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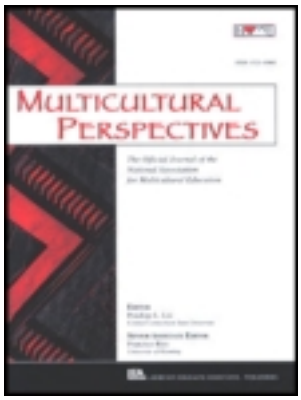

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Rethinking Safe Schools Approaches for LGBTQ Students: Changing the Questions We Ask

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In this article the authors address the limitations of framing "the problem" of in-school LGBTQ harassment within dominant anti-bullying discourses. They offer a critical sociological framework as an alternative way of understanding the issues of LGBTQ harassment and propose a research agenda in which school culture and gender policing are the objects of inquiry.

Introduction

Conversations about creating safe schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth are often narrowly focused on eliminating individual acts of bullying and harassment targeting LGBTQ kids. Anti-bullying policies and programs are reliant on the belief that "the fundamental component to reduc[ing] school bullying is to create a positive school climate that fosters caring behaviors" (Orpinas & Horne, 2010, p. 49). These interventions are part of a dominant discourse on bullying that reduces peer-to-peer aggression to "anti-social behaviour where one student wields power over [a victim]" (Walton, 2011, p. 131) and conceptualizes "the problem of bullying in terms of individual or family pathology" (Bansel, Davies, Laws, & Linnell, 2009, p. 59). In other words, *bullies* and their aggressive behavior and intolerant attitudes are understood as the problem, and success of school interventions is typically evaluated by measuring the frequency of reported bullying behaviors or student perceptions of safety. While it is undeniable that acts of overt violence must be stopped, "reduction [of bullying] is a measurable outcome . . . [that] merely *contains, regulates, and manages* violence rather than *addresses* it" (Walton, 2005, p. 112). When the absence of reported bullying functions as *the* indicator of a safe or inclusive school for LGBTQ students, we fail to account for "the social processes underpinning [homophobic bullying] and the subtle ways in which schools are complicit in sustaining them, even from the very earliest years" (DePalma & Jennett, 2010, p. 16).

This article aims to challenge this taken-for-granted conceptualization of LGBTQ youths' school experiences and argues for a broader worldview that encompasses cultural systems of power—along lines of gender, class, race, and sexuality—that persistently privilege specific groups of youth while marginalizing others (Ringrose, 2008). Shifting the definition of "the problem" in this way demands a different understanding of peer-to-peer aggression than that which underlies the bullying discourse. It requires recognition of how aggression functions in processes of social positioning and how patterns of youth aggression are reflective of cultural norms for sexuality and gender expression. To this end, we will:

1. Respond to questions most often asked in discussions of safe schools for LGBTQ students using a sociological frame, which understands schools both as cultural sites where students battle for

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social position *and* as institutional structures and systems in which normative gender and sexuality are privileged. This is a significant shift from the "anti-bullying" paradigm's attention to *behavior* and *attitudes*, which places the problem on individuals rather than culture.
2. Introduce *gender policing* as an alternative framework for understanding peer-to-peer aggression. This framework draws attention to how normative gender expectations function as tools for targeting peers, as well as the role schools and other cultural institutions play in reproducing strict rules for "normal" gender expression. This framework encompasses many forms of aggression that fall outside bullying discourses.
3. Explore possibilities and limitations of litigation and legislation for disrupting systemic marginalization of non-conforming students and creating sustainable change in schools.
4. Propose a research agenda that moves beyond defining "the problem" in terms of individual-to-individual or group-to-group interactions and, rather, identifies *school culture* as the object of inquiry.

Limitations of the "Bullying" Discourse

This article arose in response to questions commonly asked in conversations concerning the violence LGBTQ students experience in school. The responses presented here are intended to highlight the ways the *questions* themselves are limited and respond to them in a way that complicates the picture of how aggression and social positioning function in schools. Throughout this article, we will advocate for *cultural* change. We define *culture* as "the systems of symbol, knowledge, belief and practice that are available within a given context for people to use to make meaning of their experiences" (Smith & Payne, forthcoming). Lines between "normal" and "Other" are embedded in culture—and serve as tools for placing self and others within various social hierarchies. We argue that schools need to understand the cultural beliefs they are promoting, how they are teaching these values to students, and how peer-to-peer aggression actually *serves* these cultural beliefs. Sustainable change cannot occur without this cultural awareness.

What do We Know About Young People's Attitudes Toward Difference and Toward LGBTQ or Gender Non-Conforming Youth?

