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## The school counselor's role in facilitating the development of gay and lesbian students

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## The school counselor's role in facilitating the development of gay and lesbian students

### Abstract

There is a widely quoted estimate that approximately 10% of the United States population is homosexual (Coleman, cited in Slater, 1988; Cook, cited in McFarland, 1993). However, one has to remember that much of this research is based on gays and lesbians who are out of the closet (Slater, 1988). This estimate of 10% is probably a conservative statistic due to the fact that homophobia keeps people from acknowledging and embracing their true identities. Even if this statistic is treated as fact, that would mean there are approximately three million people between ages 10 and 20 who are gay or lesbian (Deisher, cited in Robinson, 1994). When looked at in these terms, this figure represents a significant minority population in the schools.

**THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S ROLE IN FACILITATING THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF GAY AND LESBIAN STUDENTS**

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**and Counseling**

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**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Arts in Education**

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**by**

**Rob Bahl**

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Entitled: THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S ROLE IN FACILITATING THE DEVELOPMENT  
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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of  
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When I entered high school I was completely isolated from the world. I had lost all concept of humanity. I had given up all hopes of ever finding love, warmth, or tenderness in the world. I did not lie to myself, but I did my best to keep other people from thinking I was homosexual. . . That way, I would never again suffer the consequences of being the individual I was. (Fricke, cited in Robinson, 1994, p. 326)

Unfortunately, these experiences are typical of gay and lesbian adolescents in this country and are often accompanied by such feelings as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideology (Coleman & Remafedi, 1989; Terndrup & Ritter, 1995). Gay and lesbian adolescents are the one minority group whose needs, for the most part, have not been met in the schools (Robinson, 1994; Treadway & Yoakman, 1992).

There is a widely quoted estimate that approximately 10% of the United States population is homosexual (Coleman, cited in Slater, 1988; Cook, cited in McFarland, 1993). However, one has to remember that much of this research is based on gays and lesbians who are out of the closet (Slater, 1988). This estimate of 10% is probably a conservative statistic due to the fact that homophobia keeps people from acknowledging and embracing their true identities. Even if this statistic is treated as fact, that would mean there are approximately three million people between ages 10 and 20 who are gay or lesbian (Deisher, cited in Robinson, 1994). When looked at in these terms, this figure represents a significant minority population in the schools.

The literature seems to be consistent in noting the need for intervention with this population. According to the literature, gay and lesbian youth seem to be most affected by acute feelings of social, emotional, and cognitive isolation, as well as the lack of positive gay and lesbian role models (Martin & Hetrick, cited in Robinson, 1994). In a study by Kissen (1991), lack of role models was also cited as having a negative impact on this population. Findings from this study also indicated a need for homosexual teachers to come out to their students (Kissen, 1991).

Because there is little support for gay youth and very few positive role models, they often develop negative self-perceptions (Slater, 1988). These negative self-perceptions are the driving forces behind many self-defeating behaviors (Slater, 1988). It should come as no surprise that gay and lesbian youth run a high risk of being homeless, using drugs, dropping out of school, prostituting themselves, committing suicide, and acquiring sexually transmitted diseases (Terndrup & Ritter, 1995). Also, according to Terndrup and Ritter (1995), this population is at risk of becoming depressed, requiring psychiatric hospitalization, experiencing family conflict, suffering from anxiety, being harassed, and being an object of violence.

In studies of gay and lesbian identified teenagers, Remafedi (as cited in McFarland, 1993) discovered that 31% had previous psychiatric hospitalization, 48% had run away from home, 58% regularly had abused substances, and 72% had consulted mental health professionals. Remafedi and

Blum (cited in McFarland, 1993) found that, with regard to a Philadelphia agency which served several minority adolescents, 50% of their clients had been involved in prostitution, 25% were runaways, and at least 25% were school phobic.

Gay and lesbian adolescents also have an increased risk for committing suicide, contracting AIDS, and being objects of violence. Maguen (cited in McFarland, 1993) conservatively estimated that 1,500 gay and lesbian adolescents take their lives each year. Cook (cited in McFarland, 1993) held that gay and lesbian youth are two to six times more likely to attempt suicide than other teens, and they account for 30% of all completed suicides among teens, even though it is estimated that they only make up 10% of the population.

When looking at this population's risk for AIDS, the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta found that 29% of 13-19 year olds with AIDS contracted the virus through homosexual activity or through such activity along with drug use. This figure rises to 64% when looking at 20-24 year olds, which is probably a more accurate indicator because of the long incubation period of AIDS (Stover, 1992).

