Published in final edited form as:

J Adolesc. 2017 April ; 56: 107–112. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2017.02.005.

“Kicked out”: LGBTQ youths’ bathroom experiences and preferences

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Abstract

Attention toward who can use which gender binary, multi-stall bathroom has brought to the forefront, once again, the ways in which youth are supported or marginalized. No study has documented sexual and gender minority youths’ experiences with and perspectives about bathrooms. We collected qualitative data in 2014-2015. Participants were 25 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth, aged 14-19, in the United States and Canada. Their comments describe first- and second-hand bathroom experiences, identify advocacy efforts, and highlight the roles of peers and adults in making bathrooms safe (or not). Youth emphasized the importance of gender-neutral bathrooms in fostering a sense of safety and inclusivity. Adult support and gay-straight alliances (GSAs) were important contributors to a welcoming environment and fostered advocacy efforts for gender-neutral bathrooms. We encourage purposeful inclusivity of youths’ voices when enacting bathroom-specific policies and legislation that directly influence their health and well-being.

Keywords

LGBTQ youth; safety; bathroom legislation; schools; gay-straight alliances

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HUMAN PARTICIPANT PROTECTION

Study approvals were obtained from the University of Minnesota (1309S43822), the University of British Columbia (H14-00931), and San Diego State University (1726093) Institutional Review Boards.

From politicians and parents to school boards and media commentators, there has been no shortage of opinions, posturing, legislating, and litigating about who can use a bathroom in a primary or secondary (K-12) school setting (Scherer, 2016; Emma, 2016; Yan, Ansari, & Newsome, 2016; Grinberg, 2016; Porterfield, 2016; Eilperin & Brown, 2016). Exemplified in the polarized use of language (e.g., “gender confused” versus “gender questioning”) during debates about bathroom rights, particularly for transgender youth, many stakeholders have demonstrated capacity to enter into conflict that quickly seems to lose sight of those who are at the center of the experience: the youth who study, eat, play, and use the bathroom together every day. With the exception of an academic journal editorial on bathrooms written by a transgender physician (Laylor, 2016), most perspectives heard to date have been adults, particularly cisgender adults (i.e., individuals whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth). This is despite the reality that the people affected most by the outcomes of these current bathroom debates and decisions are the children and adolescents who are actually using the bathrooms in schools. The New York Times (2016) is the only major U.S.-based media outlet, to our knowledge, to feature the voices of eight U.S.-based secondary (high school) students, specifically summarizing their diverse opinions as presented in their Facebook posts, in response to the Obama administration’s directive to public schools in May 2016 to support transgender students in their school bathroom choice.

Research has demonstrated that LGBTQ youth face significantly more violence and harassment from peers than straight, cisgender youth, both in general and specific to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health Issues and Research Gaps and Opportunities, 2011; Saewyc, Konishi, Rose, & Homma, 2014; Taylor et al., 2011; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). LGBT youth’s experiences with harassment have been linked to skipping schools because of safety concerns (e.g., Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2013; Taylor et al., 2011), which can have wide-ranging consequences for academic achievement, psychosocial wellbeing, and progress after graduation. According to 7,898 LGBT adolescents surveyed in the U.S. between April and August, 2013 (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2013), LGBT youth perceive a wider variety of spaces within a school as unsafe than straight cisgender youth, and bathrooms and locker rooms are often avoided, perceived as the least safe spaces in school. In another survey completed by 923 trans youth who lived in Canada, students voiced similar concerns (Veale et al., 2015). As schools begin to implement programs and policies aimed at making schools safer for LGBT youth (e.g., Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006), a deeper understanding of LGBT youth’s experiences with bathroom safety is missing, and a recent literature search yielded nothing providing youth voice specific to bathrooms. This study provides student voice and response to first- and second-hand experiences with bathrooms in schools and other public spaces, importantly, from LGBTQ youth.

Method

This qualitative study was conducted as part of a mixed methods project examining LGBTQ youths’ environments and resources [blinded study name here]. We used a go-along interview strategy whereby the interviewer and respondent are encouraged to move around, visiting and visualizing locations described in the interview (Bergeron, Paquette, &

Poullaouec-Gonidec, 2014; Carpiano, 2009; Garcia, Eisenberg, Frerich, Lechner, & Lust, 2012; Sunderland, Bristed, Gudes, Boddy, & Da Silva, 2012). The study methods are explained in thorough detail elsewhere [see Blinded for review, 2017]; a brief summary is provided below.

