choice to respect the identities of the vast majority of my student participants. With a couple exceptions, these students most often describe themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. I could have used the term “queer” in my research, but this body of literature rejects the gay-straight binary, embraces the fluidity of identity, and implies an effort to subvert a heteronormative and traditionally gendered sociopolitical system.

Beyond not identifying as queer (with a couple exceptions), my research participants would not appreciate any implication that their identity is not static and that they are not just the “same as everyone else.” They often use language to the effect of “I am who I am,” and many would see queer literature as challenging the emphatic, unchanging sexual identity binary embedded within that statement. Furthermore, rather than seeking to subvert the system, my research participants seek to fit into the system, be accepted by the system, and simply reap the protections that are already in place (for heterosexuals) within the system. Because a couple interviewees did have a queer identity, I will use LGBTQ rather than simply LGBT.

experience at school can jeopardize their academic performance and potential for success after high school. However, many educators fail to understand and compensate for the harmful experiences of LGBTQ students, and policymakers have neglected the pursuit of crucial protections and supports for them. The literature on school climate and its effect on LGBTQ students' experiences must call attention to this issue, contribute vital information about the nature of the problem, and offer potential solutions.

EDUCATORS' IMPACT ON LGBTQ STUDENTS

The first work on LGBTQ students focused on the role of educators in shaping school experiences. In 1987, James T. Sears pioneered the field of LGBTQ *student* experience with one of the first scholarly works that focused specifically on gay and lesbian young people. "Peering into the well of loneliness: The responsibility of educators to gay and lesbian youth" departed from previous literature that addressed homosexuality either as a clinical condition or as an experience of adults. After arguing against understandings of homosexuality as sinful, a sickness, or a crime, Sears asserted the educator's role as political in constructing and perpetuating hegemony. While Sears discussed broad needs of gay students, such as "these young people need a nonjudgmental atmosphere," he centered his discussion on the actions schools should undertake to accomplish general goals rather than on the details of student experience (92).

Sears (1988, 1989a) extended this research with two more articles focusing on guidance counselors and teachers, respectively. However, he also introduced a new sector for consideration: the personal and unique experiences of gay youth with regards to intersectionality. Sears (1989b, 1991) was one of the first researchers to look at the experience of gay youth in terms of identity factors such as gender, race, and regional residence.

The vast majority of work in the five years following Sears' contributions focused on adult roles in educating LGBTQ youth (Anderson, 1994; Anderson, 1997; Herek & Berrill, 1992; Lipkin, 1992; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Price & Telljohann, 1991; Remafedi, 1993; Sears, 1991; Telljohann & Price, 1993; Telljohann et al., 1995). Then, in the early 1990s, researchers started focusing on students' own experiences. This shift was reflected—and *solidified*—by the often-cited work of George W. Smith and Didi Khayatt. Their contributions prompted the evolution of the field to include detailed studies of bullying, examinations of academic performance, mental health considerations, and explanations for what factors most determine school climate for LGBTQ students.

EXPERIENCE WITH PEERS: BULLYING AND VICTIMIZATION

Starting in the early-1990s, researchers started transitioning from adult-centric studies (looking at educators) to student-centric studies. In 1994, Didi Khayatt published one of the first articles to focus on LGBTQ student experiences in school. On top of this major lens-shift, she focused specifically on the experience of lesbian students, a focus that hadn't yet been addressed by previous researchers. While Khayatt introduced a new way of studying LGBTQ experiences in school and broke ground on lesbian-specific experience, her study is significantly limited by her small number of interviewees; because Khayatt interviewed only twelve young women, her study cannot be generalized even within the time period in which she wrote. However, Khayatt's work (1994, 1995) remains crucial in the literature, directing researchers to student experience and toward understanding the school institution as heteronormative. This heteronormativity assumes that all school members are heterosexual, and is constantly reinforced through subtle, often unintentional interactions between all members of the school community. It manifests itself

through school policies, curricular choices, and casual conversation and interaction that occur casually throughout the day (Akerlof & Kranton, 2002; American Association of University Women, 2001; Eder, Evans, & Parker, 1995; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Plummer, 2001; Reed, 1994; Smith, 1998; Snyder & Broadway, 2004; Telljohann & Price, 1993; Thurlow, 2001).

