



Marginalized Youth Voice in Asia Pacific Shaping the Future of Education

Youth Consultation on Identifying Challenges in Education and Future
Education Expectations in LGBTIQ Youth Community in Sri Lanka.



COALITION FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CED)



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Conducted by:
Coalition for Educational Development
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1.0 Introduction

1.1 LGBTIQ Community and Legal Background in Sri Lanka

Same-sex relations are still criminalized under Sri Lanka's Penal Code. In 2016, Sri Lanka's Supreme Court condemned the laws, but no movement has been made to repeal them. The Penal Code, in addition to Sri Lanka's vaguely worded Vagrancy Ordinances, provide legal coverage for police targeting, harassment, and extortion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer or questioning their sexual identity (LGBTIQ) people. Prosecutions under these laws are uncommon, yet they contribute to widespread antipathy towards LGBTIQ people. Public officials have stated that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity is implicitly banned under the Sri Lankan Constitution, but LGBTIQ people regularly experience discrimination. The National Human Rights Action Plan for 2017-2021 failed to explicitly protect against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The Gender Recognition Circular was issued in 2016 (1). The process was implemented the same year and appears to be working smoothly. Legal gender recognition can be obtained within 3-5 days, with the new identity card containing no gender history. Public officials have mixed reactions to LGBTIQ issues. While some politicians disparage LGBTIQ identities as an illness or an "import from Western culture," other politicians have begun to express tentative support for the human rights of LGBTIQ people. Media portrayals of LGBTIQ issues are often inaccurate, which reinforces the general public's view that LGBTIQ people threaten culture, religion, and traditional values of Sri Lanka (2-4). It has been reported that around 60,000 LGBTIQ members are being organized and active in different ways around the country (2,5).

1.2 LGBTIQ Community in Education in Sri Lanka

Since, Sri Lanka has ratified core international human rights treaties that obligate the government to protect the rights of individuals against violence, discrimination, and other type of abuses by both private actors and government officials and agents, a continues effort has been made from several organizations to protect the rights of the LGBTIQ community. However, the focus on ‘education engagement challenges’ and ‘strategies to overcome’ have not been specifically researched on the ground level. The findings directly related to the education barriers are poorly available in the literature. Most of the research pieces have developed with anecdotal evidences or main focus was to research on mistreatment, and discrimination accessing employment, housing, and health care (2,4–6). Thus, these study findings will give a great opportunity to fill the gap in the research world by showcasing the reality of the LGBTIQ educational engagement.

2.0 Objectives of the Consultation

- To understand the challenges in education faced by LGBTIQ community in Sri Lanka
- To understand their expectations of education structures/ systems
- In longer term, to assist relevant authorities and policy makers to make informed decisions that ensure equitable access for education opportunities for marginalized youth

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Profile of Participants

Total 23 LGBTIQ youths who have organized themselves and are working closely with civil societies for their rights at different levels were participated in this participatory workshop. Participants are the permanent residents of Rathnapura district of Sri Lanka. They were highly diversified in terms of their gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, first- language, age (between 21-32 years), educational background and current educational engagement. Also, it was observed that their level of empowerment as youth LGBTIQs is varying from motivational/ encouraging level to the decision making level.

3.2 Study Design

A 1-day workshop was designed with three face-to-face sessions. The introductory speech was made by the chairman of the Coalition for Educational Development. Subsequently, all the participants were well informed about the objectives and process of the sessions by the National coordinator of Coalition for Educational Development (CED). Furthermore, usefulness of the findings to advocate the different local and international platforms was highlighted. Facilitator was able to build the rapport between the participants and the facilitators.

The sessions were conducted by an artist who has experience in working with youth. The representations of the CED also equally contributed as facilitators to maintain the quality of the program. A designated documenter was assigned to take detailed notes of the activities and processes.

3.3 Challenges and Limitation of the process

- Limited time frame and budget allocation could be considered as a challenge in completing a quality study. Timeline was one week to design, coordinate, conduct and reporting of the study.
- The sensitiveness of the topic, and the uniqueness of participants made some limitations to make a deeper analysis of the findings. Facilitator ensured participant's privacy, and recognized value for their life experiences. Therefore, findings did not come out as individual case stories, but as group work/storylines.
- LGBTIQ community is not accepted culturally and socially in Sri Lanka. Therefore, building a friendly environment to express their thoughts and experiences had been a difficult task within a one-day workshop. Considerable time was required to create a more comfortable environment and building the rapport between the facilitator and participants.
- Expressing emotions through fine art lines and symbols requires certain level of artistic skills. Developing these skills within few hours was substantially challenging.
- By considering privacy and confidentiality of the participants, individual profiles were not considered.
- The group is limited to one geographical area- Rathnapura district. Also, it was observed that all the participants belong to the mid/lower socio-economical class of the society. Their experiences and perspectives are attached to their socio-economic category.

