Principals’ moral purpose in the context of LGBT inclusion

Peter M. DeWitt
Independent Consultant, Albany, New York, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to highlight the complicated nature of safeguarding lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students. First, this paper will address the issues that LGBT students face as a minoritized group in their school system, which inhibits their opportunities to reach their full potential when it comes to emotional and academic growth. Second, this paper will be used to discuss how leadership is vital in order for school communities to help address the issues that their LGBT population face. Third, the author will make the case that a lack of leadership self-efficacy can hinder the process.

Design/methodology/approach – Three different research studies were used to highlight the needs of LGBT students. However, there is additional research that is used as well to illustrate the need for leadership self-efficacy to support LGBT safeguards. When it comes to LGBT research the research of GLSEN (formerly known as the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network) was used. GLSEN's research consisted of 7,898 students between the ages of 13 and 21. Second, data from the Every Teachers Project by the Manitoba Teachers' Society were used which involved 3,400 teachers around Canada. Although there are certain nuances between international examples which include those LGBT students living in the dominant culture as well as within indigenous populations, the author builds the case that the harassment and bullying has a common theme and can be addressed through common methods. Additionally, qualitative doctoral research was used, which consisted of 20 interviews of school leaders from three different school districts in New York State. Lastly, for the purpose of this paper the author will use the acronym LGBT to identify those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. There are many acronyms (e.g. LGBTQ, LGBTI, etc.) representing the community, and only when the research use those other acronyms, will those be used to highlight subgroup populations.

Findings – Findings indicate that, as a minoritized population, LGBT students are highly at risk for being verbally and physically harassed at school, and go unprotected by the adults who are in charge of keeping them safe. School leadership is instrumental in the safeguarding of LGBT students. Additionally, safeguarding is not nearly enough. It is important to understand that LGBT students should not just be safeguarded, but should also be surrounded by curriculum and images that will help them feel accepted into the greater school community, which takes an increased level of self-efficacy on the part of the leader.

Originality/value – The topic of engaging LGBT students in the school community is sparse at best. Additionally, this paper provides the case for safeguarding and engaging LGBT students, as well as all minoritized populations, but also discusses why it is the moral purpose of leaders to do so. However, the author believes that the addition of understanding leadership actions around safeguarding LGBT students through the lens of leadership self-efficacy and building collective efficacy is an important one, and will add to the originality of this paper.

Keywords Collective efficacy, Leadership, Professional development, Self-efficacy, LGBT, Leader self-efficacy

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

We need look no further than North Carolina’s recent passage of House Bill 2 (HB2) to understand that there is still anti-gay bias in the USA. Avianne Tan, a reporter for ABC News, writes that HB2, “Declares that state law overrides all local ordinances concerning wages, employment and public accommodations.” This, according to Tan (2016) means:

The law now bars local municipalities from creating their own rules prohibiting discrimination in public places based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Though North Carolina does have a statewide nondiscrimination law, it does not include specific protections for LGBTQ people.
According to Tan (2016):

The law also directs all public schools, government agencies and public college campuses to require that multiple-occupancy bathrooms and changing facilities, such as locker rooms, be designated for use only by people based on their “biological sex” stated on their birth certificate. Transgender people can use the bathrooms and changing facilities that correspond to their gender identity only if they get the biological sex on their birth certificate changed.

Since the passage of the law, there has been pushback from those in support of safeguarding members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, and those on the other side who do not support the LGBT community at all. Musicians such as Bruce Springsteen, Boston and Pearl Jam canceled concerts, and the NCAA threatened to cancel all national athletic tournaments scheduled for North Carolina unless the bill is repealed. HB2 has just been another example in a long series of examples of discrimination against the LGBT community.