Participants and Recruitment

Sixty-six youth in the United States and Canada were recruited from secondary (high) schools and LGBTQ youth-serving organizations; direct and snowball sampling approaches were used, with staff from the organizations often talking first with youth and then referring the youth to the study recruiter for more information if they had interest in the study. Of the 66 participating youth, 25 (38%) mentioned bathrooms during their interviews and were included in the current analysis. Similar to the total sample, the 25 were 14-19 years of age ($M = 16$), mostly of White or European race ($n = 17$), and represented a diversity of geographic locations (e.g., urban, suburban, rural) and sexual orientations (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer). Our sub-sample had a larger proportion of youth identifying as trans/fluid/gender neutral/“other” than the overall sample ($n = 13$; 52% versus 32%). Protocols were approved by IRBs at the [insert three institution names blinded for review]; two of the three institutions waived the requirement for parental consent. The third required partial parental consent, as follows (1) for youth under the age of 18 who were willing to have their parents approached, parental consent was sought and obtained (this occurred for 16 out of 17 of the minor youth in this state), and (2) any minor riding in a car as part of the go-along interview required parental consent because this was determined to be at “greater than minimal risk” (see [blinded for review, 2017] for additional details on the methodology).

Data Collection

Interviews took place in British Columbia (BC), Massachusetts (MA), and Minnesota (MN) between November 2014 and July 2015. Six open-ended questions were asked in semi-structured, one-to-one interviews to address the youth’s environment (e.g., “If another LGBT friend was visiting you here and needed help with something or had a problem, where would you recommend they go to get care or support?”). All interviews were audio-recorded, and lasted between 35 and 110 minutes. Among the 25 participants who mentioned bathrooms at some point during the interview (or washrooms, which is the commonly used term in Canada), comments ranged from 1-5 per participant ($M = 2.5$).

Data Analysis

All 66 transcripts were uploaded to Atlas.ti to facilitate coding organization and data management and coded, generating a codebook that included five types of bathroom-related codes (e.g. referring to the presence/absence of safe bathrooms, need for gender neutral bathrooms, lobbying school administrator for gender-neutral bathroom); these quotes were not specific to one interview question but were found in youth statements throughout the interview.

The 62 quotes referencing bathrooms, from 25 participants, were then analyzed using the following secondary coding process (Saldana, 2009). The first author independently open

coded the quotes, identifying and labeling specific characteristics of the quotes, such as being a positive or negative bathroom experience, the context of gender-neutral bathroom mentions, students' actions specific to bathrooms, and the actions of others such as school administrators or parents. Then, another qualitative analyst on the research team reviewed the coding and provided feedback regarding the code organization. Finally, the authorship team reviewed the final coded dataset, and affirmed the representativeness of the categorized quotes provided below.

Results

Youth shared clear examples of first- and second-hand experiences with bathrooms that were distinctly positive or negative; youth emphasized the importance of gender-neutral bathrooms as representations of safe spaces and advocacy successes. Particularly in school settings as part of their gay-straight alliance (GSA)¹ involvement, youth relayed many stories of advocacy for new and reconfigured bathrooms to be safe spaces. Participants' self-descriptions of their sexual orientation and gender identity are given with representative quotes below.

Gender-Neutral Bathrooms, Please

In school and community settings, the youth overwhelmingly associated positive bathroom experiences with those that involved a gender-neutral or single stall public bathroom, as this youth (16-year-old, female, pansexual, BC) shared, "Gender neutral washrooms, that's like a huge one. I'm, like, 300% more likely to like that place." Whether a gym, community center, coffee shop, religious institution, or drop-in youth center, the availability of a gender-neutral bathroom, and indicative signage, was associated with positive sentiments toward that organization and feeling comfortable in the setting. A youth (17-year-old, trans male, asexual, MN) shared positively about bathroom efforts and signage in their church, "They got a bathroom that was for all genders. They were already pretty transgender friendly, but they are definitely trying a lot harder now... it says 'all-gender restroom.'"

Gender-neutral bathrooms in school were praised and advocated for in their absence. A young person (17-year-old, trans male, asexual, MN) shared, "Actually my school is super LGBTQ+ friendly... they have gender-neutral bathrooms all the time, and they're getting a single stall for people who don't want to use the [standard bathrooms]." Another student (16-year-old, female, pansexual, BC) emphasized the importance of promoting the use of a gender-neutral bathroom by all students so that no one is characterized a certain way: "we don't want, like, people who are trans or non-binary to go in there and people to assume their gender because they're going in there." The same student went on to describe specific strategies that were being used to encourage all students to use the gender-neutral bathroom, "I'm trying to make it really comfortable for people by, like, it has, like, a little basket of, like, pads and tampons, a little thing of condoms."

¹A gay-straight alliance (GSA) is a school and/or student-run club, primarily in North American middle schools, high schools, colleges and universities. The goal of most gay-straight alliances is to provide a safe and supportive environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth and their straight allies.