- Moreover, assuming they have/had attended in the government schools/universities or vocational training institutes, their experiences, exposure, empowerment and expectations will be differ than a group who are/were attended in private/international schools/training centers. Therefore, the findings may not represent the country situation sufficiently.
- Facilitator make an effort to reduce the mental stress while translating the emotions into arts and elaborating the storylines by themselves.

3.4 Strengths of the process

The youth group were able to develop their skills in drawings and paintings within a short time period. Therefore, they were able to express their feelings through pictures and drawings extensively.

- There was a rapid progress of the art work which was developed by the youth groups. In the demonstration session, they practiced with the support of the facilitator and during the rest of the sessions, they were using the techniques extensively.
- The main facilitator and the team had been exposed with diversified youth related issues. Therefore, it was comfortable to move forward with this group of LGBTIQ youths.

3.5 Conducting the workshop

First session:

The session started with an open discussion on the negative and positive experiences in their lives /education journey. Also, guidance to think 'out of box' scenarios made a good foundation for this session. In this discussion they identified and presented various elements and this approach created a nurturing ground to discuss these issues openly up to a certain extent. Besides, these discussion themes helped the facilitator to introduce and develop some basic symbols, colors and lines which could indicate those experiences in a different language.

During this discussion, they articulated various positive and negative social experiences that they have been faced throughout their life journey such as discrimination, negligence, violence, abuse, bullying, mental stress, encouragements, discouragements, value additions, gaining and eluding opportunities, acceptances, rejections, possessing, dissatisfaction and some health issues.

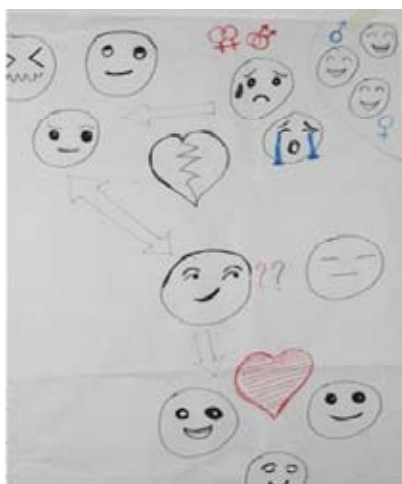
The key objective of this preliminary art work session was to capacitate the participants to sharpen their thoughts and translate them into basic fine arts on paper-based medium. In this session, facilitator was discussed and stretched out different feelings and their intensity using the basic free lines and different color combinations. Moreover, within this session, facilitator was enhanced the thinking capacities of the participants and collectively focused their thinking on education challenges.

Subsequently, within smaller groups (4-5 youths), participants developed their own free arts indicating different feelings with colors based on their imaginary story. For this group work, there were no boundaries, yet it helped to translate their thinking lines into a storyline. The active engagement of youths throughout the session created a strong foundation for the second part.

Arts of demonstration exercise: art work by the facilitator:



Demonstration exercise- Arts done by participants:



Second session:

Further in the smaller sub-groups, participants initiated their discussions through their experiences or observations different levels of educational challenges which they have faced so far. They successfully developed some colorful arts/storylines and presented it to the audience for wider discussions. Facilitator supported them to reveal the untold storylines through the participatory approaches.

Third session:

As the final stage of the workshop, participants developed some creative art posters to showcase their educational expectations broadly. It was realized that at the end of the third session they had made a good progress in terms of focusing on the topic, translating the expressions and using appropriate symbols and colors. Also, the participants demonstrated the good presentation skills by facilitating their own group work and by pitching to the audience in an active manner.

These art posters were pasted on the wall and a gallery walk was made by all the participants.

4.0 Finding

Challengers faced in the education sector

Group 01: Storyline

"Girl was told by the teacher that not to mix with other girls. Teacher was acting like she needs to protect other girls from these spoilt girls" – Group 01 presenter



Group 01 participants developed an art to showcase how a lady teacher advised a girl student who desires other girls. When the teacher asked that girl to not to mix with other girls, she was extremely disappointed. Continues discrimination by the teacher, lack of support for studies, breakups, and constant labelling and bullying by peer girls triggered the stress level of the girl student. This directly affected her engagement with extra- curricular activities and curriculum based education at school.

Group 02: Storyline



Group 02 participants explained about a university girl student who is uncertain about her sexual orientation resulting frequent unsuccessful relationships with her boyfriends. Societal judgments and peer discrimination is making her more isolated from the society. Also she is in a severe mental stress with more frequent suicidal thoughts. Later, she overcame the problems with the proper medical guidance and counselling sessions.



