LGBTQ Students' Need for Safe Schools:

Understanding and Preventing Hostile Climate Contributors

Alicia J. Fredericksen, Rachel C. Rochte, Jennifer A. Schafer, and Cody A. Sigmon

School of Education

The College of William and Mary

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Dr. Kyung-Hee Kim

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Literature Review

Abstract

This literature review examined the challenges to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or questioning (LGBTQ) secondary students' social and academic achievement. It exposed the complicated environments in which LGBTQ students develop, establishing the contributors to and consequences of LGBTQ secondary students' psychological, social, and physical victimizations. Improving hostile climates called for a strategy developed from Black et al. (2012) that includes well-designed policy, inclusive programs, and supportive environments. Research has not sufficiently accessed and addressed all LGBTQ students, leaving teachers, administrators, and policymakers with an incomplete understanding of how to address victimization. Finally, this review discussed the importance of promoting safe spaces in which LGBTQ secondary students, and thus all students, can realize their full academic and social potentials.

Keywords: discrimination, hostile climates, inclusive programs, LGBTQ, preventative measures, questioning students, safe spaces, school policy, secondary students, sexual identity, supportive environments, victimization

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According to a survey by Widmeyer Communications in 2004, an estimated five percent of high school students identify as LGBT (Snorton, 2004), and 12% of students in the seventh to 12th grades report having some degree of same-sex attraction (Murphy, 2012). In a survey of 7,376 seventh and eighth grade students in a large county in the Midwestern United States, 10.4% identified as LGB, and another 4.6% were classified as questioning (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). Lesbian and gay identities can be defined as people who are attracted to their own sex. Bisexual identity can be defined as people attracted to both sexes. Transgender individuals desire to belong as a member of the opposite sex; for example, a man wishing to be a woman. Questioning individuals are still exploring their sexual identity, gender, and/or orientation (Meem, et al., 2010). Though there are discrepancies in the estimates of the number of LGBT-identified secondary students, these surveys indicate that LGBTQ students comprise a significant portion of the American student population.

LGBT students are a cultural minority who grow up in homes and communities that espouse cultural values different from their own, as their parents are most likely heterosexual (Frank & Cannon, 2009). LGBT students experience higher levels of victimization and negative outcomes than their heterosexual and cisgender (i.e. non-transgender) peers (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Questioning students experience even greater negative outcomes than their LGB peers (Birkett et al., 2009). Victimization includes physical intimidation and violence, bullying, harassment, social isolation, verbal assault, and sexual assault (Kosciw et al., 2012; Murphy, 2012). These various types of victimization often result in negative outcomes for LGBT students. Negative outcomes include increased rates of truancy,

drug use, depression, anxiety, suicidality, unsafe sex practices, homelessness, and eating disorders (Birkett et al., 2009; Black, Fedewa, & Gonzalez, 2012; Center for Population Research in LGBT Health, 2007; Galliher, Rostosky, & Hughes, 2004; Gottfried & Polikoff, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2012; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009; Rutherford, McIntyre, Daley, & Ross, 2012). These negative outcomes lower LGBT students' school attachment, which is a major predictive factor influencing LGBT students' reduced academic achievement (Murphy 2012; Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007). As the primary space in which American students develop outside the home, schools are uniquely situated to address the victimization and consequent negative outcomes that LGBTQ students experience.

There are many factors that shape the level of LGBTQ acceptance, known as climate, at any given school (Black et al., 2012): the school's location and the religious, socioeconomic, political, and racial makeup of that location are all climatic contributors (Gottfried & Polikoff, 2012; Herek, 2010; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009). Black et al. (2012) has shown that these realities contributing to victimization of LGBTQ students can be greatly reduced through efforts by teachers, administrators, and policy makers. One method to combat victimization is through creating clearly defined and strictly enforced antidiscrimination and antiharassment policies. Additionally, schools can incorporate inclusive programs, such as support groups and training programs for school community members. Finally, schools can create supportive environments, through visible ally networks, LGBTQ-positive curriculum design, and district-wide initiatives. These methods can be used in a holistic approach to best create safe spaces in schools and promote social and academic performance of secondary LGBTQ students.

