Chapter 10
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Students' Experiences in School: What Can the School Community Do to Ensure School Success?

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Abstract This chapter examines how lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students, as a result of being alienated and oppressed by bullies and those who reject their lifestyle, become an at-risk, minority population of learners. The chapter engages in a brief discussion of where the LGBT orientation derives from, according to the perspectives of literature from different disciplines, and the Christian worldview. Based on the school experiences of LGBT learners, authors propose a model by which the school community can create a safe and successful school environment that promotes positive school experience for LGBT students.

Introduction

Individuals who identify themselves as lesbians, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) may have different backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic, religious, or spiritual beliefs. Their sexual orientation and, therefore, their identity are atypical from societal norms. LGBT students are a sexual minority who, because of their sexual orientation, face various challenges such as social prejudices, discrimination, verbal and physical harassment, threats, intimidation, and victimization. Therefore, LGBT students represent a minority population of at-risk learners. Some estimate that they currently make up between 10 and 20 % of students in schools (Friend 2014; Fisher et al. 2008). Though it is difficult to determine the exact number of these students who identify as LGBT learners, it

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is thought that LGBT students are likely to be in most American schools, and in every classroom, although many may not openly identify as LGBT (Fisher et al. 2008). Overall, there seems to be a growing trend in the number of students who identify as LGBT (McCarthy 2016).

What qualifies LGBT students to fit into the category of at-risk learners? A consideration of the definition of "at risk" offers some clarification. According to Capuzzi and Gross (2006), the term *at risk* includes "a set of causal/effect (behavioral) dynamics that have the potential to place the individual in danger of a negative future event" (p. 6). By definition, at-risk youths are those who are not likely to complete high school or who may graduate well below their potential. LGBT students fit into this description. Many from this population also deal with at-risk factors such as drugs and alcohol abuse, emotional and physical abuse, risky sexual behaviors, teenage pregnancy, disaffection with school and society, and high physical and emotional stress which may impede their educational progress (Capuzzi and Gross 2006; Fisher et al. 2008). The challenges they face both at school and at home (for some of them) put them at risk for poor school and personal adjustment outcomes. For example, over 35 % of sexual minority adolescents reportedly being verbally abused by a family member because of their sexual orientation are at risk emotionally and academically.

Similarly, the risk of bodily harm or death which sexual minority youth frequently encounter is well documented. Here are a few examples:

Fred "Frederica" C. Martinez Jr. In 2001, Fred "Frederica" C. Martinez Jr., a 16-year-old transgender teen who traveled to the Ute Mountain Roundup Rodeo, was found dead in a sewer pond in a rocky canyon five days later. Teachers, counselors, and friends described the student as a healthy, happy, well-adjusted freshman at Montezuma-Cortez High School. At the end of the rodeo that night, Martinez met Shaun Murphy, an 18-year-old at a party and accepted a ride from Murphy and one of his friends. Murphy was later arrested and charged with second-degree murder. Martinez was, at the time, the youngest person to die of a hate crime in the USA. Martinez's injuries included a slashed stomach, a fractured skull, and wounds to the wrists, and cause of death was exposure and blunt trauma. Murphy pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and was sentenced to 40 years on June 4, 2002 (Anderson-Minshall 2012).

Gwen Amber Rose Araujo is a beautiful teenager who lived in a small community in Northern California dreamt of becoming a Hollywood makeup artist some day. However, on October 3, 2002, at a party to which she went wearing a miniskirt for the first time she never returned home. The mother did not know where the 17-year-old Araujo who was transgender was for days, until police were led to her gravesite. The men who killed Araujo were all considered her friends. Her local high school in Newark, California, part of the Silicon Valley, about 30 miles from San Francisco, was in the process of rehearsals for The Laramie Project, a play about the anti-gay murder of Matthew Shepard. In September 28, 2006, the then California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed into law the Gwen Araujo Justice for Victims Act (AB 1160) which was the nation's first bill to address the *use of panic strategies, denying defendants the ability to use societal bias against their victim in order to decrease their own culpability for a crime* (Anderson-Minshall 2012).

Sakia Gunn. On May 11, 2003, fifteen-year-old Sakia Gunn who loved to play baseball, got good grades, dreamed of playing in the WNBA, and spent time hanging out with friends was waiting at a Newark bus stop with her friends after visiting New York's Chelsea Piers along the Hudson River, an area where scores of young LGBT people usually gathered on the weekends. Two men in a vehicle pulled over and invited the girls to come to their car. The girls turned down the men's sexual propositions because they were gay. But one of the men in the car, Richard McCullough who did not like rejection, stabbed Gunn in the chest before fleeing the scene in the car. Gunn reportedly died shortly after the stabbing. Her life has also been memorialized on film in Dreams Deferred: The Sakia Gunn Film Project just like Shepard, and some others (Anderson-Minshall 2012).

