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When Words Inflict Harm: Documenting Sexuality and Gender Identity Microaggressions in Schools for LGBTQ Youth

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With the adoption of anti-bullying laws and policies in most states, it may seem that things are looking up for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer or questioning (LGBTQQ) youth. We might assume that these anti-bullying laws and policies would better protect them from insults, harassment and violence at the hands of their peers and teachers. In fact, this is sometimes the case. But it is also the case that the insults become more covert, more implicit. Looking at microaggressions gives educational researchers and school personnel the opportunity to examine how gender nonconforming or non-heterosexual youth, or those perceived to be non-heterosexual, are assaulted, invalidated and insulted in ways that may not be identified as bullying or harassing behavior by adults. In fact, at times adults ignore these aggressions which contributes to or constitutes additional microagressions for students. Although some of these insults, invalidations and assaults probably are visible and apparent to teachers and other youth looking for “bullying” behaviors, some would not be and therefore the vulnerability and wounds created by these behaviors will be seen by disciplinarians as insufficient provocation for fearful or violent reactions by students experiencing the microaggressions. In these cases, principals, teachers, or parents may view the student experiencing the microaggressions as the bully, or may equalize the anger and hurt of the child who perpetrated the microaggressions over time and the student who reacted with anger and violence to these acts of “arbitrary prejudice” (Davis, 1989, p. 1570).

Using existing frameworks that describe sexuality, gender, and gender identity microaggressions, this paper analyzes the research group conversations of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. The findings describe microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations that youth experience in schools from peers, teachers, and other school staff. Microaggressions are everyday interactions that may be verbal, behavioral or environmental that undermine or discriminate based on identity (Nadal, 2008). There are three variations on microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations. Microassaults are intentional insults that discriminate against the target, microinsults are more commonly unconscious and unintentional, and microinvalidations undermine the realities and experiences of the target, often unconsciously (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). These pervasive, persistent, and derogatory experiences can create hostile environments for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer or questioning (LGBTQQ) youth, and limit their inclusion in and access to a school community. In this paper will use the acronym LGBTQQ to describe the youth population unless another source uses another term, or unless I am specifically not talking about trans youth, in which case I will use the acronym LGB.

The concept of microaggressions originated in psychology and was theorized by Chester M. Pierce in 1970. Pierce suggested that the expectation of racial microaggressions among African Americans led to hypervigilance about social interactions and a concern that one must protect oneself against manipulation and undermining from racism. This constant awareness and alertness to offense requires psychic energy and adaptive behavior (Davis, 1989) that, over the course of life, “may negatively effect mortality and morbidity” (Pierce, 1988, p. 33).

"[H]eightened vulnerability develops because of the chronic need for hypersurveillance of one's
environment and for preparation for the manifestations of whimsical, arbitrary prejudice. The person comes to be at greater risk for fractured pride and mistrust" (Pierce, 1988, p. 31). Pierce’s work demonstrates the impact of constant alertness for unacknowledged injury, and the physical and emotional manifestations of the damage on the body of those experiencing microaggressions.

Pierce’s work was adopted by legal scholars as part of critical legal studies and became a lens used by critical race theorists to analyze racist verbal assaults and words that injure. Microaggressions are actions or words that may not be typically associated with harm, or that may be viewed as having little impact. However, the accumulated impact of pervasive verbal assault and threat of assault results in material harm and in the preservation of prejudicial and negative perceptions of oppressed persons in U.S. society. Since at least the 1990s the concept of microaggression has existed in education literature (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). This work was applied to educational settings by Solorzano and colleagues in examining the experiences of college students of color. They found that students experienced racial microaggressions in academic spaces when their abilities were underestimated, they were suspected of cheating, or they were counseled to take lighter course loads or easier majors. In social spaces, students reported overtly racist interactions with campus police or student services personnel, in which students of color, particularly African American groups, were assumed to be violent and in need of extra policing. These actions reminded students that they were not thought of as belonging in the same way other students, or groups, did. Microaggressions can apply to many groups who are not in the privileged position in society, with specific variations based on stereotypes that exist about that group. “Microaggressions are subtle verbal and non-verbal insults directed toward non-Whites, often done automatically and unconsciously. They are layered insults based on one’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname” (Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002, p. 17).

