A Place to Belong: An Analysis of Different Support Systems' Effects on School Belonging for LGBTQ+ Students

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Abstract

School belonging is important for students of all demographics. Of particular concern is LGBTQ+ high school students' sense of school belonging. These students face several diverse effective for heterosexual youth are not always effective to the same degree for LGBTQ+ students (Poteat, 2011).

In order to better assist queer youth, there must first be a better understanding of which methods of support are most effective for this demographic of students. It is important to analyze these different approaches and shed light on what diverse methods schools and families can implement to better meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Current research has uncovered that both queer and straight students at schools with Gay-Straight Alliances report higher levels of school belonging than schools without GSAs, parental support has been found to be negatively associated with school dropout rates and other risks for LGBTQ+ youth, and peer support rather than peer victimization has been correlated with feelings of safety at schools and higher scores on school-belonging from LGBTQ+ students. Although there are many factors in determining an LGBTQ+ student's sense of belonging at school, among the most influential are systems of peer-based support through Gay Straight Alliances and institutional support through school policies. Parental support seems to be less influential.

Keywords: LGBTQ, Heterosexual, Peer victimization, Gay-Straight Alliances report

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Peer Support for LGBTQ+ Students Increasing Student Belonging through Gay Straight Alliances

In schools across the United States, several methods are used to increase LGBTQ+ students' perceived sense of social and school belonging, including staff trainings, school nurse inclusion initiatives, protective bathroom policies, and Title IX protections (Cicero et al., 2017). One highly researched method of promoting school belonging is the Gay Straight Alliance club at many schools. The Gay Straight Alliance, or GSA, provides a space for queer students and straight students to share solidarity, plan events together, and learn together in an LGBTQ+ friendly environment. One study found that students at high schools with GSAs reported significantly fewer cases of homophobic victimization, safety concerns, and exposure to homophobic comments at school (Marx et al., 2016).

School psychology research has found that general anti-bullying programs and initiatives can be significantly successful in reducing bullying at a school, especially when developed with an approach pulling from several different disciplines (Jimenez Barbero et al., 2012). Findings from foundational studies suggest that using a curriculum-based approach to anti-bullying over extended periods of time report highest levels of effectiveness in reducing bullying behaviors and shaping students' attitudes (Andreou 2008). LGBTQ+ students can be particularly

susceptible to the negative effects of bullying. Recent studies have found that queer student reports of loneliness resulting from homophobic bullying are reduced by peer-support groups for LGBTQ+ students at higher rates than the general student body (Lardier et al., 2020). While many schools have several other anti-bullying or pro-mental health clubs or initiatives, the same research from Marx et al. (2016) found that in order to specifically curb the negative experiences that LGTBQ+ students face, a peer-based association or club specific to the needs of LGBTQ+ students is necessary. GSAs were found to have a more focused effect. Students at schools with GSAs were 30% less likely to report homophobic victimization at school, 36% less likely to report fearing for their safety at school, and 52% less likely to report hearing homophobic remarks at school (Marx et al., 2016). One admitted limitation to this research is that it measured only the effect of presence of GSAs at schools rather than the effect of membership in GSAs on students' sense of school belonging, making this area high potential for research in the future.

Mitigating Harms

In addition to directly impacting students' sense of school belonging, the presence of GSAs have been found to be correlated with mitigation of a host of harms to youth, all of which lower school belonging. Strong precedents exist for peer support systems preventing risky health behaviors such as substance use (Goldstick et al., 2018). For example, one study found that students in schools with the presence of GSAs were less likely to report having smoked cigarettes or drink alcoholic beverages (underaged) in the past year (Poteat et al., 2013). Suicidal ideation also appeared to be curbed by the presence of GSAs in schools. In this particular study, students in schools with GSAs were found to be less likely to self-report suicidal ideation, and the difference was greater for LGBTQ+ students than it was for other students. GSA presence in schools also increased sense of safety for LGBTQ+ students (Lee, 2002). These findings seem to suggest that the presence of GSAs in schools mitigate several risk factors for both straight and LGBTQ+ students.

