Paving the way towards inclusive education

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IGLYO, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) Youth and Student Organisation, is the lead youth development and leadership organisation working with LGBTQI young activists, counting more than 100 member organisations in over 40 countries in the Council of Europe region.

IGLYO has just released their 2022 edition of the Inclusive Education Report and Index, assessing measures ensuring LGBTQI- inclusive education in the Council of Europe region in the light of 10 indicators.

In this article, IGLYO's communication officer, Jeremy Gobin, gives an overview of the 2022 Report and Index's key findings, with a specific focus on the mandatory teacher training indicator, and sheds light on how teachers and school staff can change course towards more inclusive educational environments.

What would you do?

Picture yourself at the end of a school day. One of your students who has recently stopped showing up to class knocks on the door. They are shaking. When you ask what's going on, they explain that they have just been physically threatened by three students. Why so, you ask. Because they are gay and someone outed them; meaning that their sexual orientation was disclosed without their prior consent.

It's the third time this week, and the umpteenth this semester. In the corridors, bathrooms, locker room, outside school, by text, email, on social media. They have no one else to turn to, and they say you are their last resort before ...

How do you react? What do you say? Do you do something at all? Call their parents or guardians? Do they know about their child's sexual orientation? Could telling them put your student in even more danger? Have you ever spoken about sexual orientation to your students? How about gender identity and trans people's rights? Sex characteristics and intersex people's rights? Are you yourself familiar with these terms? What about your colleagues? Your school?

If you answered no to some of these questions, this article will show you that there are easy steps to take to change course towards a more inclusive education system.

More at risk of experiencing violence

As UNESCO's Out in the Open report shows, children and youth who are or are perceived to be LGBTQI are far more at risk of experiencing bullying and harassment based on their (actual or perceived) sexual orientation, gender

identity, gender expression or variations in sex characteristics (or what we call SOGIGESC-based violence).

Having experienced it myself as a child and a youth, mostly in primary school, I can testify. My experience goes in line with data from the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, or from our own research with LGBTQI students, showing that most students do not receive any information on SOGIGESC content, and that most teachers do not intervene in cases of SOGIGESC-based school-bullying because they do not know how to.

However, the violence I experienced was proportional to my privilege: I was gay, white and I was not yet questioning my gender.

The same cannot be said for many trans, non-binary and intersex students currently attending school, who are even more often absent from the public discourse and learning materials — or negatively represented when they are — and are thus even more at risk of experiencing violence in school.

SOGIGESC-based violence in schools, which most often translates into harassment and bullying but can be amplified by the lack of positive representation of LGBTQI people in learning materials, unsupportive school staff or hostile school climates, increases the likeliness for LGBTQI youths to be more absent from class, develop serious health issues such as low self-esteem, heavy depression, self-harm or suicidal thoughts, or go as far as to hide or disguise their sexual orientation,

gender identity or sex characteristics out of fear of violence.

Inclusive education is a key – that barely anyone is using

A comprehensive school approach to inclusive education has been proven to be the most effective means to prevent and address SOGIGESC-based violence in school (see UNESCO's Behind the Numbers report and our joint Don't Look Away policy paper).

Starting from this principle, we at IGLYO have just released the second edition of our Inclusive Education Index and Report. Four years after the first edition launched in 2018, the second edition reassesses the concrete measures that all Council of Europe member states as well as Belarus and Kosovo have taken to ensure LGBTQI inclusive education in the light of 10 indicators.

To give you a broad idea of how bad the situation is, the main key finding we drew from this reassessment process is that, in four years, there has been a complete standstill in all indicators.

Only six countries provide most of the measures across Europe as of yet, whereas 10 countries have failed to implement any measure at the time of writing the report. Some countries did add anti-discrimination legislation and action plans (currently 32 out of 49), but the existence of such policies does not translate into other measures, such as inclusive curricula, support systems or teacher training.

Moreover, when there is progress, it mostly concerns sexual orientation, but there is overall very little progress for gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics.

And to cap it all, for the first time we had to look at opposition in some of the indicators due to the current backlash on LGBTQI rights, especially concerning trans, non-binary and intersex people.

Currently six European countries have implemented anti-propaganda laws that make it impossible for learners to receive inclusive content in schools.

Teaching the teachers

From what we have seen, the main areas for improvement are compulsory inclusive education curricula, monitoring SOGIGESC-based bullying and harassment, as well as – and this is where I would like to bring specific attention – teacher training.

Although teachers are key to creating an inclusive and safe environment for all learners, many still report that they lack the confidence and knowledge to discuss LGBTQI issues or support LGBTQI learners.

A teacher can at times be the only resource for LGBTQI learners, who might be afraid to talk to their peers or parents. Teachers thus bear a responsibility to acquire the skills to support LGBTQI learners. Still, most LGBTQI learners experiencing violence say their teachers rarely intervene when there is verbal harassment.

The best way to translate policies into reality would be to introduce training programs for teachers and other school staff on LGBTQI awareness and inclusion. However, our findings indicate that only 26 Council of Europe member states have introduced teacher training, but mostly on a voluntary basis and in an unsystematic way. This is far from good enough. And this is when you, teachers and education service professionals, come into play.

Tips for teachers and school staff

Achieving inclusive education is a process that, although involving players from different levels, can be ignited by you or any teacher or school staff2.

You do not have to wait for teacher training to become compulsory to implement strategies and small actions on the individual level to eventually
pave the way towards a more inclusive educational environment. You will quickly realise that your window of action is broader than you would assume.

Many young LGBTQI people recall one teacher who affirmed them and made them feel safe; you can be that teacher. Even in a hostile environment, you can create a realm of safety for your students no matter how they identify.

First, inform yourself about LGBTQI identities and engage with local and national LGBTQI organisations who can help. Many organisations are currently training school staff on how to better protect and promote the rights of their LGBTQI students; get in touch with them and see if they can support you and your school.

If there are other teachers interested in your school or union, you can petition for training. Next, check out your school's

policies; be aware of where protections are included or are lacking. Most importantly, have a zero-tolerance for SOGIGESC-based bullying in your classroom.

What you teach and the way you teach it is also all the more important as all learners' experiences should be reflected in your curriculum so that they feel represented and valued.

This can be achieved by embedding various identities in your learning materials and adopting an intersectional approach at all times [one that combines SOGIGESC with other identity traits such as socioeconomic status, (dis)ability, race and ethnicity, age, religion and beliefs, etc.].

All subjects taught in school can foster inclusion: if you are a history teacher, highlight the identities of LGBTQI historical figures; if you are a maths teacher, include various identities in your mathematical problems.

Keep it going!

These recommendations are only a fraction of what you can do to foster inclusive education within your educational environment. Further information, guidelines and exercises on inclusive education and how to prevent and react to SOGIGESC-based violence can be found
on our Resources for Teachers page: education-index.org/resources

As leaders of the classroom, teachers have an incommensurable power to equip learners with the right tools to build more inclusive societies. But being the first step towards positive change can only be achieved if you keep on challenging your knowledge and educating yourself.

And I would like to seize this opportunity to thank you for bearing such important responsibilities, especially at a time when COVID-19 has exacerbated the manifold pressure that weighs upon your shoulders.

Footnotes:

1 Azerbaijan, Belarus, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Russia.

2 The advice to teachers and school staff members provided in this article is highly dependent on national laws and policies, and I am well aware that teachers who are based in countries having implemented anti-propaganda laws or other anti-LGBTQI measures are not in a position

to safely advocate for LGBTQI inclusive education. Never hesitate to ask for advice from LGBTQI organisations and professionals in your country on how to address these issues in your local context and reality.

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