In the absence of student-centered gender-neutral bathrooms, youth shared about using staff bathrooms, or single stall bathrooms such as those found in the nurse's office at school. There were a few positive first-hand experiences related to these types of bathrooms, such as shared by this young person (16-year-old, "other" gender, queer, BC), "I also went to the school counselor and asked them which bathroom I can use if I don't want to use the boys or the girls. And they just let me use the staff ones. And people have seen me going in and out and nobody asked questions." These positive experiences accessing an available non-gendered bathroom, as an alternative to gendered student bathrooms, were repeatedly characterized by the presence of a supportive adult in the school who was approachable and willing to help the student negotiate through bathroom-related decision-making and stressors.

Bathroom Challenges are Real, Really

A genderqueer identifying young person (16-year-old, genderqueer, queer, BC) emphasized the challenges with living in a gendered society by using a bathroom example, "I guess in everyday -- day-to-day life being genderqueer is definitely--presents more barriers than being--than having a queer sexual orientation because there's so many necessities that are gender based like washrooms."

Negative experiences with bathrooms ranged from being uncomfortable (e.g., awkward, misunderstood) to being unsafe or scary, even though actual violence or overt threats while using a bathroom were not described by any of the young people. Often, first-hand negative bathroom experiences were those that occurred in non-gender-neutral, multi-stall bathrooms, such as this uncomfortable experience (18-year-old, genderqueer, lesbian, MA),

In that library right over there, I went into the bathroom there, and this is a while ago. Maybe I was a freshman. I went into the bathroom there, did my business. I was washing my hands. This woman came out. She was maybe like in between her 30's or 40's somewhere, oldish but not really. She kind of stood there and watched me wash my hands. She was like, 'this is the women's room.' I was like, 'I'm a girl.' She was like, 'oh'. She just stood there and let me leave, but she was just... she was really gross.

When asked what community-based agencies, such as community centers or coffee shops, should have, a young person (16-year-old, female, pansexual, MN) readily mentioned gender-neutral bathrooms and explained the underlying reasoning, using first and second-hand examples of being uncomfortable and afraid:

A lot more gender-neutral bathrooms... ... just more of it, because I know of a lot of people who are LGBT who are like, 'I'm scared to go in the bathroom because I'm scared the other people are going to harm me or judge me.' I never go to the bathroom in a public place because I'm just uncomfortable anyway, but I'm extra-uncomfortable that they're going to be like [makes face], 'There's a gay in the bathroom!'

Advocating for Gender-Neutral Bathrooms

Many of these young people had led or been involved in advocacy efforts to make school safe and “queer-friendly”, which for them meant ensuring the presence of a gender-neutral bathroom. A young person (16-year-old, female, bisexual, BC) shared her strong preference for a unisex bathroom, particularly for her “trans friends”:

I have a few trans friends and they’re like, they’ll get kicked out of either bathroom... I wish it was just, like, unisex... ‘Cause that way you’re not going to get made fun of, like, you’re not going to get kicked out, ‘cause you can’t. ‘Cause you are, like, everyone’s allowed in there.

In addition to describing what they wanted, many of the youth talked about the ways in which they advocated. Multiple participants described gay-straight alliance (GSA) group efforts to petition for gender-neutral bathrooms, with varying degrees of success associated with supportive (or not) administrators, teachers, counselors, and other school staff. A 16-year-old, “other” gender and queer participant from BC shared about GSA successes related to bathrooms and noted the importance of administrative support:

...and making things within the school and community more queer friendly. Like, we just got a gender-neutral washroom in our school. ... and our administrators were really awesome with that so--I believe--we’re definitely one of the first, if not the first, in [city name].

When asked what made the administrators really awesome, the same young person elaborated:

they worked together really well, and they saw that--they understood the importance of it. And they made it happen and usually there’s a lot more, kind of administrative stuff that needs to happen with it. But they skimmed over that as much as they could for now so that we could get a place to pee.

Most advocacy efforts that were described involved GSAs at the schools, but participants also offered examples of opportunities to advocate in the community and at the state legislature. One youth (18-year-old, genderqueer, lesbian, MA) described indirect advocacy efforts in the arts, specifically, use of theatre to raise awareness about bathroom challenges, “one of the scenes was about trans people in bathrooms and how even if you’re a woman, but you have a penis, you’re not allowed into the restroom because people are stupid.” Another student talked about bringing the bathroom topic to the state legislature to increase awareness of youths’ perspectives and needs. Importantly, adults played a critical role in facilitating these students’ advocacy efforts outside of the school setting.

