Promising Strategies for Prevention of the Bullying of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth

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Although bullying has received greater attention in the media as of late, those who may be most at risk for bullying victimization are often missing from the discussions. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have emerged about the educational experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. Much of the research demonstrates that the climates of U.S. middle and high schools are generally unsupportive and unsafe for many LGBT youth. These youth report experiencing harassment, discrimination, and other negative events in school, often specifically related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and how they express their gender. Such experiences include high levels of verbal and physical harassment and assault, and social exclusion and isolation (D’Augelli et al., 2002; Kosciw et al., 2010; Ueno, 2005). These experiences can negatively impact LGBT youth’s mental health (D’Augelli et al., 2002; Toomey et al., 2010) and access to education (Kosciw et al., 2010; Murdock & Bolch, 2005).

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Despite the high rates of in-school victimization of LGBT youth, research indicates that public opinion about gay and lesbian issues has become more positive over time, with increased support for civil rights for these populations and decreased negative attitudes toward homosexuality in general (Hicks & Lee, 2006). As the political landscape and educational arena change over time, the experiences related to bullying and harassment of LGBT youth may as well. How then might the experiences of these youth be different today than they were a decade ago? In general, there is very limited information about how school climate has changed for LGBT youth over time. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011) study that examined 2001–2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey data found that compared to their heterosexual peers, LGB students are disproportionally at risk for victimization by others, such as being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

Given the limited research, this article will discuss how the LGBT youth experience in school has changed in the past decade. An overview of effective strategies that can prevent bullying of LGBT youth and ameliorate its negative consequences will also be provided. We summarize findings regarding changes over time from 1999 to 2009 in experiences of bullying and the availability of positive resources for LGBT youth in their schools, from six installments of the GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) National School Climate Survey, a biennial survey on school climate for LGBT youth. The 1999 to 2009 surveys combined had a total of 17,414 participants—LGBT students between the ages of 13 and 21; from all 50 states and the District of Columbia (Kosciw et al., 2010). Lastly, we discuss implications for professionals in the fields of youth development and education, provide recommendations on how national and community-based organizations can implement positive resources for LGBT youth, and underscore how a community-wide approach is necessary to ensure safe and affirming environments for LGBT youth.

TRENDS OVER TIME

Anti-LGBT Remarks Over Time

Although bullying is typically thought of as a verbal or physical altercation, the general climate of a school can contribute to students’ feelings of safety and comfort. Therefore, when assessing the school experiences of LGBT youth, it is important to consider not only direct bullying, but also biased comments made by students in general. Over the past ten years, LGBT students commonly reported hearing homophobic remarks at school (Kosciw et al., 2010). Perhaps the most pervasive anti-LGBT remarks used in U.S. schools are expressions using “gay” in a negative way, for example, the common expression “that’s so gay” to mean that something is “stupid” or “dumb.” Nearly 7 out of 10 LGBT youth frequently hear these types of remarks in school. However, there has been a very small decline in frequency of this language since 2001 when we first asked about these types of remarks. With regard to homophobic epithets, such as “fag” or “dyke,” we have seen a decrease in frequency in the past decade. In 1999, two-thirds (65.3%) of LGBT students heard homophobic epithets frequently compared to about half (45.6%) in 2009 (see Figure 3.1). Even with the decreases over time, the proportion of LGBT students in the most recent survey who frequently heard these epithets in their school was nearly half of the sample.

School-Based Harassment and Assault

Certainly hearing anti-LGBT language in the hallways at school contributes to a hostile school climate, but having anti-LGBT epithets hurled at you may have a deeper effect on your school

Figure 3.1
LGBT Students’ Reports of Hearing Biased Language by Other Students Over Time
experience than hearing them said in passing, as can more physical forms of victimization. Direct victimization occurs more frequently among LGBT youth in U.S. schools than among students who identify as heterosexual or who are not transgender (Birkett et al., 2009; Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005). In our biennial school climate surveys of LGBT youth, we ask students about experiences of anti-LGBT bullying, specifically the frequency of direct victimization: 1) experiences of verbal harassment (e.g., being directly called names or threatened); 2) physical harassment (e.g., being shoved or pushed); and 3) physical assault (e.g., being punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) related to being LGBT. We find that they report frequent harassment and assault at school (Kosciw et al., 2010). As shown in Figure 3.2, LGBT students’ experiences of victimization continued to remain relatively constant over time. For example, in each year since 1999, approximately 25% of students reported frequent verbal harassment based on their sexual orientation. Nevertheless, from 2007 to 2009, we saw a slight drop in the frequency of all three types of harassment and assault based on sexual orientation, for example from 26.3% to 23.8% for verbal harassment.

