

Students' Perceptions of Heterosexist Attitudes Present in Schools Located in the Duluth Region: Executive Summary

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Heterosexist Attitudes in Schools

The purpose of this study was to assess the school climate of Duluth area schools for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender students; To what extent high school students in the Duluth area felt they were subjected to homophobic/heterosexist attitudes in school; To what extent there differences in school climate and attitudes related to GLBT youth between the schools, grade levels of the students, and gender in terms of what attitudes they have and/or the extent to which GLBT youth are subjected to these attitudes.

Methods and Sampling

This study consisted of secondary data from quantitative surveys administered by the Safer Schools Task Force and qualitative interviews collected by advisory board members of Together for Youth. The sample was students from Duluth area schools.

The quantitative data was collected from a total of 481 surveys, 247 male and 229 female, students between grades 8 and 12, 45 eighth graders, 224 freshman, 148 sophomores, 24 juniors, 39 seniors. Students were sampled from Duluth East (157), Duluth Denfeld (126), Duluth Central (123), and Two Harbors (74).

The qualitative data was collected from notes from eighteen interviews which included questions about their experiences in high school using an informal interview outline. There were 18 Respondents which included 7 female and 11 male. Students ranged in age from 15 to 21 years old.

Definitions

Heterosexist attitudes in school were examined by the following items:

- the use of remarks such as “sissy,” “that’s gay,” “faggot,” “dyke,” and “queer;”
- the number of times that a person does not take a stand against these remarks;
- the kinds of messages, if any, teachers and students give about heterosexuality and homosexuality;
- the presence of a Gay-Straight Alliance or support group;
- awareness of an anti-discriminatory policy at school.

School climate was examined by the following items:

- have students skipped class and/or school because they felt unsafe;
- do students feel that heterosexuals and/or homosexuals are safe at their school;
- have students seen other students physically harmed for their sexual orientation or the sexual orientation they are perceived to be.

Results

The quantitative results showed that most students heard heterosexist remarks in schools daily. Heterosexist remarks were mostly made by students, however sometimes by teachers. Data also indicated that students and teachers rarely intervened when comments were made. Two thirds of students were unaware of the anti-discriminatory policy at their school. Nearly a quarter of students reported seeing students physically harmed for their real or perceived sexual orientation. Students reported that heterosexual students were much safer in school than GLBT students. There were some statistically significant differences between schools and gender regarding heterosexist attitudes and school climate.

The qualitative results supported the findings in the quantitative data. GLBT students used the following comments regarding their high school experiences: “scary”; “not safe”; “looked down upon.”; “no safe place”; “no one safe to talk to”.

This data implies that the nature of school climate for GLBT youth is not particularly safe in the schools surveyed. High school students are subjected to alarmingly prevalent amounts of heterosexist attitudes in school.

Limitations

This study used secondary data analysis with a previously developed questionnaire and interview schedule. Because of this we were unable to obtain any further information than what had already been collected or add or omit any questions that were not pertinent to our study. There was also no reliability or validity established for the survey. Some of the between school differences might be confounded because of differences in grades surveyed or because of the different geographical locations and racial and economic makeup between schools. There is limited generalizability of this study due to the area in which the survey was administered and we were not able to establish that the sample is representative of each school that was surveyed. In light of the limitations, these findings should still be considered.

Recommendations

In order to improve school climate and reduce the extent to which students are subjected to heterosexist attitudes, we recommend the following:

- Establish and foster the growth of Gay Straight Alliances.
- Have an anti discriminatory policy, which explicitly includes sexual orientation.
- Educate students and teachers on the discrimination policy in their school and hold them accountable to it.
- Integrate GLBT inclusive curriculum into the schools.
- Train teachers, staff and administration how to better support GLBT youth throughout their high school experience.
- Teach allies skills to effectively intervene when heterosexist language/behavior is observed.