

On the Margins: LGBTQ Youth in American Public Schools

A Commentary

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The authors featured in this volume of *Urban Education Research and Policy Annuals* address the needs and perspectives of populations who are often marginalized by public schools: students and teachers of color, English language learners, and parents in urban communities. These authors shed light on the differential treatment that members of these groups often receive in public school settings and propose ways that educators can better serve these populations. In so doing, the authors in this volume are contributing to an extensive body of literature that describes and prescribes education for low-income students, students of color, and urban students and families.

In recent years, scholarship has emerged to suggest the marginalization of another group of students in American public schools: sexual minority and gender non-conforming youth. Often referred to by the acronym LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer), these students are conservatively estimated to comprise

approximately five percent of the American middle and high school population, or one million students (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012).

Given the historic marginalization and discrimination LGBTQ individuals have faced in the United States, it is perhaps not surprising that these patterns of exclusion are mirrored in schools. Homosexuality was classified as a mental illness by the American Psychological Association until 1973, and was a criminal offense in many states until the Supreme Court ruled anti-sodomy laws unconstitutional in 2003 (Bryant, 2008). Recent court rulings have made marriage equality more widespread (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.), but LGBTQ people continue to face discrimination in the workplace: no federal law currently exists to protect LGBTQ individuals from discrimination (Human Rights Campaign, 2014), and LGBTQ people on average earn less than their heterosexual, cisgendered peers (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Although public opinion has shifted in recent years in favor of allowing same-sex marriage, a



recent study suggests that homophobia continues to be more widespread than surveys indicate (Franke-Ruta, 2013).

It is important to note also that schools have historically played a role in socializing students into normative gender roles and heterosexual relationships. Whether consciously or not, teachers begin to reinforce behaviors along gendered lines as early as preschool (Cahill & Adams, 1997). Horn (2007) points out that in later years, students also police each other's gender expression. School dress codes have long prescribed gender-specific notions of appropriate appearance (Smith, 2012). Mayo (2014) describes how rituals like school dances work to affirm and perpetuate heteronormativity.

The recently released 2013 National School Climate Survey, conducted biennially by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, provides insight into the school experiences of American LGBTQ youth (Kosciw, Grotky, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). While this most recent edition of the survey does indicate that schooling conditions for LGBTQ youth have improved somewhat since the inaugural survey in 2001, many of the statistics are still cause for alarm. Homophobic and transphobic language remains pervasive in American schools; over two-thirds of LGBTQ students surveyed reported hearing homophobic remarks frequently at school, and over half had heard them from teachers or other school staff. Physical safety is a concern as well; almost one-third of LGBTQ

students reported that they had skipped school in the last month due to feeling unsafe at school, while 36% had experienced physical harassment at school within the last year. The vast majority of these students could not see themselves reflected in school curricula or access any LGBTQ-related information through their school library. While the presence of a school Gay-Straight Alliance, or GSA, was found to be a protective factor, only about half of students reported that their school had one (Kosciw et al., 2014). Overall, the results of this survey suggest that schools are still not welcoming and safe places for sexual minority and gender non-conforming youth in the United States.

The National School Climate Survey serves as a reminder that discussions about school equity and inclusivity must include sexual orientation and gender expression as well as race, class, language, and culture. As several authors have pointed out, homophobia and constricting definitions of gender harm *all* students by limiting their self-expression, not just those who identify as LGBTQ (Horn & Nucci, 2003; Wyss, 2004; Horn, 2007; Mayo, 2014). Making schools into safe places for LGBTQ youth will contribute to the larger project of making schools safe for everyone.

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