Extensive research has explored LGBTQ students' experiences with their peers, and the literature illuminates overwhelmingly pervasive experiences with bullying, harassment, and an overall environment of victimization and discomfort. Elze (2003) studied LGB students' level of comfort within their school environment using data from 136 LGB students. She also discussed student perceptions of their educational environment more broadly and their own experiences with either harassment or with support. Elze, using questionnaires drawing entirely on student's own perceptions, concludes that the most effective means of addressing feelings of comfort include combatting stigmatization of non-heteronormative sexual orientations and creating "supportive peer environments" within schools.

Mishna, Newman, Daley, and Solomon (2009) conducted related research on student experience. They focused specifically on bullying to uncover causes of harassment unique to LGBTQ students, and find that the media, efforts to "convert" homosexuals, the lack of recourse in any social aspect of their lives (either with their young peers or with parents in home lives or with other adults), and the risks associated with coming out are all factors unique to gay youth. Mishna et al. addressed bullying comprehensively, studying six major layers of bullying: prevalence, location and perpetrators, social and structural causes, effects, and potential opportunities for combatting bullying. They utilize a qualitative approach, working with nine adults who regularly interact with LGBTQ students in semi-structured interviews. The principle weakness of this source lies in its failure to interview students directly; however, it provides

objectivity through its use of the observer rather than the victim, especially since these observers had many years of experience with gay youth.

We also know that peer victimization of LGBTQ students takes place more frequently in certain locations within the physical space of the school and times throughout the school day. Many studies have established that bullying most frequently occurs in unstructured times and places, such as between classes and during free periods in hallways, stairwells, and cafeterias (American Association of University Women, 1993, 1995; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1993; Goldstein, 1994; Gottfredson, 1985, 1995; Olweus, 1991, 1993; Pietrzak, Petersen & Speaker, 1998; Slaby, Barham, Eron, & Wilcox, 1994). Astor et al. (1999) took this knowledge one step further, contributing significant theoretical framework to the study of locations of student victimization by linking incidents of bullying to wider social and institutional structures through the use of academic theory. Astor drew on the theory of “undefined public space” to conceptualize educator non-interference in bullying outside of the classroom, establishing that the lack of ownership of these times and places on the part of teachers and administrators allowed these adults to overlook responsibility for bullying that occurred. Only a few researchers have drawn on Astor et al. (1999) to study the victimization of LGBTQ students in specific locations (Adelman, 2006; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2001).

In addition to these relatively localized studies with smaller sample sizes that illustrate many details of bullying, we also know how extensive and pervasive victimization of LGBTQ students in the United States is from the research reports of advocacy organizations. The two foremost of these studies, cited by many other researchers, are the Human Rights Watch’s (2001) report *Hatred in the Hallways* and the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network’s school

climate and other reports. Because HRW and GLSEN have considerable resources, these studies have comprehensive breadth and speak to the “big picture” of real-world implications and policy recommendations more forcefully than do scholarly articles.

The Human Rights Watch (2001) relied exclusively on qualitative methods to establish major areas of concern and struggle for LGBTQ students, interviewing 140 LGBTQ youth and 130 adults who work with young people. The strength of the organization’s study lies in its ability to center student voices and experiences. This preference given to relatively unfiltered (by the researchers) student voice was seldom seen before *Hatred in the Hallways*. The Human Rights Watch also institutionalized the academic consideration of a diversity of student experiences, highlighting the importance of unstructured time and space in school (i.e. hallways) for student safety and incorporating the policy and legal world into their sociological research. Significantly, the Human Rights Watch (2001) published one of the first studies to discuss Gay-Straight Alliances. While this study excels in its detail-rich portrayal of student experience, it does not draw on larger explanatory theory or engage in complex analysis of data.