At the national level, the rhetoric around discrimination of members of the LGBT community continues. President Donald Trump has reversed the guidelines set in place by former President Barrack Obama that protected transgender students from discrimination under Title IX. Secretary Devos said that the reversal was due to the need for these situations to be dealt with at the state level, rather than at the national level. Many believe that the reversal represented President Trump’s lack of support for those in the LGBT community. It is important to note, however, that this does not end legal protections. Kreighbaum (2017) reported that, “the bottom line is that this does not undo legal protections for trans students, and school districts can and must continue to protect them and all students from discrimination.”

Although those in the community have seen an increase in public support which brought about changes to legalizing gay marriage, and the media attention behind the discourse around HB2 and the reversal of Title IX, the LGBT community still lacks full support in society, which plays out in schools around North America, as well as internationally. Kosciw (2013) National School Climate Survey reported that:

55.5% of LGBT students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 37.8% because of their gender expression. 30.3% of LGBT students missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, and over a tenth (10.6%) missed four or more days in the past month.

However, it is not just in the USA that there is a concern for the growing number of LGBT students, but in countries such as Australia we can find the same disturbing bullying statistics. Research by the Australian Human Rights Campaign (2014) shows:

- LGBTI young people report experiencing verbal homophobic abuse (61 percent), physical homophobic abuse (18 percent) and other types of homophobia (9 percent), including cyberbullying, graffiti, social exclusion and humiliation.
- In total, 80 percent of homophobic bullying involving LGBTI young people occurs at school and has a profound impact on their well-being and education.
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are three times more likely to experience depression compared to the broader population.
- Around 61 percent of same-sex attracted and gender-questioning young people said they experienced verbal abuse because of their sexuality, while 18 percent reported experiencing physical abuse. Young men (70 percent) and gender-questioning young people (66 percent) were more likely than young women (53 percent) to experience verbal abuse.
Considering that public schools around the world are a microcosm of society at large, it is important to understand that all of these issues intersect at school and not all leaders are prepared for the educational, pedagogical and political ramifications.

How safe is school for LGBT students?
There are numerous reasons why LGBT students feel unsafe. Some bullying takes place because heterosexual students lack an awareness of what it is like to be LGBT and they have biases based on that lack of understanding. The lack of awareness is often inspired by the curriculum and images that are seen in school. Schools often have an overwhelming number of heteronormative images which can perpetuate the feeling of superiority on the part of one group over another. McNeill (2013) described heteronormative as a “specific normative form of monogamous, marital, middle-class, normatively gendered, and in many implicit and explicit ways, white, heterosexuality.” McNeill further defined heteronormative as the promotion, “of a specific family form – a nuclear family made up of married heterosexual parents with children who are biologically theirs.”

In classrooms, novels and stories read by teachers, and books available to students in their school libraries are predominantly heteronormative in nature. Other times, the lack of safety comes from less subtle experiences where students use the word “gay” as slang for being weird. Additionally, they hear the word being used to elude to the fact that a student may actually be gay, and in the eyes of the student using the word, less than everyone else in school because somehow being gay is wrong.

When it came to anti-LGBT remarks at school, the GLSEN report showed that:

71.4% of LGBT students heard “gay” used in a negative way (e.g. “that’s so gay”) frequently or often at school, and 90.8% reported that they felt distressed because of this language. 64.5% heard other homophobic remarks (e.g. “dyke” or “faggot”) frequently or often. 56.4% heard negative remarks about gender expression (not acting “masculine enough” or “feminine enough”) frequently or often.

Using the word “gay” and “faggot” in a negative way may be a part of the teenage and early adult vernacular. However, for smaller percentages of students, using those words is merely a gateway into more destructive behavior. That more destructive behavior may show itself in the form of bullying or harassment of students who are perceived to be a part of the LGBT community.

When looking at harassment and assault at school, the GLSEN report found:

74.1% of LGBT students were verbally harassed (e.g. called names or threatened) in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 55.2% because of their gender expression. 36.2% were physically harassed (e.g. pushed or shoved) in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 22.7% because of their gender expression.