When considering harassment and violence towards gays and lesbians, the National Gay Task Force found that out of 2,074 respondents, one-fifth of the females and nearly half of the males said they were harassed, threatened with violence, or physically assaulted in high school or junior high because they were

perceived to be lesbian or gay.

The needs of this mostly invisible minority should be addressed in the schools. School counselors could be pioneers in facilitating the healthy development of gay and lesbian students. This is an enormous challenge. How can the needs of gay and lesbian adolescents be met in the schools? There is no single technique that will meet all the needs of any population. However, there are several techniques and strategies which can begin to meet many of the needs unique to this minority population.

The question of how school counselors can assist gay and lesbian adolescents is an important one to address because this population is at risk for a multitude of issues. The issues seem to stem primarily from acute feelings of isolation (Robinson, 1994), school marginalization practices (Carlson, 1994), and a lack of healthy role models (Slater, 1988). The school counselor not only needs to be aware of these issues, but also must have understanding and insight into how being homosexual in this society can erode one's mental health and hope for the future.

The purpose of this paper is to provide information about these issues to assist counselors in working with gay and lesbian youth. In this paper, specific interventions to employ with gay and lesbian adolescents will be identified, as well as strategies for consulting with faculty and parents. Following this, recommendations will be provided for all educators of youth.



### Isolation

Gay and lesbian adolescents think that no one shares their thoughts and feelings and that they are all alone (Martin & Hetrick, cited in Robinson, 1994). Gay and lesbian youth believe that there is no one to turn to, no one with whom they can identify (Robinson, 1994).

Robinson (1994) noted that isolation is the biggest factor for any minority group struggling to become accepted in a larger society. But while racial and ethnic minority youth can turn to their families and communities for support, most gay and lesbian youth are hit doubly hard because they are an oppressed minority and they usually know absolutely no one like themselves (Kissen, 1991). In addition, this population, for the most part, has been silent and invisible, which has contributed to them being abandoned by society and overlooked by the counseling profession (Robinson, 1994).

In 1992, Massachusetts' Governor William Weld created the nation's first Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth in response to a 1989 Federal Report revealing the epidemic of suicide by young gays and lesbians (Massachusetts' Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993). In an effort to acquire information on this topic, the Commission held five public hearings across the state in 1992 (Massachusetts' Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993). Dr. John Maltzberger, one of the country's leading experts on suicide, had this to say about gay and lesbian student isolation at one of the public hearings:

In the grips of aloneness the patient is convinced he will be forever cut off. In suicidal worthlessness, the patient is convinced he can never merit the caring notice of anyone including himself, again. The subjective result is the same; to be beyond love is to be hopelessly alone.

(Massachusetts' Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993, p. 14)

Lee Fernside, an 18 year old who testified at the public hearings talked about the isolation he experienced in relation to his identity:

I felt completely isolated from my family and friends. It appeared that I was the only one who ever had these queer feelings. I can't come out to anyone. After all, who would associate with anyone who was sick and deranged as I thought myself to be if they knew the truth. Not only does society shout at me that I am evil, but an inner voice whispers it as well. (Massachusetts' Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993, p. 14)

Steve Obuchowski, an 18 year old, believed that dying was the only way out of his isolation (Massachusetts' Governor's Commission of Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993). This belief is a common one among gay and lesbian youth. This is what Steve said at the hearings:

I felt as though I was the only gay person my age in the world. I felt as though I had nowhere to go to talk to anybody. Throughout eighth grade, I went to bed every night praying that I would not wake up in the morning,

and every morning waking up and being disappointed. And so finally I decided that if I was going to die, it would have to be at my own hands.

(Massachusetts' Governor's Commission of Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993, p. 12)

These testimonies are indications of the isolation gay and lesbian youth experience. These testimonies also indicate the strong connection between feelings of isolation and suicidal ideation.

Feelings of isolation in gay and lesbian adolescents are also the result of having little access to adequate counseling or other support services (Walling, 1993). This lack of support services is due in large part to the reluctance of educators to deal candidly with sexual orientation issues (Walling, 1993). Even in the gay community, adults are leery of providing support for fear of being seen as "recruiters." Feelings of isolation for gay and lesbian adolescents are also perpetuated because of the discomfort school counselors feel when offering counseling services to this population (Street, 1994). Apparently, the majority of school counselors believe that special training is required in order to offer this population services (Street, 1994). Street (1994) also noted that most school settings are not conducive to offering support groups specifically for gay males.