GLSEN’s research reports, such as the *2009 National School Climate Survey* and the 2005 report on school bullying showcase the notable utility of GLSEN’s research. These studies use surveys and capture large sample sizes (over 7,000 students from across the United States), adding to the reports’ credibility and giving their data increased popularity as an information foundation academic researchers can use to conduct their own research. Beyond serving as numerical data, GLSEN reports highlight important considerations for further research, introducing and quantifying problems that have not gained momentum in the academic world. In contrast to academic studies, which speak more abstractly about narrow issues, GLSEN reports identify the day-to-day challenges of LGBTQ youth that are not written about often, such as

homophobic language, feelings of safety, cyberbullying, absenteeism, and prevalence of reporting harassment incidents to adults; then, GLSEN quantifies these problems. GLSEN also has the organizational power to trace the evolution of school climate over time—a contribution unique to their reports. Furthermore, GLSEN (2009b) contributed substantial literature on the intersectionality of race and ethnicity with sexual orientation, finding that non-white LGBTQ students are more likely to feel unsafe and be bullied than their white counterparts.

Because of the work of Pearson, Muller, and Wilkinson (2007), we know that peer victimization and the associated school climate can impact academic success. Pearson et al. contributed to this literature by linking feelings of disengagement to academic non-achievement. Several studies—both before and after Pearson et al.—address both feelings and academic performance, but few connect the two explicitly using quantitative analysis (Rostosky et al., 2003; Russell, Seif, and Truong, 2001). Pearson et al. find that, if personal background is controlled for, then girls' GPAs do not experience significant change because of same-sex attraction. However, they can conclude that boys' academic performance declines significantly because of their same-sex attraction that causes them to feel isolated within the classroom. This is also the first study to draw conclusions about future implications for success dependent on curriculum choice and overall academic performance.

BEYOND WHITE MEN: SCHOOL EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Most researchers take into account factors such as race and biological sex in their studies on LGBTQ student experience. However, such consideration often acts only as a control for determining the impact of some other variable. In contrast, some researchers focus intentionality

on the intersection of multiple identity factors with sexuality. McCall (2005) discussed the different types of intersectionality research, their respective focuses, and their utility. McCall provided a foundational piece of theory for the study of LGBTQ youth in school. She highlights the importance of understanding the many different dimensions of identity with an emphasis on methodology.

Researchers who study intersectionality specific to LGBTQ youth draw on theorists such as McCall to illustrate the interlocking effects of racial and sexual identity. One of the most notable works on LGBTQ intersectionality is Kevin Kumashiro's (2001) compilation of essays that focus specifically on the intersection of race and sexuality, demonstrating how the needs and social environment of non-white LGBTQ students differ dramatically from those of the dominant, white student population whom researchers usually study. Additionally, Lance T. McCready (2010) discussed the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality for gender-nonconforming, gay, black students in an urban high school. He paid particular attention to aspects of the school and student organizations that act to allow inclusion or exclusion for these students. McCready uses case studies of four focal students to demonstrate the importance of considering the intersection of many different identity factors and how this intersection gives variety to a "gay experience" that researchers often discuss as universal. More than most other researchers, McCready demonstrates the centrality of race and gender performance for the experience of LGBTQ students and highlights other studies' neglect of these identity factors. While his book failed to consider class or thoroughly interrogate intersectionality, McCready offered useful qualitative research that illuminates the need for intersectional considerations. These two works represent two of only a few scholarly contributions to LGBTQ studies that use an intersectional lens.

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS THAT SHAPE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

THE SCHOOL-LEVEL CAUSES OF STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Research that takes a step back from individual-level experience and looks instead at the school as an institution is rare. This literature informs student experience literature almost seamlessly, but a distinction still exists between work that looks specifically at individual experience and contributions that analyze organizational dimensions of the school.

As a transition from the discussion of individual interactions creating student experience, George W. Smith (1998), working in the mid-1990s, contributed major theory regarding what about school climate creates a specific student experience. Explicitly focusing on the school and using students only as a mechanism to ethnographize the school, Smith conceptualized the “ideology of fag” that permeates American secondary schools. In this highly-cited work, Smith implies that the ideology of fag normalizes a hidden discourse that shapes interactions within the school and the experience of individual gay students. This article was among the first to offer an explanation for student experience in schools, and it contributed significant theory to the understanding of processes within schools that are shaped by objectifications of homosexuality.

