

The Unheard Voices: Communication of LGBTQ Concerns in Wisconsin Classrooms

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Research Question

- What challenges do Wisconsin educators face when addressing LGBTQ (Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer/Questioning) topics within their classrooms?

Review of Literature

- In 2009, Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported results from a survey revealing 9 out of 10 LGBT students had experienced harassment at school. Harassment led students to feel unsafe while at school (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2009).
- A review of literature in queer theory allowed us to better understand the presence of the term “queer” in scholarly literature.
 - Queer theory is used as an approach to critical analysis in which the focus is continually examining the intersection of homosexual and heterosexual spheres, as well as the hegemonic power imbalance maintained between the two (Dilley 1999).
 - Hegemony does not develop solely from ideological structures. Instead, power structures result from communicative interaction within social units and institutions, including families, workplaces, and friends (Lull, 1995).
 - Schools, by extension, are sites of hegemonic exchanges between power structures of heterosexual and homosexual spheres.
- In regard to LGBTQ issues in education, Griffin and Ouellett (2003) introduced historical trends of schools addressing LGBTQ matters and argued that schools are a “pivotal battleground in the ‘culture wars’ in the United States.”
 - Nichols (1999) described GLB youth as the “invisible minority” because of the common taboos surrounding homosexuality and the confusion about identity and sexuality during adolescence.
 - Lipkin (2002) noted that teachers are under pressure for their students to perform in standardized testing, which leaves less energy for reacting to LGBTQ issues. At the same time, while many teachers invite outside sources into their classrooms to discuss these issues, Lipkin presented his concern that this will provide no lasting change in the institution.
- Wisconsin, as a historically progressive state, has developed a reputation for its active participation in the advancement of LGBTQ policy and legislative development. According to Griffin and Ouellett (2003), in the 1980s, Wisconsin was one of two states that passed non-discrimination laws which included stipulations regarding sexual orientation, making it an important state to study for our research.
- Because policy is enacted and constructed through communication, it is an important lens through which to study the presence of LGBTQ topics in policy and education.

Method

Data Collection

- We utilized qualitative methods that allowed us to listen to the narratives of our participants (Lindlof & Taylor 2002).
- Participants were recruited via a snowball sampling technique.
- 16 semi-standardized interviews were conducted either in person or by telephone (Berg, 2004).
- Participants answered 15 predetermined interview questions followed by a demographic questionnaire.
- Demographic details:
 - Sample consisted of fourteen women and two men.
 - Ages ranged from 31-57 years and averaged 47 years.
 - Positions: middle school health educator (25%); high school health educator (25%); university professor of education (13%); high school English educator (13%); high school math educator (13%); middle school English educator (6%); retired grant writer (6%).
 - 50% had directly taught sexual education at either a high school or middle school level.
 - Education level of participants: master’s degree (38%); master’s plus credits (38%); bachelor’s degree (13%); doctorate degree (13%).
 - 25% identified as being gay/lesbian women, with the remaining participants identifying as heterosexual.
 - All participants were married or in a permanent same-sex relationship.
 - 80% of participants had two or more children.

Data Analysis

- Data was analyzed by using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000).
- Primary coding was conducted (Owen, 1984).
- Secondary coding followed an agreement on the predominance of certain themes.

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Results & Discussion

RO: What challenges do Wisconsin educators face when addressing LGBTQ topics within the classroom?

- One challenge that educators face is heteronormativity or heterosexism in their school systems, described by Chesir-Teran (2009) as “a systemic process of privileging heterosexuality relative to homosexuality, based on the assumption that heterosexuality and heterosexual power and privilege are normal and ideal” (p. 964).
 - Kate: “Maybe because teachers don’t feel comfortable....But I think it’s more the unknown. And because it’s something different than what some people have been brought up to believe. Even though it’s been around for a long time. So it’s more that educators are uncomfortable talking about it.”
 - Kate: “So it’s just like, I can only shake my head in a sense, because you know, because heterosexual, or heterosexism, is the assumption, I can’t just say I’m gay once and then like be out for the rest of my life, I have to say it again and again.”
 - Natalie: “You know, I think for me, what I deal with all the time is I’m a white, middle-class woman who has never really had to confront, and I’m heterosexual, too, so...there’s a lot of things that I am becoming aware of that I was oblivious to for most of my life because I didn’t have to be aware of them.”
 - Karrie: “But to make it something normal, you know like mentioning, I mean...in English class there’s so many authors who are gay. Let’s not hide that or suppress that....It’s a step in the process the same way that everyone we used to read used to be white.”
- Educators perceive a risk of resistance from administrators, parents, and the community associated with incorporating LGBTQ perspectives in curriculum and in classroom settings.
 - Claire: “I don’t know what the administration would say. I just feel like they would be like, “Oh God, don’t touch that one.” And I think the community would not want that taught.”
 - Karrie: “I think the self-censorship and the self-fear is actually worse in terms of what limits from bringing GLBTQ issues. Just knowing that you know, of the 30 people I’m talking to at any given time, one of them could take this to a level that would make it hellacious for me.”
 - Amelia: “I do believe I’d be opening up a Pandora’s Box. And I alone am not strong enough to confront that.”
- Educators report feeling challenged by a lack of training on how to effectively address and incorporate LGBTQ perspectives into their curriculum and classroom. Many specifically said they would like additional training in these areas.

- Claire: “We get training on all of these things, we get training on autism, and we get trained on kids who have LD [learning disabilities] and all these reading issues, I mean we get trained on all this stuff....I’ve never seen, how do you deal with kids in classrooms that are struggling with their sexual identity?....And you know, actually, I think that should be included.”
- Amelia: “I think that there needs to be training for teachers about the facts behind the biological facts surrounding this lifestyle. I think that as research becomes more complete, I think there’s more and more research studies done, I think that’s where teachers will buy in because we’re very factual people.”
- Elizabeth: “I think that the second biggest thing is that they [teachers] just feel like they don’t know enough to be able to talk about it.”

Conclusions & Implications

Conclusions

- Structuration Theory, as defined by Poole and McPhee (2005), posits that while systems and structures produce particular practices, these systems and structures are simultaneously reproduced as people participate in those practices (p. 175).
- The experiences of educators in our study affirmed the relationship between practices, systems and structures advanced by Structuration Theory.

- Educators repeatedly said that they wanted administration to be more supportive, saying that if support came “from the top down,” they would be able to incorporate LGBTQ topics into curriculum and the classroom.

- However, the educators who seemed to report the most incorporation of LGBTQ topics were those who had taken risks in order to make LGBTQ issues present in curriculum and classroom climate. These teachers eventually impacted the policies of their schools.

- Therefore, while heterosexist educational systems surely prevent teachers from incorporating LGBTQ topics, the proactive practices of educators very much positively affect these systems.

Implications

- For educators, this is an important reassurance that small steps do make a large impact on school policy and students’ lives.
- Administrators can work to be attentive to what their teachers feel strongly about and then seek to provide them space to express those passions.
- Community members and parents, then, may be encouraged that their support makes a deep impact on school climate and policies. Educators expressed their hesitation to address LGBTQ concerns because administrators are convinced the community is not prepared. However, if the community is transparent about their support, there may be a substantial difference in schools.



Fiorello, P. (2009)