

Queer Youth in Heterosexist Schools: Isolation, Prejudice and No Clear Supportive Policy Frameworks

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Over the past thirty years, equal rights and anti-discrimination legislation extended the umbrella of protection to many disenfranchised groups, but Sears (2005) observes that the new legislation and policy “can be judged as weak to moderate in their coverage and impact [upon the health and safety of queer youth]” (p. xxvii). This is, in part, because such policies are debated within a complex social and cultural history in this country. Philosophically, the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution emphasize the supremacy of individuality and equality. But when the philosophy is shaped into educational policy, the heterosexual biases of religious fundamentalists and family-values conservatives leave no room for queer students or their issues. Thus, the heterosexist policies that countenance homophobia send painful and tragic messages to our youth, which can have fatal consequences.

Take, for instance, Carl Walker-Hoover, an 11 year old boy living in Springfield, Illinois. Carl went home after school on April 6, 2009. The 6th grader grabbed an extension cord, walked up the stairs to his bedroom, and weaved the cord through his closet rafters before slipping the plastic noose around his neck. Carl committed suicide because students at his school called him “faggot” to threaten him. Classmates shouted homophobic remarks in the hallways and taunted him daily about being gay (GLSEN, 2009). The New Leadership Charter School that Carl attended offered grief counseling to students and staff and collected donations for Carl’s family in response to the community’s loss of a child. What the school failed to do, however, was to address the problem before it was too late. According to Carl’s mother, Sirdeaner Walker, she had phoned the school every week since September, 2008 to complain about children bullying her son. More than 20 phone calls from a concerned parent failed to

persuade school officials to intercede on Carl’s behalf because they perceived him to be gay and labeled this identity inferior.

Stories similar to Carl’s are far too common in contemporary society where children are coming out at younger ages (Bochenek, Brown, & Human Rights Watch, 2001). The exact number of queer¹ youth is difficult to determine because of the complex nature of identity construction and sexual development, but it is estimated that at least 6% of the nation’s youth self identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Bochenek et al., 2001). Considering the inclusiveness of queer parents and siblings, as many as 9 students in a classroom of 30 are significantly affected by sexual orientation (Fontaine, 1998). Yet despite this prevalence it is widely accepted that schools, and the policies and politics that govern them, fail to adequately address issues that concern queer youth. Suzanne Iasenza (1989) claims that education is a socialization process that imparts the values of the dominant culture. As a result, she argues, learning institutions have become tolerant of verbal harassment and physical abuse directed at students who are, or are perceived to be, queer.

In the wake of institutionalized homophobia² afflicting public schools, our nation faces a unique opportunity to acknowledge and transform the assumption that all people are or should be heterosexual and gender-conforming. My purpose in this article is to examine how we, as a nation, can reform schools to be more inclusive of diverse student identities, such as queer, by transforming educational policy to include the voices of marginalized youth. I begin by first describing federal legislation that excludes the protection of queer youth, subjecting millions of children to exploitation, humiliation, and condemnation within classrooms across the nation. Then, drawing from bell hooks (2000), and the theoretical framework

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¹Once used by the dominant society against homosexuals, the term queer was reappropriated by the LGBT community in the 1990s to revitalize the spirit of gay activism (Haggerty, 2000).

²“Homophobia is sometimes considered institutionalized because government laws, cultural rules, social expectations, religious beliefs, and other mandates strongly forbid queer people from enjoying some of the benefits inherently available to heterosexuals” (Campos, 2005).

offered by Gerstl-Pepin (2005), I examine the possibility of extending influence and power to queer youth and allies. I will make the case that the survival of nearly one-third of the student population (youth that are queer, questioning, or have family and/or friends who identify as such) depends upon an ongoing public awareness that queer identity and culture are vital and necessary parts of the whole. I will offer a clear set of recommendations to bodies of government that influence schools, which transcend politics-as-usual in order to move our nation beyond the dominant forces of heterosexism and to empower queer youth within our educational system.

Legislation and Policies That Affect Queer Youth

The laws and policies that affect queer youth and queer inclusiveness in education fall under two categories: *Formal* education policies include laws, budgetary guidelines, state department regulations, federal mandates, and judicial decisions. Then there are “unwritten” rules, or *informal* education policies that people are expected to follow. Our knowledge of these is informed by school culture. In the United States, schools are largely controlled by state and local government, which allow formal education policies to ignore queer youth issues.

