

Teachers' implicit beliefs and LGBTQIA+ students' school dropout: a Queer Media Education approach

Convinzioni implicite dei docenti e abbandono scolastico di studente LGBTQIA+: un approccio di Queer Media Education

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Abstract

This article examines the influence of teachers' implicit beliefs on early school leaving among LGBTQIA+ students, highlighting the role of heteronormative norms and unconscious biases in shaping the school climate and students' sense of belonging. Adopting the *Queer Critical Media Literacies* framework (van Leent & Mills, 2017), queerness is understood as a critical lens capable of deconstructing normative categories and institutional power structures. Within this perspective, schools are reimagined as spaces of cultural renegotiation, where inclusive educational practices – such as media education and game-based learning – contribute to the dismantling of dominant narratives. Queer education, conceived as a process of critical resignification, fosters new forms of recognition and educational relationships grounded in equity, inclusion, and social justice.

Keywords: LGBTQIA+ students; Teacher Implicit biases; Queer Media Literacies; Queer Pedagogy; Game-based Learning.

Sintesi

L'articolo esamina l'influenza delle credenze implicite delle docenti sull'abbandono scolastico precoce di studente LGBTQIA+, sottolineando il ruolo delle norme eteronormative e dei bias inconsci nel modellare il clima scolastico e il senso di appartenenza. Adottando il framework delle *Queer Critical Media Literacies* (van Leent & Mills, 2017) la queerness è intesa come lente critica capace di decostruire categorie normative e assetti di potere istituzionali. In questo orizzonte, la scuola viene riconfigurata come spazio di rinegoziazione culturale, in cui pratiche educative inclusive – come l'educazione nei/ai media e il *game-based learning* – contribuiscono alla decostruzione delle narrazioni dominanti. L'educazione queer, intesa come processo di risignificazione critica, promuove nuove forme di riconoscimento e relazioni educative orientate all'equità, all'inclusione e alla giustizia sociale.

Parole chiave: Studenti LGBTQIA+; Bias impliciti nei docenti; Queer Media Literacies; Pedagogia Queer; Game-based Learning.

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1. Teachers' Implicit Beliefs and Early School Leaving of LGBTQIA+ Students

According to recent research, teachers' implicit beliefs play a crucial role in shaping the educational experiences of LGBTQIA+ students, significantly influencing their risk of early school leaving (Zembylas, 2018; Friedman, 2021). These internalized beliefs, formed through personal experience, cultural narratives, and prevailing social representations, often operate beneath the level of conscious awareness, yet they produce tangible effects on pedagogical interactions and classroom dynamics. Queer students, defined here as individuals whose sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression diverge from heterosexual and cisgender norms (Butler, 1990; Jagose, 1996; Halberstam, 2011), are particularly vulnerable to exclusionary practices when these beliefs remain unexamined. While some educators may not openly express discriminatory attitudes, implicit biases, such as stereotyping, confirmation bias, and the self-fulfilling prophecy – can manifest in subtle but consequential ways (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). Microaggressions, the small acts of exclusion, often unintended, convey implicit messages of devaluation and erasure (Sue, 2010). These are especially evident in the routine use of binary gender language or in the assumption that all students conform to heteronormative trajectories, thus marginalizing those who do not (Zembylas, 2018). Such pedagogical environments not only impact queer students' academic engagement but also their psychological well-being and sense of belonging. Teachers who unconsciously hold biased expectations may offer less support or fewer learning opportunities, thereby limiting queer students' capacity to participate fully and succeed within school structures. To counteract these effects, scholars advocate for a queer pedagogical approach – one that not only acknowledges the presence of LGBTQIA+ students but actively seeks to interrogate and deconstruct the norms that frame gender and sexuality within educational contexts (Britzman, 1995; Kumashiro, 2002; Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004; Burgio, 2012; Di Grigoli, 2023). This perspective encourages educators to challenge the logic of mastery (Rhodes & Alexander, 2015), recognizing that learning is often marked by uncertainty, ambiguity, and epistemological disorientation (Ahmed, 2006). Rather than integrating LGBTQIA+ perspectives into pre-existing curricula as mere additions, queer pedagogy calls for a transformation of educational practices and discourses. It emphasizes the complexity of identity formations and invites reflection on how power circulates through language, expectations, and institutional norms (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2011; Jagose, 1996). Initiatives such as *Gender and Sexuality Alliances* (GSA), the inclusion of queer-authored texts, and dialogical practices rooted in students' lived experiences become crucial strategies for fostering inclusivity (Poteat et al., 2022; hooks, 1994; Taylor & Coia, 2014). This pedagogical shift aligns with broader critical, post-critical, and transformative traditions in education (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983; Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1991; Mezirow, 1991) but moves beyond the goal of reducing inequality to critically deconstructing identity categories themselves. Drawing on intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989; Ferguson, 2004; Snorton, 2017) and postcolonial perspectives (Spivak, 1988; Ahmed, 2006; Tuck & Yang, 2012), queer pedagogy highlights how heteronormativity intersects with other systems of oppression such as racism, classism, and ableism. Ultimately, challenging teachers' implicit beliefs requires more than individual reflection – it demands a structural rethinking of educational spaces as sites of possibility (Brant & Willox, 2022), where diverse identities are not merely tolerated but serve as catalysts for epistemic and relational transformation. Schools, viewed through this lens, can become truly democratic spaces, capable of fostering belonging, critical engagement, and social justice for all students.