Discussion

With over half the states in the U.S. suing over the rights of transgender students to access the bathroom of their choice (Emma, 2016), it is plausible the debate will find its way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Central to the discussions are the rights of sexual and gender minority youth, yet to date their voices have not been heard from directly, or have been overshadowed by parents, policy-makers and other adults. In this exploratory study with 25 sexual and

gender minority youth, we found that they had concerns surrounding using a multi-stall bathroom in school, and that their preferences leaned strongly toward increasing accessibility to gender-neutral and single stall bathrooms. However, when these options were made available only to sexual and gender minority youth, specifically transgender youth, such as tucked away in a school basement, or only in the nurse's office, there was frustration, feelings of being further isolated and stigmatized, and even expressed concern about safety accessing a remotely located bathroom. Importantly, although approximately half the sample included in the present analysis identified as trans, genderqueer or a similar label, cisgender LGBTQ participants expressed similar views in solidarity with their trans friends.

Indeed, the ideal scenario for many of these youth was a bathroom solution positioned within a welcoming school environment. Active gay-straight alliances (GSAs), provided peer and adult support along with a mechanism for many youths to advocate for supportive bathroom policies and physical changes, such as relabeling or constructing a gender-neutral bathroom; this finding was congruent with the literature, which documents extensive benefits for all youth when there is a GSA in school (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011; Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013; Porta et al.; Saewyc et al, 2014).

Given our findings, and the extant literature on supports for LGBTQ youth health, we propose the following strategies to ensure youth voices are heard and listened to in decision-making processes, and to act upon what we have heard from these youth regarding bathroom spaces. Findings strongly support ensuring that every youth can identify at least one supportive adult accessible in school; research has demonstrated that sexual minority youth who believe they can talk to a school staff member were less likely than their peers without that perceived support to report suicide attempts or being threatened at school (Goodenow et al, 2006). Schools should designate a point person to act as a liaison between LGBTQ youth and administration. This person should be knowledgeable regarding how to support LGBTQ youth; while it can be beneficial when that adult is also a member of the LGBTQ community, research demonstrates that most important to youth is connectedness to a caring adult (Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993). Adults play a critical role in creating an accessible and safe environment. They also contribute to the success of advocacy efforts in and beyond school settings, at every phase from planning and development to implementation, evaluation, and follow-up for numerous activities such as educational events around safety and inclusivity, and establishing accessible gender-neutral bathrooms. When youth are worried about having to use a bathroom or needing to change into a sports or band uniform, it can be difficult for that youth to be a citizen operating at full capacity and ability in school, after-school activities, and in the community.

It is important that health professionals, policy makers, politicians, school administration, and parents recognize that LGBTQ youth have voices that should be heard when bathroom-related decisions, policies, and legislation are being considered. Their voices are grounded in lived experiences that have included micro-aggressive behaviors (e.g., stares, questioning if they are in the 'correct' bathroom). Among LGBT youth and young adults, microaggressions have been linked to a range of health disparities around mental, physical and social health and wellbeing (Nadal, Issa, Leon, Meterko, Wideman, & Wong, 2011;

Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012). Improving feelings of safety for LGBT youth is one part of a larger strategy to improve health equity, and LGBT youth have concrete ideas for how to do that. Importantly, being purposeful about hearing voices includes recognizing that there are differential levels of social power associated with who is speaking; trans youth voices do not yet have the social power of their peers, so it is paramount their voices are sought with intention.

Limitations

Our findings need to be considered in the context of some study limitations. The parent study focus was on characteristics of resources and supports accessed by LGBTQ youth, not specifically on their experiences with bathrooms. This means when youth talked about bathrooms they did so because it was something important to them when answering a related but not direct question; it also means that we did not get bathroom related quotes from every study participant nor were we purposeful in systematically asking follow-up questions about bathrooms because this was beyond the scope of the primary research question. Of the 66 youth in the parent study, 25 talked about bathrooms; 41 did not, and therefore we are unable to conclude anything regarding their opinions, or reasons why they did not discuss bathrooms. In addition, the voices of straight cisgender youth would have contributed additional insights, but the sampling strategy for the parent study was not designed to include these youths. For example, straight cisgender youths' voices would have contributed to understanding the ways in which they are viewing and accessing gender-neutral bathrooms in schools that have them.

Public Health Implications

While advocacy efforts from youth are important, adults should lead the way. Youth in this study were clear that a bathroom specifically designated for trans or gender diverse youth was alienating and did not improve their feelings of safety. Public health professionals, including community-based organization and school-based administrators, should, in consultation LGBTQ youth, ensure the availability of gender-neutral bathrooms in public spaces.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research reported in this publication was supported by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development of the National Institutes of Health under Award Number R01HD078470. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-for-profit sectors.

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