The importance of teacher support: Differential impacts by gender and sexuality

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Teachers play an important role in shaping the experiences of high school students with regard to patterns of heteronormativity and binary gender norms, particularly for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students. A climate survey of high school students ($n = 953$) in the United States examined the association between students' well-being and their relationships with teachers. The sample was majority white (65.8%) and multiracial (14.1%). Cisgender (cis)-girls (49.6%), cis-boys (41.2%), and trans students (9.2%), as well as heterosexual (78.4%) and LGBQ students (21.6%) were represented. Regression models indicate teachers' use of oppressive language and their intervention in situations of bias and students' trust and comfort with teachers were significantly associated with students' self-esteem. Teachers' use of biased language was directly associated with student self-reported grades. Moderation tests indicate teacher relationships are strongly associated with heterosexual and cisgender students' wellbeing. Recommendations for teacher education and future research are discussed.

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Negative school climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and similarly identified (LGBTQ) youth continues to be a serious concern for communities and educators. Schools often mirror and reproduce inequalities through heteronormativity and binary gender systems that make up larger societal norms. Heteronormativity is the set of assumptions that privilege traditional gender roles and heterosexual orientations (Jackson, 2006; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). School culture and climate, including policies and practices, reinforce this norm in many ways, including normative assumptions of heterosexuality embedded in language and evident in curricular materials that reinforce this conclusion (Watson & Miller, 2012). These beliefs unequally distribute advantages for students who are gender conforming and heterosexual, including a sense of being normal and valued (Reynolds & Bamford, 2016). Students who express diverse gender and sexual identities often experience bullying, harassment, and microaggressions that communicate stigma and lower status (Aspenlieder, Buchanan, McDougall, & Sippola, 2009; Pascoe, 2007; Reynolds & Bamford, 2016; Wyss, 2004). Teachers are faced with the difficult but important task of challenging these oppressive structures and rethinking educational practices (Dessel, 2010a, 2010b; Grace & Wells, 2007), including enabling gender fluidity and mobility, as well as sexual self-determination. The focus of this paper is to examine the association between students' well-being and their relationships with teachers in order to understand what teachers can contribute to improving student well-being.

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Anti-LGBTQ discrimination can engender significant negative impacts on the physical, psychosocial, and educational outcomes for LGBTQ youth compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. They may experience dissolution of friendships due to their sexuality (Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009) and peer victimization, such as increased bullying, sexual harassment, and violence (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). These forms of victimization are associated with lower self-esteem and grade point average (GPA), and higher incidence of truancy (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2014). As well, due to the victimization and lack of support, LGBTQ youth experience specific forms and greater rates of depression (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Galliher, Rostosky, & Hughes, 2004; Williams et al., 2005), externalizing symptoms (Williams et al., 2005), alcohol and marijuana use, suicide attempts, and suicidal ideation (Almeida et al., 2009; Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Goodenow et al., 2006; Mueller, James, Abrutyn, & Levin, 2015; Silenzio, Pena, Duberstein, Cerel, & Knox, 2007). These indicators of marginalization are highest among transgender youth and queer/trans youth of color, who face compounding oppressions arising from the racialized and sexual policing of gender norms (Grady, Marquez, & McLaren, 2012; Wernick, Kulick, Dessel, & Graham, 2016; Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2014).

A positive school climate and a sense of belonging is important for students (Birkett et al., 2009; Dessel, 2010a; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2013), and it can buffer the adverse effects of homophobia and heterosexism on LGBTQ youth (Szalacha, 2004). A positive and welcoming school climate is associated with decreased teasing, truancy, and alcohol and marijuana use (Birkett et al., 2009). A sense of school belonging is associated with feeling safe at school (Joyce, 2015), and the existence of a school policy prohibiting bullying is associated with increased self-esteem (Kosciw et al., 2013) and a lesser likelihood of attempting suicide (Goodenow et al., 2006). In schools that have curricula that depict sexual minorities positively, LGBT youth experience less victimization (Kosciw et al., 2013). However, LGB youth report a poorer school climate and a lower sense of school belonging than heterosexual students (Birkett et al., 2009; Galliher et al., 2004; Joyce, 2015), with lesbian or bisexual female students reported the lowest sense of school belonging. This may be due to these students perceiving other students as prejudiced (Galliher et al., 2004; Joyce, 2015). This existing research highlights the dynamic processes in schools and the challenges in changing school culture. Teachers play an important role in this process by using their authority to sanction discriminatory behaviors and communicate symbolic norms of exclusion or acceptance (Wilson, Griffin, & Wren, 2005).

1. Teacher support for LGBT youth

Teachers play an important role in creating, maintaining, and influencing a school's climate (Dessel, 2010a, Garnett et al., 2014; Poteat & Vecho, 2015; Wernick et al., 2014). Teachers hold authoritative positions in classroom settings, a space where they help develop and guide the language and behavior of students. Teachers also engage with students and school staff outside of the classroom to create and enforce norms in shared spaces (Vega, Crawford, & Van Pelt, 2012). Positive relationships with teachers can be protective for LGBT youth (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Saewyc et al., 2009). For instance, teachers can interrupt bias, model ways to counter bullying, and work directly as a supportive ally for LGBT youth (Vega, Crawford, Pelt, & J.-L, 2012; Wernick, Kulick & Inglehart, 2013; Wernick et al., 2014). This involves challenging the fixed binary categories of gender and sexual orientation in course content and in everyday speech (Toomey et al., 2012). As members of the dominant groups, teachers who identify as heterosexual and cisgender can be particularly influential by using their position to act as allies for LGBTQ students and modeling supportive behaviors for heterosexual/cisgender students who may be more likely to identify with and listen to these teachers (Vega et al., 2012).

While teachers can and do work to support students, some may perpetuate harassment and other heteronormative behaviors intentionally or unintentionally, arising from socio-cultural norms, personally held biases, and a lack of information about the harmfulness of such actions (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Dessel, 2010b; Gerouki, 2010). Although several states have policies explicitly protecting LGBTQ students from bullying and discrimination (Biegel, 2010), both students and teachers report LGBTQ bias and harassment goes unchallenged or is even encouraged by teachers and other administrators (O'Connell, Atlas, Saunders, & Philbrick, 2010; Peters, 2003; Wernick et al., 2014). A majority of LGBT students (67.%) who reported harassment or assault to school staff rated the school staff's response as ineffective, with 61.6% reporting that school staff "did nothing" (Kosciw et al., 2014, p. 35). These actions directly influence students and further contribute to a negative school culture and climate (Dragowski, McCabe, & Rubinson, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2014).

By contrast, support groups in schools, such as gay–straight alliances (GSAs), which may have teacher sponsors, are associated with improved outcomes of less victimization and better educational performance and mental health status for all students (Goodenow et al., 2006; Heck et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2013; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). Goodenow et al. (2006) found that LGBTQ youth are less likely than heterosexual youth to identify supportive school staff with whom they can talk. Students who can identify supportive educators tend to report decreased victimization, increased self-esteem, higher grades, and better attendance (Kosciw et al., 2013). Further, students who reported support from school staff were less likely to be threatened or to make multiple suicide attempts (Goodenow et al., 2006). Alternatively, Gastic and Johnson (2009) found that LGBTQ youth are more likely to have teachers as mentors than cisgender/heterosexual youth, although LGBTQ youth of color were less likely to have a mentor than white LGBTQ youth. Having a teacher as a mentor was associated with future educational attainment (Gastic & Johnson, 2009).

This study builds from extant literature by investigating the association between multiple aspects of teacher relationships with student self-esteem and academic achievement. In this study, we tested multiple aspects of teachers' roles in