2. Data on Early School Leaving Among LGBTQIA+ Students

Numerous studies spanning from the early 2000s to the present consistently indicate that LGBTQIA+ students frequently experience a hostile educational climate. This environment is often marked by homophobic, biphobic, transphobic, and acephobic hostility, as well as racist remarks, fostering a pervasive sense of unsafety related to sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, race, ethnicity, and increasing exposure to harassment in both physical and digital spaces (Kosciw et al., 2022). Discriminatory school policies and practices further compound these challenges, contributing to systemic exclusion.

Empirical research demonstrates that LGBTQIA+ youth are disproportionately more likely than their heterosexual peers to experience absenteeism, academic underachievement, school dropout, and higher incidences of substance use, suicidal ideation, and risky sexual behaviour (Hillier et al., 1998; 2005; 2010; Hill et al., 2021). These factors undermine not only academic performance and aspirations but also students' psychological well-being, significantly impairing their access to formal education and jeopardizing the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. A key reference in this domain is the *National School Climate Survey* (Kosciw et al., 2022), conducted by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network)², which gathered responses from over 22,000 LGBTQIA+ students aged 13 to 21. Of these, 81.8% reported feeling unsafe at school due to one or more of their actual or perceived characteristics. Furthermore, 97.0% reported hearing "gay" used in a derogatory manner, and 58.0% heard homophobic comments from school personnel. Despite the prevalence of discriminatory language, only 10.9% of students reported consistent intervention by school staff in response to homophobic remarks. This lack of institutional action fosters profound mistrust toward school systems, as evidenced by the 61.5% of students who chose not to report incidents of harassment or assault.

The hostile climate extends beyond verbal and physical harassment; it is also embedded in institutional policies, such as restrictions on the use of chosen names and pronouns, access to bathrooms aligned with gender identity, and dress codes reinforcing binary norms. As Jackson (2010) observes, the pervasive influence of heteronormativity and the institutional absence of informed support effectively marginalize queer issues, removing them from public discourse and obstructing collective empowerment. With regard to educational outcomes, Kosciw et al. (2022) report that 32.2% of LGBTQIA+ students missed at least one full day of school in the past month due to feeling unsafe, and 11.3% missed four or more days (Figure 1). Those who experienced LGBTQIA+-related discrimination were nearly three times more likely to miss school (43.3% vs. 16.4%) and reported poorer academic performance, lower self-esteem, and heightened levels of depression. Non-cisgender students, in particular, were more likely to express uncertainty regarding their ability to complete high school, with transgender students (7.6%), genderqueer students (6.0%), and students of other gender identities (5.0%) indicating higher dropout risk compared to cisgender LGBQ students (2.1% for males; 2.3% for females). Similar trends

² GLSEN is an American K-12 education organisation, founded in 1990 and still working to ensure that LGBTQIA+ students can learn and grow in a school environment free from bullying and harassment. For more information on the educator resources, as well as the full reports here cited, visit www.glsen.org.

have been documented in other cultural contexts. The 2023 Gay Help Line Report in Italy revealed that 41.6% of respondents reported experiencing homotransphobic violence at home or school, with 31.6% of victims aged between 11 and 26. Alarming, 1.6% of queer youth reported being forced to leave their homes due to familial rejection. Of the approximately 400 youth expelled from their homes, only 10% found shelter through support networks such as *Refuge LGBT+* and *A Casa di Ornella*³. Among minors, 15% experienced ongoing family abuse, and in 5.7% of cases, homotransphobic bullying contributed directly to school dropout. Overall, 15% of adolescents reaching out to the help line stated an intention to leave school prematurely following sustained violence and discrimination. Furthermore, only 20% of transgender students in the GLSEN survey reported that schools had implemented alias careers consistent with their gender identity, reflecting the systemic barriers that continue to invalidate and marginalize their identities.

