

Supporting Safer Spaces: How School Administrators Shape the School Culture for Sexual and Gender Minority Students

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Abstract: This review highlights gaps in existing literature concerning how sexual and gender minority (SGM) students can be best supported at school, as influenced by school administration. SGM students experience additional challenges to their gender normative, heterosexual peers that affect their physical, mental, and social well-being. Student groups which support SGM youth such as Gay-Straight or Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) have a positive impact on students' sense of belonging and a school's overall climate compared to schools without similar groups. School climate is also influenced by school leaders through policy interpretation, resource allocation, and their individual leadership practices. Research shows that support from school administrators for SGM students is crucial for teachers to initiate more inclusion of this at-risk group. Existing research does not provide sufficient insight into the complex task of leading a school while fostering a sense of belonging for SGM students; my research aims to fill this gap.

Keywords: educational leadership, school administration, sexual and gender minority youth

Introduction

Sexual and gender minority (SGM) students experience additional challenges to those faced by their gender normative, heterosexual peers that affect their physical, mental, and social well-being (Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). Compared with their peers, SGM students are more likely to earn lower grades, be absent from school because they do not feel safe, and report less support from teachers and other adults at school (Kosciw et al., 2020). SGM youth report higher levels of bullying than heterosexual students: six times as much verbal harassment in connection to sexual orientation, five times as much linked to gender identity, and twice as much about gender and gender expression of masculinity and femininity (Peter et al., 2021).

Student groups that are in place to support SGM youth, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), have a positive impact on students' sense of belonging and a school's overall climate compared to schools without similar student groups (Ioverno et al., 2016; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). GSAs are a factor in lowering the suicide risk for SGM youth (Saewyc et al., 2014). Students with more protective school climates, such as through GSAs and anti-bullying policies that specify sexual orientation, reported fewer suicidal thoughts in contrast with students in less sheltered situations (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014). DeWitt (2010) notes that support from principals for SGM students is crucial for teachers to initiate more inclusion of this at-risk group.

School leaders affect the culture of their schools through policy interpretation and implementation, resource allocation, and community relations (Clifford et al., 2012). Support from principals for SGM students allows teachers to develop strategies of inclusion (DeWitt, 2010). In the province of Ontario, students have the legal right to create, name and participate in a GSA or GSA-type group in their publicly funded school irrespective of administrator support (Legislative Assembly of Ontario Bill 13, 2012; Iskander & Shabtay, 2018).

The overlap of the potential vulnerability of SGM students, the known benefits of schools having a GSA or GSA-type group, and the impact administrators have over general school culture suggests principals can contribute to positive outcomes of these student groups at many levels, which if identified, could lead to even greater improvements. In the sections that follow, I offer a review of the literature that is relevant to my research question: How do principals perceive their own influence on the outcomes of Gay-Straight Alliance student groups in publicly funded high schools in Ontario? I discuss a theoretical framework for my research, the experiences of SGM students, the benefits of GSAs, theories of leadership that could allow for greater support of SGM students, and the effects of school administrators on school culture in general and SGM students in particular. Existing research does not appear to offer recommendations on how to lead a school while fostering a sense of belonging for SGM students; my research aims to fill this gap.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

An essential concept that shapes my research design is critical heteronormativity (Leinonen, 2020; Schneider, 2013). Cameron and Kulick (2003) outline heteronormativity as mechanisms in society that promote heterosexuality as the most natural, assumed, and desirable identity. Critical heteronormativity stems from queer theory, that challenges normative constructions of sexuality and gender and contributes to inclusion and equality (Motschenbacher, 2011; Pawelczyk et al., 2014). In my experience as an educator, normative constructions, or generalizations, can be found in a variety of capacities in education. Some examples are: all students will learn while sitting quietly in rows while a teacher lectures, the promotion that everyone should attend university as a post-secondary option, and the assumption that every student has a mum and dad at home. Hetero- and gender normative assumptions continue to be seen with the organisation within schools of bathrooms, change rooms, field trip permission forms, health class topics, sports teams, and general curriculum, as well as other areas. Such generalization of sexuality and gender in the school system can have damaging consequences. It is important for researchers to continue scrutinizing how heteronormativity functions within educational systems as it impacts the policies, procedures, and curriculum (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014). The system in which high school principals operate presumes that they, their staff, and their students all fall into gender normative and heterosexual categories. As such, I will be mindful of this lens as I analyze the depth and breadth of the articles I included in my review.

