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Working with gay and lesbian youth : the counselor as advocate

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Abstract

This paper addresses the challenges and barriers that gay and lesbian adolescent youth face during this period of t development. It specifically examines the feelings and stages of the coming out process and how gay and lesbian youth deal with this challenging time. The remainder of the paper outlines the role of the counselor in helping gay and lesbian youth. The paper addresses individual, group, and classroom interventions that may be used in assisting this marginalized population.

WORKING WITH GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH:

THE COUNSELOR AS ADVOCATE

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Abstract

This paper addresses the challenges and barriers that gay and lesbian adolescent youth face during this period of development. It specifically examines the feelings and stages of the coming out process and how gay and lesbian youth deal with this challenging time. The remainder of the paper outlines the role of the counselor in helping gay and lesbian youth. The paper addresses individual, group, and classroom interventions that may be used in assisting this marginalized population.

"If anyone knew about me they would freak. I

looked straight and nobody would suspect. And

you really can't talk to anybody about it or I'd

be an outcast… There's not a day goes by that I

don't have these feelings for guys… it's always

there. So I'm always aware of being different,

of not fitting in, of having to hide, of being

unacceptable. You can't possibly know what it

feels like. It's real lonely…"

Bill, eighteen (Owens, 1998, p. 109)

Gay and lesbian adolescents are a silent and overlooked

group. They are ignored by some, harassed by others, and abused

frequently. In society, this population is either suppressed or

is outcast. In many of their families, gay and lesbian youth

are picked on and isolated, which causes them to feel confused

and lonely (Owens, 1998). They have very few rights, little

support, and no direction to help them deal with their

sexuality. Gay and lesbian youth are the biggest sufferers of

the homosexual community (Fontaine, 1998). Gay and lesbian

adolescents are at "high risk for low for low self-esteem,

academic problems, truancy, substance abuse, social withdrawal,

depression, suicidal ideation, and prostitution" (Paulson &

Worth", 2002, p. 80). This population is trapped because

adolescents have an extreme need for peer group approval, but is

legally obligated and financially dependent on parents
(Fontaine, 1998).

In the adult gay and lesbian culture, individuals can pick
and choose environments based on where they gain acceptance, but
this is not true for youth. Since gay and lesbian youth have
few places to go in which to feel comfortable, schools therefore
are a required social setting from which gay and lesbian youth
cannot escape. Schools are supposed to be safe environments for
all students to learn, grow, and achieve goals. Unfortunately,
many schools are not safe settings for gay and lesbian students.
Instead, many are harsh and non-accepting places where gay and
lesbian students are poorly treated (Marinoble, 1998).

This paper examines the feelings and confusion that gay and
lesbian adolescent youth may experience in the coming out
process and how they approach these issues in schools where
turning away or finding a new setting is not an option. It also
discusses the role of the school counselor as an advocate for
this population and as a resource for helping these students
deal with their feelings and issues. Finally, the paper
provides an overview of what schools can do to support gay and
lesbian youth.

                    Definition of Homosexuality

Homosexuality originated from the Greek word *homo,* meaning
the same. According to Davis and Palladino (2002),

homosexuality means that an individual is attracted to someone
of the same biological sex. The terms that are commonly
associated with homosexuality are gay, lesbian, and bisexual.
Many negative terms are also associated with homosexuality,
including fag, dyke, sissy, fairy, homo, and queer.

Homophobia

The negative feelings towards homosexuality are referred to
as homophobia, which originated from the Greek word phobia,
meaning fear (Davis & Palladino, 2002). The terms homophobia or
homophobic are used to describe negative feelings that
individuals have against homosexuals. Homophobia is the
irrational and excessive fear of the homosexual population that
leads to prejudice, hate, and possibly violent crimes against
gay and lesbian individuals (Welch-Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth,
1996).

Statistics

Many alarming statistics relate to gay and lesbian youth.
The main themes depicted by these statistics include physical
and verbal harassment, dropping out of school, leaving home
either voluntarily or involuntarily, and suicide. Approximately
30% of homosexual youth identify that turmoil about their
sexuality causes a change in lifestyle (Cooley, 1998). The
change in lifestyle can include school and home environments.
Schools are where adolescents spend a majority of their time.

