Creating Inclusive School Environments for LGBTQ Students:
Implications for Educators
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The discrimination and persecution of people because of their sexual orientation is as unjust as the crime of racism. Homophobia is a crime against humanity.
Archbishop Desmond Tutu (2007)

All students have the right to feel valued, respected, and safe. There are a variety of approaches teachers and principals can take to effect positive change for students who are marginalized or disenfranchised (Glaze, Mattingley, & Levin, 2012; Ryan, 2006). For students who differ from the norm — be it by reason of race, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, or physical or intellectual ability — school environments may be less than safe or welcoming. Many of these students are burdened with daily injustices and barriers to their academic achievement; however, schools can be vehicles for the redress of the inequities that define their school experiences by creating and sustaining inclusive school environments (Glaze et al., 2012). Ryan (2012) describes the process of increasing inclusion in the educational context as one that:

1. Targets exclusive systemic practices, such as ableism, classism, sexism, racism, homophobia, and so on;

2. Emphasizes the importance of access, participation, and achievement of all students; and

3. Advocates for the meaningful participation of all members of school communities in the decision- and policy-making activities of schools and school systems. (p. 7).

Undoubtedly, there are significant challenges for leaders and teachers to overcome before inclusive environments for all students can be created. Nevertheless, through perseverance and steadfast dedication, the forces for inclusion can prevail (Glaze et al., 2012; Ryan, 2006, 2012).

For students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ), schools can be hostile environments supported by the systemic and institutional biases entrenched in their daily routines. As Koschoreck and Slattery (2010) argue:

Despite the advancements in the American, British, Canadian, and global community in recent years — same-sex marriage, ordinations, U.S. Supreme Court decisions, political elections, organizations, and so on … the oppressive atmosphere for [LGBTQ] students in K–12 schooling must be addressed forthrightly. The antagonism between the challenges to the heteronormative order in the broader community and the oftentimes brutal environments that [LGBTQ] students face in schools creates an untenable conflict for many young people. (p. 158)
We have come a long way in the past decades. Now we can openly discuss LGBTQ students’ needs (Marshall & Oliva, 2010). The lives of LGBTQ individuals have improved over the past 20 or so years in countries such as Canada, but there is still much work to be done. It is incumbent on educators to take a social justice and equity stance in supporting these children and adolescents who are often portrayed negatively by media, condemned by religious institutions, and harassed in schools and workplaces (Macgillivray, 2009; Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Roher, 2010). Improving the lives of LGBTQ students requires educators to take a proactive approach to promoting the equality of sexualities from a social justice and equity perspective.

The purpose of this paper is to explore what educators can do to create inclusive school environments for LGBTQ students within elementary and secondary settings. I first provide a contextual overview by unpacking the challenges and barriers sexual minorities are faced with daily, which are deeply rooted in prejudices still inherent in Canadian society. Second, I discuss the strategies districts and schools can take to improve conditions for these students through ongoing professional development, inclusive curriculum, and the creation of safe school environments. I outline some of the challenges educators face in bringing about positive change and also provide effective strategies schools and districts can employ to achieve inclusive school environments. By participating in ongoing professional development about LGBTQ topics and issues, by critically reflecting on ways to create a more inclusive curriculum, and by creating and sustaining safe environments for LGBTQ students, the lives of these students can be significantly improved. Making change requires educators to move beyond policy and theory to engage in informed and reflective activism to ensure LGBTQ students are not oppressed or excluded as they navigate the heteronormative culture in schools and beyond.

As stated earlier, there have been noticeable improvements in the lives of members of the LGBTQ community both globally and locally. Understanding the context of that community provides important insights into the necessity for schools to address LGBTQ issues. Some countries have afforded equal rights to sexual minority groups in marriage, adoption, and access to benefits (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010; Marshall & Oliva, 2010). In Ontario, the rights of the LGBTQ community are protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Ontario human rights legislation (Koschoreck & Tooms, 2009; Roher, 2010). The Ontario Ministry of Education’s Policy Memorandum No. 119 and publication, Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, hold school boards accountable for putting policies in place that respect diversity, eliminate discriminatory practices, and promote inclusive education. In order for students to flourish academically, socially, and emotionally, they need an inclusive and supportive environment that opens up opportunities to them (Glaze, et al., 2012; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009; Ryan, 2006, 2012).

