Making School a Safe Place for LGBTQ Students

Introduction

Even though protections and fair, equal norms for LGBTQ persons are at an historic high as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, the vast majority of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer students enrolled in public schools report high levels of depression and anxiety. Many also report harrowing tales of victimization, physical and emotional bullying, and of violence. Those who do not have these stories are often the LGBTQ students who choose to stay home—or choose not to share any personal information with their peers. These forms of repression have long-lasting effects on these students' academic and personal growth, as do also all forms of anti-LGBTQ sentiment in the schools themselves.

Psychologists have confirmed that real, effective education cannot exist without security for students. For schools to educate their LGBTQ students, therefore, changes will need to be made to increase their sense of safety and well-being on campus—and off it—during their formative years. In this course, we discuss the current situation in detail, the reasons change is crucial for these students, and several practical methods for doing so in an efficient and effective manner.

Section One: School Safety is Paramount for LGBTQ Students

Case Study One

One case study highlighted the characteristics of a Boston Public School which contributed, both positively and negatively, to one bisexual student's mental health. This particular individual realized that he was bisexual during his sophomore year of high school; he came out before he graduated. Positive experiences included the student's participation within the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club and the acceptance of many of his peers—including the fact that his school had a zero-tolerance policy on bullying. Negative experiences included the difficulty of coming out to his family and friends, dealing with their reactions mostly on his own, and the mental health implications of feeling alone during most of his school experience as an LGBTQ individual. However, due to the support of his community, this individual was able to graduate and feel fulfilled most of the time. He is currently attending a four-year college.

Case Study Two

In rural Oregon, a case of rampant high school homophobia illustrates a wholly different scenario. Recent investigations into student success and safety reveal that gay and transgender students have had to endure slurs and insults from the rest of the student body—and even, in some cases, the staff. In one episode, a transgender student was pelted with food in the school's cafeteria while the teachers and administration turned a blind eye.

After asking the staff how such cases of homophobia and student bullying were punished, the investigator found that the victims of such activities—the gay and transgender students—were often punished by being assigned readings from the Bible. Students reported having suffered years of such bigotry and harassment with no support or protection to help them survive or cope.

Officials at the school had hesitated to take action or file reports both because they did not know what to do or how to help and because they were afraid of persecution themselves. This inaction resulted in an unsafe and abusive scenario for students deemed different by the majority of the community.

Case Study Three

In one school system which until recently had no LGBTQ-centric or -inclusive education, the LGBTQ students were not harassed or bullied, leading the administration to think they were doing very well in comparison to more horrific cases of LGBTQ student bullying. However, LGBTQ students felt a lack of support when, in health class, only topics concerning heterosexuality and more normative gender identities were were taught. This lack of support extended to all students, as non-LGBTQ students simply did not know how to interact with those who identified otherwise. One study followed the public perception of the LGBTQ students over a year during which LGBTQ information was incorporated into the school's health education curriculum. Instances of LGBTQ students being bulled plummeted, and the LGBTQ students themselves experienced much-ameliorated mental health benefits as a result of this inclusivity.

Summary/Conclusions

Before a student can prioritize education, they need to feel safe. Schools, therefore, need to emphasize student safety as much or more than the normal classes educating students for efficacy's sake, if nothing else.

When it comes to protecting LGBTQ students specifically, a consistent lack of information, empathy, or oversight is allowing the victimization of any students identifying away from the norm. In the cases where action has been taken, such as the establishing of GSA clubs and inclusion of LGBTQ language in school health classes, the mental and physical health and bodily safety of LGBTQ student has been much improved.

What are the responsibilities of a school regarding each of its individual students?

• When evaluating the relationship between a school and its students, it's easy to think of the social conventions regarding the gratitude, services, and actions a student owes their school. Loyalty, a level of obedience, social investments—these are all examples of intangible 'things' commonly believed that students owe to their schools. However, a school also owes its students several 'things'—intangible and also extremely concrete.

• Firstly, a school owes its students a good education. It is expected by every level of communities—students, teachers, parents, and all—that when a student graduates, that student is prepared for higher education or to be prepared fend for themselves socially and financially in the world. This may not be news; most people associate schools with the hope of a solid education.

• However, a school owes its students more than algebra, history, and a spring musical. Students attend classes with the hope of learning but with the assumption that they will be safe in order to learn. Parents entrust their children to these institutions with the trust that the school will ensure basic safety for their children. Before schools owe students a good education, schools owe their students (and the entire community) a safe space in which their minds, bodies, and persons will be protected so that they might have room to grow.

Is safety a prerequisite for a good education?

- Think about school from a student's perspective for one moment; step into their shoes. Before you lies a to-do list rife with assignments, reading recommendations, and class projects. However, underlying that list is a much simpler one: walk home, find a place to eat, and make it down this hallway without being heckled. Unfortunately, for many youths belonging to minority cultures including LGBTQ students in modern schools, there is no assurance that hallways are not gauntlets.

- Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist of the twentieth century, first put forth the idea of the hierarchy of needs. Everyone, according to this theory, has fundamental needs which need to be met prior to more specialized ones.

- While education is extremely important for a student's welfare, safety is a more basic need. Maslow argued that if a student does not feel safe in an educational environment, that the child at best will not be able to concentrate on his studies—and, at worst, may not be around long enough to benefit from them.

- Psychologically speaking, when a student feels safe, he or she feels the freedom required to think critically. When we're in fight-or-flight mode and adrenaline is coursing through our systems, our mental capacity necessarily shrinks.

What constitutes safety for students in school?

- A safe space can be defined as a place in which an individual can be certain of expressing potentially uncomfortable truths without fear of repercussion. The term originated in American colleges attempting to set certain places aside for free discourse between students and staff.

- In the history of the LGBTQ movement, which has gone through periods of time in which no space was safe for members to live freely according to their identity, a 'safe space' has referred to a place in which individuals could be themselves without worrying about suffering punitive action by authorities. This has involved dressing the ways they wanted, being with the people they loved, and other activities.

- In the parlance of schools and young LGBTQ students, safety would refer to an environment in which students are free from the threat of violence, unfair treatment, or harm from their peers, teachers, external threats, and from themselves due to depression or poor mental health.

- Being safe from external threats (such as mass shooters) is a heavy topic which must be given due consideration, but is beyond the scope of this course. We will focus on ways to ensure LGBTQ students are safe from their peers, school personnel, and any ways in which they may mentally or physically self-harm.

What do we need to be safeguarding our LGBTQ students against to keep schools safe?

- After breaking down the three main sources of potential harm to LGBTQ students (their peers, the staff, themselves), we can identify the various methods for harm to come to the students. There is physical harm in the form of bodily aggression, sexual harassment, or property damage; there is emotional harm in the form of heckling or other means of verbal abuse; and—in modernity—the prevalence of Internet abuse is on the rise.