School helps shape their future. Statistics show that little is being done to help the gay and lesbian population at school. Nearly 45% of gay males and 20% of lesbians reported being verbally and physically assaulted in high school (Muller & Hartman, 1998). Muller and Hartman (1998) also noted that due to so much violence, 20% of gay males abandon school and career goals. The problems at school resemble a domino effect when coupled with the problems at home. Often family members cannot accept the path that gay and lesbian youth may follow. Therefore, 26% of gay and lesbian youth are forced to leave home (McFarland & Dupuis, 2001) and represent 40 to 60% of all street youth (Waldner & Magruder, 1999). Living on the streets cause many more challenges for gay and lesbian youth. Often times youth beg, steal, and lie to stay alive. If the challenges are too great, some choose not to face them anymore. The most alarming statistic that pertains to gay and lesbian youth relates to suicide: three in ten homosexual youth attempt suicide (Cooley, 1998), and gay and lesbian adolescents are two to three more times likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts (Black & Underwood, 1998). According to Owens (1998), approximately five thousand children, teens, and young adults kill themselves annually in the United States, and of these youth, 1,500 are gay and lesbian. It is apparent in looking at the statistics that gay and lesbian issues are

being ignored. Understanding these statistics is a first step
in recognizing the serious plight these youth face and why it is
crucial for school counselors to help this population.

Concerns for Gay and Lesbian Youth

Adolescence is a difficult period for many individuals.
They are changing very rapidly and trying to make sense of
everything around them. Gay and lesbian students have normal
developmental concerns, coupled with the feelings and concerns
about having a different sexual orientation. In order for the
individual to progress into a healthy adulthood, coming out must
be a process.

Developmental Concerns

Adolescence is characterized by enormous physical growth,
change, and socio-cultural challenge (Greene & Croom, 2000), and
is a demanding and confusing time for many youth. According to
Vernon (1999), adolescents have a number of worries and concerns
about peers and relationships, self-image, belonging, and their
own sexuality. Other developmental issues they struggle with in
life are resisting authority, mood swings, depression,
egocentric behavior, and trying to find a sense of self. Gay
adolescents face the same developmental challenges as their
counterparts, with the added burden of trying to figure out why
their sexual identity is different (Fontaine, 1998). Many of
these youth feel they have to cover up or hide their attraction

to the same sex.   This obviously results in high anxiety for this population.

Coming Out

According to Marinoble (1998), 10% of the population openly disclose themselves as gay or lesbian. Coming out is the process of identifying and accepting one's homosexuality and developing positive self worth (Black & Underwood, 1998).   This process occurs over a period of time and is an individual, as opposed to a universal, process since no two individuals experience the process the same. According to Owens (1998), the coming out process not only happens the initial time, but also happens every time a gay or lesbian adolescent meets someone new and self-discloses.

As a young gay or lesbian individual, verbally coming out with friends can be extremely difficult, just as it is with the family or with others. They often do not come out to parents until much later in life because they are afraid of being cut off financially and because they do not want to let down the people who are close to them. They also fear being rejected by their family and friends, the people with whom they feel safest.

Because there are not many resources or support structures for gay and lesbian adolescents, these individuals are pushed into adulthood much earlier then most adolescents. According to Owens (1998), coming out is a rite of passage into a well-

adjusted adulthood. The people who gay and lesbian youth will come out to are the people who are most understanding and least homophobic. Being proud and having the courage to openly admit being gay is the first realization toward a well-adjusted adulthood (Outland, 2000).

There are three stages to the coming out process: coming out to self, coming out to others, and coming out to all (Owens, 1998). Coming out to self and admitting, instead of denying, one's true sexual orientation is the initial step. This is considered the beginning because one needs to be comfortable with the truth about being gay before it can be positively promoted and disclosed to others. Accepting this life altering change and being proud of it helps stabilize feelings in order to communicate the feelings and life choice to others. According to Owens, healthy self-acceptance and self-esteem are directly related. If a gay or lesbian adolescent accepts himself or herself, his or her self-esteem is higher. This is a positive piece of the puzzle because most adolescents battle acceptance alone. Everything around them is a heterosexual world and they have to find the strength to go against that preconceived notion of normalcy. Uncovering their homosexual identity is now the foundation they need to move forward.