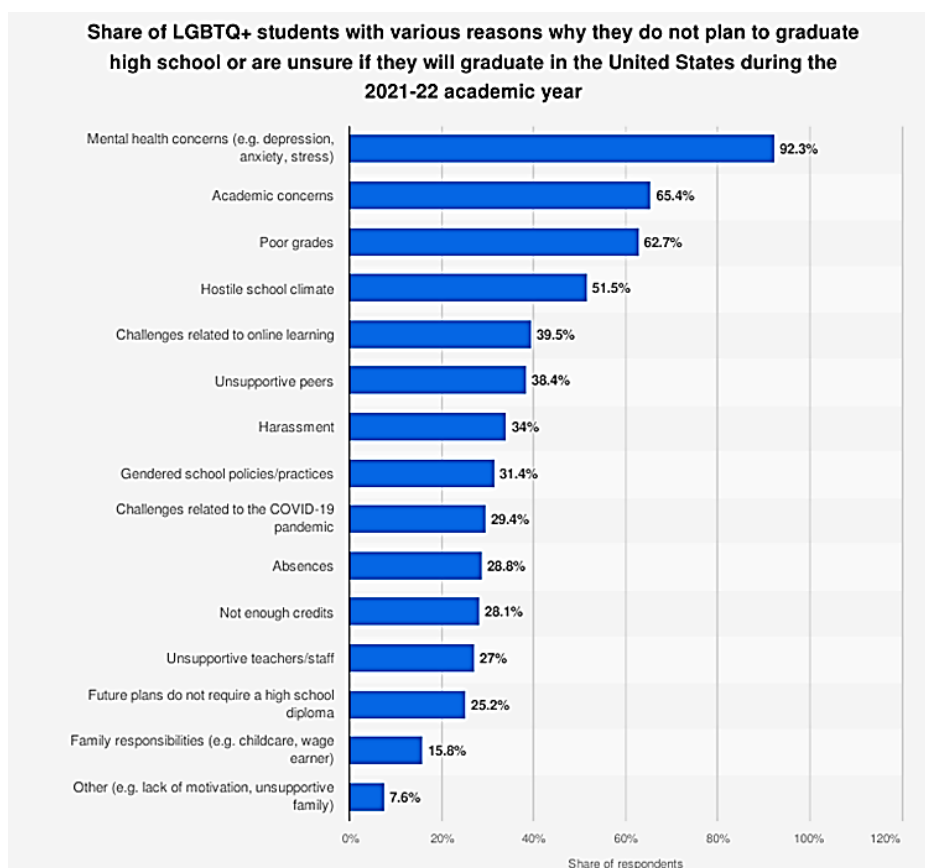


Figure 1. Reasons why LGBTQIA+ students don't plan to graduate high school or are unsure if they will graduate (Kosciw et al., 2022, p. 35).

³ *Refuge LGBT+* and *A Casa di Ornella* are Rome-based initiatives offering housing and support to marginalized LGBT+ individuals. *Refuge LGBT+* offers housing and psychological support, legal assistance, and vocational guidance to displaced youth (<https://urly.it/319tm0>), while *A Casa di Ornella* provides semi-independent accommodation and tailored support for transgender, non-binary, and intersex individuals to promote autonomy and social inclusion (<https://lc.cx/uUh0fz>).

The relationship between school climate and familial support is critical. According to Poteat et al. (2011), while parental support can mitigate the effects of victimization for heterosexual white and racial/ethnic minority youth, it is generally ineffective in buffering the psychological and educational consequences of homophobic victimization among LGBTQIA+ youth. In most cases, it also fails to promote school belonging. These findings call for increased engagement by educators and mental health professionals in equipping families with strategies to support queer adolescents.