- Cyberbullying is one type of Internet-based aggression to which LGBTQ students may be subject. This can simply take the form of posting, sending, or sharing information (or implied information) about another person which is false, insulting, derogatory, or simply private. Because of the prevalence of social media among school-age individuals and the ease with which information can be shared, spreading unwanted information from behind a screen can be simpler for the perpetrator and more injurious for the victim.

- LGBTQ students are also at risk of being taken advantage of by peers or other people hiding behind the anonymity of the Internet through cat-fishing or other forms of disingenuous remote contact. Because the gender and sexuality of students on the LGBTQ spectrum may be more publicly known or discussed than that of students who do not identify as such, there are those who might wish to reach out to these LGBTQ students in unacceptable ways to abuse or make inappropriate suggestions. These practices can alienate and disturb recipients of unwanted attention online. These practices can also tempt young individuals to place themselves in dangerous situations (for example, going and meeting someone that they've previously only spoken with online) and also contribute to negative mental health.

- Discrimination refers to any scenario in which a person has been treated unfairly because of any characteristics they represent or simply because of who they are.

This can manifest itself in several ways. Several school examples might include being passed over for inclusion in a theater production, a sporting team, or an academic opportunity; or even, in some extreme cases, achieving lower grades. One common LGBTQ-specific example of discrimination might be the disallowing of LGBTQ groups on campus while other similar groups are allowed to form and meet without restriction. Singling out LGBTQ students in this way can make them targets for pejorative or violent actions on the part of their peers and contribute to an isolated mentality for the students, lowering their likelihood of good mental health.

• Physical heckling or abuse are unfortunate practices to which LGBTQ students are often subjected. At least one parent of an LGBTQ student has compared their child's educational experience to that of 'walking into a hail-storm every day'. Because school-age children are often not the most developed in regards to tact, empathy, comprehension, and polite discourse, they sometimes react to the unknown with aggression and hostility. This is bullying, and it can range from simply impacting an LGBTQ student's mental health all the way to severe physical ramifications.

• Property damage is commonly experienced by LGBTQ students in the place of or in addition to verbal or physical abuse. One way that school-age children retaliate when confronted with an individual they do not understand is through theft or defacement of property belonging to that person. This can result in (at the very least) unnecessary expenses incurred on the part of the victim; and, at the most, contribute to an atmosphere of disparagement surrounding at-risk LGBTQ students.

• Finally, as alluded to in every scenario above, the mental health status of minority and LGBTQ students needs to be safeguarded. Far more dangerous to any student, in that it is less obvious and more insidious than physical abuse, is a depressive mentality. LGBTQ students' emotional needs for community, connection, and support not being met can result in the students' feeling depressed, isolated, and at risk for self-harm. Schools need to prioritize support for at-risk students, including LGBTQ students, and find ways to help these struggling individuals find joy, confidence, and connection in their everyday experiences. Not doing so opens these students up to devastating opportunity for lifelong harm.

Do all students in America, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, feel safe within their school environments?

- A 2017 study asked 35,000 students across eight states in the USA about their perceived safety at school. Only just over half responded that they felt safe while in classrooms, hallways, in bathrooms or on school property. This leaves a very large percentage of students who spend their school hours afraid for their emotional, mental, or physical health.

- That same study found that up to 79% of parents felt their children were in completely safe environments—free from all threat of violence. This means that some 30% of students who felt in danger did not feel like they could reach out to their parents to describe what was happening.

- In recent years, 28% of students reported being physically or verbally bullied at school. 30% admit to bullying others. 70% of students report seeing bullying happen. This means that intra-student violence—verbal or physical—effects the vast majority of the average school's student body.

Do students who specifically identify as LGBTQ feel safe within their school environments? Are students who identify as LGBTQ safe at school?

- Of the students targeted for bullying or harassment at school, most are those who identify as other or outside the norm. Right now, one perceived norm, especially among school-age children who are taught to expect nothing else, is heterosexual cisgender individuals. Those who identify publicly as anything other than that are different; and school-age children are often not naturally gifted in inclusion and tolerance.

- Even those LGBTQ students who do not choose to publicly share their identities may still be perceived by other students as quiet, different, or other without having to be told. Additionally, the stress of hiding themselves from the public eye can make closeted LGBTQ students undergo untold and extremely unhealthy levels of stress.

- The Human Rights Campaign in conjunction with researchers from the University of Connecticut recently completed a comprehensive survey of over 12,000 LGBTQ teenagers across the nation. The results were stark:

  - 8 in 10 LGBTQ students reported school-related depression.

  - Only 25% said they felt safe at school.

- 95% said they had trouble sleeping at night. Sleep issues contribute to a depressive state and simply make it harder for students to keep up in school.

- 86% of LGBTQ students characterized themselves as stressed.

- Only 41% of these students said that they received psychological or emotional support at school.

- Perhaps tellingly, only 31% of the surveyed LGBTQ students were able to express themselves in a manner fully reflecting their gender identity at school.

- The HRC also specifically asked survey questions of teenagers who identified as trangender. Two-thirds of transgender teens surveyed reported avoiding going to the bathroom if at all possible while at school. 25% skip PE to avoid having to change and shower in front of their assigned peers; 19% simply skip showering.

  - Only 12% say that their general health or sex education courses provided information helpful to their status as members of the LGBTQ community.

  - 11% say they have been assaulted or raped because of their identity.

  - 7 in 10 have experienced verbal threats.

  - 8 in 10, unwanted sexual comments.

  - 3 in 10 physically threatened because of identity. The ratio expands for those identifying as female, affecting nearly 50% of transgender girls.

- The fact that such a large proportion of the students feels unsafe at school represents a large fraction of the student base which the school system is not adequately protecting and therefore not educating as the students require (and, indeed, as discussed earlier—are owed).

Do teachers currently have the right toolsets in place to help them advocate and protect LGBTQ students?

- The short answer is, unfortunately, no. An interview with one college-age LGBTQ student revealed that many times when he had been bullied in middle and high school after coming out as gay, a teacher had been within ear- or eye-shot. The teacher could have stepped in and ensured that he was safe. This did not occur.

- For the most part, when teachers don't act, it's not because they don't want to. The student who relayed this information mentioned that sometimes, a teacher would come by and announce that bullying wasn't cool—but then walk away without enforcing any actions or corrections. Other times, teachers themselves would use incorrect vocabulary regarding his gender or orientation, pull him out of class, attempt to speak with him, but end up blushing and looking away—further alienating this student and ramifying his status of 'other' among the other students.

- Changing the culture to protect LGBTQ students will take many investments and programs. Among these will be extensive, comprehensive opportunities for teachers to educate themselves in LGBTQ history, issues, and vocabulary as well as anti-bullying messaging and actions so that when they see something occur, they're fully prepared to take action to protect those who need it most.