A sense of isolation is further magnified by often being alienated by peer groups (Walling, 1993). Many gay and lesbian adolescents have experienced significant tormenting and badgering from peers because they are perceived to be

"different" or do not have the expected and/or traditional interests (Campbell, 1992). As a result, great barriers sometimes exist between heterosexual and homosexual youth (Campbell, 1992). Gay and lesbian students are often treated with suspicion, distrust, and open hostility by their peers (Walling, 1993). This often leaves gay and lesbian youth who should be identifying with their peers with no trusted friend in whom to confide (Walling, 1993).

### Categories of Isolation

Martin and Hetrick (cited in Robinson, 1994) have identified three main categories of isolation. First, cognitive isolation refers to the almost total lack of available accurate information. Cognitive isolation also refers to the predominance of inaccurate, negative, and stigmatized information about gays and lesbians. Second, social isolation is felt by the risks of being disowned by the family, expelled from peer groups, or losing a religious social identity. All of these forms of isolation may become a reality for gay and lesbian youth, simply because of their minority status. The third and most serious type of isolation is emotional. In being emotionally isolated, gay or lesbian youth believe they are abnormal and have no one with whom to talk. Martin and Hetrick (cited in Robinson, 1994) noted that this aspect of isolation is illustrated by the larger number of gay and lesbian youth who attempt suicide. Thirty percent of teen suicides are committed by gay and lesbian teens (Marino, 1995). In addition, gays and lesbians are two to six times more likely to attempt suicide than are heterosexuals (Robinson, 1994).

### School Marginalization Practices

In the schools specifically, Carlson (1994) held that specific techniques of power have been used to keep the issue of homosexuality invisible. This, of course, perpetuates the isolation gay and lesbian youth feel.

#### Controlling Curriculum and Texts

The first technique of marginalization involves erasing all issues of homosexuality from the curriculum and text books (Carlson, 1994). Carlson maintained that in doing this, schools exclude the cultures of those outside the norm, so that the dominant culture can be legitimized as the only significant culture worthy of study. This silence towards those different from the dominant culture work to make those outside of the norm invisible and silent (Carlson, 1994). Also, because homosexuality is absent from the texts and curriculum, homophobia is not confronted (Carlson, 1994). Carlson (1994) did acknowledge that homosexuals are likely to be recognized in health curriculums.

But here again, homosexuals are often associated with disease and AIDS.

#### Dismissing Teachers

A second technique that has been used to keep homosexuality invisible is through the dismissal of teachers who have been discovered to be homosexuals (Carlson, 1994). Throughout this century, homosexual teachers have been dismissed to keep students from being exposed to "improper" role models, lechery, and molestation (Carlson, 1994). Homosexuality has been seen as contagious, a sickness, a disease, a pathological disorder, and as a threat to the

"American way of life" (Carlson, 1994, p. 9).

This view of homosexuality has caused both homosexual and heterosexual teachers to avoid class discussions in which gay issues may surface (Carlson, 1994). Teachers also avoided gay related issues because they are fearful of students asking questions and provoking conflict in the classroom (Carlson, 1994). However, Sears (cited in Carlson, 1994) found it to be common practice for many school faculty to condemn homosexuality in the presence of peers and students without facing criticism.

### Sanctioning Intimidation

The third technique used by school personnel to keep homosexuality invisible is a sanctioning of verbal and physical intimidation of homosexual teachers and students (Carlson, 1994). Students and educators in the school community are free to verbally and physically confront those perceived to be homosexual with little or no consequences. This is often tolerated because gay students and teachers are in an environment where they feel afraid to stand up for themselves.

The use of these three strategies, not surprisingly, forces many good educators out of the profession (Carlson, 1994). Thus, gay and lesbian students feel even more isolated and alienated (Carlson, 1994). As can be seen from the information presented, school communities frequently reinforce the socialization of heterosexuality, contributing to feelings of isolation and fear in gay and lesbian students that they are the only ones attracted to the same sex (Marino,

1995). By accepting this homophobia, not only are potential real-life role models dismissed, but the whole subject of homosexuality is treated as an undesirable and unsuitable topic for discussion (Carlson, 1994). All the while, homosexuals are being abused in schools (Carlson, 1994). This last form of seemingly "acceptable" oppression continues every day.

