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## Gender and Sexuality Diverse (GSD) Youth in Schools

**Gender and Sexuality Diverse (GSD) youth have continuously experienced marginalisation due to their Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE). That these negative experiences continue to be reported in their schools is particularly troubling, given the amount of time these teens spend in these settings, the power education settings have to be spaces for the development of social connections for children and teenagers, and the fact that these instances can and should be prevented. Schools are a microcosm that often reflects what is happening in society, so protecting LGBTQ+ youth isn't necessarily an easy task (considering the increase of homophobia and transphobia in some spaces nowadays). However this is precisely why it is vital to do so.**

Youth need to feel safe in the space they are in; this is a bare minimum requirement in an environment conducive to learning. Unfortunately, Gender and Sexuality Diverse (GSD) youth are continuously quoted as having experienced bullying, harassment, discrimination, or other negative experiences in their schools. When we use the term GSD, we refer to youth who identify as belonging to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Asexual, Intersex, Transgender and Gender Non-conforming (those who identify with neither gender traditionally recognised in society) communities. Because human sexuality, identity, and expression are complex and diverse, this list does not encompass all minoritised gender and sexuality diverse communities. Still, it allows us to discuss youth in these communities in such a way that sheds light on their existence respectfully. GSD youth often express issues with inappropriate name-calling, so using appropriate terminology is a starting point for addressing their concerns.



Research has uncovered how common it is for GSD youth to report negative experiences at school. It has also documented how a transformation in this setting to prioritize affirmative support for LGBTQ+ students can contribute to a better school climate for these students, and be conducive to academic success and overall improvement of students' mental health. Affirmative support is key, as GSD youth report problems with their mental health more frequently than their heterosexual peers. These include higher rates of distress, low mood, and self-harm. Though an explanation of why this happens cannot be attributed to a single cause, it has been linked to institutional homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism (...) in their environment.

Minority Stress Theory suggests that some of the adverse mental health outcomes for GSD individuals can be explained by their experiences living their minoritised identity in a world that assumes only two genders exist and that the gender assigned at birth must match the one you identify with (cisnormativity). This world also assumes heterosexuality as the norm for all (heteronormativity), which puts GSD youth at risk of victimisation, internalised homo/bi/transphobia, and stigmatisation. In other words, GSD individuals face the burden of navigating a world that constantly sends the message that they should not live their lives being their authentic selves. Although it is important to note that the acceptance of GSD people varies from country to country, overall, the experience of worsened mental health and pressure to conform to heteronormativity and cisnormativity is reported worldwide.

The recommendations provided below are relatively non-specific, as it is essential to consider each individual and each education system's needs and strengths.

Implementing any of the recommendations below on its own will most likely be unsuccessful, as it is necessary to work from multiple perspectives and levels to ensure a true affirmative space. This is because there needs to be limited space between policy and its application. Those involved in students' everyday lives become responsible for interpreting and enforcing the policies in place. In other words, if the administration sets in place a set of policies but the educators do not have the knowledge or training to adopt them and ensure their daily implementation, this policy will surely fail. Similarly, if the families and students are not included throughout the process, implementation of the policy will not satisfy the needs of those directly affected and will have a limited impact.

### Recommendations

- One of the most basic things that can be done is to put up signs indicating a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth (these include the rainbow flag, for example). Because many LGBTQ+ youth have often had previous experiences of being discriminated against or bullied, they don't always know whether the space around them will protect them from these experiences. A simple poster or flag can be an early, visible sign for the youth to understand that the area around them is safe.
- A poster or flag is not enough if it is not followed by tangible measures that protect LGBTQ+ youth in schools. Existing policies should be revised to ensure students' SOGIEs are respected at all levels — this includes verifying that the language within those rules explicitly covers the protection of students' SOGIE.
- Some teachers report feeling paralysed in situations where LGBTQ+ youth require support due to a lack of information/ confusion. Therefore, all teachers should receive up-to-date training on issues pertaining to SOGIE, so that when they witness a situation that is harmful to LGBTQ+ youth, they know exactly how to intervene and support the student. Teachers could also provide affected students with the names and contacts of supportive associations. This training should also equip teachers with adequate non-judgmental language.
- Teachers, administration, and the school community should establish and enforce a protocol meant to address situations in which bullying due to SOGIE takes place. This should be shared with all students and their families. Forms of discrimination that are more specific to GSD youth should also be considered. For example, outing — making public a person's sexual orientation when that person would rather not share that information — is a serious issue. It removes a person's agency and opens them up to further harm. As such, it should be dealt with swiftly and with sensitivity and empathy towards the student.
- It is important to respect a student's identity. This includes calling them by their chosen name, respecting their pronouns, and making the necessary arrangements to the school's physical environment. For example, ensuring the school has gender-neutral bathrooms, adjusting internal documentation to reflect the student's SOGIE, and respecting a student's agency to decide what information gets shared.
- Examine the vocabulary and language choices you make during class. Saying "ladies and gentlemen" can lead to feelings of exclusion for those who don't identify with either (e.g., a non-binary youth). Exclusively talking about "mothers and fathers" leaves out less traditional family units.
- Challenge your own biases and question your existing beliefs and assumptions about LGBTQ+ youth. Be honest with yourself about them and challenge them.