Contributors to Hostile Climate

Geographic Location

LGBT students in rural areas are more likely to go to schools with hostile climates, experiencing more harassment and assault than those in other locales (Kosciw et al., 2010). LGBTQ students living outside of urban centers (i.e. rural and suburban) are more likely to develop depressive symptoms (Galliher et al., 2004). This higher level of stress in rural LGBT students is linked to lower population levels inherent in rural communities. At lower population levels, there are fewer people statistically who would identify as LGBTQ, and those who do identify would receive greater attention for it (Miller & Mahamati, 2000). Even though positive role models are crucial to healthy identity development and psychosocial well-being (Galliher et al., 2004), rural LGBTQ students are forced to have fewer LGBTQ-identified or -friendly role models and mentors, and are consequently discouraged to come out (Miller & Mahamati, 2000). This cyclic discouragement of coming out makes LGBTQ students invisible in their communities, often causing them to conform to prevailing heteronormative expectations despite their sexual minority statuses (Galliher et al., 2004).

However, it is important to distinguish the moderating variables at play in these rural environments. Kosciw et al. (2010) have found that community-level socioeconomic status variables play a significant role in school climates regardless of location. Furthermore, Herek (2010) contends that strictly heterosexual people differ in their discrimination against LGBTQ people based on their religiosity, education level, age, socioeconomic status, geographic region, urbanicity, political ideology, and familial proximity to LGBTQ people. Schools with higher student to teacher ratios feature greater homophobic language use, and schools in regions populated by people with greater educational attainment feature less homophobic language use (Kosciw et al., 2010). Thus a school's regional location, as well as urbanicity, are predictive

variables of victimization, but these variables can be parsed out into an array of other more specific moderating variables such as socioeconomic status, educational attainment, student to teacher ratios in the classroom, and individual community members' demographics (Kosciw et al., 2010).

Media and Cultural Representations

As members of a minority culture, LGBTQ students may have difficulty finding healthy and accurate media representations of their identity (Meem, Gibson, & Alexander, 2010). Furthermore, unhealthy or inaccurate media representations of LGBTQ identity may perpetuate or exacerbate victimizers' actions against LGBTQ students, as well as mitigate appropriate detection of and response to LGBTQ students' victimization (Paceley & Flynn, 2012). There are two main problems with media representations of LGBTQ identity: the first is the quantity or availability of these representations, and the second is how these representations are depicted. Television and film, which comprise two main sources of American cultural output, have not offered frequent depictions of LGBTQ identity. When these depictions finally did appear, many were problematic in their characterizations of LGBTQ people as depressed, outcast, violent, mentally unstable, or sickly. Other representations use LGBTQ identity as a gag, or portray LGBTQ relationships in very heteronormative terms. For example, the popular television show *Will and Grace* features two gay men, but they are platonically paired to their female best friends. Their interactions parody straight relationships, while any homosexual relationships the gay men have are peripheral. More thoughtful depictions of LGBTQ identity in shows like *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* have been restricted to pay-for-TV channels. This can limit LGBTQ students' access to healthy cultural representations if their parents cannot afford these channels (Meem et al., 2010).

News media's depictions of LGBTQ identity also vary in their quantity and quality. Lopsided representations of LGBTQ-related victimization in the news greatly overemphasizes the experiences of gay Caucasian males, rendering other intersectional identities (i.e. multiple identities such as LGBTQ identity, race, ethnicity, sex, socioeconomic status etc. that interact and inform one another within the individual) less apparent or significant. Paceley and Flynn (2012) did a review of 147 news media articles published in 2010 on the LGBTQ victimization experienced by 36 different victims. The study found that over 97% of the media reported on male victims, and 95% of all reported victims were Caucasian. If educators and policymakers use such news media to inform themselves as they attempt to address the challenges LGBTQ students face, the policies and programs they do create may fail to equally protect all LGBTQ students from victimization (Paceley & Flynn, 2012). Considering that most students are raised in these media environments and that schools are a primary location of victimization, understanding the implications of media representations of LGBTQ identity is necessary when fully addressing such victimization.

Creation of Safe Spaces

As shown, the contributing factors to victimization and consequent negative outcomes of LGBTQ students are vast and manifold. Considering this fact, those who are sympathetic to the plights of LGBTQ students are not necessarily equipped to help. Millburn and Palladino (2012) found that preservice teachers—even those who consider themselves allies—are not adequately prepared to assist LGBTQ students with the many problems that they may face. Though preservice teachers agreed that bullying was a concern for LGBTQ students, they did not necessarily link bullying to its greater, more troubling effects, such as mental health concerns and risk behaviors. Considering the various estimates of students who identify as LGBTQ, a

typical American classroom of 30 students would almost certainly have at least one LGBTQ student. Therefore, school staff, whether allies or not, require training in order to adequately support all of their students.

