Specific School-Related Challenges Facing LGBTQ Students

Experiences of harassment, assault, or simply not seeing any representation of LGBTQ lives in the curricula all contribute to negative school-based experiences. This chapter details recent studies and theoretical work on the hostile climate in schools, examines gaps in curricula, and discusses family-related issues that also challenge LGBTQ students or students with LGBTQ parents. These may include a lack of role models in schools, discomfort with parental involvement, or, especially in the case of children with LGBTQ parents, difficult relations between school and family (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). In keeping with our focus on the diversity of LGBTQ experiences, this chapter continues an analysis of the intersections of racial, gendered, and gender-identity-related violence, harassment, and alienation that students in public school and family settings experience. The particular implications for schools' intervention in bias and provision of spaces for organizing LGBTQ students and allies to learn from one another are discussed as necessary for ensuring the educational success of LGBTQ students.

Schools, like the rest of the social world, are structured by heterosexism—the assumption that everyone is and should be heterosexual (that such an assumption should have to be stated or even reinforced by policies indicates that everyone might not be heterosexual but they should be). Curricula, texts, and schools too often are constructed to reflect that heterosexuality is not only the norm but also the only possible option for students. Heterosexism also is reinforced by homophobia, overt expressions of dislike, harassment, and even assault of sexual minority people, a practice that members of the school community often ignore or dismiss as typical behavior based on the heterosexist assumption that either there are no LGBTQ people present in school communities or, if there are, those LGBTQ people ought to learn to expect a hostile environment. While homophobia possibly may be—at least in some places—less socially acceptable today than it was previously, it is nonetheless the case that schools are not very supportive places for most LGBTQ, questioning, intersex, and ally students. The pressure to conform to rigid ideas about proper gender and sexuality is also damaging to heterosexual and gender conforming students. Many students of all sexual

orientations have experienced anti-gay or gender-identity-related harassment, so teaching all students to be respectful of gender and sexuality diversity helps everyone.

Members of school communities may believe that sexuality is not an appropriate topic for young people. However, there are significant numbers of LGBTQ and ally students in schools, as well as significant numbers of sexually aware heterosexual students. Ignoring the issue of sexuality means neglecting to provide LGBTQ students with representations of themselves that enable them to understand themselves, and to provide examples of ways to counter bias and work toward respect for those who initially may not be willing to respect LGBTQ students. Many LGBTQ students report hearing insulting words on a daily basis. According to the 2019 National School Climate Survey of the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), three quarters of students reported hearing derogatory language such as "faggot" and "dyke" (Kosciw et al., 2020). In the same report, more than half heard homophobic remarks from faculty and staff, and two-thirds heard negative remarks about gender expression from school personnel (Kosciw et al., 2020). Half of the students surveyed heard sexist remarks, half heard ableist remarks, and one-third reported hearing racist remarks (Kosciw et al., 2020). One quarter of students reported homophobic assault at schools, and one-fifth reported gender-identity-related assault (Kosciw et al., 2020). While supportive interventions did make a difference to students (Kosciw et al., 2020), Robinson and Espelage (2012) found that bullying explains only some of the disparities in risk factors of LGBTQ youth compared with heterosexual youth. They warn that by focusing only on bullying, schools will miss other possibilities for improving the lives of LGBTQ youth. Ullman (2018) further suggests that policy that focuses on bullying intentionally avoids more systemic discussions of gender-identity-related bias that pervade schools.

INTERSECTING HARASSMENTS AND BIASES

The 2019 GLSEN survey found that 60% of LGBTQ students surveyed had been sexually harassed in the past year (Kosciw et al., 2020). The relationship among gender bias, homophobia, and harassment is complicated. On the one hand, young women of all sexualities experience harassment, including homophobic harassment if they act in ways that do not fit the norms for women. So the scope of gender- and sexuality-related harassment is quite broad for women. Because young men have a narrower range of acceptable masculine behavior, they too are targets for homophobic harassment on the basis of any gender nonconforming behavior, including having any forms of disagreement devolve into homophobic taunts. The intersections of categories of identity, then, must become central to how educators

think and learn before they can begin to teach their students. These complex intersections of identity categories also extend to those of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. The 2019 GLSEN National School Climate Survey reported these findings:

> With regard to students' experiences with race/ethnicity, it is interesting to note that nearly all LGBTQ students of color experienced similar rates of racist harassment, but Black LGBTQ students were more likely than nearly all others to feel unsafe about their race/ethnicity. In part, this may be related to the nature of racist victimization that Black LGBTQ students experience, which may occur at a similar rate but could be more severe than the harassment faced by other racial/ethnic groups. (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. 114)

As Francisco Galarte (2012) explains, thinking about violence against transgender people of color too often is discussed only as an indication of transphobia or homophobia. He argues that this analysis misses the centrality of racism:

> It is racism that animates transphobia and homophobia as seen in the increasingly violent iterations of violence toward trans* people of color. Brown trans* bodies are a threat to racialized, sexualized, and gendered dominance. These bodies are simultaneously much too seen and not seen at all. Moreover, racialized, sexualized, and gendered violence, as an instrument of sociopolitical terrorism and control, has been increasingly normalized so that the policing, punishment, and subjugation of certain bodies (namely racialized and gendered bodies) go unnoticed.

His analysis, like that of Paceley and Flynn (2012), questions the neglect of concern about violence against LGBTQ people and youth of color in the mass media. By centralizing race as the key component in such violence, analyses like Galarte's and Vivian Namaste's (2009) also push us to think about the relationship between racial discrimination and social status, including the forms of employment open to young transgender people, especially youth of color, pushed out of schools and homes.

While most LGBTQ youth flourish and learn to counter the homophobic challenges they face, and while it is important not only to focus on the challenges but also to stress the strength and resiliency of all minority youth, it is also crucial to understand that the costs of homophobia and bias against gender nonconforming students, especially those contending with racism or other intersecting differences, can be very high. In February 2008, 15-year-old Lawrence King, who was beginning to find recognition as Leticia with some peers, was murdered by a younger White student who had been part of a group bullying him for most of the school year. King endured daily taunting. King's 12-year-old friend Erin Mings said, "What he

did was really brave—to wear makeup and high-heeled boots." Mings hung out with King at E. O. Green Junior High School. "Every corner he turned around, people were saying, 'Oh, my God, he's wearing makeup today.'" Mings said King stood his ground and was outgoing and funny. "When people came up and started punking him, he just stood up for himself" (Saillant, 2008a).

King's story underscores the strength of young gender nonconforming, gay, and transgender people, their sense of confidence about their identity, and, as well, the very real dangers they can face in public schools. As a young person of color, King's experience was further amplified by racism. Wearing eye shadow to school and trying to be authentic in this hostile context of school, King was continually open to taunting and bullying, and tried to keep strong by flirting with tormentors (Saillant, 2008b). Reports indicate that school officials were aware of the potential difficulties between King and the attacker but did not intervene (Saillant, 2008b).

The Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (Gender PAC), an organization that was active from 1995 to 2009, was dedicated to educating about gender identity. It noted in its 2002 annual report that not only were gender nonconforming students the victims of bullying, but students who engaged in school violence also had experienced such bullying: "Five of eight assailants in recent school shooting incidents were reportedly students who had been repeatedly gender-bashed and gender-baited in school" (Gender PAC, 2002, p. 8). An American Association of University Women (2001) study reported that more than almost anything else, students do not want to be called gay or lesbian; 74% said they would be very upset, understanding the cultural pressures to be heterosexual and the potential harassment that affects LGBTQ youth.

Even students who are not gay report overt homophobic and sexual harassment when they express support for sexual minorities. As one student put it, after experiencing sexualized death threats from other students while teachers did nothing to stop them, "Maybe it's because I have strong views. I've always spoken out for gays and lesbians, for Latinos, for those who get trampled on in our society. Still, I really have no idea why I was treated with such hostility" (Ruenzel, 1999, p. 24). The pressure on straight allies of LGBTQ students to not express their opposition to homophobia may indicate that not supporting gay people is an integral part of indicating one's own heterosexuality. Like Sleeter's (1994) observations that White people perform their race by expressing racist attitudes, people may perform heterosexuality by indicating their dislike of or discomfort around homosexuality.

