Chapter 10
Opening the Doors for All LGBTQ+ Students

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ABSTRACT

Given the long history of LGBTQ+ rights and the current evolving climate surrounding social justice for LGBTQ+ individuals, this chapter explores the idea of creating safe, affirming, educational environments for LGBTQ youth in K-12 and post-high-school educational settings. The authors delineate the unique concerns for the elementary, middle, high, and higher education levels separately. At each level, the authors identify the core obstacles that LGBTQ+ individuals face surrounding acceptance, developing autonomy, and gaining support. The authors delve deeply into the programs and interventions that are currently making a difference in school systems around the country and provide educators with specific ways in which they can create inclusive environments for their students. The important caveats to obtaining robust LGBTQ+ research are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The struggle for LGBTQ+ rights has a long history. While many people think of the Stonewall uprising in June 1969 as the beginning of this movement for social justice, the history of resistance to the oppression of LGBTQ+ people is a much longer one (Bronski, 2011). That movement led to many positive changes, including civil-rights protections in many states, the removal of homosexuality as

a diagnosis of a mental disorder, the overturning of sodomy laws, the federal right to marry, and the right to serve in the military. But these rights are evenly distributed neither across the diversity of the LGBTQ+ population nor across the country, nor are they safe from being revoked. For example, according to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), only twenty-one states and Washington DC currently protect against employment discrimination based on both gender identity and sexual orientation (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). The intersections of racism, sexism, ageism, and socioeconomic status with transphobia and homophobia mean that members of the LGBTQ+ community face different types of discrimination and violence. As the HRC documents, violence against transgender people affects trans women of color disproportionately. This is the climate in which the struggle continues for social justice for LGBTQ+ people.

With this evolving climate as its background, this chapter explores the idea of creating safe, affirming, educational environments for LGBTQ+ youth in primary, secondary, and post-secondary educational settings. The chapter addresses each stage of development—elementary, middle, and high school, as well as college students. The authors briefly delineate the unique concerns at each level, identify core obstacles to the creation of support, and then delve much more deeply into programs or interventions that currently work and make a difference in school systems around the country. These unique concerns include the following:

- **Elementary School**: This section explores the integration and acceptance/celebration of gender-creative children; children growing up in diverse family structures; and programs that reduce name calling, including the impact and outcomes of two national programs—Welcoming Schools, which is part of the Human Rights Campaign Foundation and Gender Spectrum, a national non-profit organization that focuses on gender.
- **Middle School**: The average age that children are coming out to themselves as LGB is around 12, the middle-school years. It is also a time when children begin to conflate ideas about masculinity or femininity with sexuality. In addition, youth begin to question authority, to seek more input and affirmation from peers rather than adults, and ideally to begin moral growth that allows them to seek and understand other perspectives. This section explores ideas regarding inclusive curriculum; the impact of school-based support programs, such as Gender/Sexuality Alliances (GSAs); and the use of community resources, such as those provided by GSAFE, a Wisconsin-based safe-schools program.
- **High School**: At the high-school level, students continue to develop autonomy, higher level thinking and reasoning, exploring differences and establishing their identities as sexual and gendered beings. For many LGBTQ+ students, this can be a difficult and dangerous time. A 2018 HRC study of youth between the ages of 13 and 17 found that compared to non-LGBTQ youth, LGBTQ youth report higher rates of stress resulting from harassment, family and peer rejection, bullying from their peers, isolation, and lacking a sense of belonging (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). This section of the chapter will explore informational programs, lesson plans, and projects, such as those available at History Unerased (History Unerased, 2018), which provide educators with inclusivity tools.
- **Higher Education:** For residential college students, college may be the first time that students live away from home, allowing for more autonomy, often with support from an active LGBTQ+ center or student group, but also with more areas of life where belonging may be problematic. The American College Health Association 2018 National College Health Assessment reported that of

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