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Introduction

Moving From Research to Policy and School Interventions

Megan C. Lytle and Richard A. Sprott

We should indeed keep calm in the face of difference, and live our lives in a state of inclusion and wonder at the diversity of humanity.

—GEORGE TAKEI (2013)

The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.

—LAO TZU (BBC, n.d.)

Throughout the process of creating the *Resolution on Gender and Sexual Orientation Diversity in Children and Adolescents in Schools*, the working group of which we were a part was mindful and intentional about planning out next steps to ensure that the recommendations made in the Joint Resolution could be applied within school districts across the country (American Psychological Association & National Association of School Psychologists, 2015). Soon after the Joint Resolution was adopted, we worked with a team of scholars and researchers to develop a series of fact sheets to provide additional information to school administrators, educators, and staff. We quickly realized that a book like this was needed to help break down barriers and facilitate implementation. Amid constantly changing laws, legalized discrimination, evolving terminology, gaps in knowledge and services, as well as struggles with finding resources, we worked with experts across the country to move beyond talking about change to walking you through strategies and examples of how to make schools affirming, safe, and enjoyable for gender and sexually

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Supporting Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Diversity in K–12 Schools, M. C. Lytle and R. A. Sprott (Editors)

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diverse (GSD) students! Similarly, as we wrote sections of this book and reviewed each chapter, it has become glaringly obvious that significant gaps in research remain, especially when it comes to learning about the distinct needs of GSD youth across various age groups, ethnicities, and intersecting identities.

EDUCATION AND HEALTH DISPARITIES

Before we sift through the empirical literature about disparities in educational and health outcomes for GSD students, we must mention that the disproportionate burdens endured by so many GSD youth is a reflection of the chronic discrimination they face, most of which can be ameliorated or prevented if societal biases are significantly reduced or altogether removed. The majority of programs and resources discussed throughout this book should be used to fight against the cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions that manifest into prejudice and discrimination. However, a few programs have been developed to support GSD youth with overcoming societal biases.

In terms of educational outcomes, research suggests that the victimization GSD students experience is directly associated with missing school (Kosciw et al., 2015), and 3.4% of GSD youth were not sure if they would graduate from high school, compared with fewer than 1% of students in the general population (Palmer et al., 2016). Both educational and health disparities are usually linked to negative school environments (Palmer et al., 2016). However, Black, Hispanic, and White youth who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) had greater odds of reporting suicide ideation than their White heterosexual peers regardless of whether they had been bullied or not (Mueller et al., 2015). In comparison with their cisgender peers, transgender students were more likely to feel unsafe at school, attempt suicide, use substances (e.g., alcohol, cigarettes, inhalants), and have intercourse before 13 years of age (Johns et al., 2019). When compared with heterosexual youth, LGB students each had greater odds of feeling unsafe at school, using substances (e.g., cocaine, inhalants), and attempting suicide (Johns et al., 2018). The majority of research has focused on the experiences of GSD youth in middle school and high school, and few studies have addressed the unique needs of GSD students in elementary school. Indeed, grade school administrators, teachers, and staff often struggle to implement affirming changes, such as using the correct pronouns, even after receiving training (Smith & Payne, 2016).

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

This book provides an overview of efforts as well as challenges in the translation and implementation of theory and research into programs, interventions, and initiatives addressing the equitable education of GSD children, youth, and

families in the context of schools. We asked our contributing authors to examine how laws, policies, and programs can bolster GSD children and adolescents; how stigma and minority stress affect school performance among GSD children and adolescents; and how GSD-affirming school policies and interventions reduce high-stakes, risk-taking behavior. Our contributors also cover bullying and the challenges encountered by antibullying efforts, advocacy strategies to create safe and welcoming schools, and the need for training of school personnel around gender and sexual orientation diversity. Throughout the book, authors integrate examples of educational and health challenges and what successful interventions “look like” in action.

We developed this book as a resource for counseling and psychological helping professions (e.g., school counselors, psychologists, social workers, student affairs leaders), education administrators, and school boards that need the scientific background, practical interventions, and model policies to address issues of equitable education for GSD children, youth, and families. Faculty and graduate students in education and the helping professions are also important target audiences for the text. According to Smith and Payne (2016), despite training elementary school teachers about GSD-specific vocabulary and how to make schools more inclusive of transgender and gender diverse youth, evidence suggests that staff struggle with shifting away from a binary perspective of gender and fixate on safety (e.g., fear over what happens if a cisgender boy has a crush on a transgender girl). Perhaps if the next generation of administrators, teachers, helping professionals, and staff are trained to not only consider safety but also learn how to create inclusive and welcoming schools, GSD youth can thrive within any school environment.

