Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescent populations: implications and implementation of LGBT guidance programs

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Abstract

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School counselors play a unique role in the development of LGBT adolescents. Counselors must maintain open lines of communication with all students, specifically LGBT populations, for their own safety and concerns. LGBT students need proper resources and support to increase self-growth and self-identity. LGBT guidance programs provide an environment that promotes growth, empathy, and unconditional positive regard for sexual minority populations. It is the responsibility of the school counselor to provide this safe haven for LGBT counseling. There are many important steps involved in forming and facilitating support for LGBT students in the school setting. If programs are implemented correctly, LGBT students can effectively work through their adolescent years.
LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER ADOLESCENT POPULATIONS:

IMPLICATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF LGBT GUIDANCE PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Adolescence is a trying time for all youth, especially lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adolescents. Although they experience the same physical and emotional changes as others their age, as sexual minorities, LGBT students deal with many additional situations and conflicts brought on by societal systems, specifically in school settings. School counselors play a unique role in the development of LGBT adolescents. Counselors must maintain open lines of communication with all students, specifically LGBT populations, for their own safety and concerns. LGBT students need proper resources and support to increase self-growth and self-identity. LGBT guidance programs provide an environment that promotes growth, empathy, and unconditional positive regard for sexual minority populations. It is the responsibility of the school counselor to provide this safe haven for LGBT counseling. There are many important steps involved in forming and facilitating support for LGBT students in the school setting. If programs are implemented correctly, LGBT students can effectively work through their adolescent years.
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adolescent Populations: Implications and Implementation of LGBT Guidance Programs

LGBT is a commonly used acronym for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and culture. Today’s LGBT youth are a subset within the LGBT community that are becoming more open with their sexual orientation but are under-represented in American public schools' culture and curriculum (Camille, 2002). Every student needs a safe, supportive atmosphere to learn, including those students who identify as gay or lesbian or those who are questioning their sexual orientation (GLBT Youth, 2007). This statement seems to be one of common sense and could be considered true in many people’s eyes. Unfortunately, more than two million lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) school-age youth in the United States and those questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity often suffer daily harassments, abuse and violence at the hands of their peers (Garcia, 2004). Both of the preceding statements show the need for research and guidance programs for our nation’s LGBT youth and adolescents.

The everyday struggles of LGBT populations can take place in a multitude of environments, including at work, at home, in daily social activities, and at school. Schools provide an environment where much of this daily harassment and distress takes place for LGBT adolescents. Since schools play a large role in this broad societal problem, it is the responsibility of school administrators, teachers, counselors, and staff to put an end to this injustice. This paper will focus on the role the school counselor plays in the safety and development of LGBT populations. The primary focus of this paper can be broken into two parts; LGBT counseling implications and ethical considerations and current LGBT guidance programs that could be integrated into guidance curriculum.
LGBT Implications for School Counselors

The core function of social work is to create a stronger fit between people and their environment (Elze, 2005). According to this statement, school counselors should be strengthening this fit for all of their students in their school, including LGBT populations. Unfortunately, LGBT students experience daily stigmatization and harassment which is well documented in recent research. According to the GLBT Youth in Iowa Schools Task Force (2006):

83% of GLBT students reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation; 92.3% of GLBT students report hearing homophobic remarks, such as “faggot,” “dyke” or the expression “that’s so gay” frequently or often; 74.8% of GLBT students report that faculty never or rarely intervene when homophobic remarks are made in their presence. Students who were frequently the target of rumors, lies or physical assault had 15-30% lower GPA’s (p. 2).

Statistics like these are not limited to just one state. According to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network’s, GLSEN, recent National School Climate survey (2007):

More than 64% of LGBT students reported feeling unsafe at their school due to their sexual orientation; more than 62% reported being verbally harassed, almost one-quarter reported being the target of physical harassment, and almost 40% reported “relational aggression,” such as personal rumors, gossip, or lies being circulated in school. More than 75.4% of LGBT youth confronted homophobic remarks (e.g. “fag,” “dyke,” or “that’s so gay”) frequently, and although these remarks most often came from other students, almost 20% of the
youth heard these remarks from school faculty and staff. The majority of students, 71%, were “bothered” or “distressed” by such remarks (p. 4).