The second stage is coming out to others. The youths may endure a lot of pain and anguish if they come out to others

before they have dealt with their internal feelings of being gay or lesbian. This is the most difficult step for many gay and lesbian youth, but easier for youth who have a strong self-image (Owens, 1998). Also, adolescents who have positive feelings about openly sharing their sexual orientation find it easier to come out. According to Owens, recent studies show that the average age of adolescents' first disclosure is at age 16. Vernon (1999) stated that adolescence is a time when peer friendships are most important and, in fact, they may move away from family. Keeping this in mind, it is not a surprise that gay and lesbian youth disclose being gay to friends before family. When gay and lesbian youth are ready to disclose to family, many inform siblings first, followed by mothers, according to Owens. There is no step-by-step procedure, which is why each individual will come out to different people and in different progressions. The fear of rejection that all adolescents struggle with is now multiplied by the certainty that coming out is going to make them even more different from others.

The third stage of coming out is coming out to all. According to Owens (1998), coming out is an important step in positive self-identification. Being able to acknowledge the fact of being gay or lesbian is finding a sense of self that the individual is comfortable with. Presenting it to all others

breaks down the walls or barriers that may have once existed in

the relationships and also opens up doors to meeting other gays

or lesbians. This is a beneficial step in developing a support

system that did not exist previously. Coming out to all

provides an extended family and circle of friends who can relate

directly to the feelings a gay or lesbian adolescent may be

going through. Finding others who can directly relate to these

issues can be the completion of a circle that has led them away

from a sense of belonging and now brings them back.

Because of a number of variables, the coming out process

can be positive or very negative. Overall, once an individual

is out, it allows him or her to openly express and explore the

real self. It is an initial step in creating a happy, healthy

adult lifestyle.

Counseling Gay and Lesbian Students in Schools

"Please *help me... I have to talk to someone...I have to tell*

someone, ask someone. WHO?... Would someone please help me?

Someone, anyone. Help me. I am going to kill myself if they

don't" (Owens, 1998, p. 167). Many thoughts such as this one

run through the minds of many gay and lesbian youth and serve as

a cry for help that many have trouble verbalizing. Gay and

lesbian youth need help in finding their way through the maze of

school, family, friends, and future. Helping gay and lesbian

students is a central task for school counselors.

School Counselor as Advocate

Counselors need to be knowledgeable about current attitudes toward homosexuality, theories and stages of the coming out process, and what it means to have a homosexual identity. Counselors should be able to provide gay and lesbian youth, as well as students who are questioning their sexuality, with accurate information and resources (Omizo, Omizo, & Okamoto, 1998).

In working with the gay and lesbian population, it is important for counselors to follow certain guidelines. First, counselors should not move them toward premature resolutions (McFarland & Tollerud, 1999). It is also important for counselors not to project their own biased feelings or agenda on them (Black & Underwood, 1998). These students are coming to a counselor for guidance, support, and most of all, to find a safe haven.

School Climate

The majority of an adolescent's time is spent in a school setting. High school is normally a time where students make life-long friends and have many memories. As an institution, schools are considered to be safe environments in which to interact, learn, and succeed. In school, students should feel free to express opinions and exchange ideas in a non-judgmental environment. However, many gay and lesbian students do not

experience this in school. Instead, school is a lonely and isolated place where their sexual orientation is used as a punching bag for other students. School is an even harsher place when school staff and administrators do not protect the youth who are in this sexual minority. School staff and administration often do not step in because of their own homophobic feelings (Human Rights Watch Organization, 2001), and most public school personnel are cautious about discussing sexual orientation (Omizo, Omizo, & Okamoto, 1998). As a counselor or teacher, being able to accept one's own sexuality and the sexuality of others is an important part of effectively serving the needs of all students.