Didi Khayatt (1995) also contributed important theory to the study of LGBTQ students. In her essay “Compulsory heterosexuality: schools and lesbian students,” Khayatt analyzes the “social relations of schooling” that “shape and determine” the experience of lesbian students. Khayatt argues that peer relationships, curriculum, teaching, and administration are all prescribed by heteronormativity. Though discussing hegemonic, heterosexist ideologies as they apply to the

school, Khayatt introduces significant theory to the field, allowing researchers to better conceptualize the environment in which student experience occurs.

Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006) contributed the first empirical study of Gay-Straight Alliances (or similar support groups) and staff support, establishing a strong connection between these two dimensions of school environment and suicide risk. Though not often cited, Goodenow et al. (2006) contributed significantly to two important trends in school-level analysis. First, a large body of research exists on Gay-Straight Alliances, started by Eric Rofes's 1989 discussion of Project 10, a support group for gay and lesbian students. The literature surrounding GSAs and other support groups establishes their potential for improving school environment and empowering students (Doppler, 2000; Lee, 2002; Lipkin, 1999; Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001; Russell, 2008; Szalacha, 2003). Second, the trend for much of the 1990s and still today (to a lesser extent) was an emphasis on adult educator response to homosexuality in the school context (Anderson, 1994; Anderson, 1997; Herek & Berrill, 1992; Lipkin, 1992; Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Price & Telljohann, 1991; Remafedi, 1993; Sears, 1991; Telljohann & Price, 1993; Telljohann et al., 1995).

Wilkinson and Pearson (2009) moved beyond a description of student experience to identify what community variables most impacted well-being and academic performance of LGBTQ youth. Drawing on theory about schools as heteronormative institutions and the assignment of stigma, Wilkinson and Pearson posited variables such as religiosity, prevalence of football, and urban locale as impacting heteronormativity of school climate, and that heteronormativity in turn determines whether LGBTQ students experience depression, low self-esteem, fighting, and low academic performance. They find that prevalence of football correlates with negative experience for both boys and girls who are same-sex attracted. However, they find

that boys and girls are affected differently for religiosity and urban location, concluding that boys suffer more if the school is in a city and girls experience greater consequences if the student body is relatively religious.

The research of Wilkinson and Pearson (2009) has several shortcomings. They constructed binary categories of “same-sex attracted” and “not same-sex attracted,” and thus essentialized the very diverse population of LGBTQ students (and potentially some who might identify as straight). While they controlled for variables such as race and parent education, these characteristics were found to be highly significant; however, Wilkinson and Pearson did not discuss the implications of these findings, shirking from an intersectional analysis. Despite these shortcomings, Wilkinson and Pearson (2009) contribute greatly to the field by moving away from descriptions of student experience and micro-level analysis of interactions between individuals in schools. Instead, they introduce an explanation of macro-level sociological forces that explain student experience.

POLICY-ORIENTED WORK

Some research takes student experience and draws clearer connections to policy recommendations. Craig, Tucker, and Wagner (2008) did this with their qualitative surveys and quantitative analysis of the experiences of youth who attended in Safe Schools Summit in Florida. They assessed emerging patterns in the experiences of these youth and studied how attendance at the summit affected their response to harassment and prejudice. Craig et al. specifically focused on empowerment, drawing heavily on empowerment theory to build on the existing literature surrounding discrimination and bullying. They conclude that 92% of the students who participated in their study perceived themselves as “more empowered” after

participating in the Safe Schools Summit. The utility of this article lies in its emphasis on student experience and the centrality it gives to students' ability to respond to their environment in ways that better their own experiences.

The National Education Policy Center and the Williams Institute (2010) collaborated to produce their report *Safe at school: Addressing the school environment and LGBT safety through policy and legislation*. The NEPC and the Williams Institute contribute to the literature on LGBTQ youth as a high-risk population for whom school administrations and policies are unresponsive. The greatest value of their report is its policy recommendations. Most academic articles confine policy implications to a page or a few paragraphs. In contrast, NEPC and the Williams Institute lay out very specific and comprehensive policy guidelines that address a variety of concerns, from teacher training to curriculum to athletics (the report fails to address other types of extracurricular activities and does not include a section on supportive organizations, such as gay-straight alliances). The NEPC and the Williams Institute even propose a twenty-section model legislation that states can adapt and incorporate into their anti-bullying laws.