- This need for teacher action necessitates a response and protective activity at the slightest hint of anti-LGBTQ sentiment. There can be no threshold under or over which permissiveness is okay. LGBTQ students report that sometimes bullying was addressed when the perpetrators were caught in the midst of the harassment, but often harmful remarks and off-color jokes about LGBTQ students were passed off by teachers as 'just slurs'. There is no such thing as 'just a slur'. In order to ensure the complete safety of LGBTQ students, there must be a zero-tolerance policy in effect for any and all anti-LGBTQ sentiment.

The Effects of an Unsafe School System for LGBTQ Students

- Students are more likely to participate in risky behaviors if they feel unsafe.

- Being alienated due to their sexual orientation or gender identity has also been shown to have a negative impact on LGBTQ students' test scores. Being depressed due to lack of support and community makes it harder to focus in class or to muster up the motivation to try to do well. Many LGBTQ students report staying home from school more often than not to avoid the unhelpful actions of their peers. The isolated LGBTQ student will likely feel unwelcome in study or homework groups and

may not even feel comfortable reaching out to their teacher for advice or clarifications on confusing homework. LGBTQ students often fail out of school when they are unable to keep up; but what's really happening is that the schools are failing their students.

• According to the CDC, there is a positive link between bullying at school and suicidal behavior in students. This is explicable due to the mental health impacts of being consistently bullied, especially when 'the reason why' is such an integral (and potentially new and confusing) part of who LGBTQ students are.

What's distinctive about the elementary, middle, and high school years for LGBTQ students? Why is it important to support them during this specific time frame?

• During middle and high school years are the years during which many LGBTQ students consider coming out—or, in other cases, feel pressured to keep themselves hidden. Either way, these formative years are precisely when LGBTQ students need the most support for optimal mental health and safety.

• When a young person decides to come out as LGBTQ, they are putting themselves into the limelight for opinions and comments from their peers. Put another way: When these children are at their most vulnerable, they are likely being judged by people who do not yet have the sensitivity, training, or maturity to handle such an event with respect.

• When a student comes out, they also have to deal with the reaction of their family. If the family is less than supportive, the student will have to look elsewhere for comfort and respect; and, if these are not found at school, the student runs the risk of getting involved in unhealthy outlets for frustration, or becoming extremely depressed.

• The fact that young LGBTQ students often don't receive this support receive it puts them in a higher risk bracket for self-harm, other-harm, and even tragic action. This is not a failure on their parts, but on the behalf of the school which did not support or at the very least protect them.

• Research shows that being 'out' is good for the mental health of the young LGBTQ individual; it lessens a sense of secrecy and shame which even at the best of times is mis-applied and too much for one person to bear. However, if the environment of

the school is not conducive to a student feeling safe enough to make that public declaration, they will keep themselves bottled up and recused. This can lead to emotional trauma, which in turn will have lifelong repercussions.

Does lack of LGBTQ representation in school materials qualify as endangering the student?

• This may not be seen as actively endangering the child, but a lack overall of LGBTQ representation in health and other school subject materials helps enforce the erroneous idea that those who identify as LGBTQ are different or 'other'. Therefore, lack of representation may not directly endanger the student, but it may contribute to an atmosphere which does not support the student as is needed.

• Specific methods for welcoming and including LGBTQ students in normal discourse need to be emphasized—particularly in teacher education. In one case, a student who identified as agender and preferred them/they/their as their personal pronouns instead of more socially accepted male/female personal pronouns asked their teachers to refer to them as such. When the teachers struggled with this simple request, the student became depressed and attempted suicide. If such tragedies can be avoided by simply educating the staff about the acceptability of different personal pronouns, then such education must be had.

• Normalizing oft-preferred social distinctions for those who identify as agender, transgender through an update of school policy and distributed materials will go a long way towards helping at-risk individuals feel much more accepted, supported, and welcome. If they feel supported, they will be less at risk for harassment by the uninformed and self-harm manifesting as a depressive symptom.

Section One Summary

Academic institutions need to be safe places in order for the students attending them to be in the right psychological mindsets for growth and education. Currently, despite the progress made in recent years for LGBTQ rights, students who identify as anything other than heterosexual, cisgender individuals are targeted for discrimination, heckling, bigotry and abuse. This often occurs under the very noses of the staff entrusted with their care—but in some scenarios, the teachers and principals of those academic institutions are adding to the problem.

LGBTQ students who are not protected and who do not experience safety at school are at higher risks for self-harm, suicide, violence, and emotional and physical turmoil. Few student subjected to such conditions thrive—let alone graduate on time. To care for these students as well as to ensure the basic effectiveness of the school system, it's necessary for teachers and officials to adopt an empathetic and comprehensive inclusivity and mindset towards helpful education and support when it comes to working with LGBTQ+ students.

Section One Key Concepts

"Children cannot get a quality education if they don't first feel safe at school." -Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education

• Psychologists, teachers, and administrators agree: No child who is afraid is going to be able to learn well. As the first and second duties of a school to its students are to protect and educate, a school is failing in its duties if any student does not feel safe —much less if an entire sector of the student population is consistently harassed, heckled, abused and made to suffer.

• Studies and surveys show that even though the LGBTQ movement as a whole has made incredible strides over the past decades in terms of rights accrued for their members and national recognition as individuals of worth, the young members of the community remain vulnerable to everyday misunderstand and persecution at school.

• At a stage of personal growth during which many young children are just discovering who they are, the school system affords them no protections as they attempt to reveal to the world their unique identity.

• Because of a distinct lack of focused protections and widespread education and inclusion of LGBTQ information in school curricula, LGBTQ students are labelled as 'other' and targeted for discrimination or abuse by intolerant or simply uninformed members of society—including students, teachers, and families.

• In order for these students to be supported according to their rights as students of a protecting, educating school, action needs to be taken to actively support each of them in their journey to full growth—as every student at every school should be supported.

- In order to reduce phobic comments or abuse, full education of LBGTQ rights and situations as well as full LGBTQ representation needs to be incorporated into all relevant school materials.

Section One Key Terms

- **Bullying**: In 2014, the CDC defined bullying as an umbrella term for certain core elements of undesirable behavior, including aggression, enforced power imbalance, and repetition of unwanted attention.

- **Cyber-bullying**: This refers to primarily verbal aggression or relational aggression (i.e., spreading rumors) via the Internet to cause harm.

- **LGBTQ**: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer. Sometimes termed simply 'LGBT', other times referred to as 'LGBTQ+', the term refers to those who identify otherwise than heterosexual, cisgender persons on the sexual and gender spectrums.

Section One Personal Reflection Question

Think for a moment about the students in your school. Are there any on the sidelines of things who seem sad and outcast? Is there anything that your school is actively doing to improve their lives?

Section Two: Treatment/Action Items

Earlier in this course, we discussed the fact that LGBTQ students are at risk for dangerous activity from three discrete sources: their peers, predators, and themselves. We can reduce the risk that they will become victim to unhelpful or harmful behaviors by seeking to ameliorate relationships and inclusion at school and reduce exposure to the harmful sides of these three conduits for unhelpful actions.

