



“Don’t Leave Us Out”: Responding to Anti-LGBTQ+ Remarks in the Classroom

Recommendations for Schools from Young People in Catawba, Cumberland, Mecklenburg, and Wake Counties

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Introduction

SHIFT NC conducted five focus groups with racially and ethnically diverse LGBTQ+ young people throughout North Carolina in order to learn more about LGBTQ+ students’ school experiences and recommendations. We asked the young people who participated in these focus groups about the experiences of LGBTQ+ students at their schools, such as experiences with peers, educators, and administrators. We also asked about their experiences receiving sexual health education and about where LGBTQ+ students access information about sexual health, such as information about condoms and STI testing.

This paper is part of a series of papers that share what we learned from students’ firsthand experiences. We hope that NC school staff and community organizations can use these young people’s recommendations to better support students’ health, safety, and success. We also hope that LGBTQ+ young people can use these white papers to support their ongoing leadership in our state.

“Education really is the best response. I know taking time out of the class to talk about it is disruptive but just saying ‘no don’t do that’ doesn’t do anything.”

Tuesday, Wake County

Methods

During Spring 2019 and Summer 2020, SHIFT NC conducted five focus groups with LGBTQ+ youth ages 14-19 who attended school in NC (n=30). Groups in 2019 were held in person. Groups in 2020 were held virtually via Zoom. Participants were selected via purposive convenience sampling with outreach by four LGBTQ+ community organizations from across the state. Recruitment in 2020 focused on reaching LGBTQ+ students who were youth of color. We obtained informed consent and guardian consent for youth under age 18 before participation. Participants received a gift card incentive for their participation. Focus groups were audio recorded and the data were transcribed. Participants had the option to write, post, or type anonymous responses, which were also recorded and used in analyses. Demographic data was collected by self-report. Open coding was used following a content analysis approach to generate salient themes that aligned with the key aims of the study. All names used are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of participants.

Demographics

A total of 30 youth ages 14-19 years old participated (mean age: 16.7). Half of the youth (15) participated in 2019, and half (15) in 2020. Participants in 2020 were mostly youth of color. Among participants in both years, more than half identified as White (57%); 23% as Black; and 17% as Asian, South Asian, or Pacific Islander. A smaller percentage identified as Latinx or Hispanic (10%), multiracial (10%) and Native American, American Indian or Alaska Native (7%). Participants attended school in the following counties: Alexander, Burke, Catawba, Cumberland, Mecklenburg, Wake, and Washington. At the time of participation, most participants were in high school grades 8-12 (73%). About two thirds attended public school and 20% attended home school after previously attending public school. Among 2020 participants, nearly half (47%) reported having a mental health condition and one third reported having a learning disability.

Participants reported diverse gender identities. Forty-three percent self-identified as transgender, and 43% reported a non-binary gender. Participants also reported diverse sexual orientations. Thirty percent identified as bisexual, and 17% identified as asexual or on the asexual spectrum.

Race/Ethnicity*	n	%
African American or Black	7	23
Asian, South Asian, or Pacific Islander	5	17
Latinx or Hispanic	3	10
Multiracial	3	10
Native American, American Indian or Alaska Native	2	7
White	17	57

*Participants were given the option to identify with all race categories that applied. For those who chose more than one category, they were counted for each category they indicated. The percent total is more than 100%.

County Where Attended or Attending School	n	%
Alexander	1	3
Burke	3	10
Catawba	5	17
Cumberland	8	27
Mecklenburg	5	17
Wake	7	23
Washington	1	3

Gender Identity	n	%
Boy/Man/Male	9	30
Girl/Woman/Female	8	27
Non-binary Genders*	13	43
Questioning	1	3

*Participants were given the option to write in their gender identity. This category includes agender, femme non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, gender flux tran-girl, queer, and transmasculine.