After identifying gaps in knowledge (e.g., how to apply research and interventions in diverse school settings), we reached out to the Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity of the American Psychological Association for feedback and suggestions. From the start, we envisioned a resource that would address a broad range of topics with a focus on diversity as well as intersecting identities. We also envisioned creating something that the interdisciplinary teams could use on the front lines (i.e., not just teachers but also school counselors, health professionals, administrators, students, parents, and others). We originally conceptualized GSD students as youth who ranged from elementary school-age children through emerging adults who were in college (Arnett, 2007). Our rationale for considering such a wide age range was that emerging adulthood is critical time for identity development, and, for some GSD youth, it is their first opportunity for individualization and living authentically (Arnett, 2007; Lytle, De Luca, & Blosnich, 2014). However, because of the significant differences between youth in K–12 grades and those in higher education, we opted to narrow the focus of this book. We are considering working on another book about the distinct needs of GSD college students.

THEORETICAL LENS

The primary lens for this book is an integration of the three pillars of positive psychology with minority stress theory. As you read each chapter, we invite you to consider how you can create positive social institutions (e.g., all-gender restrooms, inclusive policies), foster positive subjective experiences (e.g., inclusive language, curricula with GSD role models), and identify GSD character strengths (e.g., recognize fairness and advocacy as GSD strengths, promote creativity) that will help youth thrive as well as ease adverse outcomes (Lytle, Vaughan, et al., 2014; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). These pillars of positive psychology can neutralize the minority stress experienced by GSD communities due to the cishnormative and heteronormative expectations that are so prevalent within our school systems.

All too often, researchers and scholars focus on the negative outcomes that GSD individuals experience without thoroughly exploring how minority stress stems from chronic discrimination that is additive to the everyday stressors we all deal with (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer, 2003). Based on minority stress theory, individual (e.g., character strengths, positive subjective experiences) as well as community (e.g., positive institutions) resources can ameliorate the physical and mental health outcomes associated with distal (e.g., prejudice, discrimination) and proximal (e.g., internalized stigma, fear of rejection) experiences of societal biases (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer, 2003). In addition, the socioecological theory complements this integrated framework by understanding how the bidirectional relationship between different systems (e.g., individual, family and school, community) may foster discrimination and minority stress (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). However, this theory can also inform administrators, teachers, staff, and school boards on how they can implement programs at different system levels to create positive institutions and positive experiences as well as reduce minority stress.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

In Chapter 1, we (Lytle and Sprott) use the *Resolution on Gender and Sexual Orientation Diversity in Children and Adolescents in Schools* (American Psychological Association & National Association of School Psychologists, 2015) as a foundation to review some of the most accessible programs and interventions available to school psychologists, administrators, teachers, and community stakeholders.

In Chapter 2, Judy Chiasson reviews historical legal decisions that have helped to bolster the rights of GSD students. Through her personal experience as program coordinator for the Office of Human Relations, Diversity, and Equity at the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), she describes the development of the Project 10 student support group, gay prom, and Models of Pride. Chiasson demonstrates how the fight for education civil rights for Black

students serves as a template for advocacy on behalf of GSD students. Although legal discrimination continues to leave many GSD youth vulnerable, the example of LAUSD provides many practical strategies for protecting students within your school district.

In Chapter 3, Emily S. Meadows and Jeremy D. Shain provide accessible recommendations for not only creating safe spaces but also supporting GSD youth in socially conservative school environments. On the basis of empirical evidence and personal experience, they describe how trusted adults may help protect against potential risks and disparities (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014). Indeed, although the 2017 Gallup Poll suggested that approximately 4.5% of Americans (and 8.2% of Millennials) identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT), 24% of 12- to 14-year-olds who died by suicide were LGBT (Ream, 2019). Therefore, it is imperative to help schools, community stakeholders, and families recognize how dire the consequences are for youth who do not have the necessary supports and resources they need to thrive. As Meadows and Shain note, numerous resources are available to help school counselors, teachers, and administrators to create a safe and inclusive environment for all students.

Using the socioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), Peter S. Theodore and Judy Chiasson describe how GSD youth not only experience bullying from their peers, but large proportions of students hear their teachers, administrators, and school staff making homophobic and transphobic remarks. In Chapter 4, these authors review such outcomes of bullying as psychological distress and engaging in risky behaviors and discuss in depth the advantages and disadvantages of various techniques to end bullying. Specifically, antibullying interventions at the individual level (e.g., what students and teachers can do) as well as at the systems level (e.g., GSAs, an acronym that has referred to “gay-straight alliances” but more recently refers to “gender and sexuality alliances” or “genders and sexualities alliances”; inclusive curricula; public policies; advocacy) are presented along with recommendations.

Coming out is among the unique experiences that GSD youth face, but determining if, how, and when to do so should be a personal decision. Unfortunately, there are instances in which GSD youth feel forced to disclose their gender identity or sexual orientation to their parents and guardians so they can receive services (e.g., engage in therapy, participate in research). In Chapter 5, Sarah Kiperman, Gabriel DeLong, Kris Varjas, and Joel Meyers review different strategies for obtaining informed consent, informed assent, and waived consent to meet the needs of GSD youth regardless of their level of outness. Such strategies as identifying when youth can be considered “mature minors” or “emancipated minors” are important especially because recent legislation at the state level (Harper, 2018) has been proposed to out youth to their parents, and federal guidelines are not always clear (Ettinghoff, 2013). Therefore, it is essential to educate administrators, counselors, psychologists, social workers, teachers, and researchers about the rights of GSD youth and how to best support these students by connecting them to the services they need and protecting their privacy.