3. Media and schools as interconnected spaces: redefining pedagogy through the perspective of Queer Critical Media Literacies

Media representations play a decisive role in shaping the implicit beliefs of both educators and society at large regarding gender identities and non-normative sexualities. As cultural and symbolic producers, media do not merely reflect societal norms: they actively shape and reinforce dominant gender ideologies. This influence often extends into educational environments, contributing to the reproduction of gendered expectations. While the proliferation of digital content, from social networks to streaming services, can exacerbate discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes, it simultaneously offers opportunities for more inclusive and complex portrayals of queer subjectivities.

Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2021) emphasize how television, film, and digital platforms remain central to constructing, legitimizing, and disseminating normative gender representations, frequently grounded in rigid male/female binaries and cisheteronormative frameworks. Such representations marginalize and erase queer identities, and are unconsciously internalized by teachers, shaping their perceptions and interactions with LGBTQIA+ students and thus directly impacting the school climate (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021)

However, the rise of media content featuring queer protagonists and narratives, such as the TV series *Sex Education*, has introduced more nuanced representations of identity and relational dynamics. Cabassi (2022) notes that such cultural products foster positive identification among queer youth and serve as informal educational tools for developing critical awareness. Despite this potential, many educators remain unprepared to engage with queer themes in media, often reacting with discomfort or avoidance when these issues arise spontaneously in the classroom (Van Leent & Mills, 2017). To bridge this gap, the integration of guided media analysis and classroom discussions can serve as powerful tools for challenging gender norms and promoting reflective thinking.

The school-media intersection thus represents a central challenge for contemporary pedagogy. Van Leent and Mills (2017) propose the framework of *Queer Critical Media Literacies* (QCML) as a foundational approach for critically engaging with media representations of gender and sexuality. The QCML model offers both students and educators the conceptual tools to deconstruct normative assumptions embedded in media texts and interrogate the power dynamics behind representation⁴.

⁴ While aware of the fact that the framework proposed by Van Leent and Mills (2017) was subsequently revised by Andrews and Govender (2022) to incorporate a more explicitly post-critical perspective, the original model was intentionally selected for this paper as the initial analytical lens.

From this perspective, schooling is not a neutral site of knowledge transmission, but a space of cultural transformation, one in which educators and learners are called to question internalized roles and stereotypes. Teachers who foster this form of critical awareness act as agents of cultural change, helping to construct school climates that embrace and legitimize diverse identities (Van Leent & Mills, 2017).

Digital platforms, especially those oriented towards LGBTQIA+ communities, play a dual role in shaping implicit beliefs. According to Parker (2024), such spaces can offer critical emotional support, reduce internalized stigma, and foster a stronger sense of community among queer adolescents. However, they can also carry emotional risks, as deep investment in online platforms may intensify feelings of loneliness and disconnection from offline contexts. This paradox may deepen the alienation queer youth feel toward traditional educational settings, particularly when schools fail to engage with the layered messages circulating in digital culture.

In light of this, it becomes essential to support students in developing critical media literacy skills. Such training enables them to navigate digital content with awareness, recognize discriminatory patterns, and assess the benefits and risks associated with queer digital communities. From a pedagogical standpoint, equipping teachers with media literacy skills is not only intellectually enriching but represents a transformative intervention into the school climate itself.

Media literacy then emerges as a key lifelong learning strategy, capable of reshaping ingrained beliefs and relational dynamics from within. It opens the way toward a pedagogy that is not only equitable but deeply responsive to the complexity of human experience (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2021; Van Leent & Mills, 2017).

As a practical entry point to deconstruct stereotypes, Van Leent and Mills's (2017) QCML framework provides an actionable and reflective model. It aims to equip educators with the analytical tools needed to examine digital representations of gender and sexuality and to foster educational practices rooted in inclusion and social justice. The framework responds to the need to disrupt binary and heteronormative narratives embedded in educational systems through the critical engagement with media content. The QCML is structured around four interrelated dimensions, each designed to provoke reflection on specific aspects of media narratives (Figure 2):

- **Recognizing Rights:** Students are encouraged to question how media recognize or deny the rights of LGBTQIA+ people. This involves analyzing digital texts to identify discriminatory narratives and promote awareness of human rights.
- **Dialogical Reflection:** This element involves using critical classroom discussions to explore how media represent gender and sexuality. The goal is to create spaces for dialogue where students can engage in discussions about how social norms influence perceptions of LGBTQIA+ identities.
- **Reconstructing Representations:** Once cis heteronormative narratives have been deconstructed, students are guided to create new representations that value gender and sexuality diversity. This can be done through the production of alternative

This decision stems from the aim to introduce the interpretive categories of Queer Media Education in a progressive manner, thereby enabling a more accessible and structured engagement with the discursive practices under investigation.

media, such as videos, blogs or narrative texts that challenge dominant models.