Another aspect of my theoretical framework is minority stress theory, which states that the social environment in which SGM individuals find themselves influences their health outcomes (Meyer et al., 2021). This supports existing literature that shows that SGM students have better health outcomes in protective school climates (Saewyc et al., 2014). Minority stress theory explains the importance of my research into how school administrators can support safer spaces for SGM students.

Sexual and Gender Minority Students

As mentioned in the introduction, there is existing research concerning the challenges faced by SGM students in schools. Studies indicate that these youth can face bullying, harassment, and other challenges that affect all aspects of their well-being (Peter et al., 2021; Toomey et al., 2018). GLSEN's 2019 National School Climate Survey reported once more that SGM students felt unsafe and less supported as compared to their peers, leading to greater absenteeism and poorer academic performance (Kosciw et al., 2020). Still in Every Class in Every School is the overall findings from the Second National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools. There was a slight improvement between the inaugural and more recent survey results in regard to students hearing sexuality and gender-related slurs daily at school. 64% of student respondents in Grades 4 – 12 across Canada said they overheard this type of language from the data collected in 2019 and 2020 compared to 70% discussed in the 2011 report (Peter et al., 2021).

As mentioned, minority stress theory also plays a role in regards to health outcomes for SGM people. Stressors in the form of stigma, prejudice, and social rank contribute to differences in mental and physical health outcomes as compared to those who are heterosexual and gender normative (Meyer et al., 2021). This translates to SGM students being affected by the social environment that they find themselves in and the potential impact school culture has on their well-being.

All of this research serves to contextualize the importance of my research question and underscores the need for mechanisms to be in place to allow for this vulnerable group of students to meet their full potential. The research shows the immense stigma and hardship faced by SGM students without adequate support from the adults around them. It does not provide solutions for these challenges, which my research aims to do. My research question seeks to understand better how administrators in a school setting can be best equipped to provide the necessary support for this student population.

Gay-Straight Alliances

GSAs and GSA-type clubs are student groups that are formulated around the idea of supporting SGM community members. Participants are often a mix of those who identify as part of the community and those who seek to be allies. A common element of a GSA's function at a school would fall under one or some combination of three categories: social, education, and/or advocacy (Poteat et al., 2018).

As touched upon earlier, several studies exist that demonstrate the benefits of GSAs on students' well-being and sense of belonging at school (Ioverno et al., 2016; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). Research shows that more protective school climates, including those with GSAs, specifically lowered suicide ideation and suicide attempts by SGM students (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014; Saewyc et al., 2014). Regardless of if they are ally club members or not, gender normative, heterosexual students perceive their school as safer if their school has a GSA or GSA-type group in place. (Li et al., 2019). It was found that the longer a GSA or GSA-type group has been in place is positively correlated with a greater increase in perceived safety among the student body (Li et al., 2019). In addition, the mere presence of a GSA at a school has an impact on SGM youth (Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Toomey et al., 2011). More positive health outcomes and academic successes were seen among this population, whether or not they participated in their school's GSA or GSA-type group (Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Toomey et al., 2011). Both research groups commented that future studies should explore the actual reasons why improvements were reported.

These studies serve to further contextualize my research question, by showing that there are concrete means to better support SGM students. There is ample research regarding GSAs and student perceptions about these clubs, faculty advisors or teacher sponsors and their thoughts, and overall effects of these student groups (Ioverno et al., 2016; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). However, there is limited research examining if there is any connection between principals and the outcomes of GSAs. Where my research will extend their findings is in better understanding the efficacy of GSAs and how administrators can help or hinder the success of these critically important student groups.

Leadership Theories

School administrators are tasked with providing leadership, direction, and overseeing policy implementation within their schools. Their style of leadership has an effect on those around them. Thus far, I have not found any direct mentions regarding leadership styles nor theories with respect to GSAs, their formation, effectiveness, longevity, nor usefulness. From my review of leadership theories however, I would suggest that transformative and distributed leadership styles both support administrators to achieve the goal of creating and implementing policies which foster safer spaces for all students.

Transformative leadership acknowledges the power of education for social change and values the empowerment of the members of the school community (Shields, 2010). It places great emphasis on the power of the collective for implementing organisational change (Shields, 2010). Since transformative leadership has an awareness of what is happening in society, I think it is relevant to my research focus. As school settings become more welcoming and supportive of SGM students, we can expect in turn that society would follow suit.

Hatcher (2005) refers to distributed leadership as a way of accomplishing participation and empowerment of members of the school community. When reviewing examples of schools that have adopted distributed leadership, Hatcher (2005) comments that this way of operating is typically led and maintained by dedicated stakeholders, striving towards a common goal. GSAs that are present and active at schools that embrace distributed leadership would exemplify the goal of enabling input from various community members and provide an opportunity for the students to be empowered.