Lawrence King. On February 12, 2008, in Oxnard, California, Lawrence King, a 15-year-old, was shot twice in the head, in a computer laboratory at his junior high school by a 14-year-old, Brandon McInerney (Fisher et al. 2008).

Stories such as these shock our culture and should break every heart. When anyone, including those who claim strong religious and moral convictions regarding sexual ideals, condones hurtful attitudes and actions, even slightly, they have abandoned the heart of God and aligned themselves with sin. Jesus explained his mission, in contrast to the activity that characterizes the evil one this say: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10: 10). Without question, the Christian educator must take a sincere stand for unprejudiced peace and justice. The way of shalom is to love the "other"—those who are different—even the so-called "enemy" (Matthew 5: 44–47).

Shalom is about right relationships, and in Jesus' economy of values, true neighborliness, as embodied by the "good" Samaritan, takes action to care for those in need no matter what their religious affiliations, cultural labels, or orientation. Willard (1998) explains that this is not merely "nice legalism," but rather "in God's order, nothing can substitute for loving people.

And we define who our neighbor is by our love. We make a neighbor of someone by caring for him or her" (p. 110). To be "homophobic" is not akin to the love of God which "keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13: 5). St. Paul adds, furthermore, "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects…" (1 Corinthians 13: 6–7). Even if a Christian teacher has no moral ambiguity about the wrongness of homosexuality, they should be even less vague that godly compassion must intersect with their professional ethics. They are required to be protectors and called to be advocates for the vulnerable. LGBT students are a sexual minority and an at-risk population of learners. As such, they need the necessary supports from their teachers, as well as a positive, inclusive school environment, to help them experience school success.

There are, of course, differing views about the sources that cause or influence the LGBT sexual orientation, and the Christian educator would do well to stay informed and up-to-date in this dialogue, which rightly will include theological viewpoints (Satinover 1996). The focus here is based on the acknowledgement that the school experiences of LGBT learners are predominantly negative, and undeniably unpleasant. Upon becoming aware, and thus more empathetic of the LGBT experience, school professionals—along with other stakeholders—should work to effectively design school success environments and strategies, for the LGBT students.

What Are the School Experiences of LGBT Learners?

Before we examine the status of the school experiences of LGBT learners, it is necessary to remember the significance of the adolescence developmental period in the overall life experience of a young person. Adolescence is an important developmental milestone in human life. Much of this time is spent by teenagers introspecting about and developing their core belief structures and the foundations of their identity. During this adolescent period, LGBT students encounter social barriers that negatively affect their academic and overall social development in schools (Morgan et al. 2011) In his book about bringing up girls, Dobson (2010) remarks that the most paralyzing fear for a girl in the adolescent years is "the prospect of being left out, rejected, criticized, or humiliated" (p. 203). Many LGBT learners during these adolescent years are subjected to very high levels of stress and pain in their social, emotional, and educational experiences (Biegel and Kuehl 2010).

What are the impacts of anti-homosexual bias, and the LGBT lifestyle on the educational experiences of the LGBT youth? For one thing, their frequent experience of fear, anxiety, and isolation at school may hinder LGBT students from being able to concentrate on academic tasks and learn effectively (Fisher et al. 2008; Growing up LGBT in America). Similarly, the anti-homosexual bias of negative peer pressure and verbal victimizations experienced by the LGBT young people in the school setting may induce depression and hinder concentration on academic tasks, thereby negatively impacting their school experience and their educational outcomes.

As a result of the incessant negative peer pressure, physical harassment or assault reported by 60 % of LGBT students, and verbal victimizations experienced by over 80 % of them, LGBT students face higher rates of school truancy and academic failure. They not only show lower GPAs, they also evidence lower rates of enrollment in postsecondary education (Fisher et al. 2008; Morgan et al. 2011, p. 5). About 32 % of LGBT students miss school because of the harassments, as well as because of fear for safety. This is a high rate of missing school when compared to a national sample rate of 4.5 % (Morgan et al. 2011, p. 5). Since adolescents spend a large portion of this critical developmental period in school settings, it is important for educators to work toward the creation of environments where students feel safe to learn, grow, and figure out their individual identities (Morgan et al. 2011).

