When words inflict harm: Documenting sexuality and gender identity microaggressions in schools for LGBTQ youth

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 microaggressions for students. Although some of these insults, invalidations and assaults are apparent to teachers and other youth looking for “bullying” behaviors, where they are not recognized, 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 Q-sort data 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, Buccheri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilín, 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.

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 transgender 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
10. Familial microaggressions, such as long-term lamenting for the straight or gender normative child, or allowing a relative to mock the trans relative.
11. 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.

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).

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.