Leaders play an important role in school reform and their leadership is crucial for success. Compared with other industries, education does not go to the same lengths in prioritizing finding, developing, supporting, and retaining leaders (Meyer et al., 2011). As such, more investment should be made in school leaders so that highly effective leadership goes beyond an occasional occurrence and can be scaled up (Fullan, 2001).

Administrators and School Culture

The extant literature is clear that administrators have a sizable impact on the culture of the schools they run. On a practical level, Clifford et al. (2012) observed that school leaders affect school climate through policy interpretation, resource allocation, and community relations. Principals have a direct influence on school conditions such as school safety, availability of resources, and policies and procedures. On a psychological level, Fullan (2001) writes that whether or not it is the leader's intention, they have influence over the moral and ethical cultures within their organisation. Meyer et al. (2011) note that there is a known impact of principal turnover on a school community. They also observe that throughout a school, sentiments among teachers such as trust, discretion, teacher efficacy, loyalty, and overall contentment at work are all affected by principal appointments.

Boyce and Bowers (2018) review the shifts in instructional leadership research. Instructional leadership can be simplified to the overseeing of teaching and curriculum; however, it is more complex than that. The leadership and influence of principals, proven variables in the success of instructional leadership, have the capacity to have a positive impact on a school community. The practices by school leaders of building community, encouraging professional development, and supporting their teachers are noted as exemplary behaviours (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). Instructional leadership has a significant, direct, and positive impact on collective teacher efficacy. This finding is meaningful as the shared belief of the staff is that they can positively influence student outcomes.

Theoharis (2010) discusses their findings of in-depth interviews with six principals who engaged in various forms of social justice work on behalf of their students. These school administrators shared their strategies to disrupt social injustice in their school communities. All those interviewed agreed that they focus on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools. It is also noted that a crucial strategy for these administrators was their common commitment to breaking the silence and challenging the status quo (Theoharis, 2010).

The scholarship highlighted above thus far all have implications for administrators' ability to have a direct impact on student success both inside and outside the classroom, including the SGM students in their schools. Orphanos and Orr (2014) show in their work that administrators with more positively perceived leadership styles led to higher job satisfaction for their staff. This is critical as I believe schools with higher levels of trust between administration and staff are more likely to provide environments in which students feel they can trust the adults around them, which is essential to creating a culture in which all students are supported. The findings of Clifford et al. (2012) demonstrate the power inherent in the role of school administrators. This is critical knowledge as SGM students benefit from specific safeguarding measures and this research supports the value of principals and their influence on school policies. All of these findings suggest to me that administrators have a marked impact on school morale and are essential to creating positive school culture.

A significant theme in the scholarship relating to principals and inclusive school settings concerns either the disabilities, the socioeconomic status, or the cultural background(s) of the students (DeMatthews et al., 2021). A constructive relationship with one's staff, acknowledgment that there are differences among students, and an overall belief that the minority group in question is worth supporting are all important variables for school administrators. More relevant professional development opportunities for school administrators is a consistent recommendation. Although the research topics may be different, I think the studies have value as they outline how principals can facilitate change and support all school community members.

School Leadership Programs

Larson (2010) argues that school leadership programs should prepare future administrators to ask difficult questions about disparities among students and provide support for students that goes beyond academics. They encourage leaders to take a more holistic approach to problem-solving with respect to student achievement. Larson (2010) writes that social, emotional, and economic factors must also be considered along with academic success when looking at how to best support a student to reach their potential. Interpolating from this research, and given their particular vulnerability, I would conclude that the success of SGM students hinges on the abilities of their school leaders to support them in ways beyond their academics.

The reluctance of school administrators to participate in and/or offer professional development for their staff pertaining to SGM students has been explored to some degree (Payne & Smith, 2018). The researchers reviewed the value of principals being more informed about these topics and how their discomfort with their lack of understanding can lead to gatekeeping learning opportunities for their teachers. Should these learning opportunities be explored, Airton and Koecher (2019) suggest that sexual and gender diversity-training programs for teachers and administrators should reflect best practice and current thought while also allowing for updated information to be incorporated.