- **Reconnecting Intersectionalities:** The framework recognizes that experiences of gender and sexuality are not isolated, but intersect with other factors such as race, social class, disability, and cultural background. Students are then asked to analyze how these intersections influence the representation of identities in the media.

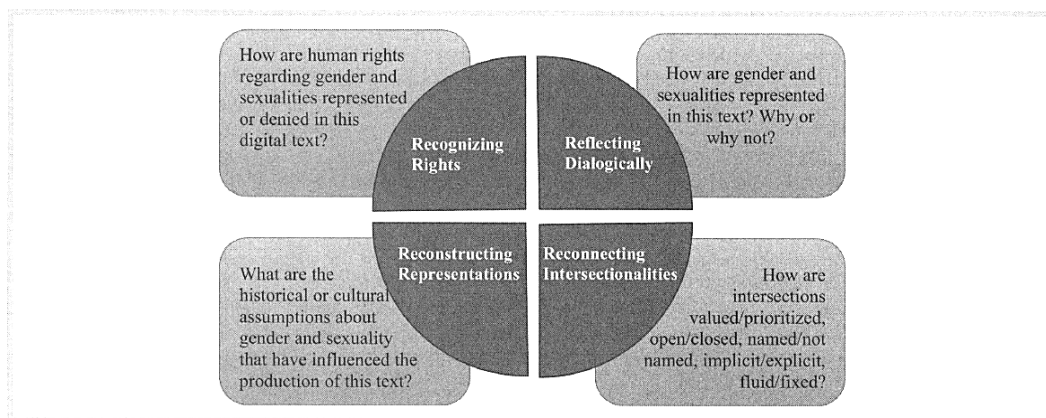


Figure 2. Queer Critical Media Literacies Framework (Van Leent & Mills, 2017, p. 403).

The four dimensions of the model, which must be considered in a fluid and interconnected manner, pursue two main goals:

1. **Promoting queer inclusive media literacy.** The QCML encourages a pedagogy that not only adds LGBTQIA+ content to school curricula but actively transforms the way students interpret and produce media content. This includes developing a critical approach to social media, advertisements, and mass cultural products.
2. **Practical application in the classroom.** The framework suggests specific activities to integrate critical thinking about gender representations in media. These include analyzing images and videos, creating sociograms to visualize the centrality or marginalization of LGBTQIA+ characters, and thinking about how search engines filter information about sexuality and gender.

4. Good Practices of Queer Media Education to Overcome Biases on Queerness

In order to systemically address the reduction of dropout among queer youth, queer education experiences highlight the need to engage the entire educational community in a process of deconstructing the naïve representations teachers may have about gender and sexuality (cf. Britzman, 1995; Malinowitz, 1995; Kumashiro, 2002). On the one hand, this implies ongoing training of teachers to recognize and value LGBTQIA+ identities, avoiding interpreting “diversity” as a problem or deviance (Garber, 1994; Kopelson, 2002). On the other hand, it is crucial to build learning environments in which the school’s disciplinary power does not result in mechanisms of exclusion, but rather in opportunities for support and dialogue (Butler, 2004; Rhodes & Alexander, 2015).

The international literature highlights two distinct but complementary areas of action in particular, which differ in their degree of radicalization and increasing proximity to the epistemological assumptions of queer pedagogy.

The first one, closer to the traditional approach of pedagogies and sexuality, takes the form of the restructuring of content and teaching practices: as Malinowitz (1995) suggests, the inclusion of texts by queer authors in the curriculum not only broadens representation, but also fosters in students the perception of a context that accommodates their identity. Activities that explore nonnormative languages: in the music workshops described by Ibrahim (2022), for example, the analysis of queer pop artists and collective discussions about gender fluidity in musical performances allow LGBTQIA+ youth to identify with a repertoire and, at the same time, teachers to interrogate their own stereotypes. A similar approach has also been proposed by Alexander (2008), who suggests breaking down disciplinary canons to promote writing and reading that disrupt heteronormativity. Similarly, Waite (2017) argues that the very production of *queer* writing (experimental, hybrid, autobiographical) offers an opportunity for those who feel they do not fit into the dominant patterns of *composition* and helps reduce the loneliness and stigma that fuel neglect.