Statistics have proven that LGBT students’ environment is not safe, both at the state and national level. The question is who is responsible for strengthening LGBT students fit with the school environment? School counselors are in a position to take action to strengthen this fit between students and environment through advocacy. School counselors are advocates for all students’ educational needs and work to ensure these needs are addressed throughout the entire school experience (American School Counselor Association, 2005). In addition, this advocacy leads to the removal of systemic barriers that impede the academic success for any student, including LGBT individuals (American School Counselor Association, 2005). As an advocate, the school counselor must take proper steps to provide a safe learning environment for LGBT students, including, LGBT perceptions of counseling, targeted school setting, ethical considerations, and specific LGBT guidance programs.

LGBT Populations’ Perception of Counseling

School counselors can provide positive support for LGBT adolescents by understanding their development and providing appropriate services to them. Before a counselor can begin to develop this relationship he or she must be aware of general perceptions LGBT populations may have regarding counseling services. Although many adolescents are reluctant to seek help from their school counselor, counselors should be aware of LGBT adolescents’ specific concerns regarding counseling.

Sexual minority adolescents may be weary of seeking help from their school counselor in fear of stigmatization, mistreatment, poor quality of care, and judgmental
attitudes (Elze, 2005). This fear can lead to lower quality of therapy, which could impede on reaching treatment goals. Although LGBT adolescents have different fears in regards to their sexuality compared to heterosexual peers, they do value the same qualities in counselors. Like their heterosexual peers, LGBT adolescents prefer qualities such as confidentiality, privacy, a nonjudgmental attitude, respect, and honesty (Elze, 2005). By understanding the perceptions and values LGBT adolescents have towards therapy, school counselors will be able to establish rapport and create a lasting impact on their lives.

LGBT Counseling Objectives

There are four main objectives for LGBT counseling in middle school and high school counseling, all of which promote growth and support for LGBT students. Reducing or eliminating homophobia (Hidalgo, Peterson, & Woodman, 1985), creating a positive sexual minority community (Lemoire & Chen, 2005), being a proactive school counselor (Baker, 2002), and transforming school cultures (Mayberry, 2006) all contribute to LGBT student growth and improvement of the entire school system.

Reduce or Eliminate Homophobia

One reason to develop LGBT counseling for high school adolescents is to educate against homophobia. The homophobia involved with schools, peers, families, and traditional morality makes it difficult for adolescents to explore alternative sexualities (Hidalgo, Peterson, & Woodman, 1985). LGBT counseling can promote a normalized view of LGBT culture. This will increase awareness and acceptance of LGBT students and also create a safe environment for LGBT students to grow academically and personally. It will also give the student body a more accurate view and representation of
LGBT life. This process will unite LGBT and heterosexual students and bring them together as one, instead of the typical isolation within the school structure.

**Create a Positive Sexual Minority Community**

Another reason to develop LGBT counseling is to provide LGBT students with the exposure to a positive sexual minority community. Unlike other adolescents who are surrounded by same sexual orientation peers, LGBT students are socially isolated. Acceptance of LGBT students could prompt potential LGBT students to explore his or her sexual orientation and work through any questions he or she may have. If a student is allowed to explore his or her identity with comfort, then they may be able to find their true self. This support provides opportunities for developing social skills, discussing the meaning of sexuality and sexual identity, finding support and understanding from peers, sharing information, and socializing (Lemoire & Chen, 2005). By implementing this awareness, the LGBT student will have another setting to safely explore his or her identity throughout their adolescent years.

**Proactive Role as Counselor**

It can be affirming for the gay student if the counselor displays phone numbers, brochures and flyers for local gay/lesbian support groups (Baker, 2002). This is one way counselors can take a proactive role to benefit the LGBT student. By being proactive, the LGBT student will know the counselor is there to serve him/her. This will make it easier for some students to come to the counselor to seek help. A recommended goal for a counselor is to provide consistent support for the LGBT student. Communication will be the key to develop a solid foundation for further development of the student.
Transforming School Cultures

The systematic change within a school involves efforts to transform antigay school climates by addressing social justice and equality throughout the entire school system and the community (Mayberry, 2006). This systematic intervention allows administrators, teachers, and faculty to have long-term effects on the school’s climate, which will result in a culture comprised of social justice and equality.