Group 03 explained a story about a university boy student who is not having any desires for girls. He is often questioned by his friends and family about a love affair which is more common among university students. This resulted him to become isolated from the society and drop outs from university education.

Group 04: Storyline

“Evil society made him to addict for alcohol and other substance. Finally, he paid off by sacrificing his school life” Group 04 presenter



Participants elaborated their experiences through a story about a male student from school who liked to be with his girl classmates. He is always discriminated by rest of the male friends and bullied by them frequently. Being a target of bullying made a major impact on his school engagement, achievement, and test scores. Besides, teachers treated him differently. Unanswerable questions were pilling-up around him. Unbearable stress was making him to drop out from the school. Isolation from the family and the society influenced him to become addicted which triggers his stress level more often.

Group 05: Storyline

"He Wishes to choose the uniform what he likes. Sadly, School guidelines didn't allow him"- Group 5



This group art illustrated about a school who desires to conducted himself as girl. Within the school he is facing problems when to use the washroom

uniform. Demarcation on toilets and school uniform as 'male' and 'female' makes him uncomfortable. Moreover, he is not confident enough to be present in the school assembly in front of a wider audience. School management does not care about his needs and he needs to be adhere to the management guidelines. These incidents forced him to be isolated within the classroom. Furthermore, teachers escalated his isolation and treated him differently. He feels angry, disappointing and stressful in the classroom environment.

5.0 Conclusion: Education Challenges

It was clear that LGBTIQ youth who face bullying and exclusion at school suffer a range of negative impacts. As documented in this report, they feel stressed due to the bullying and harassment they experience, and the stress affects their ability to study and sometimes lead them to skip or stay home from school. Furthermore, it was evident that LGBTIQ youths had been experiencing the mental stress and trauma across their educational journey (from primary education to university or vocational education level).

Lack of support from the school management, teachers, parents and peers is one of the key factors which forces them to isolate themselves from the rest of the society. According to the findings, early identification and acceptance by the teachers and parents could make a huge difference for their education outcome.

Also, lack of guidance to overcome the issues, lack of availability of quality guidance at school or university level are some of the structural issues need to be considered.

Finally, the gender based school/university infrastructure facilities and provisions make them more uncomfortable. Poor attendance and attentiveness creates poor learning outcomes of LGBTIQ students and ending them with less opportunities for their education journey. On top of that poor or limited skills trap them to a certain job area by creating poor life opportunities for their future.

6.0 Findings: Future Education- Imaginations or expectations

Group 01: Comprehensive Awareness



Group 1 expected to have a sensitive education structure and social acceptance for LGBTIQ through proper awareness at school level. Since this is a sensitive topic to discuss at community/school level, they expected to have well- equipped facilitators and properly designed program series to make aware and educate school management including teachers. This sensitivity will reduce the discrimination towards LGBTIQ community.

Group 02: Stress-free Education



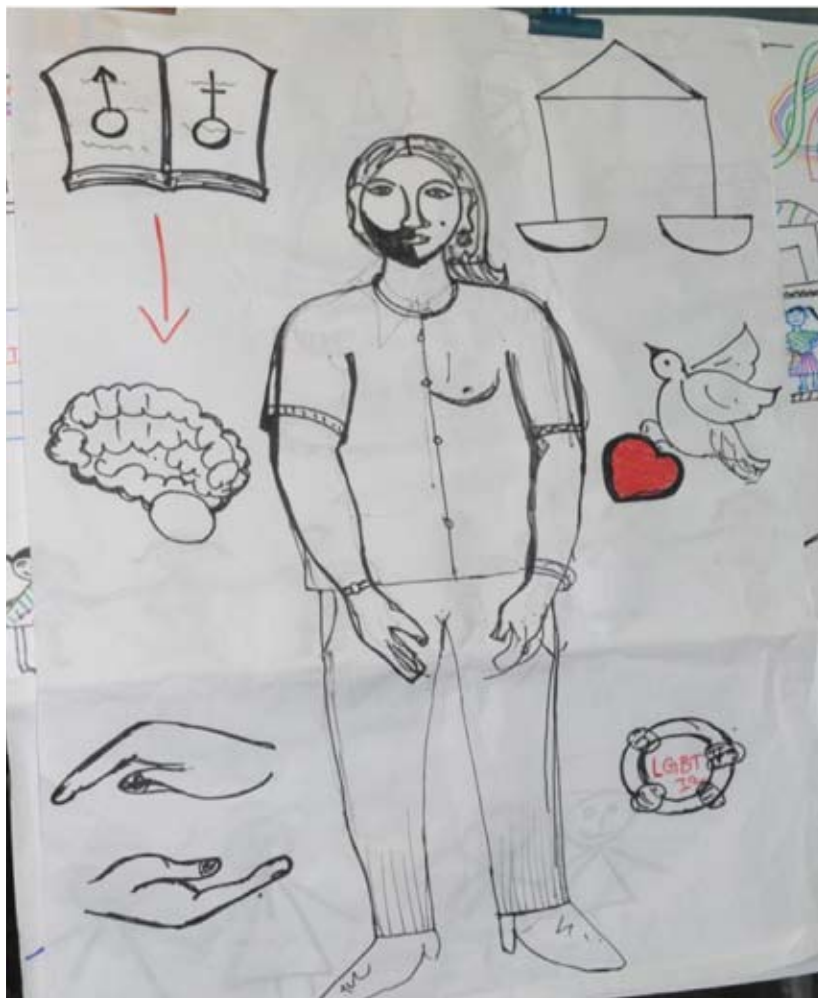
The participants of the group 02 would like to see the education journey of a LGBTIQ students as a stress-free journey. As well as, they were expecting the love, protection and acceptance from their parents, teachers and peers. They believe that well-protected and demonstrated environment will enable them to retain in the education system and provide more productive opportunities for them.

