

Book Review: DONN SHORT. Am I Safe Here? LGBTQ Teens and Bullying in Schools. 2017

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DONN SHORT. *Am I Safe Here? LGBTQ Teens and Bullying in Schools*. Vancouver, BC: On Point Press. (2017). 140 pp. \$22.95 (paperback). (ISBN 978-0-7748-9021-2).

According to Melanie, “we study all kinds of things on equity in every curriculum and in every subject. But there’s no equity in the school or in the classroom...so I think what we teach and what we practise are two different things (p. 35).” Melanie is a teacher in Donn Short’s *Am I Safe Here? LGBTQ Teens and Bullying in Schools*. The book documents perspectives of students, teachers, counselors, principals, and other educational staff members in surviving homophobic, heteronormative, and heterosexist school cultures. Melanie teaches at Sylvia Avenue Collegiate and Vocational School, where safety is evaluated mainly in terms of control and security. Contrast this with two schools nearby, Burton School and Elizabeth Coyt Alternative School, where safety is conceived in terms of equity and social justice. Through interviews with various stakeholders, Donn Short has put together a volume that delineates how different schools define safety as well as how these definitions permeate school culture.

Bullying is not a new phenomenon in schools; it draws on systemic issues in the larger school culture. By changing the school culture to embrace and include LGBTQ teens, in particular, schools can proactively reduce bullying. Many students, teachers, and counselors in Short’s book stated that safety extends beyond ensuring an inclusive environment. According to the students, safety “is more than just making sure you don’t get a kick in the nuts (p. 37).” Instead, they emphasized “just...really cutting down on the harassment and stuff by having a place where it doesn’t happen in the first place (p. 57).” Addressing incident-based bullying is inadequate if the cycle continues to be toxic. Melanie asserted that “kids would be afraid to come out here if they’re gay and lesbian because nobody respects anybody here. It’s a whole cycle of control of some, neglect of others. (p. 30)” Therefore, safety encompasses more than reducing the prevalence of bullying. Safety is a broader concept that incorporates both reactive safety (i.e. responding to incident-based concerns) and, more importantly, proactive safety, along with equity and social justice.

As Short discusses, students, teachers, and counselors have proposed/can propose changing school culture to foster inclusive safety for all educational stakeholders (e.g. educators, principals, researchers, family, and students) through five action steps. The five steps are as follows: 1) changing school policies to incorporate a broader conceptualization of safety, equity, and inclusion; 2) putting into practice equitable and inclusive K-12 curricula; 3) establishing safe and inclusive physical spaces in schools (i.e. gay-straight alliances); 4) providing ongoing support and training for teachers and administration; and 5) recognizing the need to reorganize school culture in three key areas (anti-snitch culture, religious beliefs, and rigid gender roles).

Am I Safe Here? LGBTQ Teens and Bullying in Schools is an eminent book for a broad range of audiences, notably school staff. Rather than managing individual incident-based bullying concerns, this book calls on principals, teachers, and school staff members to reform their school culture to acknowledge and affirm LGBTQ teens' realities and experiences. These reforms should happen through formal educational spaces (i.e. classrooms, curriculum, policies) and informal educational spaces (i.e. hallways, GSAs). Safety for LGBTQ teens encompasses more than physical safety; it includes the social safety that is embedded within the school culture. Participants repeatedly noted that it is imperative that equity and safety be repositioned alongside human rights principles. A proactive approach to achieving social justice and equity for LGBTQ teens can only happen through school culture reform. This includes mandatory classes to teach inclusion where inclusion is broadly conceptualized and understood beyond students with learning disabilities and topics surrounding universal design for learning (UDL; i.e. typical topics of inclusive education courses). Such inclusion classes should demonstrate how inclusion, equity, and safety are intertwined for marginalized populations, such as LGBTQ teens. Implementation is another issue. Only teachers who perceive that equity and inclusion are essential aspects of their job will include LGBTQ teens and foster an inclusive school culture. One pervasive problem, though, is the lack of resources and training. Matters of equity and inclusion need to be prioritized to receive proper resources.

Another key audience that would benefit from this book are academic researchers interested in LGBTQ-related research in education. The book triangulates the voices of students, teachers, and counselors. It highlights evidence-based results to foster an inclusive school culture, such as the establishment of gay-straight alliances and positive, celebratory depiction of LGBTQ realities and lives of LGBTQ students and/or LGBTQ parents.

Among the most important contributions of the book, though, is its emphasis on fostering a positive youth development framework. Rather than conducting research that further replicates the statistics highlighting the struggles that LGBTQ teens are experiencing in their schools, a more novel lens for

promoting the safety of LGBTQ teens can be found in the positive youth development framework. Briefly, positive youth development is a prosocial framework that recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youths' strengths by promoting positive outcomes for youths (Ginwright & James, 2002; Wagaman, 2016). It does this by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support necessary to strengthen youths' leadership strengths based on four key principles: 1) assets, 2) agency, 3) contribution, and 4) enabling environment (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008; Leung & Flanagan, 2019).

A student named Carla said, "I decided to go around the city and video all the hetero stuff I could find to show how heterodominant our culture is, sort of to intervene and say, to anybody who would see my video, wait a minute here (p. 47)." She was drawing on research methods like photovoice and mobile interviewing: methods that can provide a deeper understanding of LGBTQ teens. For photovoice, teens were provided with cameras and invited to photograph their daily experiences, documenting their lived experiences. Such visual documentation achieves three goals: 1) storytelling, 2) community discussion, and 3) action (Wang, 1999; Leung & Flanagan, 2019). For its part, mobile interviewing is a methodology in which the researcher can follow teens to collect contextualized information as they collaboratively explore physical spaces. Both methods were at work in Donn Short's book. The author analyzed multiple art pieces that the students created, such as Lazy Daisy's "Am i @ RISK?". "Am i @ RISK?" (p. 15)" initially was not considered to be a photovoice or mobile interviewing project. Short's interview with Lazy Daisy opened a space within which she could share her artwork and her feelings and thoughts regarding the risks that LGBTQ youths experience. She explained that "I'm done with the extreme negative consequences like in my old school. It's like a cue on negative. I love my school, this school, and I love what we're all doing. And I don't know, I just wanted to do a positive reaction to that fact (p. 16)." Lazy Daisy wanted to emphasise that safety is not simply about protection but also about inducing change in the culture to be equitable and inclusive.

In conclusion, Donn Short's *Am I Safe Here? LGBTQ Teens and Bullying in Schools* uniquely contributes to the literature surrounding LGBTQ research and praxis in education by providing a platform for, and evidence from, youths themselves, youths who voice their struggles and concerns, and engage as agents of change in their communities and schools. The message has clearly moved on from Dan Savage's *It Gets Better* (Savage & Miller, 2011), which contained a similar message regarding empowerment, connectedness, and hope for LGBTQ teens. The difference in Short's volume is that LGBTQ teens are the experts, taking the lead to uncover the marginalisation they have experienced, applying change in their school environments and navigating

obstacles. The message is clearly shifting. Teens are no longer viewed as passively needing support. Instead, they are active, key stakeholders in school change.

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