Going even deeper with the physical harassment and assault of LGBT students, GLSEN found that, “16.5% were physically assaulted (e.g. punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 11.4% because of their gender expression. 49.0% of LGBT students experienced electronic harassment in the past year (e.g. via text messages or postings on Facebook), often known as cyberbullying.”

In the National School Voice Report (Quaglia and Corso, 2016), students who are engaged in school are 17 times more likely to be successful in school. LGBT students who are not engaged because they feel as though their school community does not support or safeguard them, are highly at risk of not being as academically and socially successful as they could be, as well as, are at high risk of dropping out of school (Kosciw, 2013).
Fostering an inclusive school climate
Given all of these statistics, it may be surprising that, “56.7% of LGBT students who were harassed or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff, most commonly because they doubted that effective intervention would occur or the situation could become worse if reported.” Whether that feeling was real or perceived does not matter. What does matter is that these students did not feel supported within their school environment, and no one should have to spend day after day in an environment where they do not feel safe. The lack of safety these students felt was partly due to the perceptions of their teachers, which contributes to a hostile school climate.

School safety and student engagement, regardless of how a student identifies, is an important element of school climate, which is a necessary component of how our schools function (DeWitt and Slade, 2014).

According to the Ice et al. (2015):

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students’, parents’ and school personnel’s experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.

National School Climate Center goes on to say:

A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes:

- Norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe.
- People are engaged and respected.
- Students, families and educators work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision.
- Educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning.
- Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.

DeWitt (2017) wrote, “taking action to make sure we have a positive and inclusive school climate means those actions include all students, regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender” (p. 40). Unfortunately, not all of the students that enter into school buildings on a daily basis feel supported. Out of the research that GLSEN has provided regarding the safety and engagement of LGBT students, there is one piece that is most disturbing. GLSEN reports that “61.6% of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response.” Given that statistic it would be easy to say that this represents a student’s perspective and it may be incorrect. However, 61 percent of students have the perspective that the bullying and harassment they dealt with was never addressed by the adults in their building who are charged with educating and protecting them. Parents send their children to school to learn, but they expect them to be safe.

The Every Teachers Project by the Manitoba Teachers’ Society (Canada) found that “Almost all educators (97%) considered their school to be safe but when they were asked questions that focus on the safety of LGBTQ students the numbers dropped substantially, especially for transgender students.” Additionally, the Project found that, “One in five participants overall reported hearing teachers make homonegative comments such as ‘that’s so gay’ at school, with likelihood higher among Catholic school participants (28%) and Ontario participants (also 28%). A third of participants (34%) reported having heard teachers use homophobic remarks such as ‘faggot’ and ‘dyke’ at school.” All of this negative rhetoric can lead LGBT students to feel minoritized.

The author understands that references to the above Canadian and Australian studies can be complicated due to the support, or lack thereof, when it comes to LGBT students who...
also identify within an indigenous population due to cultural circumstances. However, the complicated nature of the home lives of students, regardless of their status as indigenous or part of the dominant culture, will result in the same negative effects when they approach their own schooling.

Minoritized students are the students who are pushed into feeling like the minority by another more dominant group. Minoritized students rarely see images in school that look like them, have teachers who read books on topics that address their needs, or hear common language that makes them feel included in the school community.

Harper (2012, p. 9) explained the use of minoritized instead of minority because:

Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social context (e.g. their families, racially homogeneous friendship groups, or places of worship). Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of Whiteness.

This feeling of being minoritized does not just happen based on race but it can take place based on gender or sexual orientation depending on the situation. Given the research on how often LGBT students are bullied and harassed, their status as a minoritized population which puts them at risk, as well as current events like the battle over repealing HB2 in North Carolina, it is important to understand how important of a role that schools can play in the acceptance of these students. One of the key aspects to ensuring that LGBT students are safeguarded in order to meet their full potential and possibly even exceed it is through school leadership.

