MedicalXpress

Key elements in preventing homophobic bullying in schools

January 24 2013

How are non-heterosexual people affected by discrimination endured in the school environment due to their affective-sexual orientation? This question was the starting point in the PhD thesis produced by the researcher Aitor Martxueta.

The thesis is entitled "Claves para atender a la diversidad afectivo-sexual en el contexto educativo" (Keys to addressing affective-sexual diversity in the education context), and in it, Martxueta has not only carried out an empirical study to answer the above question, he has also analysed the studies relating to the attitudes held by youngsters towards affective-sexual diversity, homophobia, and the harassment and discrimination suffered by LGTB (Lesbian Gay Transgender Bi-Sexual) students in the Basque Country, Spain, other European countries like the United Kingdom, and the United States. The thesis concludes by putting forward measures designed to prevent homophobic bullying and to guarantee that affective-sexual diversity be addressed from a global school approach.

According to the author of the thesis, "at first I was seeking to see whether the harassment endured in the school environment due to affective-sexual orientation has negative consequences on the mental health of the individuals who are now adults and who in their childhood and/or adolescence suffered this kind of discrimination". To verify this, he conducted a study with 119 individuals with non-standard affective-sexual orientations and who are members of the associations LGTB EHGAM, GEHITU and Bost Axola.

Although Martxueta warns that the sample is not large enough for the results to be statistically significant, "the study suggests that discrimination, harassment and insults endured at school due to affective-sexual orientation are related with higher levels of depression and anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem and balance of affections today".

"Yet even though it may seem strange in principle," adds Martxueta, "these very same individuals who report that they have been harassed perceive greater support and acceptance from the family and environment close to them, and display a greater and earlier acceptance of their affective-sexual orientation."

Prevention measures

Following the empirical study, Martxueta analysed the studies conducted in the Basque Country, Spain, other European countries, and the United States dealing with the attitudes displayed by the students towards their non-heterosexual classmates. "There is a great difference in the number of studies conducted here and in Spain compared with those produced in other European countries, like the United Kingdom, and in the United States, above all." In particular, he highlights Los Angeles where the LGTB community is very active and sets up education communities in which all the players are involved.

In any case, the empirical evidence confirms that those schools that lay down criteria for tackling homophobia and homophobic bullying behaviour achieve safer school climates with lower instances of harassment linked to affective-sexual orientation, where the students declare they feel safer and consequently display better well-being.

So Martxueta puts forwards some key elements designed to improve the handling of affective-sexual diversity in the classroom from a global school perspective. Among them he underlines the importance of

drawing up an inclusive curriculum that guarantees a safe school environment based on respect for human rights. At the same time he proposes that training be given not only to teachers but also to parents; and puts forward types of action and recommendations that the various members of the education system will need to take into consideration to prevent homophobic behaviour. He also puts forward support measures for the students who are likely to suffer discrimination due to their affective-sexual orientation.

Martxueta has pointed out that he plans to go on conducting studies relating to his PhD thesis to gain a better insight into what the classroom reality is and so that steps can be taken to ensure there is an environment based on mutual respect.

Provided by Elhuyar Fundazioa

Citation: Key elements in preventing homophobic bullying in schools (2013, January 24) retrieved 24 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-01-key-elements-homophobic-bullying-schools.html

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