

Sexuality and education a new approach social work essay



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Introduction to the Issue

In the modern education setting, there is a need for teachers to recognize the challenges associated with children who grow up with sexual orientation that is different from the norm. Although there has been a significant increase in the visibility and acceptance of sexual minorities in western society over the last thirty years (Alemeida et al., 2008), there are still substantive social barriers which affect the mental health of youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or queer (LGTBQ) (Espelage et al., 2008) which extend into the classroom, the home and community. The purpose of this research paper is to explore the challenges faced by LGBTQ students, and the ways in which these students can be better supported in the school system. For example, the results of the social difficulties associated with identifying as LGBTQ can result in typical responses to high stress, ranging from binge drinking, alcoholism and drug abuse (Espelage et al., 2008) to depression and suicide (Alemeida et al., 2009) to teen pregnancy as a social protection against homophobia (Saewyc et al., 2008). At the same time as direct interaction on a social level affects the mental health and psychological stability of sexual minority youth, there are internal struggles linked to normative sexual expectations that also have an impact, namely internalized homophobia (Alemeida et al., 2009). Although teachers are aware of many of these struggles. It is also true that education normative structures indicates that that heterosexual identities are normal, and other identities, such as gay, lesbian and bisexual identities, are placed outside the fields of acceptability. Youdell (2005) posits that " the school is a key site for the proliferation, modification and incessant inscription of these

discourses and therefore, the production and representation of ' compulsory heterosexuality" (p. 253). Given these social structures, the thesis of this research paper is that because of the way in which our educational system is constructed forces students to interpret and understand information in a certain way, this information is therefore reflective of the overarching hegemonic structure. As a result, it also becomes difficult for teachers and administrators in the school system to address the heterogeneous nature of mental health issues and social challenges linked to being a young person with a minority sexual identity without addressing the necessary normative shifts in their school's culture, and the community's culture, at the same time. To achieve this goal, the thesis of Stockton (2009), namely that the nature of childhood may be different from what adults perceive it to be, needs to be explored.

Challenges in Identifying as LGBTQ in School

As Vanden Berghe et al. (2010) note, most young people begin to recognize their sexual identity at the early onset of puberty, around age eleven or twelve, and begin to negotiate their sexual self-concept at around age fifteen. This means that the process of identifying with their sexuality may often come well before children are at the age where they are acting on their sexual inclinations. Nonetheless, as Youdell (2005) writes, " it has been argued that schools and sexuality are constructed as fundamentally discrete and that the people who populate schools- students and teachers- are constructed as intrinsically non-sexual" (p. 251). This means that there is an expectation in schools that children will not discuss sexual matters, even when these matters pertain to their own well-being and ability to develop as

students and as human beings. At the same time, once non-heterosexual adolescents have come to terms with their sexual orientation, they face another dilemma: whether to keep it a secret, known as staying in the closet, or to tell close friends and relatives, known as coming out. For LGBTQ youth, this is an important decision that could have lifelong implications. Rosario et al. (2001) describe the coming out process as an important step in identity development. Four important components of the coming out process are: identification of one's sexual orientation, engaging in activities related to the gay community such as recreation and social activities, the development of attitudes towards LGBTQ identity, and the disclosure of LGBTQ status to others (Rosario et al., 2001). Savin-Williams (2001) describes coming out to parents as one of the most difficult developmental milestones for LGBTQ youth. Receiving favorable responses from supportive adults may aid in the development of a positive gay identity (Rosario et al., 2001). A Lack of communication about sexuality, however, can lead to significantly negative experiences for students who identify as LGBTQ in many areas of the country. In a Canadian study, researchers Williams, Connolly, Pepler, and Craig (2005) found that social stigma complicated the adjustment of non-heterosexual youth and that difficulties with psychosocial adjustment were related to both a lack of social support and increased victimization experienced by the LGBTQ population. In their study they assessed the link between sexual orientation, psychosocial adjustment, victimization and social support and found that non-heterosexual youth experienced less social support, greater victimization, and more adjustment difficulties than heterosexual youth. This process can be exacerbated by a number of different mitigating factors such as the prevalence of bullying, the physical

