

The Need For a LGBTQ Inclusive Curriculum and Professional Training of Teachers and School Staff In Gender and Sexual Diversity

Dr. Suparna Bakaya

Abstract: This paper aims to comprehensively explore the unique challenges including bullying, harassment and mental health issues faced by LGBTQ students within educational spaces in India and abroad. An effort has been made to understand these challenges as influenced by the social and political nature of stereotyping and prejudice. It also highlights the critical role of social policy change in creating more inclusive educational spaces for sexual minority youth. There is strong evidence of greater self-acceptance and self-esteem and reduced mental health issues when coming out is supported by schools and colleges. The need for the implementation of a LGBTQ inclusive educational curriculum and professional training for sexual and gender diversity has been discussed.

Introduction

LGBTQ is an inclusive term that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer individuals who have non-heterosexual or cisgender preferences. This paper discusses the unique challenges and mental health concerns faced by LGBTQ students within educational spaces and the requirement for policy based, socio-educational reform to alleviate these challenges. Despite increased acceptance of the LGBTQ community, alarming statistics continue to emerge from educational settings that demonstrate how resistant prejudice can be to elimination. Prejudice in schools and college results in wide-spread bullying of LGBTQ students. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), bullying is defined as an aggressive behaviour in which intentional harm is inflicted by one individual upon another repeatedly through physical contact, verbally, or subtle actions. The bullied individual is not responsible for the bullying and has trouble defending themselves. Being bullied can result in internalizing and externalizing symptoms such as depression, social withdrawal and conduct issues (Sigurdson et al., 2015) which may continue well into early adulthood. National data from the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey in the U.S. showed that compared to their straight peers, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students report higher levels of cyber bullying (27% vs. 13%) as well as physical bullying on school grounds (33% vs. 17%) (Kann, et al. 2018). Further, in a national U.S. study that focused on bullying and harassment, 80% of LGBTQ adolescents reported bullying victimization or peer harassment (Ybarra et al., 2015).

A survey among sexual/gender minority youth in Tamil Nadu (UNESCO, 2018) conducted through focus groups, in-depth interviews and a structured questionnaire found that almost all the participants had experienced harassment in school because of their gender expression or perceived sexual orientation. Forms of bullying varied according to grade levels – primary, middle school or higher secondary. Bullying occurred in a variety of settings such as classrooms,

washrooms, school terrace and the playground. More than half the participants reported that co-students acted as bystanders and did not intervene to stop the bullying. Only 18% participants reported bullying incidents to school authorities. The actions taken by authorities included asking participants to change their feminine mannerisms and ignoring the incident. In some cases authorities took action against the person who bullied them. Parents often reacted to such complaints by asking their children to change their mannerisms/behaviour or ignore the incident. Many participants said that when they were subjected to bullying they either cried, suffered silently or resisted perpetrator in some way. About 29% participants skipped school for several days to avoid further problems. The fear of a backlash prevented many youth from reporting the instances of bullying to school authorities and other adults.

Allport in 1954 in his book *The Nature of Prejudice*, said that “It is a serious error to ascribe prejudice and discrimination to any single taproot, reaching into economic exploitation, social structure, the mores, fear, aggression, sex conflict, or any other favored soil. Prejudice stemmed from multiple causes and must be analyzed in terms of the interaction of personality and society” (as cited in Putilo, Haddad, & Doherty, 2014). This means that discrimination and prejudice are much beyond individual personality traits and should be seen through the broader social political lens. Thus, for any progressive change to happen, the government policies must change with time so that people start to accept it as a way of life. Such a social political change was observed in the sub-continent in September 2018, when the Supreme Court of India made a landmark decision by decriminalizing all consensual sex among adults including homosexual sex (BBC, 2018). Following that, in 2019, a ban was placed on medically unnecessary sex normalizing surgeries on children born with intersex variations by the state of Tamil Nadu in India. In June 2021, the Madras High Court ordered India's National Medical Commission to ask publishers and medical schools to edit their existing textbooks and curricula to exclude any discriminatory, derogatory, and unscientific citing of the LGBTQ people.