Conversations about how youth think about *difference* need to move beyond questions addressing individual attitudes and behaviors and toward how schools privilege some groups and marginalize others. Young people's attitudes about difference are partially formed in a school-based social scene that rewards conformity, and school is a primary cultural site where youth learn rules about who men and women are supposed to be. Children learn "'their place' in the U.S. political and social order through their public school experiences" (Lugg, 2006, p. 49)—and that place has a great deal to do with gender. Those who do not "properly perform" (Payne, 2007, p. 77) the gender normatively associated with their biological sex are "marked" (p. 64) and *policed* by their peers and denied access to social power and popularity, while those who do conform are "celebrated" (Lugg, 2006, p. 49). These patterns indicate that youths' understanding (and marking) of their LGBTQ and gender non-conforming peers is not "based solely on sexual orientation, but rather from judgments about perceived tendencies to engage in forms of expression that run counter to gender conventions" (Horn, 2007, p. 329). The further youth fall from idealized forms of masculinity and femininity, the more vulnerable they are to these patterns of policing as well as more severe forms of violence. LGBTQ youth are often the most vulnerable in this system.

Ubiquitous messages about who youth are allowed to be limit possibilities for how peers can relate to one another, the kinds of *difference* that are acceptable in the school social scene, and how individuals can understand their own gender identity (Shakib, 2003). Such strict regulation of difference produces a school climate in which LGBTQ youth are at risk for violence, and this will likely not shift until educators are better able to understand the effects of a heterosexist institutional culture on all members of a school community (Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). Schools must develop ways to change how educators think about and "see" their school environments so that they may "understand the school . . . as a community of actors and actions, where possibilities for violence, for violation, for ridicule, are always present" (Bansel et al, 2009, p. 66). The goal is not simply ending students' "negative" or "intolerant" behaviors. It is also understanding attitudes and behavior as "reiterations of the dominant order" (p. 66) that normalize the marginalization of gender non-conforming students.

Do Students' Attitudes Change Over the Course of Their K–12 Schooling?

Educational research consistently indicates that verbal and physical harassment increases as children transition from elementary school to junior high and changes again in tone and content in the transition to high school. Elementary students' worlds are largely segregated by gender, with boys and girls occupying different physical

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spaces within schools and positioning their social groups in opposition to one another (Thorne & Luria, in Payne, 2009). Elementary-age children also experience a certain amount of flexibility around gendered expectations and are often allowed to engage in "cross-gender" behavior or activities. Pressure for children to "out-grow" gender transgression intensifies as they get older and gender expectations become more rigid (Carr, 1998).

As children enter adolescence, social rules begin to change as they engage in the (heterosexual) dating scene, peer groups alter to include boys and girls, and paths to social power become more exclusive and competitive. Expectations for gender conformity intensify, which implicitly gives youth permission to police peers' behavior—rewarding those who conform and marginalizing those who do not (Horn, 2007; Payne, 2007; Shakib, 2003; Wyss, 2004). Researchers have described these changes in a variety of ways. Shakib (2003) found that for female athletes approaching adolescence, "not being viewed as feminine no longer simply meant having less gender and thus less peer status .... [A] lack of femininity meant not being 'heterosexually' desirable and peers' view a nonconforming girl as lesbian" (p. 1413). In work on the school experiences of transgender teens, Wyss (2004) argues: "gender-variant teenagers are confronted by difficulties that stem from the increasingly stringent gender rules to which teens are subject at and after puberty" (p. 710). Payne (2007) and Pascoe (2003) found that students who do not perform traditional gender were prevented from attaining power and popularity in high school. These studies illustrate the ways normative gendered expectations shift but are omnipresent in K–12 school experiences, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.

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Who Bullies Whom, and Why?

When trying to understand why kids bully and which kids tend to be targets, it is important to step outside the image of the traditional bully/victim binary—which supports the cultural myth that aggressors are youth who have a tendency toward violent behavior or have an impulse to wield power over peers whom they perceive to be weak in some way. This happens in peer cultures, but it only accounts for a fraction of the peer-to-peer aggression in schools and is only symptomatic of a larger problem. Targeting others for their failure to "do" gender "right" is a learned mechanism for improving or affirming one's *own* social status, and schools are participants in both teaching youth to use these tools and privileging some groups of kids over others.