MENTAL HEALTH LITERATURE

The literature on mental health among LGBTQ youth dominates much of the literature on LGBTQ youth experience. However, very little of this sub-category analyzes the school intentionally and sociologically as a location—arguably the principle location—in which mental health is shaped. Additionally, these sources are overwhelmingly psychological in discipline, and they rarely discuss important sociological forces that shape mental health (Garofalo et al., 1998; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Hillier & Harrison, 2004; Robin et al., 2002). Because of this

psychological focus, I will not be including mental health considerations in my study. While psychological well-being certainly affects the types of policies LGBTQ students need and also helps determine how an individual student might receive a policy, I am intentionally focusing on the interactions of individuals and groups and how such interactions directly affect a student's academic and personal well-being.

However, because this sub-set of literature is so prominent in the overall literature on LGBTQ students, it's worthwhile to note the origins of this work. This body of literature focusing on mental health factors—suicide risk, depression, use of alcohol and drugs, adolescent development—was initiated largely by Gary Remafedi in 1987 with his essay “Adolescent homosexuality: Psychosocial and medical implications.” Through interviews with almost 30 gay or bisexual male teenagers, Remafedi established that gay youth face significantly higher chances of emotional distress, substance abuse, or other problems related to sexuality. He also noted a particularly high probability for other health or social problems relative to adult gay or bisexual men.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The history of the study of LGBTQ youths' experiences in school is relatively short. With beginnings approximately 25 years ago, the field still lies in its infancy. Beyond the short length of time researchers have been paying attention to LGBTQ students, the field is further handicapped by the constantly changing nature of school experience and social culture. As the research has expanded to include explicit policy recommendations—often under the leadership of non-governmental organizations—researchers have needed to adapt pre-existing knowledge and assumptions to the evolving political environment and specific policies that have been

enacted on a diversity of levels of government. Thus, researchers have been facing a challenge to build a substantial literature that addresses the multitude of issues confronted by LGBTQ students, even as these issues themselves have evolved.

The research in this field has been significantly limited by a drive to categorize the sexual orientation of students. Even though Alfred Kinsey's (1948) work on a sexuality continuum has been available for decades, researchers continue to group students into categories like "heterosexual," "homosexual," "gay," "bisexual," etc. The term "same-sex attracted" probably emerged in order to alleviate some of the inadequacies of the labeling process, but even this term constructs a binary in which members of either group are essentialized (Wilkinson 2009).

Many researchers still neglect an intersectional perspective in their studies. When this perspective does exist, it tends to focus exclusively on race, sex, and/or geographical location. There are no major studies about class or religion. Researchers have studied race most thoroughly, and most researchers draw a distinction between male subjects and female subjects—or limit their scope to either gay students or lesbian students. However, class—a crucial determinant of social interactions in high school—and religion, which is a major determinant of personal psychological capital in regards to how a student perceives his or her own sexual orientation, are completely neglected. This represents a major hole in the research.

Furthermore, no researchers have moved beyond asking LGBTQ students about their experiences to ask what these students themselves think should be done about the issues they face.² Instead, researchers offer their own solutions. Viewing this gap in conjunction with the theoretical literature calling for treating young people as experts on their own lives (Wyn & White, 1997), failing to ask students for their own policy recommendations and insightful

² Astor did ask students for their policy inputs, but his work was with bullying in general rather than with queer students.

evaluations represents a significant shortcoming. Johanna Wyn and Rob White (1997) write that “young people... have a significant contribution to make in the institutions in which they have the most at stake” (6). The education system is one of these key institutions, yet policymakers view students as *future* leaders and school as an investment in them; instead, young people should be policy *leaders* who can contribute key insight to the education policymaking process (Wyn & White, 1997).

In response to the hole in the research that asks students only about their experiences, this study centers LGBTQ students’ own policy evaluations and recommendations. There is a policy cannon that adult policymakers consistently apply as they seek to improve LGBTQ students’ school experience, but the current model policies are missing in-depth input from students who understand the unique interpersonal and hierarchical dynamics within student bodies. By asking students about how to “fix” or “make better” their school experiences, I will identify disconnects between current policy and what students themselves believe will work based on their own lived experiences.

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