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The Importance of a Supportive School Climate on the Mental Health of Sexual and Gender Minority Students

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, adolescent mental health has become a prominent issue in America. Specifically, rates of mental illness among sexual and gender minority adolescents are increasing at rates higher than those of cisgender-heterosexual adolescents. As this issue has progressed, much literature has placed focus on the different stressors that may cause and exacerbate it. Through the lens of minority stress theory, this literature review seeks to understand how the factors that construct a school climate act as stressors on the mental health of LGBTQ+ students. After a brief introduction to this topic, there will be discussion on the social environment of a school describing how factors like bullying, student organizations, and faculty interactions play a part in creating both supportive and unsupportive school climates. Then, services directly provided by schools will be addressed to explain their impact on the mental health of sexual and gender minority students. This review concludes with discussions of findings and suggestions for future research. This is followed by an analysis of current policies that promote a negative school climate for sexual and gender minority students.

INTRODUCTION

School climate is an important factor regarding the mental health of adolescents. With the amount of time students spend in schools, high proportion of mental illnesses that appear at adolescent age, and influence of social environment, a school is the perfect place for the development of mental health issues. (Aldridge and McChesney 2018) In 2019, roughly 2.7 million adolescents suffered from depression, with 73.8% also being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. (CDC 2022) Further, among high school aged students, suicide is the second leading cause of death. (Stuke et al. 2021) For LGBTQ+ students, these statistics can be more severe, as they are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts than their cisgender-heterosexual peers. (Colvin et al. 2019) According to minority stress theory, “sexual minorities...are exposed to unique stressors related to their stigmatized social status, and these unique stressors explain why they are at increased risk for negative mental health outcomes.” (Feinstein et al. 2020:325) With schools acting as breeding grounds for mental health issues, how do the factors that build a school climate act as stressors on the mental health of sexual and gender minority students?

The purpose of this literature review is to explore how parts of a school climate can impact the mental health of sexual and gender minority students. School climate is defined as “the norms, expectations, and beliefs that contribute to creating a psychological environment that determines the extent to which people feel physically, emotionally, and socially safe.” (Aldridge and McChesney 2018:122) Sexual and gender minority students refer to students who do not identify as cisgender and/or heterosexual. (Colvin et al. 2019) To begin, I will identify ways that interactions between peers and faculty help and hinder the developing minds of adolescents coming into their queer identities. Additionally, I will discuss how school provided services fail

to accommodate for the needs of sexual and gender minority students. I will conclude by addressing current policy that works to further promote and construct a negative school climate for LGBTQ+ adolescents and suggest possible areas for future research.

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The most commonly recognized contributor to a negative school climate is bullying. Across America, a large percentage of students experience both verbal and physical harassment from other students each year. (Mark and Kettrey 2016) For sexual and gender minority students, this percentage is even higher. (Colvin et al. 2019; Marx and Kettrey 2016) Due to the higher rates of bullying that LGBTQ+ students endure, they have become an at-risk population for depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation. (Colvin et al. 2019; Marx and Kettrey 2016; White et al. 2018) A study by White et al. (2018) found that heterosexual students more frequently experience positive emotions while at school and less frequently experience negative emotions in comparison their sexual and gender minority peers. The same study additionally reported that heterosexual students experienced less frequent bullying in comparison to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual students that were surveyed. (White et al. 2018) As well as looking into negative emotions on the basis of sexuality, White et al. (2018) took gender into consideration, finding that transgender and gender nonconforming students experienced positive peer interactions less frequently than their cisgender peers, but rather more frequent bullying. While bullying greatly influences the mental health of sexual and gender minority adolescents, it can encourage another stressor: the closet. (Feinstein et al 2020) A study by Feinstein et al. (2020) found that younger members of the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to conceal their sexuality, especially when faced with stressors. This is where the importance of the findings of the White et al. (2018) study are clear, as students witnessing their out peers being victimized on the basis of their sexuality or

gender may exacerbate fears of the same happening to them. (Feinstein et al. 2020) The negative emotions associated with witnessing acts of homophobia and transphobia towards others could lead to mental health issues in sexual and gender minority students. (White et al. 2018) With concealment being associated with high levels of depression and anxiety, there is no way for sexual and gender minority students, whether they are closeted or out, to avoid the stressor that is victimization. (Feinstein et al. 2020)