For example, LGBTQ students are liable to be victims of bullying from misinformed and confused peers. One strategy for stopping this might include comprehensive education on LGBTQ issues, and the implementation of inclusive anti-bullying policies at your school. If LGBTQ students are at risk of being exploited by those older then

them in a predatory fashion, enforcing background checks and swift disciplinary action in such cases will improve their safety in another fashion.

Finally, because studies do show that LGBTQ students are more highly at risk than their peers to be depressed and therefore liable to tragic expressions of depression, it seems reasonable to think that we will be able to improve LGBTQ student safety by introducing resources to improve the mental health of struggling students. We can do this by improving education about LGBTQ issues, making sure that the teachers and administrative staff are caring, empathetic resources, and ensuring that our schools are in every way safe spaces for all students to grow.

What steps can administrations take to help support their LGBTQ student population?

• Many teachers surveyed by the GLSEN have reported that they would like to do something to help, but do not feel equipped to help a student dealing with the complex, diverse issues that the LGBTQ community has had to face. Because of this, school administrations should provide ongoing training and development for their staffs on current LGBTQ topics so that their teachers are best able to support their students who belong to the community.

• According to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, or GLSEN, between a quarter and a third of teachers nationwide currently receive information and training regarding the handling of LGBTQ issues. When compared to the resources that are now available to help train teachers on the appropriate response towards racism, sexism, and ableism, it is clear that there is more that can be done to equip teachers to help support and respond to struggling LGBTQ students.

Do teachers have a specific role to play to help mitigate anti-LGBTQ bias?

• Yes. This is not news to most teachers; some 83% of teacher surveyed by the GLSEN agreed that they had a responsibility to ensure that their learning environments were safe for LGBTQ students.

• As trusted figures of authority within the school community, teachers can be seen as resources to struggling students. One responsibility teachers have to their students is to be informed and ready to assist when approached with an issue by any student

(LGBTQ or otherwise). While assisting with academic topics comprises the majority of their job description, ensuring the safety of each student by being such a resource is a duty few teachers deny.

• If the administration of a school does not support LGBTQ rights or does not adapt materials, culture norms and practices to avoid the isolation and targeting of LGBTQ students, each individual teacher needs to educate themselves so when the schools' LGBTQ students suffer and require assistance, the teacher is able to help.

What specific actions can be done to make school safer for LGBTQ students?

• Now that we've discussed the reasons schools need to be safe, who specifically is responsible for making the changes to make schools safe, and the stakes for the LGBTQ students, we'll discuss ten concrete ways to make schools safer for LGBTQ students.

• It might be tempting to wonder where to start, what the true priorities are, and how to make the biggest difference the most quickly for the vulnerable students at your school. The best change is always the change you can make today; a moment of empathetic compassion and understanding for one at-risk student can change their whole lives for the better. However, in terms of effective change for your school as a whole, here is a recommended course of action to help build a more inclusive and supportive school community for all.

Learn the facts

• Before you can help the LGBTQ students in your school and community, you need to be equipped with accurate statistics and correct information about the current status of LGBTQ students so that you can employ an empathetic concern to improve their situation.

• Taking this course is a great first step, but taking time to educate yourself about the history of the LGBTQ movement, the psychological traumas that usually accompany the self-discovery process in LGBTQ youth, as well as the prevalence of harmful anti-LGBTQ behaviors in schools across the country which victimize countless youth, placing them at risk for bullying and self-harm will help you to become an even better resource for struggling LGBTQ students.

Understand the language

- It is possible to hurt an LGBTQ individual with the best of intentions if you are unaware of the precise language used by the LGBTQ community. Taking time to review the terminology used by the LGBTQ community is a sign of respect and will ease your conversations with members of the community.

- When in doubt, it's usually okay to politely (and sensitively, and privately) ask the individual about the terms they are comfortable with, as long as you're committed to using them. If this doesn't seem like the right course of action, notice the vocabulary they use in self-referential statements and mirror those words unless requested to behave otherwise.

- Equip yourself with resources designed to bring common LGBTQ terms into mainstream language! While this is not a comprehensive list, you can find here some commonly-accepted LGBTQ terms:

  - gay (when used as an adjective), lesbian, bi or bisexual (when used as an adjective), sexual orientation, transgender, gender identity, gender expression, transition, fairness and equality, intolerance, rejection, exclusion, unfairness, and hurtfulness (as less-charged ways to discuss behaviors to be avoided).

- Without being informed, it's easy to use a term that is pejorative without malicious intent. However, it's best to educate yourself so harmful mistakes don't happen. Below, find an incomplete list of terms which the LGBTQ community would generally rather distance themselves from:

  - homosexual, gay (when used as a noun), lesbianism, sexual preference (connotes choice), gay lifestyle, same-sex attractions, sexual identity, the verb 'admitted' (connotes inherent guilt), transgender (when used as a noun), transvestite, tranny, sex change, pre-operative, post-operative, any mention of 'rights', hatred, bigotry, and prejudice (as more-charged ways to discuss behaviors to be avoided).

- One extremely important term is simply 'ally'—an LGBTQ ally. This is a term for individuals who may not identify as LGBTQ, but are firmly supportive of their

protections. This is important because it gives those who do not identify as LGBTQ a specific role to play as well as a choice: to ally, or not to ally.

• Words have power. Using one set of terms instead of another might seem like an easy, ephemeral fix—but allowing the LGBTQ movement to choose its vocabulary, offering its individuals the respect they need, and setting an example for others are powerful ways to help increase inclusion and reduce isolation.

• When inaccurate, insensitive, or hurtful language is used, providing education and then working to stop harmful behaviors is necessary for the safety of LGBTQ students.

Stop bad behavior

• The unfortunate news is that daily hurtful actions are a part of every LGBTQ student's life. They're well used to being passed over for social activities, being the target of rude comments and hallway heckling, and finding a safe and secluded place to eat or sit on the bus. The good news? Now that you know about it, you can do something to help.

• With knowledge comes responsibility. Even before your school places policies in effect to help LGBTQ students, you should keep an eye out for students who are struggling or being marginalized. Addressing unhelpful behaviors constantly and consistently when you see them will go a long way towards changing the culture and laying the groundwork for policy change.

• Here is a basic strategy you can follow when you notice that an LGBTQ student is being targeted or victimized:

    • If a student is in danger, stop what is happening. Do not over-react, just quietly ensure that the student is no longer in harm's way.

    • Once the immediate urgency is over, speak to all personnel concerned in the incident privately. Keep your mind open to all sides of the story to prioritize fairness.

- With respect for the feelings of all involved, define what happened in succinct and uncharged terms. However, do not shy from using the correct vocabulary. If a student was being bullied, calmly state it as such.