Impact on Academic Experience

Research across several different studies suggests that peer-based support systems have a significant impact on school belonging for high school students, and that resultant school belonging is a mediator for academic performance (Vargas-Madriz et al., 2021). In many cases, GSAs have proved to be effective peer-based support for queer students. There are a few potential reasons for why GSAs help increase individual LGBTQ+ students' sense of school belonging. One factor is that GSAs help students do better in their schoolwork and feel more confident in their performance. In one study using both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the impact of GSAs on academic performance, researchers found that being part of GSAs was associated with an increase in perceived academic performance among students. GSAs were also associated with lower rates of truancy among LGBTQ+ students (Lee, 2002). In interviews from the same study, students attributed their increased confidence in academics and stronger desire to attend class to their membership in their school's GSA and sense of school belonging found there. Scholars in a different study years later found a correlation between GSA membership and higher GPAs of students, suggesting that beyond just perceived academic performance, LGBTQ+ students with GSA membership were getting better grades than LGBTQ+ students without that resource (Toomey & Russel, 2013). While this study found no association between GSA membership and civic outcomes, both studies found a definite positive association between LGBTQ+ students' school belonging sense and membership in GSAs.

A well-established psychological trend is the negative association between experiencing bullying in school and a student's academic performance (Riffle et al., 2021). The effects of bullying on academic performance is especially decreased for queer students when those students are involved with GSAs (Fenaughty et al., 2019). These findings suggest that in order to help LGBTQ+ students succeed in several different facets of life, whether it's academic or social, GSAs and the specific promotion of a sense of school-belonging can play a vital moderating role.

Parental Support for LGBTQ+ Students and Effect on School Belonging: Advantages and Limitations

In addition to institutional support for LGBTQ+ students through GSAs, another common channel for support is through parental support systems. Familial support often comes quickly to mind when considering how to support LGBTQ+ students. While there are certainly benefits to parental support for LGBTQ+ students, researchers have also found some limitations of this support channel for a variety of reasons (Poteat et al., 2013). Understanding these limitations and benefits can shed light on how to most effectively help LGTBQ+ youth avoid adverse health outcomes, feel like they belong at school, and create pathways for success later in life.

Advantages of Parental Support Systems

Parental support systems have been proven many times to be a strong support for many different types of students. High levels of parental support have been found to be associated with higher academic achievement for the average student in studies not distinguishing between sexual orientations (Fenaughty et al., 2019). The same study by

Fenaughty and colleagues noted that students with strong parental support were also less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as marijuana and drug use at a young age. Another study found that for a general sampling of students, strong parental support was associated with lower levels of suicidal ideation. Parental support appeared to buffer thoughts of suicide for heterosexual students (Poteat et al., 2011). Early studies about parental and social support for LGBTQ+ students found that a combination of peer and parental support was most effective in predicting positive mental health outcomes for queer students, although the early research did not compare the effectiveness of parental support with peer support and reports of school belonging were not collected (D'Augelli 2003). Parental support appears to result in benefits for students of all sexual orientations and mitigate some undesirable harms for students.

Limitations

While parental support seemed to have a significant buffer effect on many undesirable school, health, and life impacts for heterosexual students, that association is much weaker for LGBTQ+ students, especially in relation to school belonging (Poteat et al., 2013). Research on mixed-sex relationships reveals that LGBTQ+ individuals often value parental approval less than peer approval when making decisions, especially regarding relationships (Blair & Pukall 2015). The Poteat et al. (2013) study tested the role of parental support as a buffer against suicidal ideation and homophobic victimization for students of several different backgrounds, including different ethnicities and sexual orientations. Interestingly, parental support was found to be a significant buffer to these harms for white heterosexual youth, only a weak buffer for heterosexual youth of color, and no significant buffer was found for LGBTQ+ youth. No significant relationship was found between parental support and school belonging for queer students. Another study found that high parental support was twice as likely to predict high academic achievement for heterosexual cis-gender youth than it was to predict high academic achievement for LGBTQ+ youth (Fenaughty et al., 2019).

One potential reason parental support is not as strongly associated with success and school belonging for LGBTQ+ students is due to fear of rejection and negative reactions from parents. These fears have also been linked to increased rates of suicidal ideation among LGBTQ+ youth (Hatchel et al., 2019). In fact, one study listed parental rejection as one of the turbulent events that institutional and peer support systems, such as GSAs, helped students face and overcome (Poteat et al., 2013). Understanding the limitations on the effect of parental support for LGBTQ+ youth on students' sense of school belonging and concerns with coming out to parents is vital to understanding how to most effectively support queer youth and buffer harms such as victimization and suicidal ideation.

Institutional Support for LGBTQ+ Students

In addition to peer and parental support, institutional support directly from schools to LGTBQ+ students is commonly considered as a method of supporting queer students and raising levels of school belonging. While this paper explores studies on some of the policies, procedures, and other efforts schools have made toward supporting students directly, there is still much research to do be done on the subject and much opportunity to expand in the world of research for institutional support for LGBTQ+ students.