Despite advancements in policy development and legislation locally and globally, there are still significant systemic and institutional barriers for the LGBTQ community to overcome. Simply tolerating or protecting this population is not enough to prevent their social exclusion as a result of the dominant heterosexual discourse. In the educational context, putting polices in place to safeguard LGBTQ youth is a necessary first step. Macgillivray (2009) asserts that policy and law are necessary to protect the interests of sexual minorities especially since community members and school staff may hold private beliefs and values that discriminate against the LGBTQ population. Hence, policies and legislation are not enough to effect change; what is
needed are dedicated coalitions of socially just minded teachers and principals to embrace the work of making sure that students outside of the mainstream are treated with respect in their schools.

In school contexts, educators need to embrace a social justice framework to redress the inequities embedded in the sociosexual hierarchical structure of Canadian society. Social justice work is indeed complex and demanding, and it is not always clear what the best course of action is (Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Ryan, 2012). Notwithstanding, educators who are committed to the principles of social justice seek ways to eradicate inequities rather than perpetuate them. Marshall and Oliva (2010) posit that “social justice theorists and activists focus their inquiry on how institutionalized theories, norms and practices in schools and society lead to social, political, economic and educational inequities” (p. 20). Ryan (2012) contends further that:

Inclusion and social justice are also closely associated with the concept of equity. Inclusion and social justice will be achieved when institutions and community are equitable – that is fair. … A social justice/inclusive perspective explicitly values diversity. (p. 9).

Hence, teachers and school leaders who espouse the principles of equity and social justice can create the inclusive conditions necessary for nurturing a culture of learning in which students feel respected, valued, and safe. When educators are mobilized to enact socially just and equitable practices that make schools safer and more inclusive for LGBTQ students, we can hope to see greater acceptance and respect for sexual minorities in society as well.

The importance of supporting LGBTQ students in schools cannot be underestimated. To understand why LGBTQ individuals face barriers, feel isolated, or are treated unjustly in society and in schools, I explore how the dominant discourse creates conditions and social structures that further stigmatize minority groups. Tooms (2009) discusses how dominant discourses impede the self-identification of LGBTQ individuals, which increases their oppression. Tooms (2009), drawing on the work of Foucault and Derrida, uses a “poststructuralist” lens to critically analyze traditional views of truth and reality (p. 183). Discourse relates to the “different ways in which we individually or collectively integrate language with other communicative elements when creating and interpreting a message” (Tooms, 2009, p. 183). One of the central tenets of poststructuralism is that it is possible to deconstruct power relations in discourse, which makes it possible for us to construct and deconstruct the multiple facets of identity. Tooms (2009) distinguishes between the Big D and Little D of discourse:

D/discourse refers to the many ways of acting and being in the world.

… D/discourse contours social practice by creating particular kinds of subjectivity in which human beings are managed and given certain forms that are viewed as self-evident, rational and normal, or irrational and abnormal.

The concept of d/discourse is centered on the pragmatics of language in use. It refers to the language bits and grammatical resources that make up interactions. However, it is not talk, because talk depends on a message being created between the speaker and the receiver in discourse. The message is a combination of the d/discourse and D/discourse. (p. 184)
What are the implications of D/discourse for LGBTQ youth? D/discourse serves to perpetuate hegemonic heterosexuality in society, that is, through the dominant discourse the existence of the LGBTQ is marginalized, almost to the point of invisibility. Tooms (2009) illustrates this point by referencing a speech, “That’s What America Is,” given in 1978 by gay rights activist Harvey Milk (p. 185). In that speech Milk called on closeted homosexuals to come out in the open and reveal their sexual identity to all the people in their lives to challenge the status quo under which they were invisible. By doing so they would challenge D/discourse under which they were not recognized as part of mainstream society. If the D/discourse recognized sexual minorities as a significant part of society, as per Milk’s wishes, life conditions could improve significantly for the LGBTQ community. However, in spite of the changes we’ve seen since 1978, our culture is still defined largely by norms of a dominant heteronormative discourse that pervades society and our schools.

