



Equity Spotlight Podcast Series

Transcription of Episode Two: Mollie Blackburn, Ph.D. – Supporting LGBTQ Students

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Center Speaker: Welcome to the Great Lakes Equity Center Equity Spotlight Podcast. This podcast series will highlight organizations and individuals in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and Indiana who are working to advance equitable practices within school systems. This is the second episode in the *Centering Equity in Educator Effectiveness* podcast series. Each episode in this series will focus on demonstrating equitable practices in curriculum, instruction or the learning environment.

Center Host: This is the second episode in the *Centering Equity in Educator Effectiveness* podcast series. Each episode in this series will focus on demonstrating equitable practices in curriculum, instruction or the learning environment. My name is Gayle Cosby. I am a graduate assistant with the Great Lakes Equity Center, and I will be hosting today's podcast. Today we will be discussing the support of LGBTQ students by creating safe, inclusive, and responsive learning environments with Dr. Mollie Blackburn.

Dr. Mollie Blackburn is a professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the Ohio State University. Her research focuses on literacy, language, and social change, with particular attention to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth (LGBTQ) and the teachers who serve them. She has published in journals such as *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, and *Teachers College Record*, among others. She is the author of *Interrupting Hate: Homophobia in Schools and What Literacy Can Do About It* and the co-editor of *Acting Out!: Combating Homophobia Through Teacher Activism*.

Welcome, Dr. Blackburn. Thank you for speaking with me by phone today.

Dr. Blackburn: Thank you so much for having me, I'm looking-looking forward to talking with you.

Center Host: Thank you so much. So we'll jump right into some questions for our audience. Could you describe some of the challenges and issues that students who identify as LGBTQ face?

Dr. Blackburn: Yeah, I'll start by saying that some, um, some LGBTQ students are doing quite well, but there are those who are experiencing challenges, um, and they experience a whole wide range of issues. So some of those, um, issues kind of included verbal and physical assaults. Or some experience isolation and exclusion. Some experience um, a failure to be represented in their curricula at schools. Um, some LGBT youth get kicked out of their religious communities and/or their homes. Um, some consider suicide ideation and/or abuse drugs as a result of hostile environments, including schools, but also religious communities, and homes. So there's a whole wide range of challenges and issues that these young people face.

Center Host: Ok. Thank you for that explanation. Uh, could you tell our audience the meaning of the word “heteronormativity” and how that word, um, can um affect students who identify as LGBTQ?

Dr. Blackburn: Um, sure I'd be happy to. It's, um, if you are familiar with the term microaggressions you can kind of think about that as I'm describing it. But, um, heteronormativity is either the assumption that everyone is straight and cisgender or the implicit belief that being straight and cisgender is better than being LGBTQ--so lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer. It's often subtle, and it's harder to put your finger on, but it can really have a big impact on people, particularly on LGBTQ people. So, um, for example, when people assume that everyone is straight and cisgender, and no one is kind of calling that into question, it can make LGBTQ people feel like they are totally alone in their desires and feelings which results in the isolation I described before. Um, and similarly, when people believe that being straight and cisgender is better than being LGBTQ, it can make LGBTQ people question their value or worth in the world.

Center Host: Ok. How can we as educators work to confront heteronormativity?

Dr. Blackburn: Oh, good questions. So educators can work to confront heteronormativity, well first, by looking um, for and disrupting it in themselves. So you kind of do reflections on what you see yourself doing that kind of reifies heteronormativity. Um, so, uh, in disrupting it, they can model for other people, um, how to do the same. So, for example, educators should never assume that their students are straight, cisgender, or homophobic. That's not something we see in classrooms a lot. Um, so, educators should not ask students whether they have boyfriends or girlfriends. They should ask if they are dating anyone or taking anyone to the dance, or whatever is appropriate in the situation. Um, I'm not saying teachers have to have that conversation necessarily. Um, but, like I'm teaching a high school class right now, and I ask everyone to state their preferred gender pronouns at the start of class, to show that I am not assuming that I can interpret someone's gender identity based on their names or, what's the-, their styles.

But still, I try not to assume that those pronouns are fixed. Um, so when I pick up on things that make me wonder whether I'm using the correct pronouns, I do a quick check in with my students, so like, “I have been using feminine pronouns with you, um, but I noticed your friend used they/them/their. Which would you prefer me to use?” Because when I'm talking with a lot of, um, LGBT young people, what I've heard is that their identities (clears throat) shift and they don't want to be kind of pigeon-holed in one or the other and so I try to allow for that in the ways I address my students.

Center Host: Ok, thank you, that's that's good advice that I think educators can universally apply in their interactions with students. Um, recent studies have shown that there is a lack of appropriate interventions um, at school when students who identify or that are perceived to identify as LGBTQ they sometimes experience verbal or physical harassment due to their perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Um, in your opinion what are ways that educators can create safe, inclusive, and responsive learning environments for LGBTQ students?