LGBT youth are also frequently targeted because of their gender expression (i.e., how they express their gender; how “masculine” or “feminine” they are) in addition to their sexual orientation. When looking at the prevalence of this type of victimization over time, the percentages of students reporting frequently experiencing victimization in school based on their gender expression has remained relatively constant across years. As with victimization regarding sexual orientation, we also saw a slight decrease in victimization based on gender expression from 2007 to 2009, for example from 5.5% to 4.8% for physical harassment. Given that one of the criteria for being a target of bullying is being of low power and that LGBT individuals are a marginalized group in society, we maintain that any victimization because of sexual orientation or gender identity or gender expression is anti-LGBT bullying. In addition, one of the criteria for bullying is repeated occurrence and our measures of victimization (harassment and assault) include measures of frequency (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often) and we have continually found that youth who experience anti-LGBT victimization do so repeatedly. Thus, for the purpose of this article, we consider the harassment and assault experienced by LGBT youth discussed here as representations of bullying.

Out of School Harassment and Assault
Bullying takes many forms and, although most bullying incidents occur at school, youth can also be bullied during out-of-school time, such as on their way to school. One national study found that 9% of male and 5% of female secondary school students are regular targets of bullying away from school (Nansel et al., 2003). However, there is little known about LGBT youth’s experiences with bullying outside of school.

In recent years, there has been much attention given to cyberbullying, which is harassment using an electronic medium, such as a mobile phone or internet communications, to threaten or harm others. With increased access to electronic communication, youth may now take advantage of new technologies to expand the reach of bullying and perhaps extent of the harm. Recent findings by other
researchers show 11% of youth in general are targets of internet harassment by peers (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2012). In our surveys we have found that LGBT youth report a lower incidence of cyberbullying than in-person forms of harassment (Kosciw et al., 2010). Nevertheless, in 2005, more than 10% of LGBT youth reported being the target of cyberbullying often or frequently and the percentage has risen slightly since that time to 17% of LGBT youth in 2007 and 15% in 2009.

**LGBT-Related Resources and Supports in School**

The availability of resources and supports in school for LGBT youth is another dimension of school climate. Supports such as Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs; school anti-bullying policies that include protections based on sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender identity; positive teachings about LGBT people, history, and events; and the presence of school staff supportive of LGBT students can provide direct benefits by preventing victimization, but also perhaps ameliorate some of the negative effects of in-school victimization. Only a minority of LGBT students report having most of these supports in their school (Kosciw et al., 2010). However, most LGBT students have at least one adult in school whom they believe is supportive, and these numbers have been increasing over the past decade. Although it is encouraging that almost all LGBT students are able to identify one supportive school staff person, research demonstrates that a critical mass of supportive school personnel is necessary to make a significant improvement in students’ school experience (Kosciw et al., 2010). Unfortunately, almost half (46.6%) of LGBT students in our most recent survey still did not have that level of support (see Figure 3.3).

The presence of GSAs in schools is also more commonly reported by students and, as with supportive educators, has been increasing over the years (see Figure 3.3). The percentage of LGBT students reporting that they had a GSA or other similar club in their school increased from 25% in 2001 to more than 45% in 2009. Although still only available to a minority of LGBT students, access to LGBT-related resources in school libraries has continually increased over time, reaching the highest levels in 2009, with over 40% of LGBT youth reporting having access.

With other less prevalent types of LGBT-related supports, specifically comprehensive policy and inclusive curriculum, there has been no increase in their availability over the past decade. Access to LGBT-related information in school curricula has not changed since we began asking about it in 2001—only about 1 in 10 students reported being taught any positive LGBT content. There have also been no substantive changes in the percentage of students who reported having comprehensive bullying/harassment policies that include protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression—only about 20% of students reported having such a policy in their school from 2005 (when we first began asking about comprehensive policies) to the present (see also Figure 3.3).

Considering all trends across time—anti-LGBT remarks, victimization, and LGBT-related resources—the availability of school-based resources has improved more than factors contributing to a negative school environment. It is possible that it may take time for any of these supportive resources to have an effect on the larger school environment. For example, establishing a GSA in one’s school may have a more immediate impact on an individual student’s experience by giving the student the opportunity to gain peer support and identify supportive school staff, such as the GSA advisor. The GSA may subsequently start activities that may change school climate, such as advocating for a school policy or raising awareness (such as through participation in GLSEN’s Ally Week, an opportunity for students to be allies against anti-LGBT name-calling, bullying, and harassment), but these activities may take time to affect the larger school body. That being said, even with the increase in resources over time—only a minority of students have access to these resources, with the exception of having any supportive school staff person. It may be that certain less person-driven, more school-level, systematic changes such as comprehensive bullying/harassment school policies or inclusive curriculum may take time to implement and to have a positive effect, highlighting the need for additional work to support in-school efforts that positively affect LGBT students’ school experiences.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS**

**Strategies for Educators**

For educators seeking tools to address school-based harassment and assault as well as cyberbullying, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services’ Stop Bullying initiative (www.stopbullying.gov) offers helpful resources, such as information on what educators can do when they suspect bullying. Specifically related to LGBT students, GLSEN offers the Safe Space Kit (safespace.glsen.org), which is designed to help school professionals create a safe and welcoming school environment for LGBT youth. This kit provides concrete strategies for addressing anti-LGBT bullying, supporting LGBT students, educating about anti-LGBT bias, and advocating for changes in one’s school.