Payne and Smith (2018) commented that presenting continuing education workshops related to SGM students as a way to empower this group of youths could be quite beneficial. Beck and Wikoff (2020) found in their research that providing school principals, teachers, and school counsellors with diversity-focused in-service opportunities results in higher motivation, ability, and efficacy of the adults to lobby for SGM students. These researchers also found that administrators who took the time to participate in this training had a positive impact on the overall sense of satisfaction reported in the post-session survey results for both the teachers and school counsellors at their schools. In other words, teachers and school counsellors felt the training was more valuable when their administrator was learning alongside

them. Airton and Koecher (2019) point out that the aim of professional development opportunities that involve diversity, equity, and social justice is that the knowledge and resources benefit the students and their families supported by these professionals. This aligns with Larson's (2010) assertion that a focus on social justice at school can result in a focus on social justice in society.

School Culture and Sexual and Gender Minority Students

DeWitt (2010) notes that support from school administrators for SGM students is crucial for teachers to initiate more inclusion of this at-risk group. There is also great importance for school boards to advocate for SGM students as it signals to the school administrators that it is okay to follow suit. This cycle of support and messaging of supportive acceptance can then extend to the greater school community (Dewitt, 2010). In reviewing literature on the effects of school culture on SGM students, I conclude that school policies can have a substantial influence on student outcomes, in positive, neutral, and negative ways. Austin et al. (2012), for instance, examined how administrators could develop a school-wide program to stop bullying based on school policies. They highlight how counsellors play an important role in the program implementation by identifying the roles of students in bullying and understanding the emotional needs of students. School programs and policies can be effective if all adults in the school take a stand against bullying. This assertion underscores the criticality of positive school climates and staff morale, which research examined in prior sections indicates administrators can influence.

There is a focus in the literature surrounding whether SGM youth in schools with more protective climates had lower rates of suicide ideation and suicide attempts. Protective school climates were considered as such when there was some combination of the following: a GSA, inclusive health curriculum, teacher professional development related to supporting SGM students, and explicit anti-homophobic bullying policies (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014). School policies and procedures reduce discrimination, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts among SGM youth. School administrations that adopted explicit anti-homophobic bullying policies had lower rates of all three risk factors among the students. There was a negative correlation between the length of time the anti-homophobic bullying policies had been in place with the rates of discrimination, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts among SGM youth (Saewyc et al., 2014).

There is a growing body of work related to how school administrators can best support their trans students, a subset of SGM youth (Martino et al., 2019; Omercajic & Martino, 2020). Themes observed between the papers were that administrators need professional development and resources related to trans youth as well as the benefit of board policies they can refer to and use as guidance.

The ramifications of a school culture that is not supportive of SGM students were also considered (Iskander & Shabtay, 2018). This journal article by Iskander and Shabtay (2018) was written in regards to a specific situation when students were denied permission to form a GSA at their publicly-funded school. The activism of the youth led to legislation requiring that all publicly funded schools in Ontario support students who wish to establish, name, and run a GSA or a GSA-type group.

The research examined in this section discussed the criticality in distinguishing what has been done from what needs to be done in regards to school culture and SGM students. The article by Austin et al. (2012) supports the literature that specifically examines SGM youth and the importance of policy and procedures in place to support at-risk youth. Research by Hatzenbuehler et al. (2014) and Saewyc et al. (2014) highlights the positive impact of supportive structures for this vulnerable population. Finally, work by Iskander and Shabtay (2018) incorporates the legal aspect of school administration, especially in publicly funded school systems. None of these works highlights the impacts of school administrators and their ability to provide support to SGM youth. I consider this an area that would benefit from further research as it appears the focus has been primarily on school policies and this at-risk group rather than on those who implement those policies. By providing our educational institutions and other key stakeholders with the tools with which they can support students of all gender and sexual identities, my research will support the evolution of informed leadership, and thereby a more inclusive society.

Conclusion

This review has explored existing literature and highlighted gaps therein concerning how SGM students can be best supported and safeguarded in a school setting, as influenced by school administration. The research on the experiences of SGM students establishes the difficulties faced by this group without adequate support from the adults around them.

It underscores the need for mechanisms, including those led by school administration, to be in place to allow for these students to meet their full potential.

One concrete means of support for SGM students within a school setting is a GSA. The majority of research regarding GSAs examines their overall effects; there is limited research examining any connection between school administrators and the outcomes of GSAs. My research will extend the existing findings by better understanding the efficacy of GSAs and how administrators can help or hinder their success.

The theories of leadership reviewed have real and tangible impacts on school culture and, by extension, students. Administrators' chosen leadership style influences their ability to create and implement policies which foster safer spaces for all students. To this end, leaders must provide holistic diversity training for staff to include all aspects of student success. Participating in sexual and gender diversity-training programs alongside their staff makes this training more effective. With this understanding, my research will support and ultimately produce guides, tools, and other training material to educate principals on how best to support their staff, to in turn support student success through greater inclusion.

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