Group 03: Paradise of Equity



Group 03 imagined to have an equitable socio-educational structure in the future. This structural changes should include a strong and inclusive legal system for LGBTIQ, acceptance from different religious parties, inclusive education system and freedom to harmonize. Furthermore, they need to be certain of having this equity ant it will create strong foundation for their active engagement with education.

Group 04: Empowerment and skill development



This group would like to see how education system could pay more attention on LGBTIQ students and their needs. They also would like to have a legally protected, right based socio-educational structures/ models in the near future. They considered individual and collective empowerment and skill development concepts and approaches need to be rolled out by the government and right-based organizations.

Group 05: Robust Mental Health Support



The final group desired to have a resilient system through well-harmonized environment with rest of the community. They were anticipated robust mental support pillars at each level of education system which could guide, support and mentor the LGBTIQ students through their education cycle. Also, they need to have that mental support services for their families and educators which could educate them to be the supporters for LGBTIQ students.

6.1 Conclusion: Future Expectations

Firstly, all the groups were dreamt on stress-free education system intensively. Also, they have been illustrated what are the system changes need to be taken place near future. That includes, quality mental health services, privacy protected service accessibility and LGBTIQ inclusive education structures.

Secondly, they were seeking support from the rest of the community

including school management. Identification of their unique needs, socio-educational acceptance from the responsible people/authorities and right based approaches are the high priorities in the given Sri Lankan context.

Finally, the skill development opportunities and sustainable diversified educational pathways will secure their educational engagement even after secondary education level.

7.0 Recommendations

In an increasingly diverse society, educators and policy makers face the challenge of fostering educational environments that are inclusive and welcoming to all students and teachers. Schools and teachers must consider whether the educational context facilitates learning for all youth, including those who are LGBTIQ, as well as children of sexual-minority parents. In a pluralistic society, school administrators must also consider whether teachers, supporters or other staff who themselves may identify LGBTIQ are hindered in the workplace because of discriminatory policies, practices, or comments.

In particular, focusing on the contexts, curriculum, and policies that shape the school experiences of these students is important. Regarding school context, we acknowledge that LGBTIQ students are at risk for many problems, including exclusion from schools. Thus, government needs to make significant pledges to recognize the rights of the LGBTIQ students which should encourage them to attend school more regularly and defend themselves in instances of misinformation or harassment. Students who felt more informed will also know about the facts regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. By understanding that it is not a 'mental disorder' will be strengthened their ability to prevent discrimination and violence against themselves.

Two key indicators of school success are student achievement and overall educational attainment. Primary and secondary student success is often measured by the grades students earn, the courses they take, and the standardized test scores they achieve. In the next level, student achievement continues to be important as it relates directly to what students will experience as they move into graduate studies and careers. LGBTIQ students may face many challenges that can hamper their achievement and academic success in school. Much of the current literature speaks about the difficulties that LGBTIQ students may face in school but does not speak about any difficulties LGBT students would face at a level when they pursue higher education or vocational education levels. Therefore, conducting more in-depth research at each level to provide a legal, political, and policy overview to contextualize LGBTQ issues in education is important.

Finally, it is recommended to carry out more in-depth psychological research on these LGBTIQ youths to identify the factors which make them feel comfortable within their sexual orientation. These findings will create awareness among the community effectively. Moreover, establishing joint physio psychic facilitation platforms including inclusive- counselling modules for teachers and for those needy LGBTIQ people would be an urgent need. This will improve the students coping mechanisms and attitudinal and behavioral changes towards the positive change of their own life.

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