The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) reports that hate crimes—violent, intentional attacks on people because of their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, religion, or national origin—occur nearly 10,000 times per year (FBI, 2007). The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) (2005) reports that between 1990 and 1999, hate crimes in the United States increased each year, with crimes perpetrated against queer individuals increasing 328%. A more recent study conducted by the NCAVP (2009) reveals that from 2007–2008 the number of 15–18 year-olds identifying as victims of hate crime violence rose by 118%. Perhaps these trends are responsible for returning federal hate crime legislation (18 U.S.C. § 245) back to the Senate floor for revision in July 2007, 9 years after the brutal torture and murder of 21 year-old Matthew Shepard near Laramie, Wyoming. This marked the first time a gay rights bill had been brought to the floor of the House. Ultimately, the amendment was dropped by the Democratic leadership because of opposition, including a threatened veto from then-President George W. Bush. Resurfacing in April 2009, the Act, designated H.R. 1913, passed the House Judiciary Committee and the Senate. President Barack Obama signed it into law on October 22, 2009, which extends the 1969 federal hate-crime law to include crimes motivated by a victim’s actual or perceived sexual orientation, and/or gender identity.

Many social conservatives remain opposed to the law, arguing that it will effectively prevent people of faith from expressing their moral and biblical concerns about homosexuality.

As this political saga dragged on, many more youth were targeted. On May 16, 2007, Sean Kennedy was pulled from his car by an 18 year-old who called him “faggot” as he administered a blow to the face. Sean immediately collapsed to the asphalt, which cracked his head open and caused his death. His murderer only served twelve months in prison. Equally tragic is the killing of 15 year-old Lawrence King on February 12, 2008. Lawrence, who like Sean was openly gay, was shot in the back of the head by fellow student, 14 year-old Brandon McInerney. The district attorney’s filings state that Brandon sat behind Lawrence in class on that tragic day for 20 minutes before he fired one shot into the back of Lawrence’s head. After Lawrence collapsed, Brandon stood up and fired a second shot before storming out of the classroom. Brandon had publicly stated that he was going to shoot King the day before the murder. He told one of Lawrence’s friends, “Say goodbye to your friend Larry because you’re never going to see him again” (Saillant, 2009, p. 3).

While the brutal murders of Lawrence King, Matthew Sheppard, and other queer youth sometimes receive minimal media attention, there are several untold stories that are equally tragic and far more recurrent. When homophobic bullying in schools does not result in the taking of lives, it still often destroys them. The 2009 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010), commissioned by the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, GLSEN, interviewed 7,261 queer students between the ages of 13 and 21 to better understand their school experience. Eighty-five percent reported being verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation, 64% because of gender expression. Of this same population, almost half (40%) said they had been physically harassed (pushed, shoved) and 19% reported being physically assaulted (punched, kicked, injured with a weapon). The majority (62%) of students who suffered harassment or assault in school did not report the incident to school staff, believing little or no action would be taken.

Another piece of federal legislation that falls short of protecting queer youth from unnecessary discrimination and harassment is Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. The statute, which prohibits sex discrimination in federally funded education programs, ostensibly protects both male and female students from sexual harassment and includes incidents between same-sex victim(s) and perpetrator(s). The major limitation of Title IX, however, is that it only protects against harassment that is based on sex. Thus, while harassment against queer youth is

often sexualized in nature, it is sometimes difficult to link to a Title IX violation (Bochenek et al., 2001). The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, for example, does not constitute name-calling and pejorative jokes based on real or perceived sexual orientation as sexual harassment under Title IX.

A third federal policy that affects queer youth is the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (1791), which guarantees fundamental rights to free expression and free association. The law doesn't speak directly to queer youth, but it requires that schools respect students' freedom of speech and the right to exchange ideas freely and openly. Alternatively put, school officials cannot, under this basic freedom, suppress the identity expression of, and support for, queer youth. Given national statistics on student reluctance to report incidents of verbal and physical harassment to school personnel, however, schools are not exactly honoring students' freedom of expression when it comes to queer or questioning identities. Instead, schools are allowed to function as heterosexist institutions where the ontology of gender is presupposed and the construction of *the Other* is seen as unnatural or aberrant. This perception and the lack of policies to combat heterosexist bias, functions to reaffirm the identity of the child that cringes, insults, attacks, oppresses, and ignores *the Other*.