Dr. Blackburn: Well, to start with, the hate that they experience must must be interrupted, but also careless language needs to be interrupted as well. So, of course, educators need to stop students from using words like, “faggot,” but they also need to interrupt people using the phrase “that's so gay” to criticize something even though it doesn't feel as venomous, it still has a negative impact. Um, but those things are pretty reactive. So in terms of like proactive things that educators can do, they can post rainbow stickers or pink triangle stickers in their room, acknowledging the sa--, the sexuality of people in

their field who experience same-sex desire, so for example, stating that Langston Hughes was gay. And whenever it is appropriate, curricular inclusion can let students, students- LGBTQ students know that they matter. So, in talking about the Stonewall Riots when talking about significant social movements in the mid 20th century, for example. Or naming Bayard Rusting when talking about the Civil Rights Movement. Another thing that I hear and people talk about a lot is not wanting to be organized by gender. Whether they're lines or competitions or whatever you're doing in your classroom in school. Um, this can be a really difficult practice for those who don't experience their gender in binary terms or those who identify with the gender opposite the one that they were assigned at birth. Um, it can really be difficult for them um so that's another way that, um educators can help create safe environments.

Center Host: Um, that's pretty common in the elementary grades I think in my experience.

Dr. Blackburn: Yes.

Center Host: Yeah, thank you for that. Um, so moving to a policy making level. Um, what are some ideas that you have um that policymakers or school administrators can demonstrate, um, equity for LGBTQ students?

Dr. Blackburn: Oh there's so much work to be done here. Uh, they can make sure that enumerated language is in their anti-bullying policies, and you can, you go as like big as you can on this. So, if it's easy to get (by enumerated language I mean like listing out the particular populations of concern). Um, if it's easy to get enumerated language in your school policy, aim for your district policy. If your district's on board, argue for it at the state. But just because your school will treat LGBTQ kids rights right without enumerated language doesn't mean that the schools in your area will do the same. Or just because the current principal gets it, doesn't mean the next one will. Um, so having the enumerated language in the policy is really important.

Um, another thing I hear again people talk about a lot that's really important is to make sure there is a gender inclusive bathroom and changing area. I can't emphasize this enough. I've talked with so many trans and gender creative kids who will not drink water before or during the school day to ensure they won't have to use the restroom or who come up with all sorts of excuses to avoid changing (clears throat) for um gym class, for example. This is one of the things that is really imperative if you want to make your schools decent places for trans and gender creative students to learn.

Center Host: Ok. Thank you. Um, could you tell us what is an ally? And what are some ways educators can be allies?

Dr. Blackburn: Great question. Um, so, GLSEN which is the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network um, defines ally, um I like their definition, they define it as anyone who "speaks out and stands up for a person or group that is targeted and discriminated against..." So when we are talking about LGBTQ communities, an ally is any person who supports and stands up for the rights of LGBT people." So it can be LGBT, uh, LGBT people can be allies within their community, but so can people outside of that community. Um, and educators can be allies by recognizing and interrupting homophobia and transphobia, as we talked about before, rejecting heteronormativity, as we talked about before, including LGBT people in their curricula and conversations, facilitating the efforts of LGBT students to make their school and lives better, so helping young people do it for themselves, as opposed to doing it for them. Um, and also to recognize the, kind of um, intersectional, um, dimensions of LGBT students

identities, so recognizing that race and religion and class and all sorts of things, um, language, ability, may be different than how they are experiencing their LGBTQ identities, um, so just to remember that when you are working with um, young people.

Center Host: Hmm, that that is important, thank you, that's great advice.

Where can educators who are looking to learn more, um, so for those who maybe have listened to this podcast and want to continue the work of um that interruption you've talked about, where could they go to find resources for themselves or maybe to share with their students?

Dr. Blackburn: Great, yeah, so um well, in part... in terms of if educators are looking for examples of how this work looks, I would suggest um a book called Acting Out! Which is a book that a teacher inquiry group that I'm a part of wrote about their own experiences trying to combat homophobia in their classrooms and schools. So if that's what people are looking for, I think that's a decent resource. But if we're, if, if educators are looking for resources to share with their students, for example, GLSEN, which I mentioned before, the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network has a resource-rich website at, it's GLSEN.org. It has materials um tiered at all sorts of different levels that I think would be really useful for teachers. Um, it's also worth learning about local LGBTQ youth centers in your area. So, um, you can look online to see if there is one in your area, and what your area is might you know would be construed broadly. They're not everywhere. Um, but often times they're in cities, so that if there's a, so if you're not in a city but are near one, it might be worth looking there because those centers have, um, typically have resources online but also people that kids can connect with if that's what they need.

Center Host: Ok, thank you very much for that, and just to um repeat because I found this website to be immensely helpful as well, it's uh G-L-S-E-N dot O-R-G, um, and they do have many resources, I think they're really, um, quite helpful in terms of the research that they've done as well, um.

Dr. Blackburn: Yeah, I'm so glad you spelled that out, thank you for doing that. Um, I think that they um, GLSEN has gotten more and more um, nuanced work over the years, so like um, their older surveys didn't for example ask questions around race, and so they've woven race dimensions into their work, and focused on trans populations and focused on rural communities, and also um, uh have pulled in and have, really brought to the forefront trans issues so GLSEN, um, really has done remarkable work and is getting better and better at what they do.

Center Host: Ok. Dr. Mollie Blackburn, thank you for taking the time out to scratch the surface with us, and our listeners, and hopefully we have inspired our listeners to um, dig a little deeper on this issue. So thank you so much for your time.

Dr. Blackburn: Thank you so much for your great questions and your time as well.

Center Host: Thank you.

Center Speaker: To find out more about other Great Lakes Equity Center podcasts and other resources, please visit our website. To subscribe to a podcast, click on the podcast link, located on the Great Lakes Equity Center website, at www.greatlakesequity.org. The Great Lakes Equity Center is funded by the US Department of Education to provide technical assistance, resources, and professional learning opportunities related to equity, civil rights, and systemic school reform throughout a six state region of

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