Recent research provides guidelines that will help school staff to implement systematic change of equality for all students. The school’s entire faculty is responsible for implementing and upholding the guidelines to promote equality, not only school counselors. Mayberry suggests the following guidelines to promote equality for the LGBT student; create sites within school where sexual identities are discussed and not assumed; identify aspects of the school’s culture that can lead to devaluing any student; provide a space where student feelings about identities are explored and legitimized; and the formation of LGBT and heterosexual students alliances in order to explore similarities and differences (Mayberry, 2006). The systematic change of any culture takes a total commitment by the entire system, including administration, staff, faculty, and students. The school counselor can play a vital role in order promote the well-being of all students, including LGBT populations.

Projected Work Environment

Setting

Junior high and high schools have a high need for developmental counseling. The emotional, physical, and psychosocial transitions students face during their adolescent years can be stressful. This is especially true for LGBT students since LGBT youth are
rarely represented in the educational curriculum (Camille, 2002). Today’s generation of LGBT young people are becoming increasingly more aware of and open about their sexual orientation at a younger age (Camille, 2002). However, LGBT youth continue to make up a hidden minority because they cannot be identified by their race, skin color, or ethnicity (Camille, 2002). Many LGBT students are seeking support within their schools due to the increased risk of verbal harassment, physical abuse, and being left out of compulsory heterosexual social activities, i.e.: prom (Camille, 2002). LGBT counseling and guidance programs can eliminate unwanted distress in a LGBT student’s life, such as daily harassment and stigmatization. By eliminating negative stressors in a LGBT student’s life, LGBT counseling programs allow students to develop a healthy lifestyle at all developmental levels and promote well-being.

_Treatment Goals_

Every guidance program must incorporate goals to provide focus for the program. The following treatment goals from Evosevich and Avriette (2000) identified treatment goals related to LGBT guidance programs that include (a) identify sexual identity, (b) reduce intensity of anxiety associated with sexual identity so that daily functioning is not impaired, and (c) resolve all symptoms of depression. Additional goals include: promote acceptance and reduce homophobia tendencies by educating student body, create a community of alliance between LGBT and heterosexual students, and provide an environment of trust for all students to feel welcome (Evosevich & Avriette, 2000).

_Ethical Considerations_

Counselors need to have extensive knowledge in the area of ethics. Ethical situations are very prevalent in the profession. In forming a positive LGBT guidance
program, counselors can prepare themselves for potential ethical situations that may arise. There are four ethical concerns that could come into play with any LGBT guidance program in a school setting.

**Personal Values**

The American Counseling Association, ACA, states that counselors should be aware of their own values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors and avoid imposing these values on clients (American Counseling Association, 2005). School counselors need to examine this ethical concern while developing and implementing LGBT guidance programs. The purpose of a LGBT guidance program is to focus on the students’ values and not on those of the counselor. If a counselor is not comfortable with the issues concerning sexuality with LGBT students, the counselor’s ability to help students will be limited (Baker, 2002). A counselor can better meet the needs of LGBT students if he or she is able to accept his or her own sexuality. A school counselor's self-awareness will allow students to feel confident regarding the counselor's leadership and non-judgmental approach.

**Focus of LGBT Counseling**

School counselors must make the focus of the program clear to all students. There are many misconceptions regarding LGBT culture and they must be corrected at the beginning of the program. A school should focus on problems homosexuals face and not on the ‘problem’ with homosexuality (Stein & Cohen, 1986). It will be important for the school counselor to get all students to understand this concept. If the counselor knows the student body does not see this focus, it is important for him or her to clarify by
making changes to the program. Ethically it is important for the counselor to maintain this focus throughout the course of the LGBT guidance program.

