

"How schools can become less homophobic"

I am Peter Dankmeijer and I am director of GALE, the Global Alliance for LGBT Education, and of the Dutch expertise center for schools and sexual diversity EduDivers. I have been working for 35 years on education about sexual diversity and advising schools, local authorities and governments about LGBT inclusive school policies.

The GEEC matrix

When I advise schools I usually use the "GEEC matrix" we developed for that purpose. "GEEC" stands for Goals, Environment, Education and Care. These are the four pillars of a good school safety policy.

First, the school needs to become aware how (un)safe the situation at school is for all students including LGBTI students. Based on such an assessment, the school can formulate explicit goals to improve the situation. Without goals that are carried by the school, any intervention is destined to be well-willing, but incidental.

The second pillar is the environment. Every school has rules and should have an anti-bullying policy. An anti-bullying policy is not just about forbidding bullying. It is also about discussing rules with students, creating a welcoming and warm atmosphere and making the school building a safe and homely environment rather than a concrete grey education factory. It also means that teachers and other staff have a common idea about how to deal with a-social behaviors wherever they appear.

The third pillar is education: we need to educate the students and the teachers what good social behavior means and how you perform it. This is an essential part of being a good citizen and it should be integrated in the entire curriculum. Single lessons about homosexuality are not enough. The school needs to have constant attention for pro-social behavior from class 1 until the diploma. This is what we call a spiral curriculum.

Finally, the fourth pillar is care or student care. Each school has a system to support students that face challenges. From research it is obvious that LGBTI students have a high risk of being socially excluded and being stressed, with negative impacts on their learning results. This may even lead to school drop-out and suicide attempts. The school needs to be aware of this and take measures to support LGBTI students. But it is not just LGBTI students that need support. Maybe we would say that homophobic students actually need more support: they have real behavioral problems, which often go back to a lack of empathy, extreme needs to conform to peer pressure and inadequate coping skills. These problems not only create conflict and unsafety in school, but will also limit the social performance and career of homophobic students after they graduate.

When I present the GEEC matrix to school, I stress that changing the school is not a digital process: you cannot put safety "on" or "off". Each school has to go through a innovation process to get safer. If we want to put this in a simple way, we could distinguish between three or four phases.

In the first or zero phase nobody does anything, or single teachers or students undertake individual interventions, like inviting peer educators of the local LGBTI organization.

In the second phase, the school management starts to think about how to improve policy. They do a needs assessment , decide it has to become a priority, make a plan and implement a few first measures.

In the third phase, the ideas and implementation of interventions are shared widely with the whole staff. Several teachers experiment in their classes and different interventions are adapted to suit the school.

In the fourth phase, the students get intensively involved. They are not just taught passively about sexual diversity, but also actively come with their own ideas for projects. Maybe they will start a Gay/Straight Alliance (a group of gay and straight students coming together for social purposes but maybe also for activism).

The GEEC matrix

	Individual action	Manager action	Team action	Student action
Goals				
Environment				
Education				
Care				

After filling in the GEEC matrix, the participants introduce themselves and reflect on the learning experience they had while filling in the matrix .

Goal setting

I will now if you give you a little bit more information about what we know from research on how schools can change and how to make schools safer. Setting goals is crucial to initiate an innovation. Schools are used to focus on knowledge, but such goals are not adequate to promote social behavior. A right attitude is essential. Students that have a resistance to certain topics, for example sexual diversity, are not able to absorb knowledge and are not willing to learn skills on how to deal with sexual diversity. However, setting attitudinal goals seems to be a problem for schools. Some teachers think attitudinal goals are like

brainwashing, while some principals fear a political debate about different ideologies with parents and students. Setting behavioral objectives may be less controversial, some examples are:

- students sit next to LGBT or I students
- students are friends with LGBT or I students
- students make school assignments together with LGBT or I students
- students share a room during a school camp with LGBT or I students
- students support LGBT or I students when they are bullied or discriminated
- students work on a safe, warm and inclusive school environment which includes LGBT or I students

Even conservative Christian schools will have difficulty to disagree with such goals. Who wants to support or allow explicit social exclusion at school?

Rainbow Keys for effective schools

In the United States and in the Netherlands, some criteria have been developed on what type of interventions work to make a school safe. They quite resemble each other. In the Netherlands such criteria for a high impact school policy have been published under the name "Ten Rainbow Keys":

Criteria for adequate school goal setting

1. The school has assessed the situation the situation of LGBTI students
2. The school has a vision on teasing, bullying and discrimination
3. The school has a vision on inclusive citizenship

Criteria for adequate environmental policy

4. The school has agreements about pro-social behavior, including to LGBTI students
5. The school is consequent in dealing with negative behavior, including to LGBTI students
6. The school and takes action to promote and support self-expression at school

Criteria for an adequate curriculum and teaching

7. The school teaches basic skills for pro-social behavior and citizenship
8. The schools offers attention for sexual diversity in a spiral curriculum

Criteria for adequate student care

9. The school has an adequate system for student support including for LGBTI students and homophobic students
10. The school involves students in enhancing school safety and quality

The ten rainbow keys have been developed by Dutch national coalition of LGBT and mainstream education organizations to clarify for schools what they need to do. The rainbow

keys are also part of an interactive Internet test which school can use to assess the quality of their own school policy and the next steps they could take.

Coaching a school to become more safe and inclusive

Several scientists have done research on how organizations change and innovate. The most well-known are Everett Rogers ("Diffusion of innovations") and John Kotter ("The heart of change"). From these researches it becomes clear that most successful innovations are made in three phases: creating urgency, engaging, and sustaining.

In the first phase leaders of organizations become aware that a change is needed. Such a sense of urgency can be achieved by showing there is a problem, with statistics, but also on the emotional level by telling stories. It is also necessary that the school leaders see how the problems relate to the core mission of the school and how solutions can improve the school as a whole and not just to solve a "small" "alien" problem.

In the second phase teachers and other staff start to experiment with improving the school. They give lessons about sexual diversity, they coach LGBTI students and deal adequately with homophobic students, and there is discussion in the team how to coordinate all these interventions in a joint strategy. Teachers may need training and supervision. When the first interventions succeed and other teachers hear of them, the more insecure teachers will also start to experiment and finally even reluctant teachers will engage to some extent. When over 60% off the staff has engaged, the innovation is no longer completely dependent on external coaching, pushing and monitoring of the progress.

When the experiments have resulted in a series of good practices, the good practices need to be sustained by being integrated and anchored in the regular school policy. To make sure the attention does not falter, anti-bullying policies need to be enriched with mentioning sexual diversity explicitly, it needs to be documented how sexual diversity is integrated in a spiral curriculum about social behavior, citizenship and sexuality, and the school needs to communicate to new students, new staff and parents how they deal with these issues and what they expect of them.

Now let's explore how in Baden-Württemberg such innovation processes can be started. There probably are already some incidental interventions, like peer education, sexual education, and maybe teacher training focused on diversity. What is the current impact of these interventions and how can you build on them to start the greater organizational change in schools that is needed to create a real safe and inclusive environment.

Peter Dankmeijer, 7 July 2015