

Mel Smith asserts that protecting young people and maintaining student wellbeing are whole school responsibilities. She gives some practical advice to teachers about how to support LGBTIQ students as part of our commitment to ensuring that all our students (from all different backgrounds) feel safe and part of the school community and that they see themselves in the content that is taught. . .

Introduction

Public schools are representative of the diverse community of which they are a part and include people from a range of backgrounds, geographic locations, skills and abilities. Part of the diverse mix of schools includes those students, teachers and families that are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer or additional gender and sexuality diverse identities (LGBTIQ).

There have been a number of Australian and international research projects that have examined the experience of young LGBTIQ people and their school lives. From research we know that LGBTIQ students often experience bullying due to their gender identity and/or sexuality, which can lead to negative outcomes for these young people in a range of areas (Hillier et al., 2010). We also know that a lot of this bullying occurs in educational settings and there are things that schools can do to address such behaviour (Hillier et al., 2010; Ullman, 2015).

LGBTIQ young people exist in schools whether they are seen or “out” to the school community, and as the Department of Education (D of E) states, in Legal Issues Bulletin 55 (2014), that schools need a “...proactive approach to the development of positive school environments in which every student is respected and valued. Additionally, schools have a legal duty to protect students from foreseeable risk of harm and to do what is reasonably practicable to ensure their safety.”

Research indicates that ALL schools will have LGBTIQA+ students (and/or families). Findings from the 6th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2018 (Fisher et al. 2019) revealed the sexual attraction of students in Years 10, 11 and 12 with 39% of respondents indicating they did not exclusively have heterosexual feelings of attraction.

This finding is something that has increased over the years of the survey with the percentage of young people reporting some, or exclusive, sexual attraction to people of the same gender growing from 6% in 1997 to 39% in 2018 (Fisher & Kauer 2019).

New Zealand research about secondary students that included a transgender option indicated that up to 4% of students identified as transgender or were not sure of their gender (Clark et al. 2013). Recent Australian research (Fisher et al. 2019) reported a trans/gender diverse group of 2.3% but noted that, due to unknown response biases, the results do not constitute a representative sample of students in the senior years of secondary school.

Additionally, we also know that 1.7% of people could be intersex (Intersex Human Rights Australia, 2020) and LGTBIQ matters apply to primary schools as well as to high schools. There are many transgender students living as their authentic self from a young age and same sex parents/rainbow families form part of the school community in many of our schools.

Wellbeing

Protecting young people and maintaining student wellbeing are whole school responsibilities and need to be reinforced throughout the school, in all classes as well as the wider school curriculum.

Research indicates that where school environments are marginalising, LGBTIQ students have lower levels of morale, safety and connection to peers, teachers and the school more generally as well as higher levels of distress (Ullman, J. 2015). However in schools that are more inclusive, the opposite was found to be the case. The report also found that those LGBTIQ students who were more connected to school were happier and less distressed while there and also felt as if their teachers were personally invested in them. These students were more likely to report enhanced academic outcomes, including a stronger reported likelihood to attend university.

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) states that, “Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians,” which is reflected in the NSW DoE’s Wellbeing Framework for Schools. The Wellbeing Framework (2015) recognises that the concept of wellbeing and its close links with learning are not new and that a wealth of evidence is available on this topic.

Additionally, the Department recognises that “Particular groups of students may be more vulnerable to experiencing low levels of connectedness, including those from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, students with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. Students with low connectedness are two to three times more likely to experience depressive symptoms compared to more connected peers.” (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2018)

Consequently, schools and teachers should be seeking to boost LGBTIQ students’ wellbeing at school through ensuring their safety and freedom from bullying, as well as connection to the school. Examples of ways that schools and teachers can build connections with their LGBTIQ students or those from rainbow families include:

- the use of welcoming symbols and visual cues (e.g. rainbow flags, LGBTIQ inclusive posters etc.)
- developing positive professional relationships with students which are safe and supportive
- training for staff which addresses expectations of inclusivity of LGBTIQ students/families (including inclusive language, the use of pronouns and how to challenge homophobia/transphobia in the classroom or playground)
- promoting a positive school climate through ensuring LGBTIQ students are included and referenced in school policies (including uniform, wellbeing and discipline policies)
- setting clear guidelines for a consistent whole school approach to address bias based bullying and harassment (of LGBTIQ students or those perceived to be) which focuses on an educative and/or restorative approach
- the opportunity for engagement with the school via student groups such as GSAs (Gender and Sexuality Alliances)
- establishing safe and supportive classroom/school environments that respect diversity and identity and where LGBTIQ students/rainbow families feel safe and have a sense of belonging. This safety should extend to the ability to report marginalisation from others.