**Protection of Clients**

The American Counseling Association (2005) also states that counselors must take reasonable precautions to protect clients from physical, emotional, or psychological trauma. Since all students are protected from any of this damage, school counselors need to be aware of tendencies of specific groups. LGBT students are examples of a minority group within schools. The counselor must take precautions in his or her approach when counseling LGBT students. As a school counselor, one must constantly assess the dynamics of the student body and how these possible situations may harm students.

**Dual Relationships**

Counselors are involved in dual relationships when there is an external relationship outside of counseling sessions, such as a close friendship or relative to the client. Dual relationships are considered unethical if the counselor's professional judgment is compromised or if the development of trust is inhibited between the counselor and client (Nugent & Jones, 2005). What is the role of dual relationships in a LGBT community, specifically in a school setting? There is literature and research that show advantages for and disadvantages against dual relationships in LGBT communities. For example, harm may result from engaging in a dual relationship that leads to obscured boundaries, or accidental disclosure of personal information through LGBT community grapevines (Kessler & Waehler, 2005). In opposition, Kessler and Waehler (2005) also state that engaging in dual relationships may provide the therapist with the opportunity to serve as a social advocate, which could benefit the client. Since there is support for and against
dual relationships, the counselor needs to decide what is best for the client. The counselor should educate the client about the affects of dual relationships. This partnership can help the client and counselor assess the relationship and find the best solution in regards to dual relationships. Since every client is different, it is important to have flexibility. Some members will benefit from dual relationships, while others will not. Approaching dual relationships with flexibility is the best way to handle this ethical concern.

LGBT Guidance Programs

There are many different options that can be implemented into LGBT guidance programs. Schools have implemented various strategies for developing GLBT sensitive environments, however, these strategies have not yet been empirically evaluated (Elze, 2005). Two highly effective LGBT programs schools use to teach tolerance and acceptance are Safe Spaces and Gay/Straight Alliances (GSA's). Both programs are different in structure but both promote a safe school environment. With proper implementation and enough support, Safe Spaces and GSA's can lead to a school culture promoting social justice and equality for all.

Safe Spaces

The purpose of Safe Spaces is to promote a safe haven for LGBT and straight members of a community (Colby-Sawyer, 2005). Additionally, Safe Spaces help to increase awareness and knowledge of, and sensitivity to, important issues affecting LGBT students, faculty, and staff (Finkel, 2003). Safe Spaces also increase awareness of LGBT issues and anti-LGBT bias (GLSEN, 2007). Every school should provide this type of environment for students to ensure their safety and a productive learning
environment. Safe Spaces have a common goal to let the student know that they can be themselves without fear of harassment or physical violence against him or her (Colby-Sawyer, 2005). A student questioning his or her sexual orientation will be more successful in their exploration with a program like Safe Spaces.

The main role of the school counselor, as a Safe Space member, is visibility (Cornell College Alliance, 2003). Counselors can provide support, resources, and referrals to students that may identify with the LGBT community. They also educate the student body on issues of tolerance and misconceptions relating to LGBT issues. The combination of being both an advocate for LGBT students and educating the student body can have a strong impact on reducing homophobia within schools.

Visibility is a primary goal of Safe Spaces. Stickers with pink triangles, rainbow flags, or recognizable LGBT symbols are often used to designate Safe Spaces. As a result of publicly displaying Safe Space symbols, it stands out as an affirmation for LGBT students and lets all know that school counselors are a safe resource for support and guidance (GLSEN, 2007). In addition to displaying Safe Space symbols, schools can create a Safe Space team, of both students and staff, to publicize the program. Safe Space teams can hand out materials, provide trainings to allies who would like to become involved, and educate the student body and surrounding community regarding the importance of safe spaces and anti-LGBT bias (GLSEN, 2007).

Since anti-LGBT bias affects everyone within a school and community, Safe Space programs are not limited to those who identify as LGBT. All members of the school should be allowed and urged to join Safe Space programs. School counselors can reach out to all members of the school to participate and recruit potential members. GLSEN
(2007) recommends encouraging the following people and groups to participate and strengthen Safe Space programs: student and adult advisors in Gay/Straight Alliances and other diversity clubs, guidance and health staff, school administrators, PTA leaders, coaches, classroom teachers, cafeteria staff, and transportation personnel. The inclusion of a wide range of staff and students will create a diverse group of members to enhance Safe Space programs.