Microaggressions and heterosexism and gender normativity

More recently, taxonomies of microaggressions have been delineated in counseling, where the concept has been employed to understand the verbal, nonverbal, and visual insults that can be directed at clients from different backgrounds than their counselors, and who are differently situated in terms of power, positions and identities (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). These taxonomies describe common types of microaggressions experienced, and what kinds of stereotypes or negative beliefs they summon into the present interaction. Further elaborations of the workings of racial, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression microaggressions have also been identified. Three varieties of microaggressions are typically recognized: microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations. Microinsults are everyday comments that stereotype and degrade one group, especially in relation to a more powerfully situated group. Microinsults are often unconscious, unintentional, and seemingly innocuous, but nonetheless reinforce the superiority of one group, or the normality of one group, in relation to another. Microassaults are most often intentional, but are dismissed by the perpetrator as jokes, or as not directed at the person present. These may be intentionally insulting comments made about a group that supposedly except the person present. Microinvalidations are comments that deny the experience of oppression of the person receiving the microaggression. These comments, either intentional or unintentional, label the oppressed
person as being too sensitive about the aggression or experience, or criticize them for always bringing up oppression (Sue et al. 2007).

Expanding on the work of Sue, Nadal and his colleagues have empirically tested a taxonomy of sexual orientation microaggressions (Nadal, Issa, Leon, Meterko, Wideman & Wong, 2012) and gender identity and expression microaggressions (Nadal, Skolnik, & Wong, 2012). Using the experiences of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer informants they spoke to, they created categories of microaggressions appearing in the narratives. For the purposes of this analysis, I have adapted their separate categories into one framework for analysis. Their categories combined include:

1. Use of heterosexist and transphobic terminology, such as “faggot” or “dyke” or “That’s so gay!” or refusing to use the preferred gender pronouns.
2. Endorsement of heteronormative or gender normative culture/behaviors, such as asking people to act less gay or to dress in gender normative clothing.
3. Assumption of universal LGBTQQ experience, such as stereotypes that assume all LGBTQQ people are the same.
4. Exoticization, such as seeing LGBTQQ people as the “comic relief” or asking intrusive questions about trans persons’ genitalia.
5. Discomfort/disapproval of LGBTQQ experience, such as when LGBTQQ people are treated with disrespect and criticism.
6. Denial of societal heterosexism or transphobia, such as denying that discrimination based on sexuality or gender expression has happened.
7. Assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality, such as oversexualizing LGBTQQ persons and considering them sexual deviants.
8. Denial of individual heterosexism/transphobia, such as a heterosexual person denying heterosexist and transgender biases (“I am not homophobic. I have a gay friend!”).
9. Threatening behaviors

Two items only appear in Nadal and colleagues’ findings for trans individuals, but because they could apply to gender non-conforming lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth as well who may fear encounters with institutional power or who may experience ongoing wishes for heterosexuality in their families of origin, they may appear to belong in the unified list. These are: familial microaggressions, such as long-term lamenting for the gender normative child, or allowing a relative to mock the trans relative, and systemic and environmental microaggressions, such as never knowing if one can use the restroom in public, needing to produce an identification that lists another gender from the one presented, engaging with the criminal justice system, or being outed as trans by medical workers. These microaggressions appear in other data from this research project, but will not be presented in this article in order to facilitate using the one form of data. LGB youth in the Nadal’s study did not report these concerns. I have combined the studies for the purposes of analyzing this data to understand how both binary gender and heterosexuality expectations require LGBTQQ youth to be on guard against attacks from strangers and intimate acquaintances in their lives, and how these assaults occupy their mental and emotional capacities, and may limit their engagement with school. This expands the application of Nadal’s taxonomies to younger individuals than those represented in the original
pool of informants, and further validating the application of these categories of microaggressions.

Methodology

Data for this research was collected during a youth participatory action research project involving eight high school age, LGB, racially and ethnically diverse co-researchers. Youth researchers identified themselves as Puerto Rican, Dominican-Canadian, Haitian, African, African-American-Brazilian, Afghan, Barbadian, and White. There were three young men and five young women; two of the young men identified as gay and one as bisexual, and two of the women identified as butch or aggressive lesbian and the other three as bisexual. I identified as a White, lesbian, feminist graduate student. The research group began by writing about our own experiences of the ways students and teachers talk about sexuality and gender identity and expression in schools in response to writing prompts. The prompts came from activities in youth support group startup curricula and included “getting to know you” type activities as well as “starting to explore a social injustice” type activities. Some of these activities came from the GLSEN Start-Up guide for GSTAs and some came from other group activities found in internet searches. A complete list of curricula that activities were gleaned from is included in the appendix. Youth were also introduced to the History of Sexuality by Foucault, and the idea that sexuality, like mental health, education, and other social structures, has been categorized as pathology, as immoral, and as xxxxxxxx. As part of this writing we looked for specific discourses that echoed those historical categories.