The dominant discourse creates roadblocks for LGBTQ adolescents in society and in education. Cooper-Nicols and Bowleg (2010), who explore the experiences of members of sexual minorities in schools, distinguish three levels of heterosexism that permeate society and schools: “individual, cultural and institutional” (p. 16). At the individual level heterosexism refers to people’s prejudices against LGBTQ individuals which are manifested through put-downs, jeering, and jokes; at the cultural level, heterosexism takes the form of the perpetuation of stereotypes about masculinity and femininity; at the institutional level, heterosexism denies the existence of LGBTQ students altogether (Cooper-Nicols & Bowleg, 2010).

Heterosexism is entrenched in our cultural fabric and plays a critical role in sustaining the hegemony of the dominant population. Hegemonic heterosexuality may also explain why educators are reluctant to deal openly with issues surrounding sexual identities, which continue to be reified to conform to heterosexual D/discourse. Educators, even those who feel a moral obligation to disrupt the dominant hegemony of sexual/gender orientation, may find themselves dealing with backlash from political and/or religious anti-gay activists, and be silenced by it (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). DiPalma’s (2009) qualitative study found that gay teachers, who could be role models for both LGBTQ and straight students, remain silent for fear that their being open about their sexual orientation may incur resentment from colleagues and parents as a result of its drawing attention to issues of sexuality. Other obstacles researchers have found, which discourage teachers from exploring LGBTQ issues, revolve around teachers’ lack of knowledge about this population, lack of administrative support at the school, and fear of losing their jobs (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Hardie & Bowers, 2012; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010; Walker, 2010). Parents, community, and religious groups have even taken legal action to stop schools from exploring topics about sexual minorities, which has instilled more fear and anxiety in educators around teaching in this area (Alfano, Mannheim, & Zack, 2009; DePalma, 2009; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010; Macgillivray, 2009; Walker, 2010).

Additionally, some of the research underscores that hegemonic discourse and heterosexual norms create challenges for educators attempting to address and advocate for LGBTQ youth. Although educational discourse today does value inclusivity and diversity, sexual minorities are, for the most part, still left in the margins. Research has also found that LGBTQ students have to constantly negotiate their identities for fear of rejection from friends and school staff (Alfano et
Despite some of the obvious barriers preventing educators from addressing and advocating for LGBTQ students, sexual minority discourse is beginning to gain momentum (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010; Tooms, 2009). The next sections explore challenges faced by educators and possible strategies for bringing about positive change for the LGBTQ community. Three specific areas are discussed: professional development, curriculum implementation, and safe schools.

**Professional Development**

This section looks at professional development for educators interested in making a difference for LGBTQ students. Taking a social justice and equity stance for LGBTQ students entails that educators challenge the status quo and the assumptions about sexual identities and orientations on which it is based. Teachers and leaders are more comfortable focusing on diversity education with respect to ethnicity and religion, which are more legitimate in the eyes of school community members, than on sexual minority topics (Alfano et al., 2009; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010). Addressing these topics may cause discomfort for some staff, however, professional development geared towards helping them to critically analyze their biases and put aside their personal beliefs will help move the equity agenda forward. Educators do have some obstacles to overcome before they can become proponents for LGBTQ students. Despite the fact that teachers and principals may be open to dealing with issues of sexual orientation, studies have revealed that many lack the confidence and knowledge required to integrate topics into their programs and daily practices (Alfano et al., 2009; Allen, Harper, & Koschoreck, 2009; DePalma, 2009; Hardie & Bowers, 2012).

