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BOOK REVIEW

Safe Is Not Enough: Better Schools for LGBTQ Students

Michael Sadowski

Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press (2016)

232 pages; \$29.00 USD (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-61250-942-6

<https://www.hepg.org/hep-home/books/safe-is-not-enough>

Reviewed by Danielle Hernandez

In the past 20 years, the United States has moved rapidly in its acceptance of LGBTQ identities. In the modern LGBTQ moment's nascence, survival and safety were a primary focus for this community disproportionately affected by depression, anxiety, harassment, suicide, and homicide (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). As the nation progresses in its acceptance of LGBTQ identities, its focus shifts forward from focusing on surviving to focusing on thriving. In *Safe Is Not Enough*, Sadowski looks at a variety of schools across the country that are providing inclusion and support for LGBTQ students that go past meeting their basic safety needs. He uses these real-life examples to encourage readers to work toward preK-12 schools being environments where LGBTQ students can truly flourish socially, emotionally, and academically.

The structure of this book first introduces readers to the three most common LGBTQ supports in schools which focus on student safety: inclusive anti-bullying initiatives, Safe Zones (as indicated by Safe Zone stickers), and Gay-Straight Alliances or GSAs. Sadowski indicates that, while all of these *are* still vital for students, schools should move toward even more inclusive practices such as inclusive curricula, informed mental health interventions, and intensive professional development. The reader is then led through an abundance of case studies featuring individual programs, schools, and districts, where LGBTQ inclusion goes above and beyond safety needs. Each setting is illustrated clearly using an easy-to-follow narrative style. The reader is then provided with an appendix where tools used in a number of the case studies can be found in full. Overall, this book serves to succinctly illustrate cases where schools are going above and beyond mere safety for LGBTQ

students, and it succeeds in providing resources that may be used by a breadth of school personnel, including teachers, administrators, student leaders, and school-based mental health professionals (e.g., syllabus for LGBTQ inclusive course that fulfills Common Core requirements; outline of an LGBTQ school counseling group).

The background information provided is brief. In his introduction, Sadowski provides a definition of the acronym, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning) as well as a concise footnote providing reasoning as to why this acronym was used over others. He also clarifies some of the problematic histories of bisexual and transgender exclusion in LGBTQ literature.

LGBTQ students' disproportionate experiences of academic struggles, mental health concerns, and harassment are introduced as early reasoning for school safety initiatives in the United States. Further statistics regarding risk factors and the current state of LGBTQ students' experiences in schools are scattered throughout the chapters rather than being delegated to the introduction. Many of these data come from the 2013 GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) *National School Climate Survey* (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014), a robust biennial report of LGBTQ middle and high school students' experiences across the nation. Some points highlighted were that only 26% of students saw Safe Zone stickers in their schools (stickers indicating a supportive teacher or staff member), 7.5% of middle school students had GSAs, and that approximately 60% of transgender students were denied access to bathrooms that confirmed their gender identity.

A deeper reading of the 2013 *National School Climate Survey* will also indicate that 74.1% of LGBT students were verbally harassed, 90.8% of students were distressed by homophobic language at school, and 61.1% of students reported that nothing was done by staff to address incidents. Academically, LGBT students who experienced harassment had lower grade point averages, were three times more likely to miss school and twice as likely not to pursue post-secondary education (Kosciw et al., 2013). The most recent GLSEN *National School Climate Survey* published in 2018 shows mixed progress. While physical harassment has decreased (36% to 29%), feeling unsafe has actually increased (55% to 59%) (Kosciw et al., 2018). As Sadowski notes, safety is still something to be prioritized for LGBTQ students, but a cultural shift beyond safety is also necessary to thoroughly support these young people.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is a frequent example in Sadowski's case studies. Several chapters in this book examine the district's

policies, the state laws that empower them, and the individuals who implement them. It is evident that Sadowski views this district's LGBTQ inclusion policies as some of the most robust in the nation. In the appendices, LAUSD's policy bulletin is provided in full. It links the district's policies with California Education Codes as well as Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. LAUSD policies are especially specific when it comes to the protections provided to transgender and gender nonconforming students. It includes, for example, operationalization of terminology, specific directions on how to handle name change confidentiality, and directions for identifying and intervening in transphobic bullying. This type of specificity is suggested by Sadowski as it leaves less room for dissent and offers a stronger foundation upon which supportive school personnel can build.