In addition to writing about our own experiences, we also conducted literature searches for reports and news items discussing LGBTQ youth and schools. We found news articles, reports of social service agencies, reports about bullying or sex education in school, and other similar items. We also examined popular culture, such as television, music, and young adult literature, for representations of LGBTQ youth in schools. A list of sources we consulted in this process is included in the appendix. As we examined these items, we would read together in small groups, highlighting phrases that characterized LGBTQ youth (either positively or negatively) as somehow in need of something. Once each small group had highlighted their reading, we would share the statements made and compile them in a list. From this list, we came up with the stereotypes of LGBTQ youth that seemed prevalent in the schools and documentation.

The sources provided many examples of the discourses that young people encounter as they express non-normative gender or sexuality, in schools or in their neighborhoods or homes, from peers or adults. They gave us a rich lexicon of possibilities to ask other students about. The research team created a data-collection tool, the Queer Q Sort, through which they surveyed other students about their daily experiences in school, the attitudes prevalent among their peers, and the language and behaviors they interacted with. In total, the Queer Q Sorts used 84 phrases from these various sources to interrogate other youth about the attitudes and behaviors they encounter in schools in interactions with other youth or adults. It is the statements that make up the Queer Q Sort, not the responses of those interviewed with it, that comprise the data for this article. Here I am rereading these statements compiled by the research team (myself and eight youth researchers) for the microaggressions present in the list. Although at the time we did not encounter the language of microaggressions or use that taxonomy, it has since become more
relevant and is useful for understanding the importance of these 84 statements to young people in school settings and the ways they feel they can belong or not.

In the present paper, I analyze these statements as data for their meanings about student belongingness in schools, to assess the application of the taxonomies of microaggressions identified by Nadal and his colleagues for further understanding student acceptance and the possibility of their full participation in school spaces (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2009; Russell, 2002). This analysis of discourses LGBTQQ youth encounter in their interactions with peers and adults in school, community and home spaces expands Nadal’s taxonomy and researchers’ and school personnel understanding of youth experiences in school spaces. Using Nadal’s taxonomy of sexual orientation and transgender microaggressions, our Queer Q Sort phrases are analyzed to show how prevalent negative attitudes about LGBTQ students are deployed to undermine and LGBTQQ students and create conditions under which they must be hypervigilant in their identifications.

Reading the Queer Q Sort as Sexuality and Transgender Microaggressions

Below are listed each of the microaggression categories (1-11 above) and with each one are examples from the data that exemplify that microaggression. With each of these categorizations, I discuss how the example from the Queer Q Sort fits the microaggression category.

1. Use of heterosexist and transphobic terminology, such as “faggot” or “dyke” or “That’s so gay!” or refusing to use the preferred gender pronouns.
   - Faggot
   - That’s so gay
   - You’re so gay

In our conversations about peer interactions at school, the first and most clear example of student attitudes about LGBTQQ youth was exhibited through their use of phrases such as “that’s so gay” and “you’re so gay.” Students also frequently used “fag” or “faggot” as an insult, particularly to get a boy to stop behaving in a way that was too feminine or otherwise undesirable (Pascoe, 2007). These words and phrases are pervasive in middle and high schools, and frequently when confronted about using such language students will claim that they “don’t mean it that way” or that they “aren’t talking about actual gay people” (Linville, 2010). This disavowal of the importance of the language is a microinvalidation of the LGBTQQ student, or the ally, who points out that this language is problematic and hurtful.

This conversation becomes more complicated in cases where LGBTQQ youth use “fag” or “you’re so gay” among themselves or with non-LGBTQQ friends as a joke or a way of creating inclusion or recognizing one another (Linville, 2014; Rasmussen, 2004; Youdell, 2004). Other students may not fully recognize the import of the identity and positionality of the speaker in reclaiming names such as “fag” or “gay” and may participate, inadvertently, in silencing other voices or expressions through the prevalence of words that seem to mock, belittle, or despise others for non-normative gender expression or non-heterosexuality.
2. Endorsement of heteronormative or gender normative culture/behaviors, such as asking people to act less gay or to dress in gender normative clothing.
   - LGBTQ youth should not be too “in your face” with their sexuality and gender
   - Teachers are embarrassed to talk about homosexuality
   - LGBTQ relationships are just like straight relationships – one person is the man and one is the woman
   - LGBTQ youth shouldn’t touch or kiss in school