A possible solution for reducing homophobia and transphobia-based harassment in schools is the inclusion of a gay-straight alliance (GSA). (Colvin et al. 2019; Marx and Kettrey 2016; White et al. 2018) A GSA is a “school based [organization] for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer youth and their allies that often [attempts] to improve school climate for sexual and gender minority youth.” (Marx and Kettrey 2016:1269) A study on Minnesota high schools found that the presence of a GSA was associated with lower levels of bullying. (Colvin et al. 2019) By presenting sexual and gender minority students in a positive light, rather than as the social other, both cisgender-heterosexual and LGBTQ+ students engage in promoting a supportive school climate. (Colvin et al. 2019) In an explorative study on the relationship between victimization and the presence of a GSA, Robert Marx and Heather Kettrey (2016) found significant connections between the two. They found that GSAs are associated with lower levels of sexuality-based victimization, less fear for safety during school, and fewer homophobic remarks. (Marx and Kettrey 2016)

Classmates are not the only part of a school population to contribute to a negative school climate, as a lack of adult support in schools has been shown to be associated with increased risk of suicide in LGBTQ+ students. (Colvin et al. 2019) Instances of homophobia and transphobia take different forms when coming from adults. Specifically, one way that teachers show bias in

their classrooms is through the disrespect of a student's chosen name and pronouns. (Durwood et al. 2021; Russell et al. 2018) A study by Russel et al. (2018) explored various contexts, such as with family, friends, teachers, and classmates, that a transgender adolescent's chosen name might be used in as it related to levels of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior. They found that an increase in one context that chosen name is used for lead to "a 29% decrease in suicidal ideation and a 56% decrease in suicidal behavior. (Russel et al. 2018:505) Additionally, they observed that these factors, as well as symptoms of depression, were all significantly lower when the individual was able to use their chosen name in all contexts. (Russel et al. 2018) A study by Durwood et al. (2021) looked into teachers' respect of a student's gender identity, rather than just their chosen name. They found that when a student's gender is respected by their teachers, they are less likely to experience symptoms of mental illnesses. (Durwood et al. 2021) When students feel comfortable in their classroom environment and respected by their teachers, it is more likely they will turn to them for help. (Colvin et al. 2019) The presence of a trustworthy adult to turn to in a negative school environment has been found to lower levels of suicide ideation for sexual and gender minority students. (Colvin et al. 2019) Additionally, for sexual and gender minority students who do not feel as though they can seek help in their school environment, suicide attempts are more frequent. (Colvin et al. 2019) Implementing training for faculty that emphasizes support for LGBTQ+ students could promote a safer school climate, as students who feel as though they can reach out to their teachers for help are associated with lower levels of depression. (Colvin et al. 2019)

SCHOOL PROVIDED SERVICES

Aspects of a school climate that play a part in curating an unsafe environment for LGBTQ+ students also include services provided by the institution. In the case of many school districts,

these services allow developing adolescents an opportunity to learn and grow in an encouraging culture. For sexual and gender minority students, however, this can do the opposite. For example, schools that provide counseling for students often do not account for the struggles of sexual and gender minority students. (Farmer, Welfare, and Burge 2013; Singh and Kosciw 2017) With the increased victimization they face, counselors could play an important role in forming a positive school environment for LGBTQ+ adolescents. (Singh and Kosciw 2017) Sexual and gender minority students have stated that they would be comfortable discussing the homophobia and transphobia they face, mental health struggles, and inclination toward risk-taking behaviors with a professional. (Singh and Kosciw 2017) However, a study by Farmer et al. (2013) found that school counselors typically show less competence to provide for LGBTQ+ adolescents than those who work in professional settings. The same study describes how schools often lack training for the discussion of LGBTQ+ topics that may come up in counseling, leaving counselors uncertain with how they should work with sexual and gender minority students. (Farmer et al. 2013) Further, school counselors tend to fear negative repercussions that may arise from working with said students, such as termination, denial of tenure, or even outing themselves. (Farmer et al. 2013)