There is a notable absence of sexual orientations and identities topics in pre-service and leadership development programs; therefore, there is a need for accreditation institutions to include these in their programs (Allen et al., 2009; Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2010; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). Both novice and experienced leaders can significantly reduce homophobic behaviours in school environments, but they require support and training to deal effectively with these complex social justice issues (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010). Teachers need their administrator’s support to carry on with this work, but they may lack the courage and confidence to seek it. DePalma’s (2009) qualitative study involving practicing teachers illustrates that teachers require appropriate and explicit directives from the district, school administration, and policy developers in order to be able to confidently teach these topics. Larrabee and Morehead’s (2010) study involving newly credentialed teachers further supports DePalma’s findings. Alfano’s et al.’s (2009) inquiry involving 111 student teachers dealing with homophobic rhetoric yielded four categories of responses: “avoiders, hesitators, confronters and integrators” (p. 108). The avoiders remained silent; the hesitators challenged homophobic rhetoric; but the integrators found ways to address biases and incorporate LGBTQ themes into their programs in hopes of changing prejudices in school culture (Alfano et al., 2009). These categories can be applied to all educators. In order to move new and tenured teachers and leaders along the continuum to become confident integrators of LGBTQ topics, ongoing professional development is required to level the playing field for all teachers and principals and to bring more cohesion and consistency to pedagogy and school-level practices.
There are many principals and teachers who would advocate for LGBTQ students but do not have the knowledge or experience to do so effectively because LGBTQ issues have traditionally been excluded from training and professional development programs as outlined in the literature. Districts must support educational leaders and teachers as they implement different strategies to create learning environments that reflect an ethos of respect and understanding for sexual minorities. Research findings suggest that boards must provide ongoing learning opportunities for staff so that they can courageously and confidently embark on this work (DePalma, 2009; Hardie & Bowers, 2012). Some of the professional development could be targeted to helping staff critically explore their own feelings about these topics through discussions, reflections on readings, and case studies. Districts can support schools in employing school-wide approaches to diversity training to sensitize all staff about the complexities and multi-faceted layers of diversity education (DePalma, 2009). Educators should be encouraged to analyze approaches and programs that raise awareness and visibility around sexualities education that have been successfully implemented in different schools and districts (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2010). Teaching staff about relevant terminology, symbols, culture and history of the LGBTQ community and contributions of its members is needed so that educators can more confidently address these topics in their classrooms (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). Studies have found increased confidence and courage in educators who have been exposed to topics and issues around the LGBTQ community through professional development.

**Curriculum**

Curriculum is another vehicle that can foster positive dispositions and understandings about the LGBTQ community. Curriculum programming and implementation can enhance students’ feeling of self-worth and inclusion when the contributions of members of the LGBTQ community to society are highlighted (Alfano et al., 2009; Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2010; Koschoreck & Slattery, 2010). However, in most courses LGBTQ perspectives and information are conspicuous in their absence. Inclusion of these perspectives would help educators to confidently address LGBTQ topics. Studies have shown that discourse around sexual minorities is significantly lacking in mainstream curriculum and teacher education training manuals (Hardie & Bowers, 2012; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). In addition, schools, particularly middle schools, lack the resources educators need to adequately cover such topics (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2010). Most curricula and texts only refer to the LGBTQ in the context of dealing with “depression, youth suicide, and HIV/AIDS,” they do not feature the LGBTQ community’s history and social contributions (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008, p. 171). And texts portray only minimally the multiple intersections of sexual orientation and race, ability, or ethnicity (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). Elia and Eliason (2010) draw on research to show how sexual education, both nationally and internationally, is historically rooted in preserving and promoting “heterosexual, procreative sexuality within the confines of marriage” (p. 33). For example, in many school jurisdictions, parents have pressured schools to remove books from classes and libraries that discuss or depict same-sex marriage (DePalma, 2009; Walker, 2010). This further demonstrates the need for leaders and teachers to have the courage to confront these challenges and to educate parents about misconceptions about LGBTQ people to minimize their resistance to inclusive education. These studies underscore the importance for districts to acquire resources for elementary and secondary schools that explore the broader dimensions of diversity in order to create truly inclusive schools:
Kosciw et al. (2008) reported that [LGBTQ] students in schools with an inclusive curriculum that includes positive representations of [LGBTQ] people heard fewer homophobic remarks, experienced less harassment and fewer assaults, and felt a greater sense of safety and belonging to their school. [LGBTQ] students attending schools with supportive educators were also less likely to feel unsafe, less likely to miss school due to safety concerns, and were more likely to have higher grade point averages and educational aspirations. (Kosciw et al., as cited in Larrabee & Morehead, 2010, p. 48)

In addition, staff need to examine or confront their own biases with regards to sexuality in order to be able to honestly, genuinely, and respectfully create a more inclusive curriculum. Districts and school leaders need to support staff in developing and honing a “critical consciousness” that will help them to “recognize[e], acknowledg[e] and critiqu[e] many of these taken-for-granted patterns [which is] necessary to turn things around for those who are routinely excluded” (Ryan, 2006, p. 114). In this way, staff will be able to look through an equity lens to discern the heteronormative discourse prevalent in the curriculum. This critical reflection is needed to help interrupt the inequities permeating existing programs in elementary and secondary schools. Both staff and students can benefit from challenging assumptions about sexualities outside the norm or LGBTQ exclusion in programs through critical discussion and reflection (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008; Ryan, 2006). For instance, using inquiry to engage students or staff in dialogue to promote critical discussion of resources that overtly lack LGBTQ representation is an effective strategy. Here are some examples of questions on which such a discussion could be founded: “What percentage of the text is devoted to LGBT[Q] content?; What LGBT[Q] themes are included?; How are LGBT[Q] people portrayed? Where, in relation to other topics, are LGBT[Q] topics placed within the text?” (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008, p. 176).