Every student's speech, behavior, and dress are constantly being regulated by the cultural rules about the "right" way to exist in the school environment, and youth's policing practices often fail to draw adults' attention. For example, it is considered normal "for boys to be heroically and 'playfully' violent and for girls to be repressively and secretly 'mean'" (Ringrose & Renold, 2010, p. 591), and youth operate within these acceptable dynamics of aggression to battle for position in social hierarchies. Students who are socially powerful are those who successfully perform heterosexuality and normative gender, and great importance is placed on youths' success in the "heterosexual marketplace" (Eckert, 1994). It is, therefore, important to examine how schools institutionalize heterosexuality and thereby support social positioning practices that privilege idealized heterosexual performance. In high schools, "heterosexuality and romance are . . . publicly constructed through formal activities" such as Homecoming king and queen, school dances, and voting for the "cutest couple" (p. 7). School time and money are devoted to these rituals, and heterosexuality and gender conformity are rewarded with a position at the top of the school's social hierarchy—visibly establishing the school ideal and placing those who do not measure up in subordinate positions.

"Student [and adult] discourses of 'normal' gender and sexuality make the school feel unsafe for [LGBTQ] students" (Ngo, 2003, p. 118), so it is imperative that safe schools work focus on gaining deeper understanding of the subtle ways privileging of heteronormative gender performance constantly influences how students negotiate their school environments. In terms of understanding LGBTQ students' susceptibility to violence, this means investigating how youth discursively construct and maintain social categories and how they attribute social power to some categories and subordinate others. Youth fight for positions of power through "the continual, vocal branding of Other" (Thurlow, 2001, p. 26)—a process through which students establish their own position within the social hierarchy by marking others' positions as higher or lower than their own (Pascoe, 2007; Thurlow, 2001). It is, therefore, possible that those who "bully" do so because they are making an "extreme investment" in a cultural system that allows them to access power through the "normative regulation of others" (Bansel et al., 2009, p. 67).

Incidents of vocal targeting are "not autonomous acts, free-floating from their histories and contexts that can be accounted for through the character of one faulty individual" (Bansel et al., 2009, p.66). Biased speech and other verbal "microaggressions" (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000) should be understood as *citational* practices—"drawing on and repeating past articulations and perceptions" (Ngo, 2003 p. 116, using Butler, 1993). Homophobic language does not need to be explained in the moment, which signifies that it is citing and reproducing cultural and historical understandings about this kind of speech—and that these cultural norms are reproduced each time kids use this language to regulate one another. Hate speech acts—"faggot,"

"dyke," "homo"—injure individuals *and* the larger group of queer and non-conforming students by repeatedly placing them in "subordinate position[s]" in the social hierarchy (McInnes & Couch, 2004, p. 435–436). These patterns of aggression often occur *within* friendship groups (Ringrose, 2008), making it all the more difficult to see and to intervene. Boys' misogynistic teasing of girls, girls' verbal policing of one another's reputations, and boys' homophobic teasing are examples of verbal aggression that constantly circulate within peer groups but fall outside dominant discourses of bullying (Duncan, 2004; Ringrose & Renold, 2010; Payne, 2010). Bullying is understood as extreme or overt violence, and the *bully* and *victim* are presumed to be easily identifiable. However, these forms of daily violence and gender policing are subtle, often fade into the landscape of "normal" adolescent behavior, and this constant reinforcement of stigma goes unchecked.

What are the Capabilities and Limitations of Whole-School Anti-Bullying Programs?

When searching for "solutions" to the problem of creating supportive environments for LGBTQ young people, conversations typically fixate on interventions that purport to be able to eliminate bullying in school settings. Public discourse about bullying implies that it "is something that can be observed, discovered, found, analyzed, reported, and ultimately stopped" (Walton, 2005, p. 92). However, focusing safe schools efforts on the elimination of violent acts means all attention is being paid to individuals—bullies and victims—and their behavior, and none to the cultural systems that reproduce and sanction violence, intimidation, or harassment. For any change to be sustainable, school interventions must take on the task of *cultural change* alongside violence intervention.