Schools with less state support behind them are also featured. One such school, located in Indiana, was able to spearhead a GSA in a state that had a Religious Freedom law on the books at that time. The school succeeded in developing the GSA by beginning the club as they began all other student clubs. They specifically did not wish to treat this group as an aberration and were neither loud nor quiet about its implementation. Supported by a gender and sexuality inclusive diversity statement on the books, the school was also able to respond to parent dissent by simply nodding their head toward the statement. It offers an excellent example of how important an inclusive non-discriminatory statement can support a school wishing to grow its supports for LGBTQ students.

As changes are implemented to support LGBTQ students, there is often more local pushback than was found in Indiana. In his illustration of a southwest Missouri school—Nixa High School—Sadowski highlights the realities of very resistant communities. Nixa is located in a conservative Christian town where even support of school personnel was scant and where their GSA advisor eventually needed to move for the safety of his own family. While this location did warrant an initial focus on the safety of students, they quickly and bravely pushed into political activism. Students in the Nixa GSA were educated on lobbying, were able to bring a queer speaker to their school and were given the educational tools needed to be empowered changemakers.

Elementary and middle school age students were also included as Sadowski examined two schools in Washington and in Illinois. At this level, the schools were still able to create an atmosphere of LGBTQ positivity. Their curricular inclusion of LGBTQ topics was developmentally appropriate, although critics conflated these additions as discussions of sex acts. These

schools address a gamut of family diversity. They also address bullying, noting that the phrase “that’s so gay” is heard being used negatively even at the elementary level. Students thought critically about gender expression—what it means to be a girl or a boy. Young children challenged heteronormativity in their environments by choosing to line up according to interests rather than gender, indicating that it was more fun.

Although there were a variety of schools showcased, there were some limitations. Politically conservative locations, racially diverse student bodies, inner city, rural, Bible belt—all were represented at least once. However, there was a heavy focus on LAUSD as a near-utopia of LGBTQ-inclusive schooling. Additionally, all schools examined were public schools with no inclusion of private or religious institutions. Sadowski indicates in various case studies, the intersection of faith and sexual and gender diversity. Students in a Utah school indicated significant difficulty navigating their Mormon and LGBTQ identities. In schools that served predominately students of color, Sadowski noted that faith was a bigger discussion point in LGBTQ spaces than race. In today’s changing climate, religious education warrants more critical examination when it comes to LGBTQ inclusion. Recent controversies of LGBTQ teachers being fired from Catholic schools, Betsy DeVos’s statements about Lighthouse Christian Academy, and even Pope Francis’ welcoming remarks about LGBTQ individuals all indicate a need for Catholic education, in particular, to evaluate how they support these students. The way in which Sadowski profiled navigation of religious families and institutions can serve as a wonderful model for beginning to incorporate LGBTQ identities into Catholic school curricula and policies.

As mentioned previously, the LGBTQ community is also one which changes rapidly. A lot has changed since the publication of this book and readers should seek supplemental information, such as the most recent GLSEN *National School Climate Survey* which is available online (Kosciw et al. 2018). The case studies, although not highly generalizable, offer stunning examples of how we can improve schools across a breadth of social climates. Sadowski notes that context is a huge component in LGBTQ inclusivity, and it is highly unlikely that individuals reading his book will find themselves in the same context as the schools highlighted. However, the volume offers itself as a beacon and motivation to better ourselves and our LGBTQ students.

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