Often resources can become de facto curriculum. Teachers can develop more confidence in teaching topics dealing with sexual orientation when resources that address these topics are available. For instance, teachers can use children’s literature that explores themes of diverse family structures or look at sexual diversity through heteronormative literature by changing sexual/gender orientations of certain characters (DePalma, 2009; Hardie & Bowers, 2012). DePalma’s (2009) study illustrates that educators need to embed LGBTQ themes in lessons by making connections to other diversities such as race, religion, ability, and others so students can understand how to treat all people equitably. Teachers and school leaders can reduce negativity and biases towards LGBTQ students through inclusive curriculum approaches and connective pedagogies by using a critical lens to challenge stereotypes in curriculum that continue to push the LGBTQ community into the margins.

**Safe School Environments**

This section looks at the importance of creating and sustaining safe school cultures for LGBTQ students, who have typically been subjects of bullying and homophobic harassment. There are many implications for educators, particularly for school principals, who are held accountable through legislation and statute to maintain safe school environments for LGBTQ students. It has been reported that sexual minority students can thrive in inclusive environments where they feel supported, protected, and respected (Glaze et al., 2012; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010;
Macgillivray, 2009). Unhealthy school climates contribute significantly to sexual minority students’ problems and, as a result, society ends up pathologizing them as suicidal, depressed, or otherwise at risk. Despite equity and safe school policies in Canada and the United States, sexual minority students face homophobic bullying and harassment in a variety of forms – physical, verbal, and psychological (Roher, 2010). The literature is rife with data that show that members of sexual minorities are mistreated in schools. Demonstrating the magnitude of the problem, large-scale survey data collected by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2009) and Egale Canada (2007) support the contention that schools are not always welcoming and safe places for LGBTQ students. GLSEN surveyed over 7,000 middle and high school students in 2009 and reported that:

84.6% of LGBTQ students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported being physically harassed and 18.8% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation. Furthermore, 33.8% of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response. (GLSEN, 2009 as cited in Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011, p. 35)

Egale Canada’s (2007) survey of 1,700 students confirms that LGBTQ students are victimized by homophobic comments:

Three-quarters of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer (LGBTQ) students felt unsafe in at least one place in their schools; half of the students who responded reported hearing remarks like "faggot", "queer", "lezbo" and "dyke" daily… less than half the students knew whether their school had a policy for reporting homophobic incidents; (Egale Canada, 2007 as cited in Roher, 2010, p. 248).

Short’s (2010) qualitative study, in which over two-dozen LGBTQ high school students from Toronto schools were interviewed, found that they, too, were constantly subjected to heterosexist oppression. In addition, a study by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and other studies have found that boys are targeted by homophobic insults more than girls (Alfano et al., 2009; Roher, 2010). The data and studies give rise to significant concerns about the learning environments of this underserved and underrepresented student population.

Consequences of homophobic bullying are substantial; they range from withdrawal from activities, absenteeism, dropping out, physical injury, isolation, drug and alcohol addiction, low self-esteem, fear of self-identifying, and suicide (Glaze et al., 2012; Koschoreck & Toom, 2009; Roher, 2010; Short, 2010). Clearly, there still remains much work to be done to create and sustain inclusive environments that are safe, equitable, and free from prejudice and harassment.