To date, efforts to improve the school experiences of LGBTQ students have primarily focused on eliminating (visible) violent behaviors in schools through anti-bullying programs. Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is used by schools throughout the United States and Europe, and its designers hold an authoritative position in the academic conversation about "what works" for making schools safer (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancour, & Hymel, 2010). This program asks schools to create positive relationships between adults and students and establish firm, consistent consequences for aggressive (bullying) behaviors. Evaluations of the OBPP (many executed by Olweus and his team) have measured its effectiveness according to students' self-reported experiences of bullying or being bullied. A review of two decades of evaluation studies produced the conclusion that "bullying can, in fact, be considerably reduced through systematic school-wide efforts that reduce the opportunities and rewards for bullying and build a sense of community among students and adults" (Olweus & Limber, 2010, p. 397). Other researchers are more cautious in their endorsement of the Olweus model. Smith, Schneider, Smith, and Ananiadou's (2004) review of studies evaluating OBPP concluded, "It is clear that the whole school approach has led to important reductions in bullying . . . but the results are simply too inconsistent to justify adoption of these particular procedures to the exclusion of others" (p. 557). Swearer et al. (2010) question the validity of reliance on "self-report indices of bullying and victimization" (p. 42), calling attention to their failure to account for factors such as race, disability or sexual orientation in how they define the problem of *bullying.* These programs fail to address which kids are targeted, and why.

It is important to recognize the limitations of the strategies that are currently in place and believed to be the key to safer schools. Anti-bullying programs are assumed to be an effective method for changing school culture, but their focus on *individuals*—bullies and victims—does not account for the systems of power that allow for the social categorization of kids and privilege some categories over others. In other words, anti-bullying discourses are describing *school culture* as positive or negative (depending on the presence or absence of reported violence), not as a system of values and symbols that regulates students' positioning in the social hierarchy. Anti-bullying programs' focus on "statistics, characteristics, psychological profiles, and measurable events" (Walton, 2005, p. 113) fails to question why the same groups of students are targeted decade after decade. Anti-bullying programs are more often pushing violent behavior underground than calling systemic privileging and marginalization into question. Furthermore, "the dominant 'bully discourses' employed to make sense of and address conflict offer few resources or practical tools for addressing and coping with everyday, normative aggression and violence in schools" (Ringrose & Renold, 2010, p. 575).

Legislation and Litigation

What can Anti-Bullying and Anti-Discrimination Policies do for Schools, and What are Their Limitations?

Anti-bullying and anti-discrimination laws and policies are a focal point for political and educational leaders who focus their energy on creating supportive and affirming school environments for LGBTQ youth. The legal protections are a critical component in the pursuit of equal access and opportunity for LGBTQ

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students, and legal and political experts (and the general public) have been quick to assume that these are the key to ending homophobic harassment. However, litigation and legislation are limited in their capacity to change school climate, and we must further examine how law and politics intersect with educational environments in order to design effective strategies for changing school culture and the "public consciousness" (Higdon, 2010, p. 7).

The essential problem with relying on laws and policies is that they allow schools to maintain a reactionary position in terms of their responsibility to provide safe environments for LGBTQ students. Even when safe schools laws include a school climate standard (such as the "safe and civil educational environment" standard in New York's Dignity for all Students Act), implementation remains focused on decreasing bullying behavior, not addressing school culture. Higdon (2010) argues that anti-bullying legislation is limited because it "focus[es] almost exclusively on how schools should *respond* to bullying without paying sufficient attention to how schools can help *prevent* bullying" (p. 47). These policies can only hold schools accountable for "student–peer harassment based on its [the school's] own misconduct, including deliberate indifference to known harassment. School officials' failure to prevent harm to a student is not alone a violation of due process rights" (Bloom, 2007, 118–119). This means that victims must be able to demonstrate their schools' failure to stop the bullying once notified of its existence and it places plaintiffs under "a nearly insurmountable burden of proof" (Bloom, 2007, p. 118). Resulting legal battles between schools and bullying victims "often polarize communities and generate more hostility towards targeted students" (Meyer & Stader, 2009, p. 148). Many times, young people bringing these suits are forced to change schools to escape the abuse while the case carries on—even with orders of protection in place. Additionally, ". . . when it comes to targeting the overall incidence of gender-based bullying, to the extent a lawsuit can provide some remedy, litigation by itself is entirely ineffective . . . litigation in this context does little to protect future victims, and it is doubtful whether litigation can even 'remedy' the child who brought the litigation" (Higdon, 2010, p. 44–45). The ripple effect of litigation is a valuable tool for encouraging schools to act, but it must be coupled with comprehensive education if it is to be a tool for change.