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sites of bullying experiences and their social meaning, perpetrator characteristics, institutional and community factors, the outcome of bullying, as well as barriers and strategies to address bullying (Mishna et al., 2009). Even with early disclosure of sexual orientation to supportive teachers and overt support from their families, verbal victimization at school is also highly perceived by youth (Espelage et al., 2008). The self-definition of gay youth may be hampered as they face isolation and alienation. They may sense that their feelings are not valued by society (Espelage et al., 2008). As a result, emerging gay youth may try to deny their orientation by passing for straight and devaluing their own feelings by hiding their true social identity (Santrock, 2006). Research shows that it is not a lack of support, therefore, but unsupportive social interactions that have the greatest direct effect on mental well-being of sexual minority youth over the long term (Vanden Berghe et al., 2010). In other words, instances of direct unsupportive actions on the part of sexual minority youth's families, friends or even acquaintances may be the most significant factors in their psychological health. At the same time as direct interaction on a social level affects the mental health and psychological stability of sexual minority youth, there are internal struggles linked to normative sexual expectations that also have an impact, namely internalized homophobia (Alemeida et al., 2009; Baiocco et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2009; Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010). As a result, it becomes difficult to address the heterogeneous nature of mental health issues and social challenges linked to being a young person with minority sexual identity (Davis et al., 2009; Hirsch et al., 2008; Mishna et al., 2009). As Espelage et al. (2008) note, there is a need to recognize that sexual minority youth who are subject to ongoing homophobic teasing are naturally more deeply

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affected on a psychological level. Hatzenbuehler (2009) demonstrates that stigma-related stress creates elevations in the function of a young person's general emotions, because of the cognitive dissonance created by the disconnect between their personal feelings and their social experiences. This can lead to utilization of alcohol or drugs as a substitute for emotional balance (Baiocco et al., 2010; Espelage et al., 2008; Padilla et al., 2009). The perception of support can mitigate stress, but it may or may not relieve it in a substantive way (Davis et al., 2009; Hirsch et al., 2008) unless the community itself shifts its values (Gorman-Murry, 2008). What is clear is that over time, without a means to address the issue, youth are at risk to develop more ingrained internalized homophobia behaviors such as self-harm and more significant mental health challenges, which can lead to more desperate behaviors such as suicide (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010). For these reasons, the school, as a symbol of LGBTQ students' community, needs to take a substantive role in addressing these issues, especially given the fact that students' parents may not be able to achieve that goal for their children.

Supporting LGBTQ Students in School

Support can be found and teachers need to be able to help LGBTQ students find it. As Clouse (2007) posits, there are four distinct types of support that a young LGBTQ person in crisis needs to access, namely; emotional support, informational support, instrumental support, and appraisal support. Parents are not always able to provide all types of support, however, due to time and informational constraints (Espelage et al., 2008; Hirsch et al., 2008).

Research suggests that diffusing tensions within the social network of the school or community through informational support and instrumental

support may help the overarching challenges causing social and mental distress for sexual minority youth (Hirsch et al., 2008), which is why teachers support is often both important and imperative. This, according to the research, could take the form of community and LGBTQ peer advocacy, comprehensive health care, social and medical education, or simply a safe environment where sexual minority youth might perceive support (Davis et al., 2009; Hirsch et al., 2008). At the same time, reflecting the findings of Stockton (2009), much of the research indicated that the experiences of youth with an LGBTQ identity may also differ from those of heterosexual students, which can often make it difficult for teachers to assist. Although not all gay and bisexual youth self-identify as such, sexual orientation can be expressed through various forms of same gender attraction, including sexual behavior (Savin-Williams, 2005). Yet with only 20 per cent of gay, LGBTQ youth reporting that their first same-sex experience occurred within a romantic relationship context (Savin-Williams, 2005), these youth face unique obstacles to their relational experience and development. Diamond (2003) stated that the actual experience and meaning LGBTQ adolescents give to their romantic relationships may have surface similarities to their heterosexual peers, but closer examination reveals important structural and functional differences concerning motives, characteristics, and functions of these relationships. For example, sexual activity can function as a means of exploring one's sexuality, which may explain why sexual minority youth report high rates of sexual activity with other sex partners. LGBTQ adolescents face significant obstacles in identifying potential relationship partners, negotiating heteronormative dating scripts, external and internalized homophobia, lack of support due to secretiveness about the