The school environment should be a place where children and adolescents learn to interact with each other in a positive way. Gay and lesbian youth usually have a difficult time interacting with peers due to the barriers of sexual orientation and have trouble creating close intimate relationships due to the fear of being found out or not being able to identify with other students (Owens, 1998). If they are having difficulties interacting, teachers and counselors need to intervene to help find solutions to these relationship problems. Teachers and counselors may have to help students deal with not only promoting social confidence in students, but also help deal with

the underlying battles they face in relationship to sexual orientation and identity.

Counselors and administrators can make the school climate a warm and welcoming place for gay and lesbian students by implementing several school-wide initiatives. For example, schools can implement a discrimination free policy that includes race, religion, disability, and sexual orientation. According to Black and Underwood (1998), schools can promote this by thoroughly training staff members to recognize and discipline each incident of harassment in a professional manner.

A second option is for schools to create a safe haven for students who openly admit they are gay or lesbian. This may be the only place these students can come and feel as if they belong. It should be a place where gay and lesbian youth feel open to share emotions. This would also provide a place where students can build a support system that they may not have anywhere else.

A third strategy that can be implemented is providing an information center for faculty, staff, students, and parents (Black & Underwood, 1998). Education and knowledge is the key to breaking down barriers and stereotypes. According to Mallon (2001), the classroom is the most productive learning environment for students. The curriculum needs to be tailored to include gay and lesbian issues in order to validate for gay

and lesbian students that there are others like them (Harris, 1997).

The final thing that schools can do to promote positive growth in gay and lesbian youth is connecting the students with gay and lesbian role models in the community (McFarland & Dupuis, 2001). This will give the students someone to relate to and use as a resource for the tough emotions they experience.

Staff Development

Staff development is very important in order to help the entire school become sensitive to the needs of gay and lesbian youth. According to Black and Underwood (1998), education and training of all school employees is essential in breaking down stereotypes. Counselors can provide in-services on issues regarding current research, how to implement activities that instill openness and acceptance in the classroom, and how to adapt curriculum and language to be sensitive and include gay and lesbian youth (Black & Underwood, 1998). These first steps are important to help shift the thinking, feelings, and environment of the school.

Another important factor in staff development is for staff members to discuss homophobia, examine bias or prejudices, and confront actions and assumptions they may have personally (Black & Underwood, 1998). This step is crucial for the whole school

buy-in process. Having school employees confront their own personal fears helps them learn to accept homosexuality.

Interventions

Interventions are the key to helping gay and lesbian students with day-to-day life. Individual counseling helps the individual identify the concerns and work through the emotions associated with being gay and lesbian. Group counseling helps build support for gay and lesbian students to work through feelings of isolation and relationship issues. Classroom and awareness activities help promote a school wide initiative of acceptance of individual differences.

Individual Counseling

The relationship between the counselor and client needs to be one of mutual respect, honesty, and caring. Individual counseling allows gay and lesbian students to talk about their issues and concerns in order to better understand themselves and the world in which they live (Omizo, Omizo, & Okamoto, 1998). It is essential to be able to verbally work through issues, concerns, and fears.

A common intervention that is used in individual therapy is bibliotherapy. Through reading and watching movies and videotapes, bibliotherapy is a process to help youth solve problems (Bradley & Gould, 1999). Reading about homosexuality helps youth associate their feelings with someone who is like

them, and this is beneficial even if they do not know the person. It also helps gay and lesbian students know they are not alone by validating that someone else feels the same way; that they are not so isolated. Many of the books list other resources that the students can personally pursue if they wish.

Role-playing is another intervention that can be beneficial (Emert & Milburn, 1997) because it allows gay and lesbian adolescents to rehearse new skills or practice dealing with stressful situations (Bradley & Gould, 1999). Role-playing is also an effective way to open lines of communication and helps students develop coping skills and strategies for real life situations. Role-playing can be done in a number of ways. For instance, students can role-play what a perfect world would be like. By role-playing what a perfect world would look like they can verbalize their needs and wants. Gay and lesbian students can also use this exercise to set goals and a timeline for the future. During the role-play, students can let go of troubling feelings by talking through the differences in how they would like their world to change. Another suggestion is to have the student role-play different situations that are troubling. Examples of situations that gay and lesbian youth could encounter are all the concerns that coming out in a school community can bring, anxiety about the way they are treated daily, fighting with parents, dealing with intimate