- Affirm clearly to all involved that the harmful behavior is not to be tolerated and will result in punitive actions for those responsible. If your administration does not have clear disciplinary actions in place for bullying or other harmful behaviors, you can simply state that you will be investigating further and will be in contact with the student's parents and the school's administration.

- If the incident was of lesser danger and/or a first-time offense, you can use your best judgement as to whether immediate disciplinary action is necessary or if simply marking the occasion with a teachable moment would be best practice. However, if a student seriously came into harm's way, it is likely you will have to take action to ensure that the behavior is permanently stopped.

Set the policy

- Each student at every school needs to be protected from bullying on an administrative level. If this isn't the case, or if this isn't enforced for LGBTQ students, then these paradigms need to change.

- In order for a policy to be effective at helping students, including LGBTQ students, stay safe within an ever-changing school environment, it needs to cover three basic things:

  - The policy needs to be very specific as to which behaviors are not going to be tolerated at your school. For example, if the protection policy will cover anti-LGBTQ bullying, the policy needs to have specific language in it that specifies what constitutes each of those terms (LGBTQ, bullying, etc). Your goal needs to be education—i.e., that those who read the policy understand it; and to close loopholes. People will attempt to circumvent the policy in the future. Do not help them.

  - The policy must contain clearly-delineated consequences and courses of action as to what will happen if intolerable actions take place.

  - The policy must contain a plan for how the policy will be implemented.

- As far as anti-bullying policies aimed at protecting LGBTQ students go, they require several specific components in order for them to be fully effective and protective for LGBTQ students (and the entire student body). These include:

  - A thoughtful definition of the harassment and bullying the policy seeks to squash;

  - Language that protects the identity of each student. Particularly for LGBTQ students, their privacy should be paramount and protected by specific language in the policy;

  - Plans designed to protect those LGBTQ students who partake in gender-specific activities and information about gender-segregated locations (such as bathrooms);

  - Language that protects the LGBTQ students in with regard to both the physical and perceived components of their gender identity;

  - School-specific logistical information, including how LGBTQ students should adhere to the dress code (for example); and

  - Plans for specific training and ongoing education for support, teachers, and other staff so they are able to be good resources for struggling LGBTQ students.

Plan school-wide activities

- Policies are essential for change, but needed action does not end once the administration has everything down in black and white. Very few people will actually read the policy. It's up to the staff of your school to ensure that the contents of the policy are incorporated into daily actions and communicated to the entire school community.

- Planning LGBTQ-supporting activities makes your school's support for the community visible and undeniable. This visibility assists the community in understanding that your school plans to support LGBTQ students and communicates the fact that your school will be a safe place for those within the community.

- Specific ideas for events and materials for publicizing the ideologies of the community can be found via national resources such as GLSEN and Teaching Tolerance.

- Examples of extremely effective events that helped spread awareness and foster inclusion for LGBTQ students have included No Name Calling Week, Day of Silence, Mix It Up, and National GSA Day.

- Remember that it's important to host these events not only when you first implement the policy but as ongoing support for members of the LGBTQ community.

Be public

- The scheduled and celebrated events spreading LGBTQ are excellent ways to start a wave of inclusion and pro-LGBTQ activity across your school's community. However, they are just that: a start. What must follow is sustained, public commitment and support of the LGBTQ community in order to normalize the lives of its members in your school.

- On an administrative level, this includes enforcing the policies put in place to protect the LGBTQ students at your school; scheduling and celebrating LGBTQ-centric events and activities on an ongoing basis; and inviting the surrounding community at large to partake in and put on similar events so that everyone knows your school is an LGBTQ-positive entity.

- However, administration can only go so far. The wave of LGBTQ support that follows in administration's footsteps must be individualistic action on the parts of every teacher at your school. In short, to properly support the at-risk LGBTQ youth, each teacher should consider coming out as an LGBTQ ally.

What is an LGBTQ ally?

- A straight ally of the LGBTQ movement is an individual who may not identify as gay, transgender, or any of the other orientations or expressions encompassed by the movement. This individual, however, does entirely support fairness and equality for the individuals of the LGBTQ movement.

What are the responsibilities of an LGBTQ ally?

• Consider the historical messaging you may unconsciously be programmed with: One of the first steps is to realize that everyone has been impacted by the incorrect and unhelpful treatment and portrayal of the LGBTQ community over the past several decades. Doing your best to forget any judgmental lens through which you might have unconsciously be viewing members of the LGBTQ community is best. Honestly ask yourself whether any of the programming of the past actually reflects the people you know who identify as LGBTQ. Likely, the answer will be a resounding 'no'.

• Educate yourself thoroughly on the issues and history of the LGBTQ movement. Harboring correct empathy for the modern-day plight of the LGBTQ students at your school will be richer and more authentic if you know where they are all coming from. While the LGBTQ movement has been around for centuries (indeed, as long as there have been people), it's only recently that those who identify as members of the community have had the freedom to live as they wish in public. However, that doesn't mean that the community as a whole feels safe doing so—especially younger members who may just be learning about themselves and may be feeling confused about their identity. Having the context of the history of the movement will help you better support those keeping it alive today.

• Proactively learn and use inclusive, correct language. Words have power. Both for your own more accurate discourse, the mental health and happiness of those who identify as LGBTQ, and as a subtle but far-reaching form of public support within your community, learning what to say (and what to steer away from) can only be construed as a public good.

• Practice active, empathetic listening techniques when supporting LGBTQ individuals: LGBTQ individuals undergo unhelpful, isolating treatment on a day-to-day basis. Allowing them the freedom to convey how they feel and how they would prefer to be treated is a good initial step in protecting them from harm.

• Good questions, comments, and starter conversation topics that are endorsed by national LGBTQ-friendly organizations for allies to keep in mind are:

- Do you remember when you first knew you were [gay, transgender, etc]? Can you tell me about that?

- I'm interested in what growing up was like for you. Can you tell me a story?

- Coming out was a brave choice—I'm sure it must have been difficult for you. How did you know it was time?

- Can you tell me about the coming out process?

- Tell me how I can best support you.

- Intervene when intolerable behavior on the part of others make instant action necessary. The only way to keep children safe across the board is to ensure that whenever anyone sees improper action taking place, the instantaneous reaction is to stop it from happening. Too many times, LGBTQ students' victimization is ignored. Staff unfairly look the other way, often. Do not do this. Regardless of the victim's gender identity or orientation, if someone is being hurt or treated unfairly, it needs to stop. When you see something harmful or unhelpful occur, step in and take action—don't look the other way.

Address cyber-bullying

- Any use of technology to send or share information which could hurt or embarrass another falls under the definition of cyber-bullying. The overwhelming majority of students have access to the Internet, personal devices that allow for 24/7 connection, and social media accounts that permit them to reach massive platforms of strangers and friends with personal information.

- According to the Cyberbullying Research Center, 1 in 5 students have experienced cyber-bullying. Many of these are LGBTQ victims, as the anonymity and distance permitted by the Internet make improper behavior more accessible to misinformed perpetrators.