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relationship, and other problems unknown or rare to heterosexual youth (Diamond, 2003). Teachers need to be equipped to identify issues and manage the need of LGBTQ students as they arise. The first step towards a solution, according to the literature, is understanding how gender and sexuality issues actually work, rather than how these issues are defined by cultural norms (Davis et al., 2009; Hirsch et al., 2008). The literature warns about the problem of dividing children and young people into binary categories, such as boy and girl, and assuming that all children will fit neatly into those categories (Stockton, 2009). Teachers need to be aware of the fact that young people may have different gender expression, sexualities, and identities, and many of these will not be the same (Bechdel, 2006). Children and youth will not always know how to talk about their experiences and feelings with many other people, because it is not acceptable to be the person they are on the inside within their families and communities (Bechdel, 2006). From a sociology of education position, the message and the voice are therefore intertwined. As Arnot and Reay (2007) posit, "student voices heard in process of consultation are not in fact independently constructed "voices" rather they are "the messages" created by particular pedagogic contexts. Teachers cannot by definition separate out pupil voices from message since "voice" is always announced or realized in message" (p. 318). The thrust of this argument is that the social constructs within which teachers and students operate are necessarily part of the challenge. Without a proper support system, LGBTQ students struggle and dealt with isolation. From a teacher's point of view, therefore, one has to understand that not only will many children explore and connect with different gender identities, but other children can have different reactions to these identities (Davis et al. <https://assignbuster.com/sexuality-and-education-a-new-approach-social-work-essay/>)

al., 2009; Hirsch et al., 20080. These reactions can include positivity, encouragement, shock, negativity, and many more. In addition, these reactions can extend to the teaching and administrative staff of a school, depending on the belief systems of the adults at the school. It is the teachers and school administrator's job, however, to protect children from negativity and outwards signs of ostracism. This includes paying attention to the use of negative stereotypes inside and outside the classroom, as well as negative or homophobic words in order to create a culture of inclusion. Teachers need to be able to understand the experience of children and young people who grow up with feelings and identities that are different from their peers, so that they can help support their personal development and self-esteem over the long run.

Conclusion

Because sexual minority behaviors were thought of, at many points in history, as a capital offence, the development of sexual identity was strongly aligned with becoming either socially acceptable or socially abhorrent. In this way, the adoption of a gay persona in Western societies has become significant. Outwardly identifying as sexual minority in the public sphere, for this culture, meant at one point in time, challenging the normative structure of society and therefore permitting oneself to become stratified at a lower class. There is a political function in taking on this role, which surpasses the personal and moves into the social. This means that sexual minority youth who come out are publicizing what some people perceive as their private actions or thoughts. A child developing into an adult, however, has to purposefully deal with the reality of the conflict between their natural

adolescent shift into a sexual person and social constructs of their community which limits the naturalness of that development. As well, parental support is a key factor, but it may or may not be able to prevent the development of internalized homophobia borne by normative social values due to the influences of a child's school community and culture. Given these findings, it can be said that the thesis of this research paper is true, namely, because of the way in which our educational system is constructed forces students to interpret and understand information in a certain way, this information is therefore reflective of the overarching hegemonic structure. As a result, it also becomes difficult for teachers and administrators in the school system to address the heterogeneous nature of mental health issues and social challenges linked to being a young person with minority sexual identity without addressing the necessary normative shifts in their schools culture, and the community's culture, at the same time. Stockton (2009) believes that it is possible to move beyond a culture of advantage and towards a culture of inclusion, but believes that this change must be radical it and must have a gendered exposition in order for it to help shift society towards a more egalitarian and collective world. This is the only way that schools may be able to support a shift in the direction of caring, co-operation, dreaming, humility, empowerment, hope, humor, dignity, respect, trust, and love in the community as a whole. A teacher or even a school cannot be expected to ensure that this shift happens by independent efforts, however, but rather the move towards engaging LGBTQ youth must happen on a broader basis in order for changes to be able to be sustained over the long run. Successful reforms tend to be those that are formulated by, and out of needs articulated by, the leading community. Furthermore, prevailing

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education values are rooted in the particular functional roles of administrators and teachers, and as a result the degree of commitment to particular educational activities is governed by the local school culture. A policy to support LGBTQ students in itself may not work, but a change in overarching practices connected with the school and its constituents may have a positive impact on the culture of the learning environment over time. To this end, developing a school vision and establishing school goals, offering individualized support, modeling best practices and important organizational values for the teachers, and demonstrating high performance expectations must all be a part of a framework for supporting LGBTQ students and recognizing the unique challenges associated with children who grow up with a sexual orientation that is different from the norm.