Leadership self-efficacy

In a small mixed method approach (DeWitt, 2010), it was found that only about 30 percent of school administrators in New York State took steps to safeguard LGBT students even though there had been an increase in the number of students who came out as LGBT. Additionally, leaders within NY State understood that the Dignity for All Students Act would be passed and enforced in 2011. The law was created to help safeguard the increasing number of students bullied based on sexual orientation, sex, gender expression and race.

Fast forward a number of years and many schools still look the same with one exception. Schools have seen the increase in, not only students who identify as gay, but also the number of students who are identifying as transgender. The awareness of transgender issues alone has increased due to the mainstream media’s coverage of Caitlyn Jenner’s transition, as well as transgender actresses like Laverne Cox, and transgender portrayals like that of Jeffrey Tambor. With all of this media coverage of real life as well as television shows, schools were bound to see an increase in the number of students identifying as LGBT.

However, not all schools are safeguarding students to the extent that they could be in a time when there is so much coverage of LGBT issues. Elizabethe and Smith (2017) found:

Reasons for this are multiple, but often it is because of [educators’] own fear and concerns and because of a prevailing belief that sexual orientation […] is not an appropriate focus for education (p. 333).

That leaves many LGBT students feeling very disengaged within their school system and considerably minoritized to the point of isolation. It is also a bit hypocritical considering the amount of heteronormative images displayed around schools and included in textbooks and the curriculum.

It is the moral purpose of leaders to take on this issue. Michael Fullan (2001) wrote:

You don’t have to be Mother Theresa to have moral purpose. Some people are deeply passionate about improving life (sometimes to a fault, if they lack one or more of the other four components of leadership: understanding of the change process, strong relationships, knowledge adding, and
coherence making among multiple priorities.) Others have a more cognitive approach, displaying less emotion, but still being intensely committed to betterment. Whatever one’s style, every leader, to be effective, must have and work on improving his or her moral purpose.

So why do not leaders take this on? Why do so many leaders continue to lag behind society with this issue? First and foremost, it is difficult for leaders to take on the issue of safeguarding LGBT students if they do not fully understand the context which LGBT students are living, or have their own biases when it comes to the LGBT community. It is a concern of the author that these leaders will never address the needs of LGBT students, as well as any students who are not part of the dominant culture.

Additionally, few leaders will take on the issue because they rarely want to talk about sexual orientation with students, which means that many leaders spend time being reactive rather than proactive in these situations. This lack of understanding, and needing to understand, may be caused by the leader lacking a sense of self-efficacy when it comes to addressing the needs of minoritized populations. The author believes that this population of leaders are the very population that are within the reach of the LGBT community and can be used to build bridges rather than walls.

Bandura (1994) defined self-efficacy as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave” (p. 2). Self-efficacy is situation specific, which means that a leader may have a strong sense of self-efficacy in one area but lack it in another. Many times that other area where a leader lacks a sense of self-efficacy is when it comes to those students who do not always fit into the dominant culture.

Bandura (2000) found:

When faced with obstacles, setbacks, and failures, those who doubt their capabilities slacken their efforts, give up, or settle for mediocre solutions. Those who have a strong belief in the capabilities redouble their effort to master the challenge.

Leithwood and Yantzi (2008) found:

[…] efficacy is a key variable in better understanding effects in most organizations. Pointing to the similarity of efficacy and self-confidence, McCormick (2001) claims that leadership self-efficacy or confidence is likely the key cognitive variable regulating leader functioning in a dynamic environment.

The following image represents how a lack of self-efficacy when it comes to providing inclusive safeguards for students in that dynamic environment known as school. Clearly, self-efficacy is a complicated topic which has been addressed through research, articles and books, so the image may seem simplistic. However, Figure 1 is meant to represent how important self-efficacy may be to the topic of safeguarding LGBT students.

