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Beyond Bullying: The LGBT Student Experience

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BEYOND BULLYING:
The LGBT Student Experience
Popular opinion asserts that bullying at school has been around for decades, even centuries, and by some it is considered almost a right-of-passage of one’s school years. This opinion is often echoed with the statement “everyone is bullied in school.” But the issue is not about bullying, but about how the effects of bullying can manifest themselves for different students or groups of students.

Erica Weiler (2003) says the risk factors for students who identify as LGBT are much more severe than their heterosexual counterparts because “survival at school is the priority” (p. 10). If a student opts to keep their sexual identity hidden, there are issues of doubt and uncertainty. If a student chooses to come out, there are risks of discrimination, harassment, and often, violence. These risks then manifest themselves in students having difficulty learning or choosing not to participate in school activities. Weiler (2003) says these students are “three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to miss school because they feel unsafe” and that due to harassment, “they drop out of school at a rate that is approximately three times the national average” (p. 11). Weiler’s findings reflect other research suggesting LGBT students have higher rates of absenteeism, greater sense of self-doubt and lower self-esteem, and increased likelihood of experiencing depression and inflicting self-harm. Sadowski (2010) notes that “sexual minority youth are significantly more likely than other adolescents to experience depression and to abuse alcohol and illegal drugs, and that as many as one-third have attempted suicide” (p. 13).

The data reflecting LGBT student discrimination in K-12 schools in the past decade are alarming and disappointing: 84% of LGBT students report being verbally harassed due to their sexual orientation (Legrand, 2009, p. 13); 82.9% of these students say that school staff members never or rarely intervene when homophobic remarks are made (Legrand, 2009, p.13); more than 68% of LGBT students say they feel unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation (Weiler, 2003, p. 10); the severity of harassment and bullying tends to increase with age (Kelly, 2012, p. 18). These figures suggest the need for districts to examine issues of bullying and harassment, as well as looking at the indifference of school personnel, including both teachers and administrators. Clearly, something needs to change.

GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network) is a national education organization committed to ensuring safe schools for all students. Over the past fourteen years, they have conducted seven National School Climate surveys focused on LGBT youth and their experiences in secondary schools. The results of these surveys continue to be disturbing. However, they are an indicator that future waves of teachers preparing to enter the nation’s classrooms, need to be knowledgeable and understanding of the diversity of students they will face within a school, especially those who identify as LGBT.

While GLSEN compiles data for the entire country, the following chart refers specifically to the results compiled for the Michigan “state snapshot.”

### Statistics Concerning LGBT Students in Michigan Public Schools

- A majority of LGBT students in MI K-12 schools have heard negative remarks that are homophobic and sexist, related to gender expression.
  - 96% have heard the word ‘gay’ used in a negative way (e.g. “that’s so gay”).
  - 93% have heard the terms ‘fag’ and ‘dyke’ used regularly in school.

- 89% heard negative comments about how other students expressed their gender, such as a boy not acting “masculine” enough.

- 27% reported regularly hearing staff members make comments about a student’s gender expression.

- 19% regularly heard staff make homophobic remarks.
Colleagues (C): Give us a one-word description of what a good day at school feels like.

Alex: Safe

C: What about a bad day?

Alex: Harassment

C: During a common day in high school, do you experience verbal harassment, physical harassment, or acts of physical violence?

Alex: It depends on the person, my friends are very accepting, but if it’s someone from outside my group, I get called a faggot, and they just walk away. It’s how it goes. I’ve been physically harassed before—maybe a little pushing or people bumping into me and calling me “gay” or saying “Sorry faggot” but I’ve never experienced physical violence at school because of being gay.

C: Why do you think that happens?

Alex: I’m confident in who I am, but the way I dress and the way I look and talk is different. I think because I stand out some people don’t like that.

Nearly 4 in 10 (39%) experienced physical harassment such as being pushed or shoved, based on their sexual orientation.

- 15% were physically assaulted (punched, kicked or injured with a weapon) due to how they expressed their gender.
- 88% have had lies told or rumors started about them.
- 65% experienced cyberbullying (attacks via electronic harassment)
- 55% were sexually harassed
- 51% had property that was damaged or stolen

Most MI LGBT students have been victimized within the school setting, and the incidents were not reported to adult authorities.

- 82% were verbally harassed based on their sexual orientation.
- 68% were harassed based on how they expressed their gender.

82% were verbally harassed based on their sexual orientation.

- 60% never reported an incident to anyone on the school staff
- 60% never shared the details of an incident with a family member
- Only 27% said that when an incident was reported to a staff member, an effective intervention occurred.

MI LGBT students most often lack access to resources or support structures within a school.

- 96% could name at least one member on the school staff who supported LGBT students.
- 52% could name numerous (6 or more) members of the school staff who were supportive.
- Only 44% had a GSA (gay-straight alliance) group, or similar, at their school.
- Only 11% experienced any kind of positive presentation of LGBT persons or events in a historical context.

Data from Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network 2011 National School Climate Survey.
C: Alex, you were talking about your friends being supportive. What kind of support do you get from your friends and peers?

Alex: My friends do support me, and encourage me to be myself, and to take pride in who I am. My peers may give me a smile, and walk away which is great. It warms my heart, ya know?

C: Have you had friends or peers stick up for you when you are harassed?

Alex: Only close friends, and usually the same person.

C: How does that make you feel?

Alex: It makes me feel awesome.

C: Is this person your best friend?

Alex: She isn't my best friend, but she is a good friend. She is bi(sexual) and understands, so that helps.

C: Do you think your grades have suffered based on your high school experiences as being a gay youth?

Alex: Yes. I’m bullied before my 2nd hour class pretty often. I don’t really have any good friends in that class. When people say mean things I tend to think about it. It makes me distracted in class because I think about what they say and I don’t do well. If it felt comfortable in there, I would probably get more out of it. I’ve also skipped school because I don’t want to deal with getting called “gay” or a “faggot.” Sometimes I just get fed up. That hurts my grades, too.

C: Tell me about a GREAT experience you’ve had so far this year.

Alex: This year I was adopted by people who love me for who I am. It helps having support from adults like them. When people bully me at school it helps to know that other people are there for me. That support has been helpful in building my own self esteem.

C: What thing(s) about you should people know, but might misperceive based on the ‘gay’ label?

Alex: Being gay doesn’t define me. Most people think I’m feminine just because I’m gay. I do a lot of things any straight guy does. Just because I’m a gay guy it doesn’t mean I can’t be friends with straight guys, but a lot of times people think that way. I play sports, listen to the same music, and joke around like any other guy does.

C: Last question…what are your plans after high school?

Alex: I want to be a tattoo artist while I’m in college, and work towards becoming a PA (physician’s assistant) or a doctor. I want to help people be and feel beautiful and healthy.

*Alex is a pseudonym for the student interviewee. His real name has been omitted to ensure his privacy and confidentiality.

References


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