Finally, the Equal Access Act of 1984 requires that all public secondary schools provide equal access to extracurricular activities. This law includes student clubs that address queer issues and offer critical support, such as gay-straight alliances (GSAs). Unfortunately, opponents often prevent GSAs from being created or limit students' access to them by requiring parental permission in order for students to participate (Kosciw et al., 2010). At many schools, permission slips are not generally required for membership to clubs, such as the National Honors Society or Future Farmers of America. As a result of needing parental consent, queer youth who are not out to their parents (approximately 37% according to the 2009 National School Climate Survey, Kosciw et al., 2010), and straight allies who fear talking about queer issues with their families, may be reluctant to access this school resource.

State and local policies also shape the overall school experience for queer youth. At present, 20 states and the District of Columbia recognize what the federal government does not: States must ensure that school districts foster safe learning environments for all students by adopting explicit laws that prohibit sexual orientation discrimination and harassment. This leaves school children and adolescents in 30 states vulnerable to homophobic bullying, harassment, and abuse, which often lead to increased rates of truancy, drop out, depression, and suicide (Kosciw et al., 2010; Bochenek et al., 2001; Owens, 1998).

The Lived Experience of Queer Youth

Youth that reside on the margin because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity, as well as individuals with non-conforming gender expression, know what it is like to be part of the whole, but outside the center. Schools are a small reflection of the larger society in which we live and for queer youth the language and symbols at school serve as daily reminders of their marginalization. Heterosexist and gender specific ideologies surface in kindergarten when students learn the standardized equation for what constitutes a family and when taught social and gender norms from fairytale characters. Middle school is a battleground for gay and lesbian epithets that often go uncorrected by teachers. Phrases like "that's so gay" echo throughout school bathrooms and hallways, which cause young, influential kids to grow up equating homosexuality as something that is wrong, objectionable, and perverse. In fact, the average queer youth hears anti-gay slurs such as "homo", "faggot" and "sissy" about 26 times a day or once every 14 minutes (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008). High school signifies a whole new host of challenges. Overt and hidden homophobia is communicated through a curriculum that honors and teaches Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks when exploring the Civil Rights Movement, while ignoring the influence of Harvey Milk, Anne Kronenberg, and the Stonewall Riots. Similarly, traditional high school rituals, such as prom, are organized around assumptions of heterosexuality and gender conformity. Queer identity is particularly vulnerable when these norms are threatened; such was the case when Lebanon School District (Lebanon, Indiana) refused to allow a lesbian student to wear a tuxedo to her high school prom (Buzuvis, 2009).

The journey from elementary to high school sometimes teaches queer youth to compromise who they are if they wish to enter the center. By conforming to heteronormative behavior, queer youth can reside here, but they cannot live in the center unless they choose to live a life divided; unless they choose to harbor secrets, to exist within an institution and engage in relationships that steadily kill off their spirit, and to remain in a learning environment that may go against personal values and sacred beliefs.

But living as many queer youth do, on the edge, enables them to see from both the center and the marginal lines. At this interface, where the margin and center meet, queer youth possess the unique perspective to critique and challenge our educational norms. Policy discourse between the margins and the center, which is comprised of central offices of formal power such as a legislative assembly or school district, provides a way of reframing the political struggle in a way that establishes queer youth as important political actors (Marshall &

Gerstl-Pepin, 2005). Queer youth need to know that they can reject their reality—a reality often defined by fear and compromise. They need a forum to celebrate school policies that support them, but also an opportunity to challenge policies that appear supportive, but camouflage weaknesses. An example of a cloaked-policy is the Oregon Safe Schools Act. In 2009, House Bill 2599, the Oregon Safe Schools Act, was signed into law. On paper, the law strengthens anti-bullying policies for K–12 public schools in Oregon and in many ways it has paved the way for establishing healthy anti-bullying policies in all of Oregon’s 198 school districts. Yet, although the legislation specifically highlights protection for queer youth and has several provisions that hold school districts and individual K–12 institutions accountable for drafting policies, the law does not require any formal training for school officials, teachers, students or parents on the issue of bullying. Nor does it require schools or districts to collect data on the number of reports of bullying or the outcome of these reports.