**Why school leader efficacy matters**

![Image of self-efficacy and inclusive safeguards](image)

*Figure 1. Impact of self-efficacy on carrying out inclusionary practices*
To further illustrate the need for leadership self-efficacy, the author believes that when leaders begin to safeguard LGBT students there are a variety of issues that take place. Leaders receive pushback from parents. For example, many high schools across North American take part in the GLSEN’s sponsored “Day of Silence” where students do not speak for the day in recognition of all of the other LGBT students who have been silenced around the world because of their LGBT status. There have been cases where parents kept their high school students home for the day in protest of a school leader’s willingness to encourage their students to take part in the Day of Silence.

Other times when a leader stands up for one minoritized group over another they are seen as pushing their agenda. This constant push and pull requires a great deal of self-efficacy. The reasoning is that safeguarding LGBT students can become such a divisive conversation that it often creates sides. One side stands for the support of LGBT students while the other side looks for a counterargument, and the pushing of an agenda is seen as that counterargument.

The author believes that the key behind raising the self-efficacy of leaders in order to help them find the belief that they can overcome any obstacles that arise from safeguarding LGBT students is through the use of collective efficacy. Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) defined collective efficacy as “the collective self-perception that teachers in a given school make an educational difference to their students over and above the educational impact of their homes and communities” (p. 190). It is the belief of the author that through the combined effort of school leaders and staff, they together can find ways to help support the needs of LGBT students.

What can educators do collectively?
It is important to remember, in this case, that safeguarding LGBT students and including curriculum and books that represents them is not just good for the LGBT student population but is equally as good for the rest of the student population because it helps prepare them for the diverse society we live in. Safeguarding LGBT students can be a part of a bigger picture of making sure that leaders safeguard all minoritized populations, which will also help alleviate the argument of pushing one’s agenda.

Additionally, it is important to do more than just house books that include LGBT students in the school library. It is important to offer books where LGBT students or adults are depicted in a positive way. Too often the literature and movies revolving around the LGBT community have focused on sexual promiscuity and the AIDS epidemic. Although those are issues that the LGBT community face, it is equally as important to provide stories that show the positive side of the LGBT community.

In the research of John Hattie, which involved more than 300 million students from developed countries around the world, he found that teacher-student relationships had a 0.72 effect size which is well over the hinge point of 0.40 which many researchers agree can provide a year’s worth of growth for a year’s input. Although there are many nuances to Hattie’s research because he averaged effect sizes for his influences on learning, educators can agree that relationships are central to fostering a supportive and inclusive school climate, and a necessary component of including all students so they can reach their maximum potential. Teachers who take an interest in the lives of their students, including those who are LGBT, can have a profound impact on how the student does in school.

There are some basic steps that schools can take to safeguard LGBT students, but also all minoritized populations. These simple steps may make it more palatable for leaders to take on such issues. First and foremost is to create a school board policy that safeguards all students, regardless of race, gender, gender expression and sexual orientation, and then follow through on that policy when students report being bullied and harassed (DeWitt, 2010). Schools that have a policy in place safeguarding minoritized populations are
more likely to support LGBT student during times of bullying. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission:

LGBTI young people at schools where protective policies are in place are more likely to feel safe compared with those in schools without similar policies (75 per cent compared with 45 per cent). They are almost 50 per cent less likely to be physically abused at school, less likely to suffer other forms of homophobic abuse, less likely to self-harm and less likely to attempt suicide.

Second, school leaders and teachers can display images that are less heteronormative and more inclusive that support LGBT students. Beyond the images that hang on the walls of the school building, leaders and teachers can provide curriculum that represents all of the students within their school building. Perhaps that curriculum includes literature that is age appropriate and a special category within their school library where students can take out books that have LGBT characters or plots (DeWitt, 2012).