The pressure on all students to conform to a gendered or heterosexual norm is powerful, especially in the school context where public knowledge and choices about identity are closely watched. The public context of 15-year-old Black gender nonconforming Sakia Gunn's assertion of her

lesbianism when harassed on a street in Newark, New Jersey, was an important indication of her claiming space in her community; but her life was lost when her harasser killed her ("Lesbian Stabbing," 2003). Her space of assertion was honored by the Newark community's outcry against homophobic violence in a mass vigil commemorating Gunn's death and life (Smothers, 2004). A year after her killing, the school district that refused to have a moment of silence for her immediately after her murder allowed the anniversary to be acknowledged by having a "No Name Calling Day" (Smothers, 2004). It is important to understand that homophobic violence and the potential for harassment do structure the lives of sexual minorities. But the understanding of their identities, of the places to go to find communities that support their gender and sexual identities, and of their ability to express their identities—even in challenging situations—demonstrates that sexual and gender minority youth like Gunn are actively and creatively involved in making their lives and communities.

LGBTQ YOUTH AND THE CHALLENGES OF ACCESSING EDUCATION

The examples of youth suicide or homophobic and transphobic murder are extreme manifestations of bias. But in each case, a less spectacular, more everyday experience of homophobia or transphobia also preceded the more violent act. In other words, these were students who were already making their way through school contexts that were not supportive and did not take seriously their concerns about peer or adult bias. That kind of isolation or harassment, in and of itself, has a negative impact on school attendance and educational aspirations of many LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students who experience extreme harassment in schools are likely to report plans to continue their education beyond high school, and students who experienced more LGBTQ-related victimization at schools reported a lower grade point average and higher absenteeism (Kosciw et al., 2020). Further, youth who are out or public about their gender identity or sexual orientation were more likely to report experiencing more harassment, but they also expressed a higher sense of self-esteem.

Despite what sometimes seems to be an overwhelmingly hostile context in schools, the concerted efforts of students, teachers, administrators, and other members of the school community can shift school climates. As the 2019 GLSEN survey (Kosciw et al., 2020) shows, schools can make a difference in the experiences of LGBTQ youth. For example, students in schools with Gay-Straight Alliances or Gender and Sexuality Alliances report hearing fewer homophobic remarks, report seeing staff intervene in bias more often, and were less likely to feel unsafe in their schools. Moreover, students in schools with inclusive curriculum reported lower levels of harassment, higher attendance rates, and more feelings of connection to their schools.

However, progress can be undone without adequate institutional and teacher support. Teachers themselves may find it difficult in some contexts to advocate for LGBTQ students either because they themselves do not want to be outed or because they are concerned they will be misrecognized as LGBTQ because of their advocacy. One of the first Gay-Straight Alliances to attain the right to meet in public schools using the federal Equal Access Act disbanded years later because of continuing community hostility and lack of institutional advocacy and support. That group, however, eventually was reorganized and supported by a unanimous vote by school officials, who had been educated about and were now supportive of anti-homophobia projects (ACLU, 2006).

Students' health and risk behaviors also are affected by homophobic and transphobic experiences at school. Negative experiences at school involving gender identity or anti-gay harassment are associated with depression, stress, anxiety, and consideration of suicide, among other things (D'Augelli et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2005). Students who feel unsafe at school or unconnected to school because they have no support for their experiences of homophobia and transphobia may engage in unsafe sexual behavior and substance abuse (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002). LGBTQ students not only may lack support at school, but also may face rejection from their families, with a similar outcome of greater risk for thoughts of suicide, unsafe sexual behavior, and substance abuse (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; C. C. Ryan et al., 2009). Thinking about the obstacles faced by LGBTQ youth, who experience a wide range of exclusions in their attempts to access education, may help provide a better school-based response to ensure their educational success. In addition, because LGBTQ youth may not find support at home, school-based support and advocacy for their access to education are all the more crucial.