This next section explores strategies, grounded in the research, that can effectively create caring learning cultures where LGBTQ students feel safe in the hallways, washrooms, change rooms, yard, classrooms, and so on. Both district and school leaders need to work to mobilize staff, parents, and community members to contribute to a collective effort to make a positive
difference for this student population. The following are strategies educators can implement to realize positive school cultures where LGBTQ students can thrive emotionally, socially, physically, and academically:

- Establish clear policies that articulate anti-bullying and anti-homophobic discourse;
- Challenge hurtful rhetoric, such as “this is so gay,” that demeans LGBTQ students;
- Participate in sensitivity training to debunk myths about LGBTQ youth;
- Partake in training to learn how to recognize and deal with anti-gay epithets and homophobic harassment;
- Provide measures to ensure students can safely report bullying incidents and ensure victims are provided with counseling and support;
- Access resources and information from community agencies or organizations advocating for sexual minorities such as the following websites: Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network: www.glsen.org, Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays: www.pflag.org, Gay Straight Alliance Network: www.gsanetwork.org, www.safeschoolscoalition.org;
- Provide students with an adult they can connect with;
- Display artifacts, posters, and signage which represent LGBTQ youth;
- Invite input from sexual minorities regarding safe school policies and anti-bullying programs.
- (Cooper-Nicols and Bowleg, 2010; DePalma, 2009; Glaze et al., 2012; Koschoreck & Toom, 2009; Macgillivray, 2009; Roher, 2010; Short, 2010).

Another successful strategy is the formation of Gay-Straight Alliance clubs (GSAs). Research about GSAs, which are gaining popularity in both Canada and the United States, has underscored the importance of these organizations to schools. GSAs are places where “all students can go for social activities and emotional support, but that are especially important for [LGBTQ] students, their straight allies, and students with [LGBTQ] parents and family members” (Macgillivray, 2009, p. 26). Cooper-Nicols and Bowleg (2010) conducted a qualitative study in the US in which 13 LGBTQ youth from different schools were interviewed. Students reported that GSAs had a positive effect on school climate, programs, and policies, provided opportunities for all students to gain a better understanding of LGBTQ youth, and made a noteworthy difference in creating safer and more inclusive places. Other survey data collected about schools in the US that have GSAs support these findings and also point to reduced harassment and increased feelings of safety among sexual minorities (Macgillivray, 2009; Valenti, 2010).
However, certain districts and school communities continue to put up roadblocks to the formation of GSAs. Valenti (2010) interviewed GSA advisors in different US urban, suburban, and rural schools and the results highlight the challenges they face in their roles. Many are shunned by parents and staff or are not entirely supported by school administration (Valenti, 2010). Some indicated that the role of GSA advisor can be a lonely one and requires moral courage and a social justice activist stance to withstand the opposition (Valenti, 2010). In more vocal communities, angry parents, negative media attention, or oppositional staff have made it difficult to carry out the work of these clubs (Macgillivray, 2009; Valenti, 2010). Some parent groups in the US have taken legal action against GSAs, but courts continue to support these clubs based on the students’ right to “peacefully assemble” and “discuss their views” (Macgillivray, 2009, p. 30). These studies illustrate how important it is for schools to provide safe places for LGBTQ students to assemble and ensure that staff who take on GSA leadership roles are supported in dealing with resistance.

In conclusion, educators can empower LGBTQ students, who continue to be marginalized and victimized through dominant discourses and heterosexist structures in society, by working to make curriculum and schools more inclusive and more equitable from a social justice perspective. Allowing the proliferation of homophobic or anti-gay behaviours is wrong and goes against the moral fabric of our society. Pushing LGBTQ topics to the margins will continue to perpetuate systemic inequities for LGBTQ students.

Hence, it is incumbent on teachers and educational leaders to ensure the rights of LGBTQ students are protected and their voices are heard and respected, regardless of the personal beliefs or values of individual educators. Districts need to ensure supports are in place for school leaders and school staff to work together with community members to create and sustain inclusive school cultures. The research has shown that positive gains in professional development, curriculum initiatives, and safe school strategies can inspire school staff to move out of the comfort of acceptance of the status quo and take on a more proactive stance in support of LGBTQ students. These three areas are equally important in creating and maintaining inclusive school environments. Ongoing exposure to LGBTQ topics can disrupt the dominant heteronormative discourse in our schools.

As we move on with this important work, we need to ensure the voices of the LGBTQ community are heard so that we can continue to use that perspective to inform our actions in maintaining inclusive school environments. Public education can transform the lives of our students, and the work we do at the system and school level can have a profound effect on the lives of LGBTQ youth both in school and society.
REFERENCES


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