Student researchers presented several examples of how they were asked not to be too “in your face” with non-normative sexuality in school settings. In many cases they were told by friends, teachers, or principals that no one objected to them being gay (lesbian, bisexual, etc.) they only wished they would not display their gayness quite so obviously (Leck, 2000). In many cases, students who were well-liked by adults but encountering harassment for their sexuality from peers would be counseled to not be so visibly gay as a strategy to be more safe in school. In addition, students with a girlfriend or boyfriend who showed affection in school would be punished for their displays (kissing, holding hands, hugging, etc) when non-LGBTQQ students would not be noticed or, if noticed, would not receive the same punishment (Hunt & Moodie-Mills, 2012). These different approaches to students’ expressions of their sexuality and gender identities told students that teachers were embarrassed by their outness, and wished that students would not make them confront non-heterosexuality at school. Although schools were full of sexuality (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2009, Pascoe, 2007), heterosexuality was not considered to be either “too much” or “in your face,” in general by teachers, but any expression of non-normative gender or sexuality embarrassed teachers and administrators and seemed overtly sexual to adults. Adults were afraid of being seen as promoting homosexuality if they acknowledged students’ sexualities and gender expressions.

3. Assumption of universal LGBTQQ experience, such as stereotypes that assume all LGBTQQ people are the same.
   - Girls who play softball or basketball are lesbians
   - Boys who play basketball or football are not gay
   - All gay boys are feminine
   - All lesbians want to be men or look like men
   - LGBTQ people are visible by how they look
   - LGBTQ students will hit on anyone
   - Families reject LGBTQ children
   - LGBTQ relationships follow heteronormative norms (male role/female role)
   - LGBTQ students are depressed and suicidal

These stereotypes of a universal LGBTQQ experience may negatively affect the lives of LGBTQQ youth in two ways: by limiting others’ understanding of and interaction with them to these stereotyped images; and by limiting non-LGBTQQ youth from certain expressions and activities for fear of being labeled non-heterosexual. Rather than encourage others to get to know LGBTQQ students personally, and to understand what is happening with them socially, academically, personally in their interactions with school, family and other institutions, stereotypes give other students and adults assumptions about how LGBTQQ students’ lives are. These stereotypes may encourage students and adults wishing to be allies to fight battles that are
not important to the LGBTQQ students in their schools, or keep students who would become friends with LGBTQQ students from getting to know them and discovering the complexity of their identities beyond their sexuality or gender expression. It may cause non-LGBTQQ students to fail to understand how LGBTQQ students’ love relationships work if others assume traditional masculine and feminine roles within them (Tuck, 2009).

Stereotypes about LGBTQQ students lack of parental support, depression and suicidality, and indiscriminate attractions can make adults feel like LGBTQQ youth bring harassment and bullying on themselves, or support them in thinking that LGBTQQ youth have something “wrong” with them and that they need to be taught to be different or to behave differently in order to protect them from suffering (Kumashiro, 2000). Rather than inspiring an interrogation of the social forces that may position LGBTQQ youth as unfortunate and unprotected, some adults view this position as a sign that LGBTQQ youth are in the wrong and should be corrected. Challenging these stereotypes, rather, can encourage school leaders to see that there are varying experiences and that school climate can be a big factor in students’ attitudes toward their peers.

4. Exoticization, such as seeing LGBT people as the “comic relief” or asking intrusive questions about trans persons’ genitalia.
   - Most girls are bi or experimenting
   - Bisexual students are experimenting or confused, not gay
   - Bisexual girls are sexy
   - Trans people are born in the wrong body

Exoticization was most apparent in our conversations about bisexual girls. Bisexual girls’ sexuality was presumed to be open to interpretation and available for consumption by both straight-identified boys and lesbian-identified girls. They often appeared in our research team conversation as sexually available to everyone, confused or experimenting and as “easy” or malleable their sexual feelings and how they would like to act on them. We explored extensively the idea that bisexuality gave girls a position in which they could enact sexual agency in ways that were not available to straight-identified girls. In some cases youth researchers agreed with this characterization, but if the topic of bisexuality arose in conversation again later, the same exoticizing stereotypes of bisexual girls would again surface. Many of these stereotypes conform to characterizations of women and their sexual agency (Tolman, 1994, 2006), and draw on images of women’s sexuality that are common in pornography currently (American Psychological Association, 2007). The sexual power girls can wield by feigning or acting on bisexual desires is seen to maintain the sexual agency in the gaze of the consumer of that sexuality, rather than in the body or actions or desires of the girl exploring sexual expression (Tolman, 2006).