Although such developments are an indication of progress, sexual minorities still experience many problems due to lack of social inclusion and acceptance from the society. There have been reports of LGBTQ youth committing suicides in India and other parts of the world due to stigmatization and ostracization. In a recent incident, a grade 10 student from a well-known school close to Delhi died by suicide leaving behind a note accusing his school of bullying (The Quint, 2022). It was reported that the student had been harassed many times over his sexuality and had reported the matter to school authorities. However no timely action was taken. This lack of action may be tied to nonconformity to traditional cultural norms (by being non-heterosexual or non-cisgender) being viewed as “sexually immoral.” Individuals in collective cultures including India, Malaysia and Pakistan have been found to be more strongly opinionated and endorsing of their beliefs regarding protection of cultural norms and “honour” as compared to British Whites (Lowe, et al., 2021). An example of cultural tightness was seen in December 2021, when India's National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) had to take down their newly developed LGBTQ friendly teacher training module due to opposition from India's right-wing politicians (Hindustan Times, 2021). Right wing populist parties, individuals with strong religious affiliation and people with lesser education are usually less accepting of sexual minorities as opposed to left wing political parties, individuals with weaker religious affiliation and those with higher education (Poushter & Kent, 2020). The forcible push that occurred in November 2021 on the NCERT in India by the right-wing politicians to pull out the training manual on the inclusion of transgender children in schools unfortunately affirms such strong heteronormative beliefs, leaving no room for acceptability for sexual minorities. This is even though the first audit of NCERT curriculum to make it LGBTQ inclusive was in 2014.

LGBTQ youth report that they are expected to have a heterosexual orientation in school and feel misplaced as a result. Furthermore, many youths from small cities report not having enough knowledge of sexual orientation and what being non-heterosexual or non-cisgender means, which adds to further confusion in the development of their authentic self and sexual identity (Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015). Often such children do not know how to stand up for themselves when being bullied due to a lack of any language or community that teaches children how to act in such a scenario (Goldstein et al., 2021). This is also because there is almost no regular conversation on the topic of sexual identity as these topics are generally considered taboo, especially in Asian cultures. There is also an overall lack of discussion, knowledge, and facts about homosexuality in schools, media and society which creates confusion and uncertainty around the topic of sexual identities, often creating a feeling of alienation among the sexual

minorities (Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015). As a result, even though friends may share their feelings and thoughts about their self-identity and sexual preferences with each other, there is a huge vacuum when it comes to having such discussions with one's family and/or teachers (Wei & Lui, 2019). In fact, research shows that coming out to non-accepting people may lead to threats, bullying and reduced self-esteem (Wei & Lui, 2019). Some of the negative communication and behaviours received by LGBTQ individuals from their family or friends after 'coming out' include denial, religious talk, insensitive or inappropriate questions, comments, shaming statements, and aggression (Manning, 2015).

The impact of discrimination against the LGBTQ is well documented across the globe and it is important to be dealt with. It would perhaps be easier to tackle the stigma associated with same-sex relationships and sexual minorities if it is made part of the educational system where children are taught about non-heteronormative and non-cisgender identities from an early age in life. Children at a younger age are more open to ideas and their views are evolving and developing as compared to adults who may be set in their ways of thinking. However, this is no small task and requires change at the level of policy making and educational framework to allow classrooms to be a safe space for the existence of sexual minorities and discussions on sexual and gender diversity.

The Need for Educational Reform and LGBTQ Inclusive Curriculum and Teacher Training

LGBTQ students report better physical, social, and academic development when they are part of a supportive school environment that is inclusive and supportive as opposed to a hostile school environment which is aggressive and discriminatory. The only way to break political and social stigma is the change that must be brought about by law and policy reform. Research shows that social support reduces the negative mental health effects of minority stressors such as homophobia and homonegativism (Berg et al., 2016), and cultural and social support experienced by the sexual minorities helps them develop self-acceptance and 'coming out' at an earlier age than later (Rosati et al., 2020). A 30-minute online intervention called RISE (Releasing Internalized Stigma for Empowerment) showed a significant decrease in the level of internalized homophobia in gay men and a modified version of RISE too showed reduced internalized homophobia for cisgender gay men, bisexual people, and transgender people (Israel, et al., 2021).

Youth also express a strong desire to educate themselves about LGBTQ and benefit enormously from engaging in healthy discussions about sexual identity and preferences (Manning, 2015). Addressing non-heteronormativity and a non-cisgender way of life is not only realistic but also very much needed in the present times to provide support to the

LGBTQ youth at risk and to sensitise heteronormative individuals towards the rights of the sexual minorities.