In Chapter 6, Julie C. Herbstrith uses the ecological systems perspective to translate basic science into interventions and practices in K–12 schools that support GSD families. Specifically, she addresses systems-level issues that families headed by GSD parents face, including educators' lack of knowledge about GSD communities, school climate with elements of heteronormativity as well as cishnormativity, and prejudice directed against GSD families. Herbstrith goes on to describe evidence-based strategies that have been found to reduce prejudice (e.g., intergroup contact and invocation of social norms), and how these strategies can be applied to better support GSD families.

The American Psychological Association's *Respect Workshop: Preventing Health Risks and Promoting Healthy Outcomes Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Students* (Rosenbaum et al., 2018) is an additional resource for school districts, state professional organizations, and individuals across disciplines who are interested in preventing health risks and promoting health outcomes among GSD youth. In Chapter 7, Sam E. Greenberg, Jana E. Sharp, and Clinton W. Anderson provide an overview of the *Respect Workshop*, participant outcomes, and how this program can be adapted to meet the diverse needs of school districts across the country. This training is available in two formats (online and in person), and participants gain access to additional training materials.

In Chapter 8, Amie R. McKibban and Austin R. Anderson describe how legislation (e.g., laws that require GSD inclusive curricula) and school policies (e.g., enumerated antibullying and harassment policies) can address issues of health disparities for sexual and gender minority students. Specifically, they discuss policies around curricula, school sports, and gender-related spaces (e.g., locker rooms, bathrooms) in relation to how each of these procedures can ameliorate minority stress as well as improve the health and well-being of GSD students. In addition to exploring these concerns, the authors provide numerous resources and strategies to help schools implement more affirming policies.

In Chapter 9, we (Sprott and Lytle) review how existing efforts are starting to address gaps in service and note that, despite these efforts, additional research as well as program development are needed to make educational environments safer and more affirming for all students. We also discuss what lessons have been learned about implementing interventions, programs, and policies for GSD youth. On the basis of these lessons learned, we propose an agenda for research and future advocacy in response to the gaps in knowledge.

KEY TERMS

The language and terminology used to describe GSD individuals is constantly changing and expanding. Regardless, we consider all school populations to be diverse, meaning inclusive of the entire spectrum of genders and sexual identities. However, throughout this book, authors do use the term *gender and*

sexually diverse to mean primarily those children and adolescents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ). The term *gender and sexually diverse* is often used as a more strength-based and inclusive umbrella term because not all individuals identify with the terms in the LGBTQ acronym. For instance, some gender-expansive or non-binary individuals do not identify as transgender because the cisnormative expectations of gender as a binary concept are often forced on transgender communities. When referring to research literature, chapter authors may specify subgroups or spell out only LGB, for example, because the research sample included only individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and no participants identified as transgender, queer, or questioning.

Additional terms such as “cisnormative” and “heteronormative” are also used throughout this book. *Cisnormative* refers to the assumption that all individuals are *cisgender* (i.e., the gender assigned at birth aligns with their gender identity) because this is the expected “norm.” Between cisgender privilege and cisnormative beliefs, individuals who identify as or are perceived to be transgender and gender diverse are frequently misgendered, their pronouns are assumed or ignored rather than respected, and they endure harmful microaggressions associated with *transnegativity/transphobia* (i.e., bias and prejudice toward transgender and gender diverse individuals). Similarly, *heteronormative* is the assumption that all individuals are *heterosexual* (e.g., a cisgender male is attracted to a cisgender female), and, again, this is the expected “norm.” Heterosexual privilege in combination with heteronormative beliefs often leads to assumptions about whom students should be attracted to and how health education classes should be taught, and influences forms, policies, and *homonegative/homophobic* (i.e., bias and prejudice toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning individuals) cultures within school systems. Beliefs about sexual orientation often stem from cisnormative expectations and may contribute to conflated presumptions about gender identity and sexual orientation.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Use this book as a guide and an inspiration for how you can make your school safe, affirming, and inclusive for GSD students across cultures; enhance professional development for you and your students; educate or suggest talking points for elected officials (e.g., superintendents); and for students and parents to prepare their school system for the unique needs of GSD families. Each chapter addresses how suggested research, programs, laws, and policies can be adapted or implemented within the school system. In addition, please refer to the *Takeaways and Opportunities* section at the end of each chapter; there, key content points are summarized in bullet list form, and readers are given at least one question for reflection or suggestions for actions you can take to better “walk the walk” for GSD students in your schools and districts.

In addition to the resources discussed throughout the book, an Appendix provides a list of resources organized by topic. And, to help you easily find the information you are looking for, some of the resources are listed under more than one topic.

We hope this book inspires you to become a champion for GSD students in your schools and districts. Education is a basic human right, and all students should be able to thrive at school. It should not be a student's responsibility to make their school safe and affirming. That is our job. As mental health professionals, teachers, administrators, and staff, please use this resource to identify what steps you can take to ensure that GSD students have a safe and affirming place to learn and grow.

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