In addition, the youth researchers and their peers expressed limited knowledge of or interaction with trans students. In general, trans students were characterized as more victimized, more ostracized, and more damaged than LGBQQ youth. Trans youth were presented in news items and reports as more subject to becoming involved in prostitution, drug use and becoming homeless. The reasons for this additional burden was seen to lie in the social rigidity about gender dysmorphia. Even for students who expressed gender in ways that differed from their same-gender peers, they also expressed a lack of understanding of the experience of trans youth.
As such, their curiosity and questions about trans people leaned toward the exotic and would have been invasive if asked to a trans person.

5. Discomfort/disapproval of LGBTQ experience, such as when LGBTQ people are treated with disrespect and criticism.
   - LGBTQ youth shouldn’t touch or kiss in school
   - A club for LGBTQ students is immoral
   - Homosexuals, bisexuals and drug users are most likely to get STDs/HIV/AIDS
   - Gay boys are disgusting
   - A positive attitude toward gay people in the curriculum threatens the family and marriage
   - LGBTQ people are weird
   - Homosexuality is an inappropriate topic for high school classrooms
   - Teaching about homosexuality is dangerously misleading because it is an unacceptable lifestyle

Several overtly aggressive and negative themes emerge in this category, in which nonheterosexuality is called immoral, disgusting, pathological, dangerous and unacceptable. These themes most closely fit the categorizations of sexuality described by Foucault and used previously by Carlson and me (Linville & Carlson, 2010b). Although when viewed as a list in this way one can easily see the negative tone in these statements, in schools they may be used in a microaggressive way by teachers in sex education classes, for example, presenting statistics on HIV and AIDS that focus only on non-heterosexual populations, or in the linking of sexual experiences with drug use and sexual exploitation. In the current sex education landscape, this kind of aggressive scare tactic is seen as a useful pedagogical method to scare students away from sexual initiation, experimentation or expression, for fear of the far-reaching and long-lasting consequences, including poverty and a ruined life (Fields & Tolman, 2006).

Another site where these kinds of comments can be used in a microaggressive way, rather than overtly, is in the assertion that a teacher or student’s personal beliefs conflict with homosexuality. In this way, peers or adults can say to a student that they are inappropriate, unacceptable, dangerous or sinful from the perspective of caring (for their souls) or teaching (about public versus private behavior) (Leck, 2000). This can be framed, again, like a lesson provided for the good of the student, but serves to diminish their experience and identity, and to tell them there is something wrong with them. This framing of the conversation about sexuality and gender expression in schools fails to acknowledge the power differentials between adults and students, frames it as unproblematic and unquestionably caring, or equates a need to express one’s religious beliefs (“I just don’t agree with/believe in homosexuality”) with the need to express or explore one’s identity. The equalizing of the power between these two points of view/positions fails to acknowledge social privilege and oppression, and the dominance of the intolerant view of LGBTQ youth and their more tenuous position. The expression by adults or other students of disbelief, discomfort, or disapproval of LGBTQ experiences can have a material consequence for LGBTQ students in schools, by providing a climate in which expressions of disapproval can escalate to violence, or in which their behavior is construed as confrontational and oppositional to authority and disciplinary measures result in their expulsion (Hunt & Moodie-Mills, 2012).
6. Denial of societal heterosexism or transphobia, such as denying that discrimination based on sexuality or gender expression has happened.
   - A school for LGBTQ students discriminates against heterosexual students

Claiming that creating a safe space for students who have experienced discrimination in the schools they have previously attended discriminates against heterosexual students denies the social power differences between heterosexual students and teachers and LGBTQ youth, denying societal heterosexism. This sentiment, found in newspaper coverage of the creation of the Harvey Milk High School (Herszenhorn, 2003), denies both the experiences of youth in schools and also the equal right to safe access to education for LGBTQ youth. In the previous section I described how discomfort and disapproval of LGBTQ experiences often overlook the differential power positions of LGBTQ youth and those who disapprove. The framing of these positions as equal, and the students’ power or desire to threaten the adult as equal to the adult’s ability to threaten the student’s existence denies the power of societal heterosexism and transphobia. This position may deny that discrimination exists, or may equate the discomfort of heterosexual students and adults to the discrimination faced by LGBTQ youth. As is explained in other examinations of differing social positions of power, prejudice may happen from any social position but the consequences of discrimination are unequal (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). The power of heterosexism means that discrimination experienced by LGBTQ youth may deny them equal opportunities for education, employment, housing or safety in many public situations, in ways that cannot be experienced by heterosexual or cisgendered persons based on their sexuality or gender (Chesir-Teran, D. 2003).

7. Assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality, such as oversexualizing LGBT persons and considering them sexual deviants.
   - Bisexuals want to have sex with everyone
   - Gay people spread AIDS
   - LGBTQ people can’t have intimate relationships because they are only interested in sex, not love
   - LGBTQ youth can’t have sex because they can’t find sex partners
   - LGBTQ relationships are not long-lasting, and will not last a lifetime like marriage
   - Gay sex isn’t real sex, it’s perversion because it uses body parts for things they were not intended for
   - LGBTQ people have sex all the time and are obsessed with sex

A selection of the discriminatory attitudes found in sex education and the negative stereotypes of LGBTQ people found in media and popular culture, these beliefs and microaggressions describe young LGBTQ people as lonely, unattractive, driven by their perverted sexuality, and in league with sexual predators, fetishists, and the criminally mentally ill. Although it would be worthwhile to contest those categorizations themselves, in this paper I simply note that equating non-heterosexuality among teens with other categories considered deviant or dangerous in our society stereotypes LGBTQ youth as being controlled by a sexuality that is ungovernable and devouring, and positions them as either deviantly sexually aggressive or passive and out-of-control. This framing discourages straight-identified students from allying with or befriending
LGBTQQ youth, since their sexuality is presumed to be out-of-control and contagious – one can never be sure if the LGBTQQ youth will hit on or otherwise corrupt the straight-identified youth.

These microaggressions assume a normative array of sexual positions and practices, as well as identities. In this frame, the normative prescriptions will protect the person, insuring that they will have a life-long stable relationship and that they will not get diseases. Deviating from these normative practices, by using body parts in non-heteronormative ways or by partnering with someone who does not identify as the opposite sex/gender, puts one at risk for unhappiness, loneliness, disease and relationship instability.

8. Denial of individual heterosexism/transphobia, such as a heterosexual person denying heterosexist and transgender biases (“I am not homophobic. I have a gay friend!”).
   • Being trans is much harder than being lesbian, gay, or bisexual

As in the first category, when peers use language such as “that’s so gay” or “fag” they often deny the meaning in these words and the importance of saying them. In these cases, straight-identified peers may claim that their gay friend is not bothered by the words, therefore they are not hurtful, or that their gay friends use this language. Similarly, straight-identified youth or adults may deny their own expressions of heterosexism or discrimination by claiming knowledge of or friendship with LGBTQQ people. When LGBTQQ youth claim that being trans is much harder than being lesbian, gay, or bisexual, they are similarly claiming that heterosexism is not so bad. In this way they deny for other LGB youth the depth of discrimination they experience under heterosexism, by claiming that transphobia is much worse. While this acknowledges the depth of transphobia, is also revictimizes (Tuck, 2009) trans students as experiencing much more challenging situations than LGB youth. Students debated in research group discussions if language describing trans persons, such as “trans people are born in the wrong body,” (Research Group Meeting transcript, 3/5/08) was negative and stereotyping or just descriptive. They were concerned about the possibility of revictimizing and further pathologizing the trans students’ experiences as deviant.

9. Threatening behaviors
   • Schools should be changed to protect LGBTQ students from bullying
   • LGBTQ youth are harassed or beat up in schools
   • Bullying and homophobia exist in just about every high school.
   • LGBTQ students face hatred
   • Gym is an unsafe place at school
   • Public high schools can be unfriendly and scary, especially for LGBTQ students
   • LGBTQ students are vulnerable to violence

Throughout the literature about LGBTQQ youth experiences in schools the research team found numerous examples of stereotypes of LGBTQQ youth being victimized in schools and subject to violence. All of the youth researchers provided examples of violence or threats of violence they had experienced in schools at the hands of peers or adults, because of their sexuality or gender expression. Youth researchers noted that gym or the locker room can be an especially threatening space in the school, and one where students have the opportunity to threaten violence against other students without calling as much attention to themselves. In a mapping exercise,
students identified spaces in the school building where students were unsupervised or indirectly supervised by adults as spaces where peer behavior could become threatening to LGBTQQ youth. Adult behavior more often took on the pattern of threatening students through voiced insults and disapproval of the way they looked – related to their gender identity or expression – or through ignoring complaints about students’ threats, or blaming the LGBTQQ youth for putting themselves in the position to have violence or threats directed at them.

In social science research we see that anti-bullying legislation sometimes further penalizes LGBTQQ youth, identifying them as trouble-making, aggressive and oppositional to authority and singling them out for further disciplinary measures (Quinn & Meiners, 2013). These inadvertent by-products of legislation and policy meant to protect and safeguard LGBTQQ youth may be part of the reason that a much larger percentage of incarcerated youth identify as LGBTQQ (Hunt & Moodie-Mills, 2012). In addition, gender roles that seem at odds with the body of the youth in question can result in harsher punishments for similar attitudes or behaviors, both in schools and in the criminal punishment system.