The second one, which is more characterized by a transformative and radical thrust, concerns the construction of spaces of support and authentic relationships, as in the case of GSAs and so-called safe(r) spaces. The former refers to school groups founded by students, often with the support of faculty, that propose themselves as spaces of aggregation, confrontation, and activism for LGBTQIA+ youth and heterosexual and cisgender allies; they do not only demand inclusion in the existing system, but also challenge the mechanisms of exclusion, silencing, and normalization that schools reproduce. As Alexander and Rhodes (2011) argue, these alliances produce a political counter narrative, creating spaces of collective agency for queer subjectivities. In these contexts, the institutional visibility of commitment to nonconforming subjectivities translates into everyday practices of recognition and legitimation. Also, within this framework are performative and ambiguous transformative educational proposals, in which educational action is not limited to transmitting content related to gender identity but takes the form of a critical traversal of the categories through which identities and knowledge are constructed. In this sense, as Kopelson (2002) and Britzman (1995) point out, the teacher's work is configured as a reflexive and situated practice, capable of activating processes of challenging naive representations and suspending dominant normativity. *Didactic coming out* (Garber, 1994) becomes, in this perspective, a pedagogical gesture through which the teacher breaks the apparent neutrality of their role to assume an ethical and relational position that also empowers students to express complex, fluid and resistant subjectivities. A pedagogy that defines itself as queer must be able to integrate, in a complementary rather than exclusive manner, both an approach focused on reformulating teaching practices and content, as well as a radical path of reconstructing the epistemological and structural framework itself.

In this context, video games, as interactive media, offer unique opportunities for learners to critically engage with concepts of identity, representation, and social justice. Bo Ruberg's seminal works, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (2019) and *The Queer Games Avant-Garde* (2020), elucidate how video games inherently possess queer potential and highlight the innovative contributions of LGBTQIA+ game developers in reimagining the medium.

However, in the everyday school environments, findings have shown that the vast majority of LGBTQIA+ students experienced identity-based harassment while attending school in-person, online, and in hybrid online and in-person settings (Kosciw et al., 2022). As illustrated in Figure 3, online games have been an unsafe environment where bullying and

harassment happened against queer young people, by others from their school. Integrating queer educational practices into game-based pedagogies not only challenges the implicit biases held by educators but also creates environments that affirm queer identities and empower students. This approach is crucial in mitigating early school leaving among LGBTQIA+ students, positioning queer media education as both a theoretical framework and a practical tool in reimagining contemporary pedagogical landscapes.

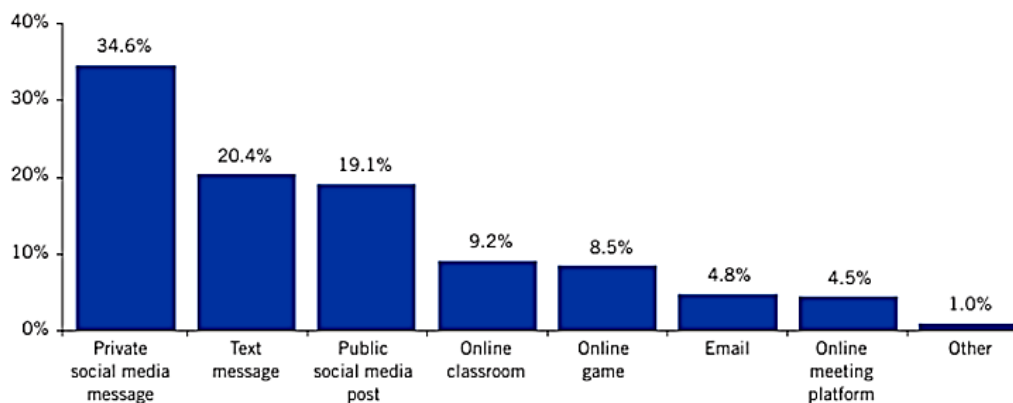


Figure 3. Methods on online communication used to harass or threaten students during the past school year (From Kosciw, Clark & Menard, 2022, p. 24).