RESITUATING "BULLYING" IN SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The topic of bullying has gotten much media coverage and school-based attention in the past several years. But *bullying* as a term does not capture the institutional scope of exclusion that LGBTQ and other minority youth experience. Nor does the term *bullying* itself necessarily encourage school personnel to think broadly about exclusionary and hostile experiences students face, especially those that are based on gender and sexual orientation. Indeed, researchers on bullying caution that misunderstandings about the relationship between bullying and institutional, pervasive bias miss not only the rights-based aspects of gender-based bias, but the damaging effects of such experiences as well. Nan Stein (2003) cites a Vermont case where a young, middle school boy was harassed by students who thought he was gay. His parents, using a then-new Vermont law on bullying, took

the case to court and lost, although had the case been based on a federal Title IX claim rather than a state anti-bullying law, they likely would have been successful. Stein argues that in the rush to provide for school safety after Columbine and in a climate of continuing attention to bullying, schools have adopted rules that "de-gender" school-based harassment, in effect leading them to also neglect existing federal protections for students (p. 787). Relatedly, school districts have not provided enough training for school professionals on their legal obligations to protect students' rights; additionally, the discourse of bullying has shifted the focus away from rights and onto the figure of the bully, an individualized, seemingly isolated cause of school problems (Stein, 2003).

Such misunderstandings of law and policy lead to category errors in enforcement or to ignoring the problem of harassment altogether. In their examination of how teachers understand anti-bullying and anti–sexual harassment laws, Charmaraman et al. (2013) found that teachers believed bullying to refer to unpleasant peer-to-peer relationships, but did not understand that sexual harassment could be peer-based. Further, teachers did not connect what they took to be boys bullying girls with Title IX's prohibition of a hostile gender-based environment created by sexual harassment. Charmaraman et al. argue that more training is needed to ensure that school professionals understand Title IX's requirement that policies and action ensure an equitable learning environment. As discussed in the Introduction to this volume, neglecting to protect students from gender-based discrimination can lead to school district liability, as well as negative student outcomes, so ensuring that all school personnel understand their obligations is crucial. These trainings ought not to be "one and done" processes; moreover, all too often trainings and obligations under Title IX and other anti-discrimination policies are resisted altogether. Ullman (2018) describes schools that significantly restructure their understanding of gender-related bias and anti-transgender bias, offering students space to discuss such issues weekly and involving teachers in rethinking how schools can become more inclusive. Charmaraman et al. (2013) also found that school personnel were inadequately trained to access already-existing, school-based resources on bullying and Title IX, and were unaware of negative psychological and health-related outcomes related to experiences of bias in schools.

The impact of these misunderstandings can have a major effect on students' ability to access education and to thrive in school and out. James E. Gruber and Susan Fineran (2008) found that the adverse effects of sexual harassment were greater than those of bullying, and those adverse effects were particularly evident among young women and sexual minority students. Boys, too, they found, were more significantly affected by sexual harassment than by bullying. Gruber and Fineran conclude that if schools are seriously interested in safety for all students, but especially young women

and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning students, they need to return to emphasizing sexual harassment prevention in a broader way:

> We are not suggesting that bullying prevention programs be curtailed; rather, we would argue that sexual harassment prevention receive attention as a distinct focus. All students need to benefit from a safe school environment and the mental and physical health implications from sexual harassment and bullying behaviors need to be considered. Keeping schools safe in the twenty-first century is a worthy goal but continuing to focus on boys' behavior and bullying violence in schools, rather than on all students' negative experiences with sexual harassment detracts from our ability to provide a healthy environment for all children. (p. 13)