- recognising significant LGBTIQ community dates including, but not limited to, International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT), Wear It Purple Day and Pride month (June)
- knowing where, and how, to refer students for additional information and support, including community LGBTIQ groups, if needed
- encouraging, facilitating and incorporating same-sex parents/caregivers in the classroom and school community activities
- being visible as an ally, which can be done through the display of LGBTIQ inclusive materials such as posters, and role modelling appropriate language and behaviour

Curriculum

Educational programs should be respectful and inclusive of all students, including those who are LGBTIQ or from rainbow families. Relationships and gender identity may be discussed in many curriculum areas, including PDHPE classes. Topics covering human rights, the changing nature of the law as well as family histories may all include discussion about LGBTIQ perspectives. Such practices are in line with syllabus guidelines and enable students to connect with content that is meaningful to them.

Research has shown that one aspect of LGBTIQ marginalised school environments was limited representations of sexuality and gender diverse individuals. However, teachers who spoke in a positive and supportive manner about sexuality and gender diversity contribute to a positive school environment (Ullman, 2015).

In this report many students felt that their teachers were reluctant to discuss sexuality and gender diversity with them despite student interest to do so, and even in the face of overtly discriminatory behaviours (Ullman, 2015). These findings echo other research and anecdotal reports where teachers have expressed discomfort or reluctance to address LGBTIQ topics due to a lack of direction or support from their educational system or because of fears of becoming targets of the media or broader community (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; Leonard et al, 2010).

These concerns have been exacerbated for some with claims that the federally funded Safe Schools program and Gayby Baby resource were banned in NSW. However, this has not ever been the case and schools can continue to use both resources, ensuring they adhere to Departmental policy while doing so (particularly the Controversial Issues and Audio-visual Materials Policies).

Research has also found that current sexuality education in many schools is a problem for young people but more so for LGBTIQ young people whose sexual health needs are not acknowledged, or included, and in some cases the messages that are being given are harmful (Hiller et al 2010, Robinson et al 2013). The experience is more isolating for gender diverse and intersex young people who in many cases fail to be represented in teaching topics at all.

The need to also incorporate LGBTIQ inclusive topics in the curriculum in primary schools is highlighted by the facts that at least half same sex attracted young people realise their attraction while in primary school (Hiller et al. 2013), and that there are often rainbow families that are not recognised, or acknowledged, in the stories that are read or the content that is covered in class.

Overall this research indicates that including LGBTIQ inclusive topics in teaching and learning programs contributes to creating safer and more inclusive schools. This results in improvements in students' wellbeing, their educational engagement and, ultimately, academic achievement.

Steps teachers and schools can take to create a more inclusive curriculum include:

- ensuring LGBTIQ and diverse family representations are included in library books and resources
- incorporating inclusive and representative materials in both primary and secondary school curricula, which serves to reflect and validate their identity and/or family
- incorporating LGBTIQ inclusive material into sexuality education programs
- exploring and addressing gender expectations and stereotyping, and incorporating discussion of gender diversity more directly
- engaging in professional development to expand knowledge and understanding of LGBTIQ inclusivity in schools

Conclusion

The strategies that have been suggested above are not the only ways to be inclusive of LGBTIQ students, and individual students will respond to different approaches based on their personality, past experiences and interests. It is important that, as educators, we ensure that students (from all different backgrounds) feel safe and part of the school community and that they see themselves in the content that is taught. Doing so leads to more engaged and successful students who flourish and who are more likely to reach their full potential. It also expands other students' horizons of their own lived experience and builds empathy and understanding of diversity.

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