- A good place to begin is with a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes cyber-bullying, as only with a definition is it possible to take steps towards

corrective action. Cyber-bullying, as defined by the Cyberbullying Research Center, is not limited to but can include:

- Sending messages or texts that are mean or threatening;

- Tricking someone into posting personal information, or revealing that information for them online;

- Forwarding clearly private messages to others or posting them to a wide audience;

- Sharing images that are overly explicit online without consent;

- Starting and spreading harmful rumors about others online; and

- Starting, curating, and perpetuating fake social media profiles to embarrass, seduce, or make fun of anyone while under a false identity.

- Addressing cyber-bullying can take many forms, but it's recommended to make it clear to students that:

  - Cyber-bullying is a form of bullying and as such it will be addressed with similar disciplinary action as in-person or physical bullying;

  - Being involved with cyber-bullying is a negative thing that will follow them through school and job applications for the rest of their lives; and

  - If they are on the receiving end of cyber-bullying of any kind, it needs to be reported to a teacher or staff member for further investigation.

Train and educate everyone

- Most teachers realize the fact that they are in a position with a unique opportunity to provide support for LGBTQ students undergoing unfairness and persecution. Most of these teachers do not feel equipped to take further action, however. Advocate for comprehensive education and training to be in place at your school to empower teachers to be the support that young, struggling LGBTQ students need to thrive and learn.

- A good place to begin is with a comprehensive school survey. Ask the teachers and administrative staff at your school to rate the school's perceived safety levels, what they know about the LGBTQ movement, and what they believe good action steps would be.

- After this, turn to certified and well-produced online programs such as Groundspark's Let's Get Real or Ready, Set, Respect from GLSEN. Provide these resources to each individual staff member, schedule ongoing events to review the materials as a staff, and incorporate LGBTQ educational material into the curricula of your students.

- Anticipate a transition period for those unaccustomed to the concept, but gently make everyone aware that while confusion is understandable, unfairness and harmful behavior is not. Enforce the safety-oriented policies you've helped put into place while repeatedly guiding the misinformed to a more inclusive mindset.

Work for comprehensive health education

- A very difficult struggle that many LGBTQ students have to bear is the fact that health education in schools (an awkward subject for any student, regardless of identity or orientation) often is tailored to heterosexual people who identify as male or female. The fact that the information simply does not, in many cases, apply to LGBTQ students makes them feel 'other', and singles them out for unhelpful and harmful attention from their peers.

- A lack of education is the single most prominent reason LGBTQ students are targeted for harmful actions. Most students are not inherently malicious; fear of the unknown simply prompts them to target that which they do not understand. Therefore, comprehensive and sweeping education of the entire community regarding LGBTQ issues should provide the most safety for LGBTQ students in the quickest and most efficient fashion.
- In order to be a truly helpful and ultimately inclusive curriculum, an LGBTQ-friendly health education should include:

  - Comprehensive, accurate, scientific information about gender, physical anatomy, and orientation

- Age-appropriate information, depending on the audience the materials are intended for

- Representation, in text and picture form, of the entire spectrum of healthy and happy families in today's world

- Accurate and practical information about sexual health, and resources for assisting students in preventing STDs

- A brief historical overview of the LGBTQ movement

- Perspectives from underrepresented communities, including those from the LGBTQ movement.

- Note that many of these points are applicable to healthy, safe experiences for individuals who do not identify as LGBTQ as much as those who do—making an updated, more comprehensive health education a good goal for the improvement of the entire community.

Provide resources

- If met with opposition and disapproval from the non-LGBTQ community, the best thing you can do is be non-confrontational. Provide resources detailing the history and statistics regarding the LGBTQ movement. If necessary, simply make the argument that you are prioritizing a community in which no-one is bullied and every student is safe. Few people can argue against that.

- The distribution of resources that educate about LGBTQ issues should be non-confrontational, positive, informative—and, if possible, endorsed, approved, or obtained from one of the nationwide LGBTQ advocacy groups.

- Resources may also include one-on-one counseling with a professional trained in LGBTQ advocacy, invitations to GSA or other LGBTQ events, or other.

Will upping support of the LGBTQ student population have an adverse effect for others within the school?

- Teaching tolerance will have a positive effect on everybody. By showing that it is not okay to target and abuse one group of people, the school will ameliorate the support and safety of the next minority group which might have been targeted.

- If any other, non-LGBTQ, students and staff within a school feel uncomfortable with treating LGBTQ community members according to their preferences (for example, adopting a person's potentially nontraditional personal pronouns), that is an issue to be handled by direct mentors on a case-by-case basis, as long as there is not discrimination, violence, or bigotry evidenced by the non-LGBTQ person. Confusion and quiet discomfort with a new norm affect non-LGBTQ members far less than physical and mental abuse affect the LGBTQ community. If there is any harmful action such as bullying or abuse, then that should be handled with the urgency required in all cases of school violence.

- Ultimately, supporting the LGBTQ portion of the student body will result in safer conditions for the entire population due to increased awareness of interpersonal boundaries and expectations for appropriate school behavior.

Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs

- These organizations are student-run, and members of the LGBTQ community as well as persons who identify otherwise are all welcome to join. They form a safe space in which questions can be asked, tough conversations can be had, and—crucially!— peoples of all orientations and identities can brainstorm ways to grow within their communities. Any disparities or issues seen between GSA members and the non-GSA portion of the school are discussed, and then awareness and action plans are spread throughout the rest of the community.

- Some of the actions of GSA clubs in the past have been LGBTQ workshops, Days of Silence for quiet protest and the raising of awareness, and attending community walks and events.

Communication with Families about School Safety Issues

- School safety neither begins nor ends at the boundaries of the school campus. Recent studies on student and parent perceptions of school safety revealed that parents tend to believe their children are far more safe than reality would indicate. This can lower the chances of students successfully approaching and confiding in their parents for help.

- When families of LGBTQ students are not supportive and empathetic to their child while their child navigates his choices regarding his identity, that child becomes high-risk for depression and self-harm. Families must be educated comprehensively —whether their child is LGBTQ or not—as to the effects of their actions, reactions, and inactions.

The Purpose of a School (The Need for Change)

- If the purpose of a school is to provide an effective education for their students AND provide basic security for each student, it would appear that the current status quo isn't doing either of these things. LGBTQ students are overwhelmingly treated as different, which opens the door for bullying, harassment, and abuse.

- Even when the students themselves are not targeted for violence (emotional, physical, or otherwise), the lack of support for their journeys leaves them more liable than their peers to depression and self-harm.

- When school health curricula do not include comprehensive information about the LGBTQ path, students who identify as such are made to feel less-than and other.

- Therefore, updating educational materials to include adequate representation, educating students and staff alike about the LGBTQ journey, and establishing support systems such as GSA clubs (and more) are vital for the LGBTQ student's education, safety, and livelihood.