School climates that allow sexual harassment and bullying to continue have a negative impact on all students, whether through the general discomfort of being around hostility, the particular message of intolerance extending beyond those to whom it is directed, or simply the fact that very narrow understandings of sexuality and gender are broadcast through the school without interruption (Payne & Smith, 2012). Such heteronormative environments affect everyone, even pushing heterosexual-identified students to express their anxieties about homosexuality and potential for misidentification of their sexuality (AAUW, 2001; Pascoe, 2007). The experience of hostility and disapproval has an effect on LGBTQ youth school outcomes. In addition, research indicates that such negative outcomes of school-based bias are felt even more strongly by students who are questioning their sexuality (Williams et al., 2005). Finding neither overt support from LGBTQ youth, either because they haven't joined such friendship or organizational networks or because they do not fit the definitions of the terms LGBTQ, nor support from heterosexual peers because they don't fit there either, questioning youth are isolated and experience more bullying and depression than other groups (Birkett et al., 2008).

But teachers feel pressured to maintain their focus on accountability and also report not feeling well prepared to address incidents of harassment (Greytak et al., 2016; Lichty et al., 2008; Meyer, 2008). Teachers further report that they themselves are not well prepared on issues related to LGBTQ students, and even if they know what to do to make classrooms welcoming, most do not put that knowledge into action (Greytak et al., 2016).

This research on the disconnection between policies and school action points to a number of different challenges for teacher and administrator preparation programs. We need to find ways to motivate those teachers and leaders who are already aware of the need for advocacy but are not able to overcome their personal biases or overcome the obstacles that other people's biases pose for them. In short, educators need to know how to be

more active in advocacy for students, either putting aside their personal opinions that run counter to the best interests of their students or learning better how to confront processes and even colleagues who are not willing to act in the best interests of students. In addition, preservice teachers and administrators who want to be better practitioners need to know the scope of the problems facing LGBTQ youth in schools. Laws and regulations can help them improve school climate and help them know how to put inclusive knowledge into practice. Homophobia and transphobia, in a very real sense, affect everyone—even professionals who know they ought to do better by sexual and gender minority students feel constrained by the biases circulating in their schools.

These examples point to the need to address homophobia and sexual minority issues through multilevel approaches. Youth are capable of asserting themselves and finding community with others, but without the institutional support of schools and the interventions of respectful adults, the struggles they may have to face are all the more daunting. Ensuring that sexual minority and gender minority youth have space and time to meet together creates one space in school that addresses their communities. Incorporating LGBTQ and gender-identity issues in curricula, teacher education, school leadership programs, and school anti-discrimination policies are all strategies that reinforce inclusion across the entire school institution.

ANOTHER FORM OF "NOT" EDUCATION: "YOU CAN'T SAY GAY" POLICIES

Each of these steps requires more than just stopping harassment. It requires thinking critically about the messages in curricula, the way teachers and administrators talk to students, and the way school-based social events are organized. Exclusions of LGBTQ-related information signal to students that such people are not respected members of the school community, and in the vacuum of official school silence bias from students can go unchallenged. In the Anoka-Hennepin district of suburban Minneapolis, school policy required that teachers maintain neutrality on the topic of homosexuality, until it was revised in light of a successful court challenge. Purportedly concerned that teacher authority could be coercive on sensitive topics, the district developed a policy that would require teachers to not respond to questions about sexual orientation or offer their own opinions on LGBTQ issues. Teachers were positioned as authority figures who ought not to express their own position on the issue, while students were allowed to continue to shape the school environment in ways that let at least some opinions on homosexuality circulate freely. According to some parents, including the mothers of two students whose experiences of homophobic harassment contributed to their suicides (two of four suicides related to sexuality or perceived
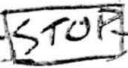
sexuality in that school district), the school itself was not neutral; indeed it became more hostile toward their children. Parents and LGBTQ and ally students argued, too, that when authority figures in schools retreated from contentious issues, students with strong—and mostly negative—opinions filled the gaps.