Safe Space Strategies

There are three main ways to improve the lives of LGBTQ students: policy, inclusive programs, and supportive environments (Black et al., 2012). Policies include preventative measures addressing victimization, as well as protocol for proper response to victimization when it occurs (Advancement Project, 2010). As there are no national preventative measures explicitly for LGBTQ students, the protection of these students is a responsibility addressed at the state and local levels. Only 10 states and the District of Columbia include sexual orientation and gender identity and expression in their educational antidiscrimination and antiharassment policies, meaning that in the vast majority of the United States, there are few broad protections offered to LGBT students. A further three states offer protections only for sexual orientation (Hannah, 2011). Though the relationship has not been proven causative, LGBT students living in states that have these preventative measures report less victimization (Kosciw et al., 2010). However, it is possible that LGBTQ students and their victimizers are influenced by these preventative measures in a manner similar to the media and cultural influences mentioned earlier in this review.

When statewide measures are not in place, the responsibility to protect LGBTQ students falls to schools and their districts. Kosciw et al. (2010) found that only 37.6% of LGBT students reported victimization in faith that their reports would be addressed. Thus much victimization goes unreported, which enables consequent negative outcomes. Black et al. (2012) suggest that in addition to lacking preventative measures, schools that have poorly worded or implemented

preventative measures are more likely to effect negative outcomes in their LGBT students. Though unambiguous and readily enforced preventative measures are clearly needed, policies often address victimization, such as harassment and bullying, only after it occurs. These policies do little to anticipate and mitigate the many other climatic contributors examined in this review. Many schools have implemented inclusive programs, which are key in improving school climate. Participants in one college ally training program reported increased knowledgeability of and sympathy toward LGBTQ experience and victimization (Worthen, 2011). Black et al. (2012) indicated that training programs like Worthen's, as well as summits and diversity training, can also improve participants' attitudes toward LGBTQ people. Furthermore, these programs often establish a visible ally network, which is central to fostering a sense of school belonging (Galliher et al., 2004).

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are another vital component to inclusive programming. GSAs are student-initiated, student-run organizations that are most often sponsored by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). Through GSAs, GLSEN seeks to combat the ignorance that perpetuates victimization by providing safe spaces, educational programs, and opportunities for activism (Murphy, 2012). Schools featuring preventative measures are more likely to contain a GSA, which indicates the mutual benefit that policy and programming can have for one another. LGBT students who attend schools incorporating well-designed policy, inclusive programs, and support environments to combat victimization experience fewer negative outcomes (Kosciw et al., 2010). Furthermore, in contrast to LGBT students attending schools without GSAs, LGBT students attending schools with GSAs report 20% fewer instances of homophobic language use and 12% more supportive comments from teachers. These students are also 25% more likely to report their schools as

containing visible and accessible allies. Students attending schools with a GSA are more likely to report disapproval of victimization of LGBT students, even when their personal attitudes are not explicitly supportive of LGBT identity (Murphy, 2012).

Though preventative measures and GSAs are crucial to the creation of safe spaces, much of their influence is on climatic components outside of pedagogy and curriculum. Inclusive programming can only go as far as the faculty allows it, and most often the responsibility to create a positive classroom climate falls to the teacher. Students feel safer and are thus more academically focused in classrooms in which they perceive their teachers as unwilling to bystand when victimization occurs (Furrow, 2012). Considering that most efforts to reduce victimization utilize education as a central element, Furrow (2012) recommended that teachers' confrontations with victimizers remain educational rather than punitive. This educational approach can also be extended to curriculum, where inclusion of LGBTQ identities can help filter and replace less positive media representations (Furrow, 2012; Ramirez, 2006). The classroom provides a unique opportunity to directly combat the cultural representations that have negative effects on healthy identity formation in LGBTQ students (Emfinger, 2007). However, discussions of and academic encounters with LGBTQ identity should be conducted in ways that are sensitive to students who are questioning or reluctant to discuss their sexual and gender identities (Furrow, 2012). This way, classrooms become spaces not only where preventative measures are enforced, but where proactive actions are taken to improve school climate.