5. Game-based Learning as a Queer Educational Practice

The intersection of queerness and games has been a subject of academic inquiry since the early 2000s, with foundational works like *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). Over the past two decades, queer game studies have emerged as a distinct interdisciplinary field, driven by scholarship exploring queer representation in mainstream games (Kang & Yang, 2018) and the experiences of marginalized players in an industry historically dominated by cisgender, heterosexual men (Kohlburn et al., 2022, Shaw, 2014; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012). Queer developers have also played a crucial role, using game design to challenge normative structures and expand the discourse⁵. Beyond representation, queer theory and games share an intrinsic philosophical affinity, both resisting rigid categorizations and embracing fluidity and playfulness (Harper et al., 2018). Queer theory constructs a *space of possibility* where dominant understandings of gender, sexuality, and power can be reimagined – an approach that aligns naturally with the experimental and interactive nature of games.

Game-based learning offers a promising, queer educational practice that may help mitigate student dropout, particularly among those who experience marginalization and hostile school climates. As Kosciw et al. (2022) document, a significant proportion of LGBTQIA+ students report absenteeism and disengagement due to feelings of unsafety and exclusion,

⁵ Examples of games depicting queer lives and experiences could be *Mainichi* by Brice (2012), which allows the players to simulate the life of a black trans woman (<http://www.mattiebrice.com/mainichi/>); and *The Tearoom* by Yang (2017), a game about consent, sexual practices but also oppressive conservative systems against the LGBTQIA+ community (<https://radiatoryang.itch.io/the-tearoom>).

conditions that can precipitate higher dropout rates. In response, game-based learning, by its very nature, challenges conventional pedagogical paradigms, fostering environments where students engage in non-linear, experiential learning that privileges creativity, experimentation, and identity exploration. Drawing on the framework presented in *Queer Game Studies* (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017), this approach not only destabilizes normative narratives of success and failure but also reconfigures the educational space into one that mirrors the transformative potential of queer theory. In this paradigm, the process of learning becomes an open-ended, dynamic practice where traditional markers of achievement are reinterpreted, and the very act of *failing* is reframed as an opportunity for growth and critical reflection - a perspective echoed in the broader literature on game-based learning (Gee, 2003). Gee (2003, 2008) identifies 12 key principles of effective game-based learning, emphasizing engagement, autonomy, and meaningful challenges. Players develop a personal connection (identification) and actively participate (interaction), benefiting from risk-free experimentation and control over their learning (autonomy). Well-structured problems and increasing difficulty foster skill development, while instant feedback enhances critical thinking. Immersive, contextualized learning and a balance between challenge and enjoyment sustain motivation. Exploration, teamwork, and problem-solving further enrich the experience, making game-based learning a powerful educational tool.

To reduce students' dropouts, the National Dropout Prevention Center (Duckenfield, 1990) identified 12 key strategies for effective dropout prevention programs based on an analysis of over 350 existing programs. The 12 strategies included parental involvement, quality early childhood education, reading/writing programs, individualized instruction, use of technology, mentoring/tutoring, workforce readiness, summer programs, flexible schedules, staff development, school-based management, and community/business collaboration. Those have been explored also by other studies, including addressing both individual and institutional factors, such as family involvement and quality early childhood education (Duckenfield, 1990; Schargel & Smink, 2014). From an educational perspective, Tavares et al. (2024) found that close student-teacher relationships, individualized support, and mentoring programs were key strategies to reduce higher education dropout. Additionally, innovative pedagogical approaches, including interactive teaching methods and technology integration, could help engage students and reduce dropout. On this regard, recent studies suggest that gamification interventions can positively impact student engagement, motivation, and academic performance in various educational settings. For instance, it has been found to make learning more enjoyable and improve students' understanding of difficult concepts (Adeoye, 2024). In e-learning, gamification elements such as badges, levels, and leaderboards have demonstrated significant effects on student motivation and engagement, potentially reducing dropout rates (Castro et al., 2018; Zakaria et al., 2024). Finally, gamification could act as a protective factor against early school leaving by improving well-being and school engagement, although sustained implementation is crucial to avoid rebound effects (Guerrero-Puerta et al., 2021).

