The Contribution of Schools to the Feeling of Acceptance and the Risk of Suicide Attempts among Austrian Gay and Bisexual Males

Martin Pföderl1,2, Gregor Faistauer1, & Reinhold Fartacek1,2
1) Suicide Prevention Research Program at the Institute for Public Health, Paracelsus Private Medical University, Salzburg
2) Department for Suicide Prevention, University Clinic for Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Christian Doppler Klinik, Salzburg
3) Homosexual Initiative (HOSI) Salzburg

34th Annual Meeting of the International Academy of Sex Research, July 2008, Leuven, Belgium

Background

Many studies report that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals are at a greater risk for attempting suicide (Bagley & Tremblay, 2001; McDaniel, Purcell, & D’Augelli, 2001).

Most LGB become aware of homosexual attraction in late childhood or early adolescence - i.e., when most of them are still in school. Isolation and stress are frequent during this developmental stage and likely cause mental health problems, including suicidality (Mayer, 2003).

School may increase the suicide risk of LGB students, because:
- Harassment experiences in school are much more prevalent among LGB youth compared to heterosexual youth (Reis & Saewyc, 1998).
- Harassment at school is associated with mental health problems and suicidality (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Reis & Saewyc, 1998; Rivers, 2004).

Schools may decrease the suicide risk of LGB students with:
- Interventions against homophobia
- LGB-friendly school climate
- Presence of LGB role models

Studies on the impact of school-related risk and especially protective factors on the suicide risk of LGB individuals is insufficient, even more so in German-speaking Europe.

Method

Participants

468 gay or bisexual Austrian men, aged 18 to 46 years, completed an electronic questionnaire that was linked to a popular website for gay men (gayromeo.com).

Measures

Outcome measures:
- Acceptance at school
- School related suicide attempts were separated from other suicide attempts with the item "Did you attempt suicide because your homosexuality caused such a hard time at school?"

Risk and protective factors included:
- Coming out at school and actual/expected reactions
- Homophobic harassment
- Harassment based on gender role nonconformity
- Interventions of teachers against homophobia
- Presence of peers/staff to talk about homosexuality
- Presence of gay/lesbian peers or teachers
- Presence of books or brochures about homosexuality
- Having homosexuality addressed in the classroom
- Perceived association of sexual orientation with school performance
- Perceived importance of addressing homosexuality in the classroom

Results

18% of the participants reported having attempted suicide.

44% of them reported that the situation at school partly or mainly caused the suicide attempt. These participants also reported higher levels of suicidal intent.

35% of the participants felt that they were not or probably not accepted at school.

Risk factors significantly associated with school related suicide attempts were (see also table):
- Negative reactions to coming out
- Coming out to only a few people at school
- Harassment at school
- Lack of acceptance at school
- Having tried hard to perform better at school because of one’s homosexuality
- Voting against discussing homosexuality in the classroom

After controlling for all other variables in a regression analysis, coming out to only a few others, acceptance at school, and voting against discussing homosexuality remained significant predictors (boldface table entries).

Protective factors did not significantly correlate with school related suicide attempts. However, many protective factors were significantly associated with feeling accepted at school (statistical test results not reported here):
- Coming out to most people at school
- Positive hypothetical reactions to coming out
- Positive actual reactions by peers to coming out
- Presence of out LGB peers or teachers
- Not having experienced anti-gay harassment
- Interventions of teachers against antigay harassment
- Having peers to talk about homosexuality
- Having books about homosexuality in the library
- Discussion of homosexuality in the classroom.

Table: Associations of school related suicide attempts with risk and protective factors at school

| Risk / protective Factors (reference category) | OR (95%-CI) | p
|---------------------------------------------|-------------|-----
| Coming Out at school (closeted)             |             |    |
| To few others                              | 3.5 (1.56 - **) |    |
| To most others                             | 1.29 (0.41 - 3.38) |    |
| Peer reaction to coming out (negative or very negative) | 0.28 (0.09 - * 0.87) |    |
| Neutral or positive                        |             |    |
| Homophobic harassment by peers (no)        | 4.04 (2.02 - 8.46) | ** |
| Never experienced homophobic harassment (no) | 0.24 (0.11 - 0.48) | ** |

Harassment based on gender atypicality (never/ever):
- Rarely                                      | 2.45 (0.95 - 6.08) |    |
- Sometimes                                  | 2.99 (1.15 - 7.47) | *  |
- Often                                      | 5.86 (1.84-17.12) | ** |

Acceptance at school (totally accepted)
- Probably accepted                           | 2.42 (0.69-11.67) |    |
- Probably not accepted                       | 7.19 (2.33-32.72) | ** |
- Not accepted                               | 11.0 (2.62-59.18) |    |

Importance of Homosexuality in education
- Mentioning it briefly                       | 0.59 (0.09 - 2.13) |    |
- I am against this because it is stressful  | 2.8 (1.16 - * 6   |    |
- I don't care                               | 0.66 (0.09 - 2.37) |    |

Discussion

Schools contribution to the increased suicide risk of sexual minorities

Nearly half of the suicide attempters believed that being homosexual at school partly or mainly caused the attempt. Thus, school likely contributed to the high suicide attempt rate in our sample of gay and bisexual Austrian men.

In addition, about one third of our participants did not feel accepted at school. This points to an alarming situation among gay or bisexual youth in Austrian schools.

Risk and protective factors

Not surprisingly, school related suicide attempts were associated with negative social reactions to coming out or with harassment experiences based on one’s homosexuality or one’s gender atypicality.

Factors related to a LGB friendly school climate (e.g., LGB role models, teachers intervening against homophobia) did not significantly correlate with school related suicide attempts. However, those factors were significantly associated with the feeling of acceptance at school. Feeling accepted, in return, was a strong predictor for school related suicide attempts.

Two results not reported previous in studies were:
1. Those who reported school-related suicide attempts were more likely to feel that homosexuality should not be addressed at school because it would be stressful. Therefore, discussing sexual minority issues in the classroom should be done carefully.
2. Participants who tried hard to perform better at school because of their homosexual orientation were more likely to report school-related suicide attempts. Extraordinary performance may be a strategy to cope with homophobia at school. School personnel should be aware of this.

Limits

- The results may be biased by cross-sectional, web-based sampling, and by the retrospective design.
- Not using established psychometric scales may have led to an underestimation of true associations.

Strengths

- First such study in German speaking Europe
- Investigation of a wide range of school-related risk factors and protective factors that may contribute to the suicide risk of sexual minority youth
- Provides empirical evidence that may guide further development of suicide prevention programs in schools.

References


