

Educator Advocacy for Queer Students in Schools

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In this *Dialogues* we are highlighting educators, community members, and researchers whose work focuses on advocacy for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ+) students in educational institutions. Despite greater visibility, more legal protections, and seemingly greater support for LGBTQ+ individuals, LGBTQ+ students in K-12 schools still face hostile school environments with little to no representation in school curricula. The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's most recent [school climate report](#) found that over half the LGBTQ+, or queer,¹ students surveyed reported facing regular bullying and harassment. Additionally, trans and gender nonconforming students, and transgender people in the United States at large, [face threats to their rights](#) under the Trump presidency.

As we stated in our first issue, our aim is “to create a new journal for two primary reasons: to challenge the idea of what counts as scholarship in education, and to create a structured space that allowed multiple, diverse voices about pressing contemporary issues to be heard” ([Mommandi, 2018](#), p. 45). We are committed to affirming the humanity of all people, [and especially people who have been marginalized in our society](#). There are instances where there are *not* two legitimate sides to an argument, and the need for safe, accessible, and equitable schools for all students is one of those instances. It is not our goal to convince readers that queer students face difficulties in school and therefore need supportive adults. There is no question this is the case. Our goal is to push beyond that and to engage in a dialogue about how educators and other adults in schools can, through action, advocate for queer youth.

The term ally, common in discussions about queer youth, signals that heterosexual, cisgender people accept and support queer individuals, but does not insist upon action. Advocates can be people of any identity, including queer people, and advocacy means taking action in behalf of queer students whose power is much more limited within schools. bell hooks (1989), speaking of feminism, said advocacy “implies that a choice has been made, that commitment to feminism is an act of will” (p. 31). Educators advocating for queer students in schools are making a choice and a commitment to act in order to ensure equity and justice for queer students.

The majority of the research concerning queer students focuses on the difficulties they face in school due to bullying and harassment (Fields, Mamo, Gilbert, & Lesko, 2014; Payne & Smith, 2012). While homophobic bullying and harassment is a serious issue, this narrow focus on bullying encourages researchers, educators and administrators to believe the issue lies with a few mean kids or isolated incidents, allowing them to ignore the [hetero/cisnormative](#) practices

¹ We refer to LGBTQ+ students as “queer” throughout this introduction to capture both sexual and gender diversity among K-12 students (Butler, 1990), and to honor the re-appropriation of the word “queer” as an empowering term (Capper, 1989; Pinar, 1998).

and policies present in school rules, curriculum, district policies, and overall school culture (Payne & Smith, 2013). This focus also paints all queer youth as victims, waiting to be rescued, rather than as complex members of the school community who have a voice and who need adults with decision-making power to listen (Brockenbrough, 2015). In instances where schools have LGBTQ+-inclusive policies and supportive clubs like Gay Straight Alliances, white queer students fare better than in schools without those policies (Kull, Greytak, Kosciw, & Villenas, 2016). Queer students of color, however, find that there are few, if any spaces, that are affirming of both their race or ethnicities *and* their queer identities (Poteat & Scheer, 2016; Venzant Chambers & McCready, 2011; Blackburn & McCready, 2009).

These essays represent a diverse range of perspectives. Sam Long, a high school biology teacher, provides a practical and useful framework for a gender-inclusive and [gender-expansive](#) biology curriculum. June Gothberg, LaSonja Roberts, and Mary Ebeger, assistant professors and a faculty specialist from Western Michigan University explore ideas and resources for supporting LGBTQ+ students with disabilities, a group often ignored in LGBTQ+ education research. Amanda Cherry, a middle school language arts teacher, discusses the importance of vulnerability and gives helpful advice for queering teaching practices. Ethan Trinh, a graduate student, explains the importance of uplifting queer voices and bringing marginalized students into supportive classroom circles. Krishna Pattisapu, Director of Diversity Recruitment and Retention at The University of Colorado Boulder, asserts the need for separate spaces for queer youth of color to gather with each other for support and friendship. Finally, Suraj Uttamchandani, Iona Pfingston, Becca Smith, and Barbara Dennis, a doctoral candidate, two community advocates from the Chroma Youth organization, and a professor from Indiana University, describe what they learned as volunteers in an LGBTQ+ youth advocacy organization about the differences between allyship and advocacy.

As you read, we invite you to consider how you can get involved in your community to ensure queer students [have strong advocates in their schools](#). It is not enough to talk or write about the negative experiences of queer youth or to identify ourselves as allies. Educators, community members, and researchers need to move beyond bullying prevention toward proactive advocacy that validates and empowers queer youth. We all need to confront how our own practices and school policies may reinforce hetero/cisgender norms and make schools unsafe. These practices and policies often not only ignore the value of, [but the existence of](#) queer students and teachers. We need to become knowledgeable about the many other diverse identities among queer students and [address how multiple identities, such as race, gender, and dis/ability, compound the homophobia that queer students experience in schools](#). We need to learn about and [include positive representations of queer people and topics as a regular and embedded part of the curriculum](#), and engage with community organizations to help inform and support advocacy for queer students in schools. Most of all, the *Dialogues* presented showcase how moving beyond allyship into advocacy can provide safer and more just educational spaces where queer students can thrive along with their peers.

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