Given these limitations, those designing safe schools initiatives must carefully consider the kinds of effects they hope anti-bullying law and policy will have and how they envision making those anticipated effects a reality. Higdon (2010) argues that the exact details for the "solution" to homophobic and other gender-based bullying are unclear, but they will include litigation brought by victims, anti-bullying legislation, and "education concerning the harms caused by bullying on the basis of gender non-conformity" (p. 41)—the latter requiring increased cultural awareness on the part of schools as to how they reproduce heteronorms and operate on heterosexist assumptions. A key piece of this is educating all school personnel on the link between bullying and normative gender. Whether or not teachers intervene in harassment on behalf of LGBTQ students is typically dependent upon their own beliefs and knowledge about gender, sexuality, and bullying (Anagnastopoulos, Buchanan, Pereira, & Lichty, 2009; Higdon, 2010); therefore, they need to be equipped with knowledge and resources that will empower them to recognize and disrupt the cultural patterns that privilege conformity and marginalize difference. Safe school laws are often vaguely written and fail to include mandates for educator training. Additionally, there is often little commitment to enforcement, and the mandated LGBTQ inclusive school policies fail to offer the desired protection (Bloom, 2007). Enumerated non-discrimination policies alone do not necessarily provide protection for LGBTQ students (Payne, Smith, & Johnson, 2009). Policy must be part of everyday practice—its enforcement must become part of the school culture.

Schools "could create safer and more inclusive schools by educating their teachers and principals on their legal and professional responsibilities in working with queer youth" (Meyer & Stader, 2009, p. 148) and state, district, and school policies are necessary to clearly establish those responsibilities. However, Youdell's (2004) work on youths' experiences resisting "wounded" or victimized identities in school "highlights the limits of equal rights and anti-discrimination based policies and interventions . . . by indicating the mundane, day-to-day constitutive practices that oppositional and structural politics and policy reform are unable to penetrate" (p. 490). Increased educator awareness of the institutional structures and systems that reify heteronorms and the impact of peer-to-peer microaggressions that discipline difference (Solorzano, et al., 2000) can only be gained through professional development opportunities that allow teachers to "see" their school environments differently—encouraging them to understand their professional responsibility to LGBTQ students as extending beyond legal responsibility.

Changing the Questions We Ask

Based on these analyses of the limitations of "anti-bullying" frameworks for addressing the problem of the marginalization of LGBTQ students, we propose questions that we believe outline a research agenda that will produce much-needed knowledge about creating more affirming school environments:

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- How do we move the focus of the conversation beyond individual acts of violence and to schools as cultural sites that privilege gender and sexual conformity?
  - What do bullying interventions look like with this shift?
- How do schools understand their culpability in perpetuating the privileging of hegemonic gender?
  - What possibilities are there for schools to create new avenues to student prestige that do not require heterosexuality and the performance of hegemonic gender?
  - How would increased availability of status and power shift the high school social hierarchy and how would that impact school violence against LGBTQ kids?
- What kind of professional development will empower educators to take on the responsibility of creating affirming environments for LGBTQ students—rather than simple concern for their "safety" (Payne & Smith, 2010, 2011, & 2012)?
  - What type of professional development is "do-able" given the day-to-day reality of schools?
  - How do we help educators understand systems of power that marginalize based on gender conformity and equip them to teach through or around these systems?
  - What role might LGBTQ inclusive classrooms play in reducing school violence?
- What are the benefits and limitations of litigation (punitive solutions) and legislation to reduce instances of bullying, and how do we move toward preventative, proactive solutions?
- What are the limits of character education, tolerance, safety, and multicultural discourses for creating equity and reducing violence in schools?
  - In what ways are these approaches engaging in the "superficial accommodation of difference" (Daniel, 2009)?

What New Research Needs to be Done and Supported?

Future research on creating safe and inclusive school environments for LGBTQ kids needs to focus on exploring schools as cultural sites and the interactions between litigation, legislation, and educational practice. We know that inclusive anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies provide LGBTQ students with the recognition and legal ammunition they need to insist upon protection from violence, but we do not know how to effectively use these policies to shift cultural norms in a way that will open up opportunities for LGBTQ kids to be full participants in their school environments. "Anti-bullying" frames "the problem" as a need to protect victims and overlooks "the role that schools play in the reproduction of social relations along axes of class, gender, race and . . . sexuality" (Youdell, 2005, p. 250). To date, research on the school bullying experiences of LGBTQ kids has been preoccupied with individuals' homophobic attitudes and quantifiable measurements of violence. Shifting the common understanding of the problem away from individual student behavior and toward systemic oppression allows researchers to examine the multiple ways schools privilege heterosexuality and (implicitly) give their students and educators permission to marginalize LGBTQ youth. Furthermore, qualitative investigation allows researchers to gain deeper insight into the minutia of day-to-day school happenings and provides a richer understanding than the simple tally of reported acts of violence. This kind of knowledge is critical for understanding "why social justice policies and programmes have not shifted radically, in the ways hoped for, the inequalities with which they have been concerned" (Youdell, 2004, p. 490).

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