Implications

This literature review highlights the current status of LGBTQ students as it pertains to victimization and negative outcomes. The review establishes a link between victimization and negative outcomes, while also enumerating the many ways in which such victimization and

consequent negative outcomes can be mitigated. Victimization has been parsed into three main categories (psychological, social, and physical), and mitigation efforts are also comprised of three main categories (well-designed policy, inclusive programs, and supportive environments). These three categories of victimization mitigation have been proven to be the most effective methods for addressing the needs of LGBTQ students. Thus, a combination of well-designed policy, inclusive programs, and supportive environments is recommended. As social acceptance of LGBTQ identity and practice continues to grow, so does its associated body of research. Therefore, research on effective strategies for improving the lives of LGBTQ students is quite new and is still a work in progress. It is difficult to predict which specific attempts at creating positive school climates will be the most effective because each school's climatic contributors call for individualized strategies. The newness of research on LGBTQ secondary students has precluded extensive longitudinal study of programs whose findings and recommendations are generalizable.

Due to the nature of research on categorical variables, and especially on a sensitive, not-readily-observable set of characteristics, all of the data is necessarily extracted from self-report. Expectedly, estimations on the percentage of the secondary student population identifying as LGBTQ vary wildly. Self-report should be of special concern in research that attempts to address the Q of the LGBTQ population, as those who are questioning may be reluctant to label themselves, or may not even have the ability to articulate the exact nature of their sexual and/or gender identities. Birkett et al. (2009) was the most helpful source in this regard, as it delved into the relationship between questioning students and the increased victimization they experience. However, it only surveyed seventh and eighth graders in a Midwestern school district, which means that the data can neither be generalized to high school

students, nor can it be generalized to LGBTQ students in other geographic locations. Regardless, this study has troubling implications when compared to the climate surveys (Kosciw et al., 2010, 2012), as these studies relied on data collected from students self-identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender on Facebook. This means that the survey was filled out only by those comfortable and safe enough to publicly claim an LGBT identity. Thus the voices of questioning and LGBTQ students who conceal their identities—also known as being closeted or in the closet—are conspicuously absent from the most cited research on the state of school climate in the United States. Considering that Birkett et al. (2009) indicated that questioning students would benefit the most from victimization mitigation, it would be prudent for GLSEN to incorporate both questioning and closeted students in their samples.

More troubling concerns arise when taking into account the basic premises upon which some of these studies are constructed. Much like the lack of intersectionality included in media representations of LGBTQ victimization (Paceley & Flynn, 2012), it is entirely possible that the surveys gauging victimization are doing so in ways that prioritize the gay Caucasian male experience over other identities. Furthermore, many of the cited studies are to the exclusion of transgender identities, focusing only on degrees of homosexual attraction. And perhaps most importantly, these studies presume that LGBTQ identities are static and easily labeled, and that the participants have as much knowledge of and facility with the researchers' language as the researchers themselves. Therefore, students still figuring out their identities, closeted students, or students who have not even considered their sexuality yet may not be able to respond accurately to surveys.

Complicating this ambiguity of language is the fact that one's cultural values may shape the connotations particular terms contain. For instance, Wolff, Himes, Kwon, and Bollinger

(2012) found that evangelical college students differentiate between homosexual attraction and practice, and consequently discriminate more against practicing homosexuals than simply people who are attracted to the same sex. Considering that the words "gay" and "lesbian" do not convey anything about attraction versus practice, such linguistic ambiguity could pose challenges when applying language to LGBTQ identity when surveying people who belong to this particular group. For this reason, consistent acknowledgement of the many ways in which LGBTQ identity intersects with other identities is vital for research in this field. An example would be that LGBTQ students of low socioeconomic status might not have consistent internet access, meaning that GLSEN's surveys would not reach them. Another example would be that all of these surveys are conducted in English, and thus any language barriers would prevent students of many different backgrounds from participating. Therefore, researchers should consider how their methodologies may overlook or even exclude many minority groups that exist within the LGBTQ community.

Conclusion

In light of the noted gaps in the research examined in the discussion section, recommending hard-and-fast policy poses a great challenge. However, schools can tailor well-designed policy, inclusive programs, and supportive environments to meet the specific demands of their respective hostile climates. Furthermore, lack of representation of the voices of closeted and questioning students in the dialogue on school climate means that only the experiences of vocal LGBTQ students is considered when policymaking occurs. However, research supports enforceable antidiscrimination and antiharassment policies, as well as the implementation of GSAs and visible ally networks. As the newness of studies on LGBTQ students fades and studies of causation are more readily available, policymakers, GSA members, and allies will gain

a clearer idea of which strategies are best when improving school climate. If GLSEN were to track the emergences of well-designed policy, inclusive programs, and supportive environments within each school, and cross-referenced these policy changes with students' reports on climate, then the predictive validity of their studies would greatly improve.

