

UBC researcher finds LGBT initiatives help straight students, too

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When considering LGBT rights and equality, many people nowadays think they're the just thing to do. What's often overlooked is how such social changes actually benefit straight people as well.

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UBC nursing professor Elizabeth Saewyc discovered this aspect during her 20 years of research on LGBT issues among youth in the U.S. and Canada, primarily focusing on health disparities between various demographic groups.

As the Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre executive director, Saewyc received a five-year grant of \$2 million in 2012 from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research for research about LGBT students.

By phone, Saewyc told the *Georgia Straight* that when Ontario was discussing safe-schools legislation in the 1990s (Ontario's Safe Schools Act was passed in 2000), she noticed protesters argued that these policies would only provide special rights for a small group of students and cause harm to the majority who are straight.

She realized there was no evidence to either prove or disprove that, and that her research had to compare straight students at schools that had antihomophobia initiatives and those that didn't.

Initially, she thought the results would show that straight students would remain unaffected. To her surprise, she discovered improved health outcomes among straight students at schools with supportive LGBT policies or measures.

"Straight youth are also reporting lower levels of discrimination because people perceived them to be gay or lesbian, and lower levels of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, binge drinking, problem substance abuse," she said. "So these are unexpected differences where we're seeing healthier heterosexual youth in schools that have supportive policies for LGBTQ youth, which is not what you'd expect, necessarily."

She explained that although the percentage of heterosexual students who were experiencing homophobic discrimination was small, due to the larger heterosexual majority, that percentage meant discrimination was experienced by about the same number of heterosexual students as gay and bisexual ones.

As a local example, in 2005, Azmi Jubran won a landmark B.C. Human Rights Tribunal case against the North Vancouver school district for failing to take action when he was experiencing homophobic bullying from fellow students even though he was not gay. In addition, homophobic and transphobic bullying can be used against anyone, straight or LGBT, to police gender-role definitions.

While Saewyc acknowledged that all of her studies show correlation rather than cause, she said that some, such as an examination of gay-straight alliances (GSAs) in schools, paid attention to the time frame when measures were implemented.

"We looked at the time when GSAs were established in each particular school, when each school district implemented their policy, and we factored that into the analysis we did so we could actually make sure that the intervention happened before the outcome we're measuring," she said. "When schools have policies in place for at least three years...that's when we're seeing the differences between them and places that have never had those policies or who haven't had GSAs for three or more years, so this is giving us greater confidence that there is a relationship going on."

She noted that some anomalies have occurred while progress is being made.

For instance, she observed that in many studies there was a “bump” when health-problem rates increased around 2008 and then decreased.

While the studies were unable to explain why this happened on a causal level, she said that time period saw the introduction of LGBT initiatives and legislation.

“There’s a couple years right after same-sex marriage, and right in the midst of some of those nondiscrimination laws being passed and policies being enacted in schools, that can create perhaps an increase in some of the distress,” she said. “The good news is that ends up being a bump and a decline. It’s just that the overall disparities haven’t completely vanished yet.”

In other words, this spike could be an adjustment period in which people were adapting to new social realities.

“Maybe it’s that this visibility and these law changes have created a bit of a backlash,” she suggested. “So people who were happily unaware that there were lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in their midst are suddenly confronted with the fact that ‘These people exist and they’re in our high schools!’ And that can precipitate a certain amount of discomfort and reaction that may not have happened before.”

She said she would like to do qualitative research that includes talking to youth to find out how they feel about some of these issues and health concerns, in order to examine their perspectives on the problems.

What she does find clear—and something to consider in between the wake of Vancouver Pride Week and the start of the new school year—is how support and safety can significantly improve the health of students.

“What really comes through again and again, no matter where we’re doing this research, [is that] when lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender teens feel safe at school, feel cared about by their teachers, feel like they belong at school and are a part of their school, it has huge differences in their health and well-being,” she said. “It’s not just a matter of reducing the homophobia. It’s also making sure we’re increasing the actual support and caring for our LGBTQ youth. It matters for everyone.”