



Building Resilience among LGBTQ+ Students

By Ricky Robertson

A great deal has changed in terms of LGBTQ+ (LGBTQ+) visibility and equality over the past several years; yet we still find that LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately more likely than their non-LGBTQ+ peers to: be bullied and harassed at school by peers and teachers; receive negative messages about their LGBTQ+ identity within their faith community; endure family rejection; experience homelessness; suffer from severe anxiety and depression; struggle with self-harm and substance use; and attempt suicide.¹

What we see in these outcomes are forms of adversity and trauma and the harmful effects they have on the health of LGBTQ+ youth. Therefore, I invite us to consider trauma-responsive practices that cultivate resilience among LGBTQ+ students.

Resilience is a set of qualities, comprised of social-emotional skills, that help a person to overcome adversity and develop in healthy ways. According to resilience researcher Bonnie Bernard, these qualities include: social competence (communication skills, empathy, social connectedness); problem-solving (critical thinking, planning, asking for help); autonomy (positive self-concept, emotional awareness, self-regulation); and a sense of purpose (goals, hope, faith).² As educators, we foster students' resilience through supportive relationships as well as intentional practices that cultivate these skills.

Social Competence

To foster social competence, students must feel a sense of safety and belonging within their learning community. To create a safe learning environment for LGBTQ+ students, first reflect upon the policies currently in place within your school. These policies include but are not limited to: dress code; accessibility of gender-segregated spaces (bathrooms, locker rooms, etc.); student data (names, health records, etc.); guidelines for family communication; guidelines for supporting students who transition; anti-bullying and harassment policies. Compare your school's policies to examples of LGBTQ+ inclusive school policies and advocate for any needed improvements.³

Belonging is nurtured through positive relationships with both educators and peers. To establish and maintain supportive relationships with LGBTQ+ students, educators must be LGBTQ+ culturally competent. It is critical that school administrators provide professional development that allows educators to explore their own mindsets, biases, and beliefs about sexual orientation and gender; while learning about key concepts, terms and issues that are relevant to the lives of LGBTQ+ youth.

Educators foster belonging among students through classroom practices that include sharing pronouns

in thoughtful ways, intervening when they witness anti-LGBTQ+ bias, and inviting students to reflect upon and share about their cultures and identities. Sponsoring a Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) offers LGBTQ+ students and their allies the opportunity to form life-affirming relationships. These school clubs provide a space of belonging and support for LGBTQ+ students and their peers. A study found that Canadian high schools with GSAs had half the rates of suicidality among all students compared to schools that did not have these clubs.⁴ This is further evidence that affirming students' identities and cultures fosters healthy social-emotional outcomes.

Autonomy

Autonomy is a resilience trait that is built upon a student's positive self-concept, one that is inclusive of their sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Young people define themselves in relation to their peers, family, teachers, faith community and the larger society. To support transgender and gender diverse students in developing a positive self-concept, make it a schoolwide practice to refer to people with the name and pronouns that correspond to their gender. Research has shown that referring to transgender youth in ways that match their gender identity reduces their risk of suicide by as much as 65 per cent.⁵

Family acceptance plays a critical role in the development of a positive sense of self for LGBTQ+ youth. Research conducted by the Family Acceptance Project found that LGBTQ+ youth from highly rejecting families are eight times more likely to attempt suicide; six times more likely to experience severe depression; and three times more likely to struggle with substance use, as compared to LGBTQ+ youth who are accepted by their families. Fortunately, research has also shown that family accepting behaviours contribute significantly to the mental, physical and behavioural health of LGBTQ+ youth. As school administrators, it is important to provide staff, especially counselling staff, the opportunity to learn about the nature and impact of family accepting/rejecting behaviours and ways to support LGBTQ+ youth and their families.

Problem-Solving

Supporting LGBTQ+ youth in addressing problems through self-advocacy builds resilience. Educators can identify themselves as allies for all students, including LGBTQ+ students. Allies provide a supportive space for students to feel heard. Allies are an especially important resource if a student experiences anti-LGBTQ+ harassment or violence in school. Many LGBTQ+ students do

not report experiences of anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination or bullying because they fear further retribution from peers and school staff. Educator allies can support LGBTQ+ students in reporting and resolving these harmful experiences before they escalate.

Sense of Purpose

A sense of purpose, possibility and hope is a necessary component of resilience. LGBTQ+ students need to see people like them positively represented in the curriculum and learning environment. LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum supports LGBTQ+ youth in developing sense of hope for their future that is grounded in an appreciation of the brilliance and strength of those who came before them. When educators teach LGBTQ+ topics across content areas, it is important to acknowledge the diverse identities of LGBTQ+ people across race, class, religion, gender, disability and country of origin. Beyond encouraging the inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics within curriculum, school administrators can also foster LGBTQ+ visibility within their school by hiring and supporting LGBTQ+ educators.

I encourage you to reflect upon your school's current policies and practices and take the next step in cultivating an affirming learning community for LGBTQ+ students. May you lead in ways that inspire LGBTQ+ students to envision a bright future for themselves. ☞

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¹The Health of LGBTQIA2 Communities in Canada: www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/HESARports/RP10574595/hesarp28/hesarp28-e.pdf

²The Foundations of the Resiliency Framework by Bonnie Bernard: www.resiliency.com/free-articles-resources/the-foundations-of-the-resiliency-framework

³Creating an LGBT-Inclusive School Climate by Teaching Tolerance: www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/Teaching-Tolerance-LGBT-Best-Practices-2017-WEB-Oct2017.pdf

⁴School-based Strategies to Reduce Suicidal Ideation, Suicide Attempts, and Discrimination Among Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Adolescents in Western Canada by Elizabeth Saewyc, Chiaki Konishi, Hilary Rose, & Yuko Homma: journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ijcyfs/article/view/12856

⁵Chosen Name Use is Linked to a Reduced Depressive Symptoms, Suicidal Ideation, & Suicidal Behavior Among Transgender Youth by Stephen Russell, Amanda Pollitt, Gu Li, & Arnold Grossman: pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29609917