On the other hand, the *Safe Schools for All Youth Coalition* simultaneously released a comprehensive “Safe Schools Toolkit” available online, which extended agency toward getting conversations started locally if a policy was not already in place. The document ensures that by asking just a few questions of administrators and local school board members, people can get the conversation going on their district’s anti-bullying policy—and potentially alter the school environment for an untold number of public school students. Queer youth can have significant influence in these interactions, which can allow policy makers to consider them as a source of living and tangible evidence of a need for change. It is the tragic stories of Lawrence King and Carl Walker-Hoover that cause individuals to look within themselves and envision a new way forward. The counternarratives of these youth, which offer a unique perspective that differs from the mainstream, provide a way of capturing marginalized voices. These voices have stories that should be considered to determine how we develop and implement educational policy.

Recommendations

Indeed a great deal of work must occur in order to improve the school climate for queer students and to educate all children to be respectful and accepting of diverse ways of being. Within the current framework, school board members and other educational stakeholders, much like all politicians, elicit and maintain power by limiting dramatic and radical change. While it is, therefore, in an individual’s personal interest to maintain a sense of heteronormative status quo, such inertia can ultimately destroy vulnerable lives. To counteract politics as usual,

conversations on educational policy that specifically attend to the needs of queer youth must deviate from the hegemonic center, where policy originates, and reach out to those who are affected most. If voices of queer youth (including straight allies) penetrated this imperium to expose personal narratives that speak to our nation’s gay suicide epidemic and oppressive heteronormative institutions, which ban students from freely expressing themselves, then perhaps we can rally support and build more consensus around inclusive education.

The Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin conceptual framework (2005), *Politics from Margin to Center*, reflects theories of postmodern resistance that honor the viewpoints of marginalized individuals and support such counternarratives. It communicates an urgent need to render ways in which the hegemonic policy arena ignores the unmet needs and lived realities of disenfranchised groups. The framework can be implied to suggest that queer youth can create alternative publics and present counternarratives to redirect the priorities and concerns of the center. With proper thought and implementation, this model could help alter policy to reflect an agenda far more inclusive than that represented by the center. Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) describe an overview of this process:

This new viewing, or re-visioning, can lay the groundwork for educators to engage as policy advocates, negotiating their own identities, articulating realities and needs in their own narratives, and engaging with other challengers in re-visioning democratic, socially just bases for school politics and policy (p. 88).

Queer youth must emerge from the margins to facilitate dialogue and increase understanding between themselves and the center, which again represents dominant heterosexist school culture. Through dialectical means, state and local governments and school governing bodies can work to transform the political struggle in a way that affirms queer youth and enhances the health, safety, and education of all students. A tangible example of this is a school-based GSA (i.e. a student-led group of queer youth and straight allies who share the value of creating a safe place for students to address homophobia and other forms of oppression) attending a school board meeting. This group of disenfranchised and disempowered youth leaders can use this forum to educate policy makers on their lived realities and unmet needs within the school. Within this example, GSA members can also invite school board officials to a Gay-Straight Alliance meeting in an effort to extend the experience and encourage those residing in the center to experience a bird’s-eye view of the fringe.

Beyond initiating an open and honest dialogue between policy makers and queer youth, it is recommended that individuals as well as collective groups, such as GLSEN

and The Safe Schools Coalition, continue to advocate for comprehensive safe school policies and legislation at the federal, state, and district levels. These organizations, and others like it, can utilize cultural and social capital to connect queer youth residing on the margins with those stationed in the center of the political arena. Furthermore, as national momentum builds to protect queer youth (and those perceived to be queer) from bullying and harassment, we must pair these efforts with a stance that goes beyond tolerance and non-discrimination policies. Failure to transverse in this way can pigeonhole queer youth into playing the role of victims and hinder the nation's ability to transcend tolerance to modes of acceptance, embrace, and the employment of critical pedagogy in classrooms throughout America.

Finally, much broader than any policy, individuals must reflect on their personal narratives to consider how we might improve the overall school climate (and greater society) for all children. We should resurrect our own school experiences to recall how difficult it is to simply belong. Stir up memories of the awkward and humiliating trials and tribulations of adolescent puberty and first date blunders. Envision the insecurities that come with high stakes testing and academic performance and then position them in today's classrooms driven by No Child Left Behind and a competitive, dismal economy. Consider the peer pressure and risk involved with "fitting in" given the recent growth spurt in media, communication, and technology. Imagine the mere task of survival for anyone entering middle or high school. Now picture yourself queer. Or better yet, suppose your son was Lawrence King or Carl Walker-Hoover.

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