Strategies to Create a Safe and Successful School Environment for LGBT Students

It is the legal and moral duty of teachers, and the schools they work in, to provide a positive and safe school environment for all students, including LGBT students. The Office of Civil Rights of the United States Department of Education has guidelines which prohibit sexual harassment and the existence of a school environment that will be considered sexually hostile for students, not excluding students who identify as LGBT (Fisher et al. 2008). Furthermore, for over ten years, the courts have ruled in favor of schools providing equal access for all students as well as protecting them from harm and harassment (Fisher et al. 2008).

We propose a three-tiered model of intervention, such as the response to intervention (RTI) process, which is currently used with success in education. The RTI process used in education is an inclusive, multi-tiered, school-wide, and problem-solving initiative covering both general and special education in collaboration with families from the early school years, and it is designed to identify and address the academic and behavioral needs of struggling learners early so as to provide access to needed interventions.

Just as the RTI process consists of at least three tiers, the intervention approach being proposed, by which the school community can create for LGBT students school success environments that promote positive school experiences and outcomes, will consist of three tiers. The three tiers are as follows: a macrolevel which targets the entire school community, a mezzolevel aimed at the classroom level, and a microlevel of intervention which aims to serve a very small group of LGBT students such as individual students who are encountering significant academic, social, and emotional problems.

Macro Level of Prevention and Intervention

Macro prevention refers to policies, strategies, procedures, and actions at the district and school-wide levels that promote positive social, emotional, and academic development for the entire school community. Such macro level practices promote a school-wide climate and environment that is positive, accepting, and safe for all students, including sexual minority students. Since bullying is very commonly experienced by LGBT students, bullying prevention and intervention is a prime example of a macro level school practice.

Bullying is the unwanted, aggressive, angry, or painful behavior by a child or group of children against a more vulnerable child or group of children. The high incidence and devastating effects of bullying in schools are comparable to the combination of the high incidence and destructive effects of cancer and coronary heart disease in the wider society today. School-wide policy and training on bullying is one way for schools to promote a climate of acceptance and safety for all students, including sexual minority students, in an environment that fosters healthy interactions between students. A bully-free environment is a conducive environment for learning (Fisher et al. 2008).

Bullying in schools directed against LGBT youth is widespread, despite legal protections and provisions (Fisher et al. 2008). The sexual minority students face a unique set of safety concerns. More than 85 % LGBT students face harassment because of their sexual or gender identity. Another 20 % or more of these sexual minority students are physically attacked. In part because of the excessive harassment and safety concerns they face daily, the suicide rate for LGBT students is believed to be about 4 times higher than that of their peers in the straight population (Biegel and Kuehl 2010). Many educational institutions have failed to develop adequate institutional policies and practices that adequately address the serious bullying-related issues and concerns of LGBT youth (Biegel and Kuehl 2010).

The first step in creating a bully-proof school community is for the administration to put in place a code of conduct which includes a a zero tolerance policy with a clearly spelled out anti-bullying. The policy may need to include explicit guidance designed to safeguard LGBT students. For example, the following guideline provided by Shore (2014) is helpful:

- Take all bullying incidents seriously, even those that seem minor.
- Take immediate action to ensure the student's safety.
- Tell the aggressor that bullying is unacceptable and reiterate the specific consequences for bullying (rules/consequences should have been clearly stated at the beginning of the year and clearly posted).
- If the bullying is verbal, intervene to stop ridicule immediately.
- Report the incident to the principal or designated person (per school policy).
- Follow school policy for disciplinary action and other required steps (p. 3).

The administration should also create an anti-bullying task-force and designate a leader or coordinator. The name and contact information of the anti-bullying task-force leader should be made visible by being posted in the cafeteria, the school nurse's office or clinic, the school office, the student handbook, and the school Web site. Counselors and staff trained in bullying prevention and intervention should work together as a team with the task-force coordinator to develop and maintain the school's anti-bullying program. The anti-bullying task-force and the administration should engage in frequent and effective communication with students, families (especially the parents), and the community about ways to create more positive school climate and ways to prevent or solve bullying problems.

Bullying usually takes place where or when adults are not present. As part of the effort to curb bullying, and further the school climate improvement process, it is necessary to identify places where bullying occurs and to take action to make such places safer. The anti-bullying task-force, the administration, and teachers in addition to working together to identify those places where bullying frequently happens should find creative ways to help immediately remove them. For example, students or staff can be trained and assigned to monitor these locations, and cameras can be added to help with the monitoring. Typically, most students at the middle and high school level have cell phones, and most schools have security or campus police. Students should be provided with a phone number to call for immediate help and should be encouraged to call for help if they find themselves in danger.

