



Schooling “Normal”: Constructing Acceptance & Inclusion for Sexual Minority Children & Youth in Schools

Key Concepts

- ▲ ALBGTTIQQ is a common acronym that includes Asexual, Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgendered, Two-Spirited, Intersexed, Queer & Questioning.
- ▲ There is evolution of gender & sexual identity from early childhood to young adulthood and beyond.
- ▲ Sexual orientation is caused by multiple biological & socio-cultural factors working in concert with each other.
- ▲ Sexual minority students are at increased risk of isolation, name-calling, bullying, violence and poor educational outcomes.
- ▲ Sexual minority teachers are at increased risks of sexual harassment, termination & isolation.
- ▲ Policies & attitudes to combat this negative school & work climate must come from the top & be enforced.



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The inclusion of ALBGTTIQQ children and youth within schools remains a persistent issue primarily because the topic of sexuality remains an area of discomfort for many adults. Further, unlike most other marginalized groups, there is a deep history and legacy of morality attached to sexuality originating from various belief systems. However, at the heart of schooling is the inclusion of all children and youth. All who enter the doors of a school should be able to achieve the fundamental right of an equitable, fair and relevant education. Today that is not the case.

A key issue when reviewing inclusion of sexual minorities in schools is how little is done in this area, partly because the topic remains taboo and there remains deep resistance within schools to research the sexual identities of students and the experiences related to those identities. Since 1999, in the United States a biannual survey carried out by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) is done to check school climates and experiences of sexual minority youth. In Canada the first such school climate survey is in the midst of being undertaken by EGALE (Equality for Gays & Lesbians Everywhere), but it has been beset by challenges because school boards have refused to participate. If researchers cannot get in to schools to understand the issues, school officials cannot address them.

This review provides a brief social history of the evolution of sexual minorities, followed by the biological research done to better understand the embodiment of sexual identity. From these points the reader will uncover that sexual identity is not something that miraculously blossoms at the age of 13, or the onset of puberty, but is already in the making as young as the ages of 4, 5 and 6. In addition to sexual minority youth, there are sexual minority children, all with sexual lives that encompass exploration. With this background in mind, the review turns to the experiences of sexual minority students within schools.

Relying primarily on the GLSEN 2007 School Climate survey and including some elements of the EGALE work, the review makes clear that schools are not particularly safe places for many sexual minority students. They are far more likely to be targets of verbal, physical, social and cyberbullying that creates significant isolation and barriers to learning. Further, adults were seen as unsafe for people to seek help. There are no mentors to create points of normalcy or grounding; these students are simply cut off. As a result, sexual minority students are more likely to skip school and be eventually pushed out of the system. Also explored are the issues of name calling and the use of epithets of “gay”, “lez”, “dyke”, “fag” to insult. Over time, the environments for these students have either stayed the same or have gradually become less safe.

Next, the review examines what schools are doing now with respect to policies and curricula with regard to anti-homophobia or the inclusion of sexual minority topics and issues. The current trend is to lump these under policies of equity, multiculturalism or bullying. Notable examples include the Toronto and Vancouver district school board policies. In curriculum, focus remains on the "plumbing" and AIDS/HIV issues of sex rather than sexual identity. Typically heterosexual sex appears within physical education, but not homosexual sex. Sexuality may appear in Physical Education, English or Social Studies/History but only as an add-on. In every case, sexual minority is limited to gay and lesbian identity (asexuality, transgendered/transsexuality, bisexuality, queer, questioning, two-spirited and intersexed remain erased) is treated as "controversial" and "sensitive", so there remains an air of taboo. This treatment of the topic will ensure that sexual minority issues and topics will remain on the margins. Sexual minority needs to be understood as normal, not different.

So what can be done? Several options are explored, including: (1) Senior school officials/administrators must publicly support the needs and interests of all students, including sexual minorities; (2) Safe School Policies must spell out the needs of sexual minority students, protocols and consequences for dealing with bullying based on sexual minority and these policies must be enforced; (3) Gay-Straight Alliances have been shown to be effective in creating more positive school climates for all students, and sexual minorities in particular; (4) Have sexual minority role models among school staff and teachers. These adults should be encouraged to come out and be visible, and there needs to be safe places and safe people for students to turn to in times of need; (5) A curriculum that includes and integrates sexual minority status across all course content so that sexual minorities feel they are reflected within the knowledge they are acquiring; and (6) Teachers and family members need to be educated on issues of sexual minority identity. There needs to be greater awareness and sense of inclusion coming from all adults.

Many other things can be done and are outlined within the review. The first step, which is huge, is recognizing that this is important. Only when there is political will can the rest that needs doing be done.

"FAG" "DYKE" SCHOOLING "NORMAL" "LEZ" "sissy"

"This review was written just as a York University study highlighted that sex education is not teaching what students are looking for: students are not interested in the 'plumbing' of sex, but the pleasure and relationships and identity of sexuality. Students want to understand more about what makes up sexuality and identity. Part of this requires adults to become more comfortable and sensitive with exploring topics of sexual orientation and sexual identity...Adults can't hide behind issues of morality and embarrassment; youth need and want to understand the fullness of sexuality in all its guises."

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