Sexual Orientation	n	%
Asexual and Asexual Spectrum	5	17
Bisexual	9	30
Gay or Homosexual	3	10
Lesbian	4	13
Queer	3	10
Questioning	2	7
Pansexual	3	10
No Answer	1	3

Transgender (Self-Identified)	n	%
Yes	13	43
No	13	43
Unsure	4	13

“Silent Allies” Are Not Helpful

Participants in all five focus groups reported that, in their experience, NC school counselors, teachers, administrators, and students who witness anti-LGBTQ+ remarks and slurs generally do not intervene or react effectively. Participants described the following responses by school staff as unhelpful and harmful:

- Offer only one-on-one statements of support (ex. “I accept you”);
- Talk about it only with the affected LGBTQ+ students;
- Focus on LGBTQ+ students’ response (ex. suggest LGBTQ+ students start therapy);
- “Look away” or act like it didn’t happen;
- Stop, or interrupt, harmful comments without explaining why; and
- Shame or ridicule the students who make harmful remarks.

“Be Loud About It” and Educate, Educate, Educate

“I guess kind of systemically, I think a lot of times when people [are] growing up using slurs and stuff, it’s out of ignorance. So I wish that kind of, for younger people especially, if someone says, ‘ooo that’s gay,’ I wish that people would be more often, ‘Hey, let’s not say that, here’s why, and here are some other things you could say instead.’”

Bryce, Mecklenburg County

“Long story short, calling people out and making them recognize the root causes of their (usually unintended) hurtful comments/behavior is good and worth it. ... As a teacher, you should want to create a safe environment for your students, and if that requires kind of being in a weird moment for five seconds or so with another student, you know, then like, it would be so great to know that they think it’s worth it, on behalf of all the rest of the students who shouldn’t be subjected to that type of language or behavior.”

Marimba, Wake County

Participants expressed widespread agreement that school staff and students who witness anti-LGBTQ+ remarks should be “openly vocal” that the behavior will not be tolerated, and why. More specifically, they recommended that staff and districts who want to support students’ safety should respond to anti-LGBTQ+ remarks in the following ways:

- Clearly state what behaviors won't be tolerated, and what the punishments are ("letting other students know you're there for queer kids");
- Take time to educate and explain how the language can hurt people in the classroom;
- Do not be afraid to "make the space uncomfortable for the oppressor";
- "Keep the same energy" as when responding to disability slurs, racial slurs, and other identity-based insults or bullying; and
- Intervene even when other teachers are making the harmful remarks.

Some participants had experience with a school staff person who responded in these helpful and affirming ways. For example, Nia, a student in Catawba County, described an eighth grade arts teacher who was "very accepting":

"... there would be times that some of the guys in the class would be talking to each other and talk about people who were in the LGBTQ+ community and my [arts] teacher would go up to them and stop them and explain to them that that type of language and speaking, uh, was not to be accepted in her classroom. There were times that she sent them to the office for it or to the guidance counselor ... she handled the situation very well."

Ojay, a student in Cumberland County, shared about the impact of two supportive teachers:

"They always encouraged us to understand that we are just as important as anybody else that goes to our school. They always help us understand that we deserve the same freedoms as everybody else. And thank God we don't really have to deal with like, discrimination in that environment, so we tend to like, stay in that end of the school."

Satale, another student in Cumberland County, explained that the classroom of one supportive teacher "is like a home, basically, and all the [students] don't ever want to leave there because it's like leaving home."

School Staff Need Mandatory, Student-Informed Trainings

"It's really just as simple as teachers need to be informed about easy things they can do, like stopping an action, educating a student that's like saying hurtful [stuff], and moving on from it and not dwelling on it for too long."

Jon, Mecklenburg County

Participants shared detailed, enthusiastic direction regarding the trainings that they want school staff to receive in order to better support LGBTQ+ students. They recommended that:

- Trainings should be mandatory (required) for all staff, including administrators and substitute teachers;

- Trainings should demonstrate how school staff can respond helpfully to classroom situations, including when other staff make anti-LGBTQ+ remarks;
- Trainings should familiarize staff with different pronouns and teach staff not to assume students' pronouns; and
- LGBTQ+ students should be involved with creating and delivering trainings, and even “be part of the ones to give that talk.”

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