Additionally, teachers can focus on issues that involve LGBT students, like a debate around the HB2 Bill, the reversal of Title IX or gay marriage. Debates are an important method that teachers can use to teach students how to interact around a controversial topic and learn from one another (DeWitt, 2012). Confrontation is not a bad thing if it leads to a better place, and not all students have to agree on the topic of being gay, but they can certainly take time to have conversations about it to open up a reciprocal understanding. This idea is supported by the research from the Manitoba Teachers’ Society, which found that:

Educators were most likely to report that LGBTQ content was relevant to “health/family studies/ human ecology” (86%), but this was closely followed by many other subjects including social studies (79%), English language arts (78%), and social justice/law (78%). Many participants also saw LGBTQ content as relevant to history (63%), religion (59%), the arts (57%), French language arts (53%), science (46%), and physical education (46%). One in five saw it as relevant to mathematics (22%).

Professional learning and development of teachers and leaders are a necessary way to understand the needs of the LGBT community (DeWitt). According to Hattie, professional development has an effect size of 0.51. Timperley et al. (2007) found that effective professional development occurs:

Over a long period of time (three to five years), involves external experts, teachers are deeply engaged, it challenges teachers’ existing beliefs, teachers talk to each other about teaching, and school leadership supports teachers’ opportunities to learn and provides opportunities within the school structure for this to happen.

When considering LGBT students, and the research presented in this paper, it is clear that professional development around inclusive practices for LGBT students would challenge the beliefs of teachers. For example, in the Manitoba study, researchers found that, “Almost all (99%) participants agreed that “it is important for students to have someone to talk to, “but only 73% indicated they would be comfortable discussing LGBTQ topics with students.” When it comes to professional development it is important for schools to work with experts in the field of safeguarding LGBT students.

In many large towns or cities, there are LGBT community organizations that would enjoy the opportunity to work within a school system. Those organizations are always prepared and eager to do outreach with any school or organization that has an interest in LGBT issues. This is a necessary component to supporting LGBT students, because very often teachers and leaders do not know how to help support that marginalized population within their schools. Professional development can help bridge a level of understanding for the school community.

Additionally, leaders need to engage families, which is where leadership is necessary. Schools all have LGBT students, and in many cases schools have LGBT parents who are a
part of the school community. Parents need to understand that the school climate is supposed to be safe and inclusive for all students who enter the doors. That takes dialogue at parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings and open house.

Clearly, there will be pushback on the part of parents, which is why many school leaders will not follow through on safeguarding LGBT students. There are countless examples of parents pulling their students out of school when those schools are honoring the Day of Silence, which is a national event across the USA where students remain silent protest for all of those LGBT students who do not feel as though they have a voice, and we just need to refer back to HB1 where there are states that go out of their way to discriminate against the LGBT community, as well as the reversal of Title IX which seems to indicate that President Trump may offer the same type of discrimination.

Leadership is about working with all stakeholders to make sure that they are maximizing the potential of all of the students who enter into school. Dialogue, professional development, school board policies and codes of conduct are some of the necessary components to making sure that this happens.

In the end
When leaders care about including all students in their community in the greater conversation about academic and social-emotional growth, should it be considered pushing one’s agenda? No, it should not. The research presented above illustrates the need for immediate action on the part of leadership in schools because there is a high percentage of LGBT students who are risk of being bullied and harassed.

Furthermore, the job of the school is to make sure that students not only meet their own expectations, but teachers and leaders should be instrumental in helping students exceed their expectations. In order for that to happen, school leaders must help teachers address the absence of curriculum, images and the common language necessary for LGBT students to flourish in their school setting. That is why the discussion around self-efficacy is necessary. Leaders need to feel a sense of self-efficacy to make these situations happen, and that self-efficacy has to include the belief that all students are welcome in school.

Schools should have climates where all students feel engaged socially, emotionally and academically. We understand from the research presented that that is not happening. It is the moral imperative of leaders to make sure that all students are engaged to the fullest extent. When the person in charge of the school neglects this moral imperative, they fail to live up to the title of leader.

References
DeWitt, P. and Slade, S. (2014), School Climate Change: How Do I Build a Positive Environment for Learning, ASCD, Alexandria, VA.


Further reading


Corresponding author

Peter M. DeWitt can be contacted at: pmdewitt518@gmail.com

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com