How should schools handle LGBTQ students and their usage of traditionally gendered activities and locations?

- This is a charged subject, and one which, likely, your state's government has written about. Taking the time to check what the current laws are in your area is a good

first step. Then, ensuring that your school is in compliance with those laws—whether or not you believe they are fair—will help at least ensure that there is no confusion with how students should be behaving. Working towards more inclusive laws on a national and statewide basis is beyond the scope of this course, so making sure that your school is compliant and then prioritizing support of the students after that is currently the best course of action.

What are some specific actions that teachers can take to ensure the safety of LGBTQ students?

- Whether the administration of your specific school supports the LGBTQ community or not, there are definitely actions that individual teachers can take in order to establish themselves and their classrooms as resources to LGBTQ students in need.

  - Create colorful, happy 'safe space' signs and post them in your classroom and on your classroom door. These signs and stickers help notify students that you are available for discussion of issues relating to LGBTQ or anything else during the course of class or just in conversation. Having this outlet and solidarity can be the difference between a student who feels he has no recourse and a student who feels completely supported even during a difficult time.

  - Get an LGBTQ Ally or similar flag pin and wear it on your clothing for wordless affirmation that you can help struggling students.

  - Offer to start a GSA or other LGBTQ organization at your school. For any students or teachers who choose to attend meetings, it will be an outlet for frustration and a place of commonality from which you can brainstorm further actions to make your entire school a safe place for LGBTQ students. For any LGBTQ individuals or allies who do not feel comfortable attending such a meeting, it will still bolster their confidence that there are those at their school who care.

  - If you see homophobia, take instant action. Aim to be compassionate towards the instigator of any unhelpful or harmful action, but be very firm to ensure that everyone who witnesses the action knows that anti-LGBTQ sentiment or activities are not tolerable at your school.

- Try to integrate topics relating to LGBTQ history, issues, or fairness into your subject and everyday tutelage. For example, if you teach science, feel free to assign information about the contributions of Alan Turing, an LGBTQ computer science; if you teach about politics, discuss LGBTQ policies and the contributions of Harvey Milk. Even if you're not able to add concrete subjects to your curriculum regarding LGBTQ topics or people, incorporating the language into your everyday rhetoric will assist with helping your students have a more authentic view of the world in which they live.

- Lastly, if you're an LGBTQ ally, consider that just as much a part of your professional identity as your academic credentials! Pursue ongoing education regarding LGBTQ issues and mental health care as much as you can, informally or otherwise, so you're able to provide even stronger resources to those students at your school (LGBTQ or not) who are struggling and need expert advice.

How can I prioritize a healthy relationship between myself and my students so that I can be there for them if they are struggling?

- Research does show that if a student has mentors and supportive educators in their life, they will be much more likely to reach out if they are in a time of crisis. Fortunately, that means that one of the most impactful ways to improve the lives of LGBTQ students at your school is something you can do yourself: You can become an LGBTQ ally and live that in your daily life.

- However, supporting another human being goes far further than merely supporting the concept of their sexual identity, or even working to establish fairness and equality for the community to which they belong. Finding ways to build a healthy teacher-student relationship with every student should be a major goal that every teacher should work towards. In the case of struggling students, however, this relationship can be completely life-saving.

- There are three general ways to present yourself as a dependable mentor and resource for students in your classroom:

- Create a sense of trust. If you prioritize making sure that every student in your classroom—and, indeed, the whole school—feels seen and cared-for, they'll be much more likely to see you as someone worth trusting if they need serious help. You can do this by being curious about them and their lives, by paying attention to them, and showing appreciation. A small comment here or there, or even simply asking how things are going, will go a long way.

  - Steep yourself in your student's context. Making sure you know as much as is possible about the background of your students—what they like to do, where they come from, what their needs are—will make you a more relatable mentor.

  - Model healthy social dynamics. As their teacher, you're responsible for teaching them far more than just academics.

- One caveat must be mentioned: Every healthy student-teacher relationship has its boundaries. For the protection of the student as well as your own, take commonsense precautions. For example, being alone with one student in a secluded area is likely not a good idea; and if the student starts showing signs of over-dependence upon you or begins to share things that are inappropriate, work with the student's family as well as the administration and resources at your school to gently aid the student find professional help elsewhere.

How can we protect LGBTQ students from abuse and predators over the Internet?

- Unfortunately, this is a threat that is present for every student, not just minorities. Taking precautions to teach students about the internet while limiting their access and the access of others to their online personas will result in a safer browsing experience for all students.

- Adding modules to the students' education to help them learn safe practices on line, how to spot when people are not being their authentic selves, and lessons on the permanency and inherent danger of the Internet and social media would also be potentially life-saving inclusions for not only LGBTQ students but the entire student body.

- Lessons that help instill the fact that the Internet is forever would likely reduce the occurrences of cyber-bullying as well as other forms of online harassment and harmful behavior.

Can incorporating widespread clarification and use of preferred personal pronouns contribute to the safety of LGBTQ students?

- LGBTQ students may inherently feel a lack of control over their surroundings, their bodies, and much of what goes on in their lives. One thing they can hope to control is how they are perceived; and part of that perception carries through in the way people refer to them.

- A powerful way to show support, inclusion, and acceptance of the identity to which students identify is to encourage the use of preferred personal pronouns.

- Often, for LGBTQ youth, their chosen pronouns are such an emblematic part of who they identify as and who they wish to be that if their pronouns are rejected or belittled, they feel as if they are as well. Students who feel rejected are at risk for depression and other symptoms of negative mental behaviors.

- Asking students what their personal pronouns are, therefore, is a sign of deep consideration and respect. This need not be limited to students identifying as LGBTQ.

Section Two Summary

"Schools often lead the way for the broader society in modeling inclusiveness and pluralism." -The American Federation of Teachers

LGBTQ students aren't safe at school. Changing that for their better health and growth will take both sweeping administrative reform and proactive initiative on the part of each individual staff member. However, by prioritizing education, fairness, and inclusivity within the school systems, more students will be safer—and your school will set a good example for other schools to become safer after you!

Section Two Key Terms

• **GLSEN:** The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educational Network is a national group that has many resources for helping schools and communities support their LGBTQ members.

• **GSA:** Gay Straight Alliance clubs are fantastic resources to create small safe spaces and resources for LGBTQ students within schools, as well as forge relationships between members of the community and allies to create inclusion and fairness for all within the school community.

• **Pronouns:** A person's personal pronouns refer to the set of relative articles by which they prefer to be addressed. Typical male pronouns are he, him, and his; typical female pronouns are she, her, and hers. Many individuals who identify as agender – as neither specifically male or female – choose to identify with either, both, the plural pronouns of they, them, and theirs—or any of a widely varying group of other personal pronouns.

Section Two Personal Reflection Question

Would you consider yourself an LGBTQ ally? If not, why? If so, are there ways you can help others become allies, or ways you can further your support of the LGBTQ youth at your school?