Arm students with helpful anti-bullying strategies and skills, such as what Coloroso (2004) calls the four most powerful antidotes to bullying which are as follows: "a strong sense of self, being a friend, having at least one good friend who is there for you through thick and thin, and being able to successfully get into a group" (p. 137). Additionally, provide emotional support to a student who is bullied as soon after the bullying incident as possible. In an imperfect public system, these are the kinds of ideas that resemble the hope for shalom.

Another way for schools to promote a climate of acceptance for LGBT students is by using printed materials, mass media, staff, and professional developments to educate the school community. Students, parents, teachers, and other members of the school community need education on issues pertaining to the LGBT community, such as issues about gender identity and sexual orientation, provision of community resources (e.g., counseling centers for families), and correcting misinformation related to the LGBT community.

Credible reports indicate that teachers lack the comfort or knowledge base to effectively address the issues related to the LGBT student population (Morgan et al. 2011). It is significant that "as of 2005, less than 40 % of school districts offered any kind of education about sexual orientation, and only 30 % of schools offered staff development activities" (Fisher et al. 2008, p. 82). Professional development opportunities can be provided by school administration for teachers that address their knowledge base on gender identity and sexual orientation issues, as well as other topics relevant to the LGBT population.

Studies show that faculty and other professionals do benefit from education that broadens their horizons on LGBT issues and helps in the essential task of creating safer and more inclusive school environments. For example, in an experimental mixed-methods field design by Dessel (2010) that tested outcomes of an intergroup dialogue intervention on public school teacher attitudes, feelings, and behaviors toward LGB students and parents, the quantitative findings of the research indicated that dialogue participation resulted in statistically significant positive changes in attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. The data analysis of the study confirmed positive changes as a result of dialogue participation.

Mezzo Level of Prevention and Intervention

The mezzo tier is concerned with the classroom level. Not only packaging and presenting the curriculum in an inclusive manner has the potential to help create a more positive school climate for LGBT students, but it also has the potential of helping them engage in effective learning. Classroom teachers, working in collaboration with school administration, can play a big role in making this happen.

A recent study in Canada found that teachers and administrators played a significant role in the effective implementation of strategies and programs that were found to be successful for supporting LGBT students in Canadian Catholic schools, just as the strategies and programs have been successful in the public, secular schools in the USA. With the support from the administration, the Canadian teachers became creative with their specific subject material. Consequently, they introduced "small but positive changes in the curriculum and the inclusion of LGBT-specific initiatives" (Liboro et al. 2015, p. 170). Here is an example of the incorporation of LGBT material into the curriculum by one of the Canadian teachers in the study, as shared by an administrator.

> Just today, I got called in by the head of one of the departments because he wants to put a number of frameworks and lenses to go through English literature … and he wants to put the gay-lesbian lens as one of the lenses to choose from. So if they want to, students can choose to discuss a tale through the lens of queer studies (Liboro et al. 2015, p. 171).

Other ways that teachers can incorporate LGBT material into the curriculum include the following: discussion of an article or editorial commentary in a newspaper or news magazine about the LGBT community, use of safe language (instead of words such as "joto" and "faggot"), giving room for students to read and discuss works by sexual minority authors, providing students the opportunities to write papers on popular artist, athlete, or influential individual who is a member of the LGBT community, and crafting projects or developing curriculum that portrays how people with divergent views or beliefs work collaboratively, harmoniously, and productively together. Examples for such project or curriculum work might include: military people from different countries and divergent backgrounds fighting together against a common enemy, Russian Communist Cosmonauts working together with American Christian Astronauts on space projects, etc.

Wong and Wong (2009) theorize that in the process of effective learning, the teacher does more than make a difference. Their dictum is that the teacher is the difference. They, therefore, insist "it is essential that the teacher exhibit positive expectations toward all students" (Wong and Wong 2009, p. 11). It is common knowledge that for personal or religious reasons, many teachers still feel uncomfortable addressing the topic of homosexuality and that teaching practices are linked to teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward students having a positive or negative effect on student achievement (Klehm 2014). Is it possible, therefore, that an approach based on grace, not shame, welcome, not rejection, would make a long-term impact on a student? God demonstrated active love "while we were yet sinners" (Romans 5: 8), and now, those who have received that love are compelled by it (2 Corinthians 5: 14) to serve as agents of shalom in where there is confusion. No matter what their current comfort level or how intractable their religious convictions, it is the teacher's responsibility to create a safe learning environment for every student in their classroom (Morgan et al. 2011).