Part of the difficulty with the policy was the assumption that if teachers were neutral, the school experience would reflect that neutrality; another related problem was that positive education about sexuality and gender stopped (C. Mayo, 2013). The tacit message to students who see that teachers do not intervene in homophobic harassment may be that such acts are acceptable, not only in the school but in the broader community, and that no authority figure will provide LGBTQ students and their allies with support. According to the 2019 GLSEN survey of school environment (Kosciw et al., 2020), over half of LGBTQ students had heard homophobic remarks from staff and two-thirds had heard bias about gender expression. Only one-fifth of school personnel consistently responded to anti-LGBTQ incidents. But just over one-third of students reported that staff were present when students heard biased comments and staff did challenge those remarks. Students who attended schools that intervened in anti-LGBTQ harassment and who also had supportive faculty reported better attendance rates and school success. Teachers in the Anoka-Hennepin district themselves recognized the problem with the policy of neutrality imposed there, not only because of its intent to keep them neutral but also because the extent of their necessary neutrality was unclear. This lack of clarity, some argued, meant that many teachers were overcautious in taking any action against homophobic bullying, wondering, "Could I get fired for that?" (Wooledge, 2012). Anoka High School teacher Mary Jo Merrick-Lockett explained, "If you can't talk about it in any context, which is how teachers interpret district policies, kids internalize that to mean that being gay must be so shameful and wrong. . . . And that has created a climate of fear and repression and harassment" (quoted in Erdely, 2012). By restricting teachers to neutrality, then, the policy created a hostile environment in the school.

As national media attention became focused on the policy, the board decided to replace it with a policy that would have required teachers to remain neutral not only on issues of sexual orientation, but on all so-called controversial issues. Yet the impending lawsuit and eventual settlement squashed that even broader attempt at defining *neutrality* in terms of teacher disengagement (Erdely, 2012). The Anoka-Hennepin school district has since settled a lawsuit brought by students in the district, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights. In agreeing to the consent decree, the district replaced its "neutrality" policy with a multitiered approach to addressing harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity. According to the consent decree negotiated between the U.S. Office of Civil Rights, the students, and the district, the district now

must take proactive steps to ensure that students' rights under Title IX and the Fourteenth Amendment, as well as Minnesota's Human Rights law, are protected. The consent decree states that "all harassment, including that based on nonconformity to gender stereotypes and/or gender identity and expression," (p. 8) as well as any "sex-based or sexual orientation-based," (p. 10) is prohibited. All school personnel receiving a report of such harassment need to "investigate, address, and respond" to such report following all relevant laws and regulations (p. 9) (*Doe v. Anoka-Hennepin*, 2012).

But this was not the end of the story, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. A change in presidential administration in turn meant a change in how the U.S. Department of Education intervened in LGBTQ-related bias in schools, and within a few years the Anoka-Hennepin district school board reverted to conservative exclusionary practices and once again found itself the focus of a lawsuit. This time a young transgender man who had been allowed to use facilities matching his gender had that recognition revoked by his high school. As discussed later in this book, he has since won a significant monetary settlement against the district, whose apparent commitment to equity lasted only as long as the impact of a lawsuit (Verges, 2021). Better, of course, to make equitable changes more permanent and pervasive.

[STOP]

RECOGNIZING FAMILY DIVERSITY:
LGBTQ-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS AND SCHOOL EXCLUSION

Harassment and exclusion based on homophobia and transphobia also extend to families, including families of LGBTQ youth or families whose members are LGBTQ (Casper & Schultz, 1999). Increasingly, LGBTQ families are involved in their children's education or interested in advocating for LGBTQ youth and do not always find schools supportive of their concerns. Given that same-sex marriage is now legal, schools need to be more responsive to this historic time for the growth—and public representation—of families who are either LGBTQ headed or actively involved in ensuring that schools respectfully educate their LGBTQ children. Difficulties remain for parents who may not be easily recognized as parents, whether they are same-sex or appear to be racially or ethnically different from their children. As one gay male parent explains, "I still carry the adoption paper with me in my wallet just in case I'm ever stopped" (Wells, 2011, p. 167), knowing full well that single men with children, especially gay men, are still culturally suspect.

The most recent U.S. Census report on same-sex couple households showed over 980,000 same-sex couples in the United States (Walker & Taylor, 2021). Other estimates put the number of gay families between 1.4 and 14 million. There is no especially reliable way to get a baseline number