Motivation is a central element in gamification, as it drives behavioural change (Mazur-Stommen & Farley, 2016). Research highlights the role of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in engagement (Mekler et al., 2017; Hamari et al., 2014), showing that reward-based gamification yields short-term effects, while long-term change requires deeper motivational elements (Nicholson, 2015). Integrating game studies with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2002) emphasizes the need for competence, autonomy, and social relatedness (Sailer et al., 2017). Effectively addressing these needs requires an educational design that consciously integrates game elements to create a meaningful and engaging learning experience. Thoughtful incorporation of game

mechanics, such as autonomy-supportive challenges, competence-building feedback, and opportunities for social interaction, can foster intrinsic motivation and a sense of belonging. This approach is particularly crucial for LGBTQIA+ students, who often face exclusion and marginalization in traditional educational settings.

6. Conclusions

As we have highlighted, teachers' implicit beliefs, often shaped by naive forms of knowledge and reinforced by standardized media representations, can profoundly impact the experiences of queer students in school. These dynamics significantly contribute to higher dropout rates among LGBTQIA+ adolescents, who frequently perceive the educational environment as hostile, discriminatory, or silently exclusionary (Zembylas, 2018; Friedman, 2021; Kosciw et al., 2022; Taylor, 2022).

In response, the pedagogical imperative extends beyond merely accommodating marginalized identities, a hallmark of traditional approaches to gender and sexuality, to reimagining the very epistemic and educational foundations of schooling. In this context, queer pedagogy, particularly in its application to queer media literacies (Van Lent & Mills, 2017), offers a framework that integrates critical deconstruction with transformative imagination. This approach, although anchored in a not totally radical approach, is not only about exposing the heterosexual or binary norm but also about fostering new modes of representation and creating alternative worlds where queer identities can express themselves, find recognition, and actively shape their realities.

A particularly significant example of this transformative dynamic is game-based learning as a queer educational practice. Video games and digital play environments challenge the linearity of traditional learning, offering spaces for experimentation, productive failure, ambiguity, and performativity – elements that strongly resonate with the core principles of queer theory (Shaw, 2017; Ruberg, 2019). By enabling players to inhabit multiple identities, explore nonlinear narratives, and engage in contexts with flexible rules, play emerges as an epistemological practice that disrupts fixed notions of identity and standardized measures of educational success.

Designing learning experiences that incorporate play or video game dynamics from a critical queer perspective can be an effective strategy to counteract the isolation and disengagement of queer students. Such an approach restores the centrality of motivation, self-determination, and a sense of belonging in education. As recent studies on school dropout suggest, the opportunity to engage in learning environments that are flexible, collaborative, and responsive to individual complexity can significantly reduce dropout rates and enhance overall educational well-being.

This perspective is informed by the theories of queer pedagogy and performativity, which view identities not as fixed entities to be represented or contested, but as discursive practices constructed and destabilized through action, language, and relationships (Butler, 1990; Barad, 2007). Within this framework, schools can serve as spaces for epistemic and political experimentation, where students do not merely learn to uncover stereotypes in media texts but are also encouraged to imagine and create alternative content that challenges dominant narratives of gender and sexuality.

This requires reimagining the pedagogical act as a performative gesture, no longer merely the transmission or critique of preexisting meanings but the co-construction and coding of

new meanings that give voice to fluid, misaligned, hybrid, and nonconforming subjectivities. The Queer Media Literacies framework, in this sense, emerges as a practice of symbolic resistance and ontological openness, traversing languages, bodies, and affects to generate new alphabets for worlds yet to be conceived. Ultimately, as several analyses suggest, the recognition and legitimization of queer identities foster the creation of alliances among peers and with teachers, expanding the horizon of possibilities for those who perceive themselves as marginalized (Waite, 2017; Ibrahim, 2022). Intentionally queer education helps to:

- *Counteracting marginalization*: When LGBTQIA+ identities are neither silenced nor discriminated against, the pressure on some students to leave school decreases (Butler, 2004).
- *Recognizing the multiplicity of voices*: Creating spaces for open storytelling and writing (Alexander, 2008; Waite, 2017) fosters a greater sense of belonging and reduces the risk of emotional isolation.
- *Training conscious teachers*: Naive representations diminish when teachers develop skills in listening, self-criticism, and ongoing engagement with the school's queer community (Kumashiro, 2002; Rhodes & Alexander, 2015). In-service training can support the use of inclusive language, the review of educational materials, and the sharing of best practices, helping to mitigate unconscious bias.

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