Parasocial contact hypothesis which is an extension of the Contact Hypothesis or Intergroup Contact Theory given by Allport in 1954 states that, people's prejudice towards an outgroup can reduce through mass-mediated interaction such as television. This is especially true when such individuals have limited opportunity to interact face to face in real time with the minority. (Schiappa et al., 2005). Individuals who are exposed to the outgroups or sexual minorities or when engaged in imaginary discussions with the members of the LGBTQ community, show lower prejudice due to an increase in self-understanding and a decrease in relational uncertainty as supported by the parasocial contact hypothesis (Waggoner, 2022). LGBTQ youth attending schools that have gay straight student alliance (GSAs) report experiencing less homophobic comments, feeling safer and more supported at school by teachers and staff, reduced victimization, less mental health issues and better academic achievement (Heck et al., 2013)

The implicit stigmatization associated with being a sexual minority usually extends beyond the explicit bullying that one experiences with peers which highlights the need for a more inclusive curriculum. A curriculum is social, political, ideological, and communicative in nature which is why a LGBTQ inclusive curriculum is required to bring about change at the societal and political level in the acceptance of sexual minorities. A change in the language used in texts and communication at school which is largely heteronormative is essential to create inclusivity for sexual minorities. Use of queer texts in classrooms would help bring to attention the issue of being a sexual minority amongst all students creating normalcy about it and furthering open and healthy discussions on the same. Having students participate in book clubs where they themselves choose the queer inclusive texts and then engage in open discussions or identifying and discussing LGBTQ themes present in literature is another way to promote inclusivity of queer representative texts in the curriculum (Page, 2017) and create feelings of positivity among students regarding gender and sexual diversity (Batchelor et al., 2018). Questioning texts through a queer pedagogical lens can shed light upon the heteronormative norms that exist in the texts, schools and society at large helping to bring about a radical change in the existing schooling practices (Page, 2016). As reported by GLSEN, 2011 and Kosciw et al., 2016 (cited in Page, 2017), use of an inclusive curriculum helps LGBTQ students feel safer and more engaged at school, better accepted by peers, and engage in less absenteeism. Evidence for this can be found when looked at educational systems that are LGBTQ inclusive.

One such example is the Canadian Educational System which has been LGBTQ inclusive since 1998 and continues to create strong support for gender and sexual diversity in

education (Meyer, Taylor, and Tracey, 2015). By and large, Canadians demonstrate high acceptance for the LGBTQ community. As per the Pew Research Centre report of 2020, Canadians are now more likely to say homosexuality should be accepted by society; 85% say this, compared with 80% found six years ago and 70% found in 2007 (Poushter & Kent, 2020). Educational level policy changes in Canada can be seen through the implementations made at the provincial levels in schools such as through the British Columbia's School Act which states that "teachers should ensure that classroom instruction, assessment, and resources reflect sensitivity to diversity and incorporate positive role portrayals, relevant issues, and themes such as inclusion, respect, and acceptance. This includes diversity in family compositions and gender orientation". This has further led to sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) related initiatives including working together with the GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) clubs, organizing anti bullying events, and providing teachers with lesson ideas and resources to make classrooms SOGI inclusive (Kendrick, 2019). The document 'Seeing the Rainbow' advocated by the Canadian Teachers' Federation and the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2002) is one example of promoting an LGBTQ inclusive curriculum. An Additional Qualification course in LGBTQ issues in Education was set up by the Ontario College of Teachers in 2010 along with the anti-homophobia training run by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation in 2012. Another such example is AGAPE, which is a focus group formed by the faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, Canada, to discuss issues related to sex, sexual and gender differences in education and culture regarding the needs of sexual minorities. Other developments include programs such as Wells, 2007 in Alberta, Pride Education Network, 2013 in British Columbia and Pride in Education, 2013 in New Brunswick (Kitchen and Bellini, 2013).

This does not mean that there is no incidence of heterosexism, transphobia and/or homophobia in Canadian schools and some provinces are further behind than others when it comes to the creation of safety, inclusiveness, and support in schools because of their religious and political affiliation with heteronormative and binary norms (Grace & Wells, 2006). However, since it is mandatory that every student and teacher who is a sexual minority person be protected at school, the LGBTQ inclusive education policy enables the teachers and school staff to implement the anti-discriminatory laws in schools. Research has found that an LGBTQ inclusive curriculum in Canadian schools helps teachers develop readiness and competence to teach and discuss the existence of non-binary sexual orientations and gender identities (Batchelor et al., 2018). Teachers who have received adequate training in gender and sexual diversity are better able to deal with and intervene, if necessary, in incidences of student bullying due to them being a sexual minority. An inclusive curriculum and teacher training also sets the environment to help students think

about gender and sexual diversity and develop respect and responsibility of ethical behaviour towards their sexual minority peers (Grace & Wells, 2006). Thus, it can be said that peer support and education including, in-school mentorship programs, drop-in groups for LGBTQ youth and after school programs about gender and sexual diversity helps promote social, emotional, and physical safety among LGBTQ youth.