Given that most school personnel do not receive professional development that encompasses LGBT-related issues (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2008), it is critical that school professionals be provided with both pre- and in-service professional development about addressing these issues in schools. Staff training (and all prevention measures) about bullying should specifically address bullying of LGBT youth and provide concrete strategies for educators to address bias-based bullying.

**Strategies for Youth Service Professionals**

While the problem of anti-LGBT bullying may be most apparent in school, given that is where youth spend most of their time, bullying can occur in all areas of a young person’s life—including after-school programs, neighborhoods, and social spaces. There are steps that professionals in the fields of youth development, and specifically those working in national and community-based organizations, can take to implement positive resources for LGBT youth. Beyond the importance of LGBT-related in-school supports, LGBT youth may also greatly benefit from out-of-school time that is inclusive of LGBT issues. Some local communities have programs specifically for LGBT youth, often in local LGBT community centers, that can be an important resource for this population by providing social supports and an environment affirming of LGBT identity. These
groups may be particularly useful in ameliorating some of the negative effects of the homophobia that is prevalent in school communities, especially when youth who do not have peer supports at school such as a GSA. Despite the potential benefits of these programs, the majority of LGBT students (58%) do not have an LGBT youth group or program in their local community (Kosciw et al., 2010). Furthermore, there are areas of the country where youth are even less likely to find an LGBT youth group or program, such as rural areas and southern and midwestern states. Thus, it is important for leaders in local LGBT communities to consider how to create and support such youth community groups.

Even though some local communities offer programs for LGBT youth specifically, youth development programs for the general community, such as the Girl Scouts or Boys & Girls Clubs, may also foster positive identity formation and provide a critical safe space for LGBT youth (Nicholson et al., 2004; Russell & Van Campen, 2011). Thus, it is important for local youth development programs to be cognizant of, accessible to, and affirming of LGBT youth. Some experts in adolescent sexual health programming, recommend that the creation of inclusive programs for LGBT youth be intentional and conscientious and should include: staff self-assessment of their own values and beliefs; inclusive language that does not assume the gender of a youth’s partner or date; and explicit prohibitions against anti-LGBT language and actions (Augustine et al., 2002). Providing training for youth development professionals on LGBT youth issues may be one way to ensure that program staff are competent in serving the needs of LGBT youth. The National 4-H, for example, recommends that 4-H professionals be aware of and open to youth and volunteers who are diverse, including LGBT identity along with other demographic characteristics, such as race/ethnicity and physical and learning abilities (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004). Staff and volunteers of youth development programs can become allies to LGBT youth by being accommodating to student-led initiatives such as the Day of Silence (www.dayofsilence.org), supporting the formation of an LGBT youth group, and ensuring that their programs are safe spaces for all youth, including LGBT youth.

**Strategies for Parents and Families**

Research suggests that parental support can buffer the negative effects of victimization for LGBT youth (Espelage et al., 2008).

Familial involvement in both in-school and out-of-school time can help to ensure that students are safe and can develop a positive sense of self both in and out of school. Parents should speak to staff at school or from youth programs about the climate for LGBT youth, engage the staff about any negative experiences their children may be having, and advocate for inclusive policies and procedures for working with LGBT youth. For those working with parents who have an LGBT adolescent, parental rejection during adolescence relates to high risk for depression and increased health risk behaviors in young adulthood; conversely, parental support is related to greater well-being and decreased risk behaviors (Ryan, 2010). One of the ways in which parents and family members of LGBT youth can provide support and advocacy is through involvement with their local chapter of PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; www.pflag.org).

**CONCLUSION**

In this article, we presented 10 years of data from the GLSEN National School Climate Survey, the only study that has consistently documented the school experiences of LGBT students nationally. We examined changes over time from 1999 to 2009 on indicators of a hostile school climate, such as the experiences of harassment and assault, and on the availability of supportive resources for LGBT youth. We also discussed implications for professionals in the fields of youth development and education and highlighted how families, community-based agencies, and national organizations with a local reach can provide LGBT youth with invaluable resources and supports. In order to ensure positive and healthy development for LGBT youth, it truly does take all members of the local community—school staff, youth service professionals, and families—working together to ensure LGBT youth are safe, affirmed, and supported both in school and out.

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