Policies

Another support method is through the direct policy making of a given institution, which can be supportive of LGBTQ+ students in a variety of ways. Bullying prevention and management is one common focus area for school initiatives, given the negative association between reported exposure to bullying and feeling safe at school for high school students (Varjas et al., 2009). One study considered the difference between punitive and supporting disciplinary actions in answer to homophobic bullying and what effect these policies had on students' sense of school belonging (Day et al., 2016). Punitive discipline was related to zero-tolerance policies, often resulting in automatic suspension or expulsion upon offenses. Supportive approaches were related to added support systems, structural-level changes, social-emotional learning, and school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports. Studies have found little evidence suggesting that punitive discipline in any educational context is effective in curbing bullying or promoting an inclusive learning environment (Gerlinger & Wo, 2016).

The Day et al. (2016) research specifically compared the difference in the effect of punitive discipline for homophobic bullying and supportive discipline on levels of school connectedness among students. The study found that schools with punitive disciplinary approaches had no significant effect on homophobic bullying. LGBTQ+ students at schools with supportive approaches, however, reported less homophobic bullying and higher levels of school connectedness. This trend of support for students raising levels isf school belonging more than policies of intimidation was supported by the positive effect schools' decisions to host GSAs had upon LGBTQ+ students' sense of school belonging (Poteat et al., 2013). Studies on protective policies and curriculum for LGBTQ+ students have also found that extensive teacher training is necessary to effectively equip high school staff to protect each

queer student (Snapp et al., 2015). Misunderstandings are common when implementing LGBTQ+ policies, and clarity with staff is imperative.

Connection with teachers

Foundational studies in teacher engagement suggest that teachers often influence the average student's attitude about school (Klem & Connell 2004). Perceived support from teachers also appears to have some effect on LGBTQ+ students' overall sense of school belonging, although perceptions of belonging were strongest when teacher support was combined with strong peer and family support (Murdock & Bolch, 2005). One study specifically compared the influence of teachers versus the influence of peers on LGBTQ+ students' sense of school belonging. Interestingly, the study found that feelings of connectedness with the school and with teachers did not predict LGBTQ+ students' depressive symptoms, while feelings of peer connectedness did have a negative association with depressive symptoms (McLaren et al., 2015). The notion that connectedness with adults does not have as great an effect on student well-being as connectedness with other students is supported by the Poteat et al. (2013) study, which found that parental support did not have a significant effect on levels of school belonging. Research on the effects of teacher connectedness and school policies on LGBTQ+ students specifically is very limited, presenting opportunities for future research.

Conclusion

While several different methods exist for supporting LGBTQ+ students, each one varies in effectiveness. Peer support systems, especially through GSAs, were consistently proven to be very effective in helping queer students feel like they belong. Parental support, interestingly, did not seem to have any significant effect on school belonging. While little research exists on how institutional support systems and policies affect LGTBQ+ students' sense of belonging, preliminary results seem promising, especially regarding the effectiveness of supportive disciplinary approaches.

Much research has been done on the effect of support systems on LGTBQ+ students' mental health and other wellness factors. This review can help consolidate information, provide insight, and point the educational world in promising new directions for supporting queer students. It is evident that something beyond parental support must be offered to these students in order to help them feel like they belong at school. This research informs the educational sphere that focusing on ways to assist LGBTQ+ students come together as peers, such as GSAs, will be the most powerful aid in helping them feel like they belong and can be successful at school. Schools without peer organizations like GSAs might consider what organizational changes they can make to help each student feel included. Another important implication of this research is the future possibilities for implementing supportive disciplinary policies at school to both protect LGBTQ+ students and curb general bullying across the student body.

One limitation to the findings in this review is that it unclear whether the of GSAs and supportive disciplinary policies change a school's culture or schools with supportive cultures happen to also have GSAs and supportive disciplinary polices. These findings are also limited in scope to the high school world, as almost all evidence found was focused on high school students. To help expand knowledge on the topic LGBTQ+ belonging, more research needs to be done at the high school level. More potential for future research lies in comparing GSAs and supportive disciplinary policies' effectiveness in different regions of the world to better understand broader culture's impact on belonging. There is also a dearth of research on LGBTQ+ student experiences on a university level, particularly regarding school belonging. Research in these areas can more accurately inform universities' protective policies and diversity and inclusion strategies.

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