

# Chapter 4

## LGBTQIA+ Students: Trauma and Education

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Structural changes have occurred at a rapid rate in the U.S. concerning LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and ally/asexual) rights and lived experiences. However, in K-12 education LGBTQIA+ students continue to face challenges and obstacles not faced by their heterosexual, cisgender peers. Using heteronormativity as its underpinning, this chapter will highlight some of the challenges encountered by LGBTQIA+ students, provide a background to understand the current state of educational practices and policies, and provide recommendations for teachers, administrators, students, and communities to help reduce the trauma endured by many LGBTQIA+ students.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Trauma from the Greek root ‘wound’ originally referred to a physical wound, a laceration, or a tearing of bodily tissue (Braga et al., 2008; Haider, 2012). In the 1860s, the word trauma came to include psychic pain as well physical pain (Braga et al., 2008). Overtime, trauma has come to represent pain that a person or persons experience outside of normal day-to-day malaise or uneasiness. In the scope of this chapter, trauma is specifically tied to oppression experienced by a group of people that is not experienced by the larger society. In short, trauma for today’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/ally (LGBTQIA+) students can manifest itself in both the physical and emotional realities of our students based on their social location and identity.

The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educational Network (GLSEN) biennial climate survey report highlights continued inequities and traumas that exist for LGBTQIA+<sup>1</sup> students. Kosciw et al. (2020) found that over 59% of LGBT students felt unsafe going to school. Thirty-two percent of LGBT students missed at least one day of school in the past month due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable with the school environment. Almost all LGBT students have heard the word “gay” being used in a negative way, and over 52% of LGBT students heard homophobic remarks from teachers and/or staff in school. Finally, over 86%

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of LGBT students experienced harassment or assault at school. The findings from GLSEN continue in a similar manner when it comes to other experiences such as discriminatory practices and policies and lack of perceived concern by teachers and administrators.

In this environment, LGBTQIA+ students carefully negotiate a daily labyrinth of stressors including emotional, physical, and psychological harm. Taking a strength based view of LGBTQIA+ students, this chapter will provide a background that includes legislative and juridical moments forwarding LGBTQIA rights, the constructs of heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia, the use of a feminist reading of trauma for this chapter, and highlight interventions enacted by teachers, administrators and students that may help alleviate and reduce the deleterious impact of trauma on LGBTQIA+ students.

## **BACKGROUND**

*Well I didn't have much choice. That was a clinical placement. I was [the consultant's] first student. Basically the first year I was there, more or less all I ever did was shove electricity down homosexual patients. — Clinical psychologist (King, 2004)*

Despite legislative and juridical advancements concerning LGBTQIA+ rights, including, the right to marry (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644, 2015), serve in the military (The Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010), and the prohibition of employment termination based on one's LGBT identity (*Bostock v. Clayton County*, 590 U.S., 2020), LGBTQIA+ students still face uncertainty in their safety while at school (Kosciw et al., 2020). A historical rendering is important to understand the continuation of trauma for LGBTQIA+ students.

While same sex relations and transgender/two-spirit<sup>2</sup> identities have been part of various cultures across the globe for thousands of years, it was Carl Westphal who deployed homosexuality as a medical term in the middle part of the 19th century (Foucault, 1978/1990). This deployment allowed for not only the medicalization of LGBTQIA+ people but a deficit view as well. A deficit view included the chemical castration of gay men most notably Alan Turing, a British scientist and WWII decoder highlighted in the 2014 film *The Imitation Game* (Hughes, et al., 2019), the use of electric shock therapy for lesbian and gay men (King, 2004), and the inclusion of homosexuality in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual as a psychological disorder by the American Psychiatric Association until 1973 (Drescher, 2015). While these practices have since receded in U.S. culture, the ideology of the homosexual as the abject “other” survives to this day. Current material iterations of this ideology can be seen in 30 states that do not prohibit conversion therapy<sup>3</sup> (Family Equality, 2019), a lack of laws prohibiting discrimination against transgender people (see Department of Health and Human Services 85 FR 37160, 2020), and adoption obstacles for LGBT people (Goldberg et al., 2019).

These events from yesterday and today, plus many more examples not included here, offer educators an opportunity to shift not only practices and policies that impact LGBTQIA+ student, but the underlying ideologies i.e. heteronormativity that promote an inequitable educational environment.

To clarify some key concepts (see Figure 1) used throughout this chapter, the author posits heteronormativity as a particular episteme (normative, ideological, ontological) by which heterosexism and homophobia operate through material practices.

Specifically, heteronormativity is the “heterosexual culture’s exclusive ability to interpret itself as society” (Warner, 1993, p. xxi) through “linguistic and/or cultural practices which construct and circulate

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