Micro Level of Prevention and Intervention

The micro level of intervention targets a very small group of LGBT students, such as individual students who are encountering significant academic, social, and emotional problems. Teachers can use small group and individual counseling to provide coaching and coping skills for LGBT students who are encountering significant academic, social, and emotional problems such as depression, self-esteem issues, and poor school attendance.

Another example of the micro level of intervention could be individualizing the educational program of a student with disabilities receiving special education services who may be experiencing serious academic, social, and emotional problems related to persistent bullying. This can be done through Individualized Educational Program (IEP) and the 504 plans such as those used in special education. The IEP and the 504 plans are designed to support the student in the pre-K to 12 setting. Both plans are free of cost; they are developed and intended to address the student's academic, behavioral, and social concerns. However, there are several differences between both plans. For example, in order to qualify for special education services, a student must qualify under one of the 13 disability categories according to the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA) of 2004 (Friend 2014; Turnbull et al. 2016; Yell 2016). If a student with a disability is found to be a victim of bullying, the IEP can be useful to address the issue in his IEP.

The 504 plan is a "blueprint" for how the student will have access to learning. The 504 plan is derived from Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act which is a civil rights law to stop discrimination against an individual with disabilities and has two requirements: to have a "disability" which may include "learning and/or attention issues" (Yell 2016). The 504 plan has broader definition than IDEA of a disability (Yell 2016). While we are not labeling all LGBT students as disabled, we are making the case that in some cases, a student would qualify for the 504 plan as a result of being threatened and harassed, emotionally and physically harmed by others, and hence suffering emotional and mental distress which will impact their ability to learn and/or attend to learning. In the case of an LGBT student who might be experiencing attacks from a bully, the 504 plan will be useful since the negative results can affect the child's academic performance and social adjustment. Because the IEP or 504 is in effect, a contract and to be implemented by the school, it gives either the IEP or 504 team considerable power in dealing with a bullying situation.

In either of the cases, the IEP or the 504, the meeting should include the LGBT student, parent, teacher, and school administrator. The meeting provides an opportunity for the IEP/504 team to identify resources and strategies for stopping the bullying and protecting the student. If behavior or skills deficits related to the student's disability are contributing to the child's being bullied, they should be addressed in the IEP/504 plan. Certain disabilities interfere with social competence, making students especially prone to bullying. Students in special education usually have been administered formal evaluations that are part of their file. It is important to review these evaluations, consider the nature of the student's disability (with particular attention to intellectual, communication, and social skills deficits), and conduct an informal assessment of social competence.

Conclusion

The intent of this chapter has been to highlight and decry the extremely stressful, non-inclusive learning environments that many LGBT students are subjected to, and to propose a three-tiered model for creating safe environments and strategies that will help the students experience school success which will include staying in school and participating actively, feeling included, getting improved GPAs, being able to concentrate on academic tasks and learning effectively, lowering the rate of school truancy and academic failure, and showing higher rates of enrollment in postsecondary education. The intent of the chapter has not been to glamorize or endorse immoral activities done in the name of homosexuality any more than there would be such intent for similar goings-on by heterosexual students. Even if it could be definitely and unmistakably proven that homosexuality is, as claimed by activists, biochemical and immutably genetic in origin (which is usually the basis for the argument against the position of scripture) would immoral actions committed by a homosexual then become morally defensible? For example, if a heterosexual male who has the biochemical, genetic wiring to lust after women, and to engage in sex with as many women as possible, both before and after marriage, if he decides to act on his natural, biological inclinations, would that absolve him of his immoral, promiscuous actions? As Dobson (2001) points out, promiscuity for unmarried heterosexuals is the exact moral equivalent to promiscuity for homosexuals.

The question of this chapter has been "what is the obligation of the Christian community in the face of the fact of homosexuality in the face of the adverse circumstances, and poor school outcomes, to students who identify as LGBT?" What should the Christian response be? The approach of the Christian community as it relates to homosexual-identifying youth is indicated in the Scriptures. We are to be Christ's ambassadors, reconciling the world to himself through his love and grace (2 Corinthians 5: 19). We are to be compassionate, helpful neighbors (Luke 10: 25–37) exhibiting our Christian values, such as kindness and acceptance through practical action. The public school is a pluralist context culturally, religiously, and even in terms of gender and sexual orientation. Those who gather for worship, on the other hand, have confessed common allegiance to Christ and have agreed that the Scriptures provides authoritative principles and standards for *their* moral practice. The church must, therefore, struggle over its criteria for participation and membership (Grenz 1998). The school and teachers of individuals classes, however, especially Christian teachers, should provide a clear and consistent welcome to all those who come seeking knowledge, truth, and wisdom.

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