As it stands for the present, current studies fall short of including closeted or questioning students. Birkett et al. (2009) developed a strategy for using self-report to gather data on questioning students. Rather than having students check a box claiming an identity, students were asked to what extent they felt confused about their sexuality, and had the opportunity to claim a straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity. Students could also report to what extent they felt confused about their sexuality. Allowing students to classify themselves on a spectrum revealed that many students are still in the process of determining their sexual identities. This study has shown that it is possible to gather data on questioning and closeted students even when the data requires self-report. Future studies could incorporate creative methodologies such as this one in order to include a more representative sample of the entire LGBTQ student population.

Word Count: 3546

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Who Did What

Alicia Fredericksen (group leader)

- Researched articles on geography and socioeconomic factors on LGBT climate, as well as articles on inclusive curriculum
- Sources
    - Emfinger (2007)
    - Furrow (2012)
    - Galliher et al. (2004)
    - Herek (2010)
    - Ramirez (2006)
- Co-wrote the first draft of the paper
- Organized meetings and meeting times
- Managed email communication on meeting times, locations, and plans
- Created calendar plan for meetings
- Helped with initial edits and APA issues
- Co-wrote revisions of final paper
- Met with Dr. Kim to discuss edits

Rachel Rochte

- Researched articles on topics of relevance of the issue, statistics on effects on LGBT population, homelessness, school policies, national policies (or lack thereof), GSA's in schools
- Many sources found wound up not being used because we shifted the focus of our paper as we began compiling information.
- Sources Used
    - Center for Population Research on LGBT Health (2007)
    - Hannah (2011)
    - Kosciw et al (2010)
    - Miller & Mahamati (2011)
    - National Coalition for Homelessness (2009)
    - Pearson, Muller & Wilkinson (2007)
    - Quillen (2010)
- Co-wrote first draft of paper
- Orally helped with edits of paper
- Sent summaries of meeting progress and future meeting plans to group members

Addie Schafer

- Researched articles on topics of religion and culture in relation to LGBTQ environments, antidiscrimination policies dealing with language, peer behavior, and other social factors for LGBTQ students, as well as media representations
- We deemed some of my original sources unnecessary but also changed the focus of parts of our paper based on a couple key sources
- List of Sources:
    - Black et al. (2012)
    - Gottfried & Polikoff (2012)
    - Meem, Gibson & Alexander (2010)

  - Murphy (2012)
  - Paceley & Flynn (2012)
  - Rutherford, McIntyre, Daley & Ross (2012)
  - Wolff, Himes, Kwon & Bollinger (2012)
- Co-wrote the first draft of paper
- Scribe at meetings attended and emailed out notes (managed email communication)
- Set-up Google Docs
- Created group agenda/ calendar
- Reserved books from ILL
- Created to-do list after feedback of draft
- Orally helped with initial edits of paper
- Kept track of progress on to-do list for final edits
- Kept track of which comments we responded to
- Sent email to Dr. Kim requesting a meeting time
- Printed out copy of edited paper to discuss with Dr. Kim

Cody Sigmon

- Sources
  - Birkett et al. (2009)
  - Black et al. (2012)
  - Frank & Cannon (2009)
  - Kosciw et al. (2009)
  - Kosciw et al. (2012)
  - Millburn & Palladino (2012)
  - Snorton (2004)
  - Worthen (2011)
- Suggested research topic to group members and subsequently professor
- Researched occurrences of hostile climates and the ecological contributors thereof; also researched effectiveness of tolerance and ally training
- Co-wrote and typed first draft of paper
- Organized meetings and meeting times
- Managed email communication in order to organize meeting times and locations
- Created group agenda
- Worked on to-do list for revisions
- Composed portion of revisions for final literature review
- Typed up initial email response to Dr. Kim regarding Dr. Kim's comments
- Typed up comment responses to prepare for meeting with Dr. Kim
- Worked on correcting APA issues
- Met with Dr. Kim regarding final revisions