Another service provided by schools that is catered to heterosexual students is sex education classes. (Estes 2017; Garg and Volerman 2020) In America, 48 states require that the public-school curriculum must include sex education. (Garg and Volerman 2020) Of those 48, only 22 include LGBTQ+ topics. (Garg and Volerman 2020) While this may seem progressive, a deeper look into these policies is jarring, as six mandate discriminatory education and five mandate a neutral stance, suggesting that schools teach that health education is bias free, when it is not. (Garg and Volerman 2020) Of the schools that do not have policies regarding LGBTQ+

topics in sex education, 13 require that schools use normative language, promoting monogamous, heterosexual relationships and abstinence until marriage. (Garg and Volerman 2020) Policies like these are harmful to sexual and gender minority students, as rather than learning about what their identity entails, they are subjected to an education that promotes heterosexuality as a social norm. (Estes 2017; Garg and Volerman 2020) A study by Michelle Estes (2017) interviewed non-heterosexual individuals on their experiences in sex education. The majority of participants noted that the classes they took centered around heterosexuality and were exclusive towards the LGBTQ+ community. (Estes 2017) One participant described school based sex education as an intimidation tactic, while another stated that they felt “like [they] couldn’t ask [questions] or [they] couldn’t talk about it,” going on to describe how the sexual minority students in their class were treated like a taboo. (Estes 2017:622) Estes (2017) found that sex education, when taught in this manner, can feel uncomfortable and demeaning, leaving those who take them alienated from their heterosexual classmates. This study only looked into the opinions of 10 sexual and gender minority individuals, but with roughly 80% of U. S. states not mandating or recommending inclusive education, it is plausible that they are not the only ones feeling this way. (Estes 2017; Garg and Volerman 2020)

CONCLUSION, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND RECENT POLICY

This literature review explored how aspects that construct a school climate act as stressors on the mental health of sexual and gender minority students. Socialization with both classmates and school faculty was discussed as a stressor through the ways bullying, use of chosen name and pronouns, and comfortability seeking help impact the mental health of LGBTQ+ students. (Colvin et al. 2019; Durwood et al. 2021; Marx and Kettrey 2016; Russel et al. 2018; White et al. 2018) Additionally, the ways these factors encourage students to conceal their sexuality was

addressed as an additional stressor, with mental health issues being associated with fear of homophobic and transphobic victimization. (Feinstein et al. 2020) Counseling and sex education were discussed as stressors in the way they alienate sexual and gender minority students. (Estes 2017; Farmer et al 2013; Garg and Volerman 2020; Singh and Kosciw 2017) Through this research, it is evident that these stressors construct an unsupportive school climate for sexual and gender minority students, which negatively impacts their mental health.

Further research is needed to fully understand the broad scope of this topic. As more policy is written into action that promotes an unsafe environment for sexual and gender minority adolescents, it is more important than ever to fully acknowledge how the school systems we construct negatively impact the mental health of these students. A comparative study on cisgender-heterosexual and sexual and gender minority students who have taken sex education classes at schools that provide inclusive, exclusive, and neutral stances in the class would be of use to identify how a school's social climate changes depending on exposure to LGBTQ+ content in classes. Additionally, it would be beneficial to look into the relationship school climate and mental health of sexual and gender minority students in private schools, as most accessible research has been conducted in public institutions.

Based on the findings of this literature review, it is vital for school systems to promote an environment that is inclusive of their sexual and gender minority students. However, recent policies have tended to do the opposite. A group of stressors I did not discuss in this literature review as they could form one of their own include policies that construct a negative school climate specifically for transgender and gender non-conforming students. One specific policy being adopted by many American public schools aims to ban transgender girls from playing school sports. (Chen 2021) 23 states have considered this policy, but have not implemented it,

three have passed bills for it which were vetoed by their governors, and ten have put this policy into action, effectively preventing transgender girls from participating in harmless extracurriculars. (Chen 2021) Supporters of these policies claim them to be a victory for equality for girls, when it is rather the opposite. (Chen 2021) Transgender girls are girls and claiming equality for their gender while excluding them is counterproductive.

An even more recent bill to pass in America is the Parental Rights in Education bill, which passed in the Florida senate on March 8th, 2022. (Woodward et al. 2022) This bill specifically prevents educating younger elementary school students on sexual orientation or gender identity but leaves education on these topics for higher grades up for interpretation by school faculty, stating that classroom instruction must be age or developmentally appropriate. (Woodward et al. 2022) Though supporters of this bill claim it is not meant to be harmful but rather to keep sexuality out of education, there was originally an amendment that would allow schools to out sexual and gender minority students to their families, despite whether or not they had an unsupportive home environment. (Woodward et al. 2022) Additionally, supporters call it the “anti-grooming bill,” and describe LGBTQ+ identities as “sexual stuff” and “transgenderism.” (Woodward et al. 2022) With their discussion of the bill’s implications, it is evident that the intent is not involve parents in the learning process, but to further curate an unsafe environment for some of the most at-risk students. (Woodward et al. 2022) What is needed is not avoidance of these discussions, but conversation on inclusive education.

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