relationships, and homophobia. By role-playing the situations, gay and lesbian youth can work out strategies and develop coping mechanisms. Learning these strategies and coping mechanisms prepares gay and lesbian youth to deal with uncomfortable situations when they arise. Yet another role-play could be the gay or lesbian student and a partner role-playing parents, teachers, or bullies. In this activity students would enact all the ways they perceive people treat them to a partner. The students could then brainstorm and rehearse different ways of handling the negative comments or behaviors. This helps then present and work through all the feelings that are difficult to verbalize. In addition, it allows the counselor or partner to examine the comment the gay or lesbian youths are hearing and how they are being interpreted.

Group Counseling

Group counseling can be a beneficial way of providing support for gay and lesbian youth. According to Muller and Hartman (1998), group counseling centering on the "therapeutic factors of universality, hope, and interpersonal learning" (Muller and Hartman, 1998, p. 39) is an essential step gay and lesbian youth in accepting self and belonging by peers. Group counseling can also help students develop social skills and healthy ways of interacting. They can discuss concerns and socialize (McFarland & Tollerud, 1999). This may be important

for gay and lesbian youth because of the barriers they face connecting with their peers. The group can help them develop skills to survive in a harsh school environment. The counseling groups can be an important way to help gay and lesbian students explore developmental issues in regard to being gay, such as decision-making, self-esteem, reactions and consequences to situations (McFarland & Tollerud, 1999). This is important for gay and lesbian youth because they may not have any positive role models to help them deal with these developmental issues.

Forming groups is also beneficial because it may be the only place gay and lesbian students do not have to hide. Feeling that they do not have to hide helps raise the gay and lesbian youths' self esteem and gives them options they did not previously have. They can also get advice and feedback from positive peer role models. This is an important key because many gay and lesbian youths do not have anywhere to go for advice. It helps them find a sense of belonging. The final reason why group counseling may be helpful is it can help members feel less isolated. The group environment needs to be supportive, safe, non-judgmental, and respectful.

Classroom Guidance

Classroom guidance is the first line of preventive counseling for children and adolescents (Tollerud & Nejedlo, 1999). Infusing gay and lesbian issues into classroom guidance

educates masses of students at one time, ensures that all students are getting the same information, and that the information is processed in a productive way. Providing accurate information helps break down myths and misconceptions about the gay and lesbian culture and opens the lines of communication between students of different sexual orientations by encouraging them to talk about issues and ask questions. Classroom guidance can also help infuse language that is more sensitive for gay and lesbian students. It can help bring about diversity and change in the classroom. In using this step it helps all students.

Awareness Activities

Awareness activities are in important way of creating awareness of gay and lesbian issues and helping all students appreciate diversity. Examples of awareness activities include inviting guest speakers from the adult gay and lesbian community to speak with all students. This has two benefits: one, it allows the entire population to really hear what is like to be an openly gay adult in the society and community. Second, it conveys to gay and lesbian youth that there is life after high school and helps them look toward the future with a hint of optimism, instead of thinking life will always be filled with harassment and embarrassment. Another awareness activity would be to encourage the formation of a gay/lesbian/straight

alliance. This alliance would help break down stereotypes that students could have. The alliance can also serve as a support system for gay and lesbian students at school. This support is very important at school where gay and lesbian youth may not have adequate support from their peers on a daily bases.

Educating students at school just is not enough. Parents, community members, and school staff all need to be educated about homosexuality. Educating the populations that come into contact with gay and lesbian youth will help create more sensitivity toward the struggles that gay and lesbian youth face. Presenting informational meetings on issues that pertain to gay and lesbian youth can do this.

Conclusion

Gay and lesbian education and advocacy are a must in this ever-changing society. Developmentally, adolescents struggle with many issues, and being gay or lesbian makes life much more difficult. It is important to educate and promote learning about gay and lesbian issues to parents, students, and school personnel. Knowledge and education are the keys to breaking down the barriers that gay and lesbian youth experience.

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