School Belongingness

In adolescence, when identity is developing and destabilization is always a risk (Nakkula, 2003), these microaggressions make it harder for young people to explore their gender and sexual expressions, and challenge their feeling of belonging in their social groups in schools. Microaggressions have been shown to be directed at LGBT individuals in both overt and covert ways (Nadal, 2008; Sue et al., 2007). This variety of insults, invalidations and assaults can be seen in the present analysis as well. Students may be told “Gay boys are disgusting” by their peers, which is explicitly insulting. However, they may also hear more subtle forms of insults, such as assumptions that they will have problems in school, with their family, or finding other LGBTQQ youth to date or be friends with. The assumptions of LGBTQQ youth victimhood and their vulnerability was also presumed by youth researchers to be an insult because of the way that it assumed a singular experience for all LGBTQQ youth and denied the individuality of their experiences with friends, family, community and identities. Students repeatedly asked to be seen as a complex person with multiple identities (Tuck, 2009).

While this lack of understanding can feel terrible for LGBTQQ students, who may feel misunderstood and limited by these stereotypes, another tragic loss occurs when non-LGBTQQ students do not listen to and hear LGBTQQ students and the questions they raise about the “natural” connection between sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexuality. Other youth have the opportunity to deconstruct these connections and begin to question for themselves the ties that gender and sexuality exert in their own lives, and to explore, if only theoretically, the possibility of other ways of doing gender and sexuality (Mayo, 2004).

It has also been proposed that where greater protections exist against overt aggressions, that more covert aggressions will creep in (Nadal, Issa, Leon, Meterko, Wideman, & Wong, 2011). We may see this happening in schools now where Gay, Straight, (Trans) Alliances have formed, or where state anti-bullying legislation includes protections on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. School personnel may be attentive to addressing the more overt forms of harassment and assault that students have faced in these situations, and may need to
become more aware of microaggressions that are not perceived as verbal assaults. Microaggressions have been shown to elicit three types of reactions in those who experience them: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional (Nadal, Wong, Issa, Meterko, Leon, & Wideman, 2011). Nadal and his colleagues describe LGB people reacting either passively or confrontationally, considering the need to conform to the idea presented in the microaggression, and having emotions such as sadness, anger, fear, despair, and mistrust. These behavioral, cognitive, and emotional reactions may have consequences for students in schools.

Research on belongingness reports that students need to feel peer group belonging in order to thrive in school. Peer group belonging contributes to student academic achievement as well as their social adjustment and emotional well-being and self-esteem (Lee & Robbins, 1995; Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2007). Because of the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional consequences of microaggressions, the consequences of students experiencing microaggressions could be as negative for their peer interactions and academic growth as more overt forms of bullying are. Loss of peer belongingness, through microaggressions and the responses that LGBTQQ students have to experiencing microaggressions, may significantly impact student relationships in schools, making them distrustful of peers, or resulting in confrontational behavior that results in the LGBTQQ student being punished.

The belongingness research also points out that students’ sense of belongingness with teachers is important to their academic achievement (Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009). Teachers build trust with students by acknowledging them both socially and academically. In cases where microaggressions may be overlooked or perpetrated by teachers, students may lose faith in teachers and disconnect from their academic goals. Teachers may not view microaggressions as really “bad,” or even view them as ways of teaching students to get along in the “real world,” but the effects could have deleterious consequences for students. In particular, where sexual orientation and gender identity microaggressions are combined with racial microaggressions, students may be told, however subtly, by teachers that they do not belong in the school, and that problems they face are brought on by them. This kind of toxic message creates a disconnect for students from school, and may contribute to missing class, missing days of school, and dropout (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012).

Findings from this research show that microaggressions are prevalent in LGBTQQ youths’ school days, and that these incidents can escalate into physical assaults and violence in some cases. In addition, data show examples of validating experiences that take place in the everyday school interactions of LGBTQQ youth. Further research should examine the supportive structures in schools for LGBTQQ youth and ways these structures combat microaggressions. These findings point to ways schools can restructure their policies and practices regarding gender nonconforming and queer students in order to create a more inclusive and accessible school community for students across the gender and sexuality spectrum.