Allies play one of the most powerful roles in Safe Space programs. An ally is a member of the majority group who has the goal of ending oppression by being advocates for the oppressed population, in this case, LGBT students (OLSEN, 2007). Historically, allies have been an effective way of changing the thinking and behavior of the dominant culture (OLSEN, 2007). Safe Space allies are non-LGBT people who support the rights of LGBT students and stand by their side in the face of oppression. Students and staff alike can become allies and create positive impacts on Safe Space programs.

Safe Space programs take a great deal of commitment not only by the school counselor but the entire school and community. GLSEN has provided a how-to guide for implementing Safe Space programs. School counselors are offered a step-by-step implementation of the Safe Space program, including, seeking approval from administration, planning a training, marketing and recruitment of members, and finally training members to carry out the program (GLSEN, 2007).

**Gay Straight Alliances**

“Gay/Straight Alliances, or GSA’s, are student-led and student organized school clubs that aim to create a safe, welcoming, and accepting school environment for all youth, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity” (American Civil, 2003). Since
more than two million LGBT school-age youth are suffering from daily harassment, GSA's are a great way to reduce this fear. Since the development of Project 10, a counseling and education program for sexual minorities, almost 3,000 school-based GSA's have registered with the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, GLSEN (Elze, 2005). GSA's not only function to provide support for LGBT students but also educate their schools and communities on sexual orientation and gender identity and advocate for LGBT issues (GLBT Youth, 2007). The forming of GSA's is an imperative new approach to form an organization within the gay community (Snively, 2004).

GSA's allow students, both LGBT and straight, to work together for the best interest of the entire school. GSA's create a safer school through the education of the students and staff, creating a safe and supportive environment, and creating an environment of acceptance of all, not only LGBT students (GLBT Youth, 2007). GLBT Youth in Iowa Schools Task Force also reports research showing that schools with GSA's having significantly lower incidents of harassment based on sexual orientation. GSA's not only decrease incidents of harassment but play a major role in the daily lives of LGBT adolescents by creating a safe environment which they can develop positive relationships with their peers and build relationships with adult mentors (Camille, 2002).

GSA's can also be very empowering for LGBT students who participate and can counter some of the negative statistics previously mentioned. According to Camille school-based support groups, such as GSA's, can lead to less LGBT student homelessness, high school dropouts, drug and alcohol abuse, victimization, and suicide, all of which are risks LGBT students are susceptible to (2002). This empowerment
allows students to work toward a collective goal, not just through doing but also through being, which justifies the existence of GSA’s (Camille, 2002).

The initiative to start a GSA can be overwhelming and sometimes confusing to school counselors. Organization and commitment are two characteristics that will allow school counselors to implement a successful GSA within their school. The GLBT Schools in Iowa Task Force created a set of guidelines for counselors to follow to implement a GSA, including (2007):

1. Follow guidelines for starting a student organization in your school.
2. Find a faculty advisor who you think would be supportive.
3. Find other students who would be interested in participating.
4. Pick a meeting place and time that is convenient and offers privacy.
5. Inform counselors as they may know other students interested in participating.
6. Inform administrators.
7. Advertise through school bulletins, announcements, flyers, etc.
8. Plan your meeting.
9. Hold your meeting and establish ground rules from the start.
10. Network with other GSA’s in your area and plan for the future (p. 15).

Conclusion

Our third president Thomas Jefferson once said, "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (Learning to Give League, 2006). These truths may be more applicable today than in the early 1800s when Thomas Jefferson proclaimed this statement because of America’s rich
diversity and variety of cultures. If indeed this powerful quote is the formula for the betterment of our society, then schools are one institution that is in an optimal position to uphold its core beliefs. Public school systems and its staff, specifically school counselors, must provide an environment that allows every student to pursue these inalienable rights and develop his or her full academic, social, and emotional potential. Minority populations, like LGBT youth, need more support within schools to meet these development needs. LGBT guidance programs can provide a strong foundation for LGBT youth and must be implemented throughout the education system to ensure the life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness of LGBT youth and their futures.
Reference List