Section Three: Making School a Place Where Students can Be Themselves

The end goal for any school should be to help usher into a world of possibility young individuals who feel comfortable in who they are and also feel equipped to continue growing—while being able to support themselves and make the world a better place.

As the only way that students can be productive members of society is if we first allow them to realize the unique way in which they can do so, schools need to be safe places in which students are allowed to express themselves. One difficulty arises when one considers that young students are inherently living and being in a state of metamorphosis. The pre-teen and teen years constitute a period of time during which self-realization is occurring; and that can be scary and confusing—even for those

whose gender identity and sexual orientation has been traditionally supported for centuries.

For both LGBTQ students and their peers, comprehensive support from their school and teachers will transform the way they're able to relate to themselves and each other. If LGBTQ students are supported, they will be able to grow where they're planted and bloom successfully. If those who don't identify as LGBTQ are taught compassion and empathy and supported in their own right, they'll be much less likely to lash out at the unfamiliar—creating a safer environment for all.

Ultimately, each school needs to work hard to create an atmosphere of trust in which each student can be themself. In this final section, we'll discuss a few proactive ways teachers and administrations can work to make this happen.

Are teachers able to go beyond teaching and help their students be fully themselves?

Yes. Think back to your own formative school experiences. Was there ever a case where a teacher or support staff at your school helped ensure that you were able to grow? Conversely, did you ever feel like the administration looked away when you needed help most? See if you can brainstorm ways to ensure that no child under your care will experience a similar plight. It's impossible to be there at all times for all people, but with creativity and a little bit of effort, it's entirely possible to change lives for the better.

Teach Your Students the Art of Speaking (And Disagreeing) Well

We teach our students the fundamentals of sentence structure and drill them in mental math. However, when it comes to putting together a logical argument, learning how to disagree with someone politely and productively, and having respect for each other through sticky situations—these are often skills which we assume (or hope) that our students will pick up by themselves. Instead of leaving this to chance, let's instill in our students a real-world skill which will ameliorate school violence now and set them up for a lifetime of success later!

Why is it difficult for students to speak well? Why would they resort to other ways of working through confusion (such as bullying) instead?

- In America, the #1 fear isn't death or falling from great heights; it's the fear of public speaking. Having to put your own thoughts on display and defend them in front of even one or two other people requires a vulnerability which makes most of us exceedingly uncomfortable. Because putting together a respectful response to an unknown scenario often requires a level of introspection requiring significant self-knowledge and, to be frank, not a little humility and effort, many students find it easier to speak with their fists (so to say) instead of their brains and hearts.

- Setting up a classroom (and school) environment in which opinions are celebrated and arguments are carried out well will allow students to find ways to express themselves peacefully, particularly if we help them walk through confusing and stressful circumstances to help them make it happen.

Teach Your Students to Respect Views Other than Their Own

- When a child is very young, they tend to believe that the entire world is as it is viewed through their unique and very specific lens. This built-up world-view is extremely important for early development, as it allows the child to form the opinions which inform his personality, goals, habits, relationships, and other intrinsic facets of his life.

- However, when the child has grown to a more mature age, it's equally important that the child discovers their world-view isn't the only one, and that other, potentially very different, world-views not only exist but can be equally valid. The fact that not many people are able to understand this as adults (and act in a way commensurate with that belief) is the root cause of many problems. Ensuring that this understanding takes root during a child's more formative years can not only transform a school community, it can set up an entire generation for more positive action as adults.

- The best way you can help facilitate this awareness in your classroom is by giving your students the rhetorical toolkit they'll need—compassion, empathy, curiosity—and then exposing them to as many world-views which differ from their own as possible. This is a fundamental part of education.

- For a concrete approach to making this happen, consider equipping your students with thoughtful, respectful questions to use when confronted with a world-view they may disagree with. For example, they could say something like, "Can you

please explain why you believe/do/say that?" or "I respectfully disagree with what you just said, because [insert cogent argument here]," or simply "I think something different" instead of the much more forceful "You're wrong." It will certainly take time for students to achieve this level of mature discourse, but that's what school is about: the journey and the training.

• Ultimately, it's imperative to help students realize that a respectful disagreement is not a negative thing. It's a positive thing—as long as it's carried out with respect to all parties concerned.

Celebrate Mistakes Made in Your Classroom

• As mentioned above, the act of sharing one's beliefs before a classroom—or, even more pertinently, coming out to one's community as a member of the LGBTQ movement—takes incredible amounts of bravery and vulnerability. Doing all you can to foster these two tendencies in your students will help ease the journey an LGBTQ student is going through. One concrete way you can foster bravery and vulnerability in your classroom environment is to celebrate mistakes made and lessons learned.

• Focusing on teaching students not only the right answers to questions but the development of a correct answer, the ability to justify their opinions and question others' in respectful ways will take them further than memorizing mental math. Try to create a classroom atmosphere which positively supports each student's growth— even when their trajectories take a dip (and perhaps especially then). This will foster an environment in which students feel safe to be themselves.

Section Three Summary

To make schools safe havens of growth for all students, teachers are called upon to go further than merely teaching their subject. Ensuring that every student has the creative space and trust necessary to be vulnerable and present their authentic selves in class without fear of being mocked or treated poorly will help them grow—and it may help them feel less likely to lash out when they encounter people who represent world-views different from their own.

Teachers should focus on celebrating students' mistakes and growth and on teaching their students to disagree well. Respectful disagreement instead of incendiary,

instinctive disbelief and reaction has the capability to change the world—and certainly can change your students' lives for the better.

Section Three Key Concept

Respectful disagreement: The idea that two people with two differing world-views can in fact disagree without resorting to violence or unhelpful hatred.

Section Three Personal Reflection Question

Think about the last time you felt most like yourself. Who were you with? Where were you? What were you doing?

Do you remember the first time you felt that way? Was it a good or bad experience? Did anyone help you to discover that state? Consider the joy of helping someone else get to that place of self-knowledge as you prepare to make your classroom a more inclusive, fair, and helpful community.

Conclusion

LGBTQ students comprise, according to some studies, roughly 8% of school-going children in the United States of America—which means that at least 1.5 million students in schools today face the challenges of navigating life with those who do not understand them. This would be difficult under the best of circumstances, but when those around them can be violent and vindictive, it's easy to understand why many LGBTQ students choose to just stay home.

It doesn't have to be that way. Those 1.5 million students—a number which is likely an understatement—can be supported and even cherished by their communities. Steps can be towards inclusion and fairness, steps which can simultaneously protect these at-risk youth from bullying, depression, discrimination, and other unhelpful and even harmful outcomes.

These steps towards safety need to be taken at the administrative, staff, and student level; but it starts with individual action. Begin to create an atmosphere of trust, an environment in which students believe they can share themselves with security and

even celebration, and students everywhere will be able to make the most of their education and become everything that they are meant to be.

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