Appendix A: List of Statements for Queer Q Sort
1. Schools should be changed to protect LGBTQ students from bullying.
2. Parents of LGBTQ students worry that they may not be able to get married.
3. LGBTQ students will not be able to have children.
4. A school for LGBTQ students discriminates against heterosexual students.
5. LGBTQ youth can't have sex because they can't find sex partners.
6. Segregating LGBTQ students from other students creates intolerance among both gay and straight people.
7. GSAs or other clubs for LGBTQ students make school safer for all students.
8. LGBTQ students have an unhappy future.
9. Teaching about homosexuality is dangerously misleading because it is an unacceptable lifestyle.
10. Teachers are not reliable supporters of LGBTQ youth.
11. LGBTQ youth should not be too “in your face” with their sexuality and gender.
12. LGBTQ youth are harassed or beat up in schools.
13. Gay people can’t go to heaven.
14. LGBTQ relationships are not long-lasting, and will not last a lifetime like marriage.
15. LGBTQ students are discriminated against no matter what.
16. Bullying and homophobia exist in just about every high school.
17. Not all LGBTQ people are the same.
18. There is more than one way to get HIV/AIDS.
19. High school students should get information about sexual health.
20. All teens are curious.
21. Teachers are embarrassed to talk about homosexuality
22. It’s much harder to be trans than to be gay, lesbian or bisexual.
23. LGBTQ students face hatred.
24. LGBTQ students will face discrimination.
25. Families reject LGBTQ children.
26. LGBTQ people have a harder life.
27. It should be mandatory for junior high and high school students to have an HIV/AIDS curriculum.
28. New York City teens are at a higher risk of HIV/AIDS than other teens.
29. LGBTQ relationships are just like straight relationships – one person is the man and one is the woman.
30. Gym is an unsafe place at school.
31. Trans people are born in the wrong body.
32. Public high schools can be unfriendly and scary, especially for LGBTQ students.
33. LGBTQ students are vulnerable to violence
34. LGBTQ students are depressed and suicidal.
35. LGBTQ people can’t have intimate relationships because they are only interested in sex, not love
36. Homosexuality is an inappropriate topic for high school classrooms.
37. Homosexuality is wrong.
38. If you have sex with someone of the same sex/gender, you must be gay.
39. LGBTQ students are isolated in schools because there are few of them.
40. LGBTQ youth shouldn't touch or kiss in school.
41. It’s important to identify as LGBTQ if you have sex with someone of the same sex.
42. LGBTQ people choose to be LGBTQ.
43. Gay people spread AIDS
44. There are no LGBTQ people in our English or history books or curriculum
45. LGBTQ students need separate high schools so they won’t get beat up or harassed.
46. A club for LGBTQ students is immoral
47. Gay sex is perversion because it uses body parts for things they were not intended for.
48. Homosexuals, bisexuals and drug users are most likely to get STDs/HIV/AIDS
49. Bisexuals will go out with anyone.
50. Bisexuals want to have sex with everyone.
51. LGBTQ students will hit on anyone of the same sex.
52. Gay boys are disgusting.
53. A positive attitude toward gay people in the curriculum threatens the family and marriage.
54. LGBTQ students have bad relationships with their parents.
55. LGBTQ youth have trouble meeting anyone to date.
56. LGBTQ people are weird.
57. LGBTQ people have sex all the time and are obsessed with sex.
58. Students should not be separated on the basis of race, gender or sexual orientation.
59. Bisexual students are just experimenting or confused, not gay.
60. LGBTQ people are born that way.
61. LGBTQ people are visible by how they look.
62. Bisexual girls are sexy.
63. Everything rainbow is gay.
64. Most girls are bisexual or experimenting.
65. LGBTQ people should be viewed as real people, to be respected and appreciated.
66. Young children should learn about gay parents and families.
67. It is appropriate for middle and high school students to discuss society's treatment of homosexuality.
68. LGBTQ students should be provided with more information about sex and health issues.
69. Sex and sexuality is always going to be a sensitive topic for children and teens.
70. The English teacher’s classroom is the safe place at school.
71. For schools to be accepting of LGBTQ youth they should teach about LGBTQ people and issues in all subjects.
72. LGBTQ youth have friends and community.
73. Bisexual people have more options for romance.
74. LGBTQ students get support from their parents.
75. Being LGBTQ is not any better or worse than being straight.
76. Being LGBTQ is fun.
77. Straight people are the ones with the problem with homosexuality, not LGBTQ people.
78. Teachers give support for LGBTQ students.
79. Most LGBTQ students attend school with no problems.
80. All lesbians want to be men or look like men.
81. All gay boys are feminine.
82. Schools should allow gay couples to go to dances and the prom.
83. Girls who play softball and basketball are lesbians.
84. Boys who play basketball or football are not gay.