On the other hand, countries that lack ethical guidelines and policies regarding sexual minorities and LGBTQ inclusivity in the curriculum leads to difficulties especially those for teachers and staff with high conformity to heteronormative norms and strong religious affiliations as this may inhibit them from offering the much-needed support to LGBTQ students in school (Wei and Liu, 2019). At times teachers in certain schools do opt towards using queer text to make the curriculum more LGBTQ friendly, but this is a choice and not a requirement as it is not part of the curriculum (Page, 2017). Furthermore, simply opting for the queer text reading without having students engage in healthy meaningful post reading discussions does more harm than good as it may create confusion due to questions left unanswered (Page, 2017). Furthermore, such healthy discussions without adequate teacher training in the use of a gender and sexual diversity inclusive curriculum are solely dependent upon the credibility and insight of a teacher. Additionally, change is also needed in the field of psychotherapy where the major theoretical models are rooted in heterosexual normative research and do not apply well to those who do not confirm to these norms. There is a strong need for specific training to develop competence when working with sexual minorities (Moleiro & Pinto, 2015).

The challenge of implementing an inclusive curriculum and teacher training regarding the same can be harder in smaller rural areas as there is usually less exposure to sexual minorities in small cities. The age and religious affiliations of the teachers too may create a conflict with the acceptance of a LGBTQ inclusive curriculum. Older teachers may feel less comfortable than younger teachers to talk about non heteronormative issues in class as they may have spent most of their lives living according to heteronormative standards. Thus, unless an overall change in the curriculum is brought about, the positive acceptance of LGBTQ youth in the educational system would depend upon the discretion of the instructor. A lack of an overall curriculum that sets the rules of inclusivity of sexual minorities itself creates a sense of exclusivity and gives society the message that sexual minorities are not relevant enough to be considered equal to the heteronormative people.

Research also shows that unfortunately, simply having an inclusive curriculum is not enough if the intention behind the change is missing. The ongoing program of gender and sexuality diversity teacher education (GSDTE) in the U.S. attributes its ineffectiveness to a lack of intention for change in the rights of the LGBTQ people (Goldstein et al., 2021). Incentives can be taken by the educational authorities and

school administrators to find ways such as workshops and training to support teachers in developing an inclusive curriculum and communication for the LGBTQ youth in school. These trainings or workshops can help provide teachers and school staff a safe space to discuss their queries and personal beliefs or religious views that play a big role in the acceptance or resistance of sexual minorities (Wei & Liu, 2019). Teachers report feeling more confident in providing intervention for bullying against youth of sexual minorities when they have received proper training and guidelines regarding the same (Hudson, 2017).

At times teachers and students who follow heteronormative rules may feel that simply maintaining silence and not engaging in active discrimination against the LGBTQ students would be enough to make them feel inclusive. Unfortunately, this is not true as silence and absence of active discrimination cannot replace open healthy discussions about sexual and gender diversity which creates a feeling of genuine inclusivity for the LGBTQ students (Hudson, 2017). Silence and invisibility about one's sexual identity makes one feel alienated and rejected and increases mental health issues. As mentioned by Sears in 2009 (cited in Hudson, 2017), the lack of LGBTQ inclusive curriculum may not be to 'protect children's innocence' as it is projected to be but rather a desire of the adults (parents, teachers, and staff) to protect themselves from inner reflection, embarrassment, or controversy.

Conclusion

Based on the above-mentioned review of literature, it can be said that there is a strong required for change in people's heteronormative mindsets so that a greater acceptance of sexual minorities can be created in society. An understanding that sexual minorities face unique challenges at school and in their personal lives; use of non-heteronormative and non-cisgender texts in class; and engagement in healthy constructive discussions in school about sexual identity and gender diversity, is crucial to the social political change required for the creation of a LGBTQ inclusive society. Although some changes can be seen in the Western countries regarding the creation of a more LGBTQ inclusive curriculum, this is still a dream in collective cultures such as India. Taking necessary steps in acknowledging that there is a need for change in the social cultural norms of the society is the only way to move forward.

The Way Ahead

An educational reform in the existing heteronormative and binary curriculum towards a LGBTQ inclusive curriculum is essential to help develop an acceptance of sexual minorities amongst children and youth from a young age. There is a strong need for professional training about sexual and gender diversity to help teachers and staff manage their personal issues such as religion and affiliation with heteronormative and cisgender norms that prevents them from creating LGBTQ inclusive

classrooms and reducing discrimination and bullying against sexual minorities. Once a LGBTQ inclusive curriculum is implemented, anti-discriminatory laws can be exercised in schools that prevent the sexual minority youth against abuse and victimization. Only a social political reform can help create a LGBTQ inclusive world where they are given the respect, rights, and privileges they deserve to live happy healthy lives. Hopefully that day shall come soon.

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