#### Lack of Role Models

"Gay people are the only minorities that do not have a parent as a role model" (Krysiak, cited in Walling, 1993, p. 11). Michael Hutchins (cited in Marino, 1995), a private therapist who counsels gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents in Tucson, Arizona stated, "In times of difficulty, most adolescents can go talk to their parents, but gay and lesbian teens often don't have their parents as a resource" (p. 8). In addition, gay youth constantly receive messages that homosexuality is undesirable and not valued. In contrast, the "normality" of heterosexual youth is affirmed by positive role models everywhere (Walling, 1993). Heterosexual youth usually can also look to their heterosexual parents as role models. Again, homosexual youth seldom find positive gay role models, which contributes to their feelings of isolation.

Devin Beringer, 17, who testified at the public hearings in Massachusetts talked about how a gay-positive role model helped him:

I was constantly denying the feelings I had for other guys. In the process of hiding these feelings, I repressed all emotion. Concord Academy changed all this. It was the first place I encountered that was even

slightly gay-positive. When I arrived, an openly gay faculty member was assigned to be my advisor. Through him, I learned that being gay is not the horrible and disgusting thing society makes it out to be, but instead, a normal and natural part of me. (Massachusetts' Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993, p. 20)

Professor Gregory Herek of the University of California-Davis also testified at the hearings (Massachusetts' Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993). Studies which Herek conducted have shown that the key factor in reducing fear and intolerance of gays and lesbians is a positive personal experience with an openly gay or lesbian person. Herek stated that the presence of openly gay and lesbian staff members is an integral part of school programs that are trying to reduce bigotry while providing support for homosexual students. Herek emphasized that the great majority of youth attend schools that do not have any openly gay or lesbian personnel. Adults set the tone of the school community through explicit and implicit messages about acceptable behavior, attitudes, and conduct. Still, through intimidation or ignorance, school staff members fail to provide the support or protection needed by gay and lesbian youth.

Sharon Bergman, 18, appealed to closeted gay and lesbian teachers at the hearings and said: "If not for the support I found in openly gay teachers at my high school, I would be dead today. I hope to God that future teachers have the courage to come out to their students" (Massachusetts' Governor's Commission



on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993, p. 20).

Robert Parlin, a high school teacher, discussed his motivation for coming out of the closet to his students. Parlin stated:

First, I began to think about the terrible messages that closeted gay teachers send to their students; that being gay is shameful, not an appropriate subject for discussion; that lesbians and gay men were not welcome or valued members of the school community . . . "

(Massachusetts's Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993, p. 23)

Campbell (1992) believed that gay and lesbian adolescents cannot expect to develop positive identities if gay and lesbian adults hide their identities. Adults who hide their identities only perpetuate the myth that homosexuality is bad and should be kept hidden (Campbell, 1992). Slater (1988) echoed the view that adolescent gay men and lesbians face an enormous lack of healthy role models with which they can identify, thus developing negative self-perceptions while compounding the isolation they feel. Slater (1988) held that there is a marked lack in ordinary, well-functioning adults from various economic, cultural, and occupational backgrounds. In the end, homosexual youth are not provided with essential role models.

### Interventions

There are several interventions school counselors can implement with gay and lesbian students such as group counseling, faculty development, beginning a

resource library, and maintaining a safe school atmosphere. Although some of these interventions may seem simplistic, they are often overlooked by school personnel. Other interventions may take the cooperation of the staff of the whole school system to implement. Regardless of the intervention, the school counselor, as an advocate for all students, has an ethical responsibility to help create a school environment in which all students can reach their full potential, including lesbians and gays. The following interventions can create a safer environment for gay and lesbian students.

#### Group Counseling

Stover (1992) emphasized that providing counseling services at the school is a must for gay and lesbian youth. One way in which school counselors can facilitate the development of gay and lesbian youth is through group counseling. According to Gonsiroik (cited in Teague, 1992), it appears that support groups are the most valuable resource for gay and lesbian adolescents because they facilitate the development of social skills, provide support and understanding from peers, present information about the meaning of sexuality and sexual identity, and promote socializing. Group counseling alleviates feelings of isolation, provides role models, and allows gay and lesbian students to develop a social identification and self-pride so that a successful life adjustment can be made (Teague, 1992). Groups also help stop the social isolation and secrecy that most members experience (Lenihan, cited in Teague, 1992). Groups also focus on personal adjustment (Lenihan, cited in Teague, 1992). In addition, members

of groups have reported a more positive self-concept (Herdt & Boxer, cited in Carlson, 1994; Westifeld & Winkelpleck, cited in Teague, 1992). Finally, groups allow gay and lesbian adolescents to take advantage of a safe, secure atmosphere so that trusting relationships can be established (Lenihan, cited in Teague, 1992). Herdt and Boxer (cited in Carlson, 1994) noted that the group experience had been a positive experience of change in that:

. . . for the first time in their lives, they begin to talk openly about sexual feelings with peers and friends of their own age who show them respect, finding others like themselves, and adult role models whom they can admire. Their worst fears are that they are 'out of their minds,' full of sin and sickness. . . (p. 17)

Herdt and Boxer (cited in Carlson, 1994) concluded that support groups, along with other supports in the gay community, provide a necessary context for an empowering "coming out" experience.

Tipkin (cited in Schwartz, 1992) held that support groups should be formed for lesbian and gay students. Groups can help gays and lesbians overcome their fear and isolation and encourage them to remain in school. Support groups for gay and lesbian adolescents allow them to develop social skills with others like them. Tipkin (cited in Schwartz, 1992) held that they are able to feel understood and have access to accurate information. Tipkin (cited in Schwartz, 1992) noted that benefits of support groups include increases with self-esteem and self-concept.

### Faculty Development

Stevenson (cited in Marino, 1995) noted that schools need to create inservice programs for school personnel and parents to increase their awareness of homosexuality and gay and lesbian students. In doing this, adults can acquire strategies and information which may help a gay or lesbian student in the future.

In addition, Hunter and Schaecher (1987) stated that school policies should prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Harbeck (1994) believed that school suicide prevention programs need to address the concerns of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. School faculty need to begin to create a safe environment for gay and lesbian students by developing policies which protect gay and lesbian students from discrimination, harassment, and violence. It is of utmost importance that teachers, counselors, and school staff consistently enforce these policies. All school staff must be trained in conflict management, crisis intervention, and violence prevention. School-based support groups for gay and lesbian students should be started. Counselors and administrators need to be familiar with gay positive referral sources for gay and lesbian adolescents and their families. Finally, the school needs to develop a curriculum in which gay and lesbian issues are addressed.

### Resource Library

McFarland and Humphrey (1992) suggested maintaining a resource library and lists of materials for gay teenagers and their parents. Anderson (1994) echoed this belief and stated that the counselor can be an advocate for the

purchasing of library books that address homosexuality, gays, lesbians, and gay rights so that all students can become more aware of the world's diversity. The school counselor and librarian should have accurate, unbiased, non-stereotypical, and non-heterosexist information and reading material for gay and lesbian students. This information and reading material should include magazines, fiction, and non-fiction, as well as informational books, articles, and pamphlets.

### School Atmosphere

Coleman and Remafedi (1989) noted that the counselor should help create an atmosphere in which sexuality can be discussed. They also held that counselors should never assume students are heterosexual because this will discourage many from mentioning homosexual behaviors or feelings.

Treadway and Yoakam (1992) held that abusive and derogatory language such as "faggot" or "lezzie" must be challenged. A standard of conduct related to sexual orientation should be established in the same way that racist and sexist terms are not acceptable in the classroom. Abusive language directed toward persons suspected of being lesbian or gay constitutes sexual harassment. Stevenson (cited in Marino, 1995) also believed that non-sexist language needs to be used throughout classes and the curriculum.

### Conclusion

The author of this paper believes that the mere presence of the gay and lesbian population in the schools will most likely require interventions. Because of

their presence. Glen and Russell (cited in Dunham, 1986) noted that it is imperative that school counselors become aware of and work toward the resolution of their own homophobic biases. The counselor should also be familiar with the coming-out process and acknowledge its importance. In addition, McFarland (1993) stressed that school counselors should assist gay and lesbian youth in challenging internalized homophobia before self-defeating behaviors are ingrained. Counselors should also help these youth identify and express their anger and encourage them to establish a support system. Finally, Stover (1992) noted that counselors should also be aware of positive and reputable referral sources to whom a school counselor may refer students and families.

When looking at the various unique and common developmental needs of this minority, the evidence suggests that these needs can indeed be met using several interventions within the schools. The author believes and the findings from the professional literature support the idea that the interventions discussed in this paper are appropriate and effective with this population. If these recommendations are followed by school faculty and staff, gay and lesbian students will be likely to come to recognize themselves as lovable, special, and worthwhile human beings. They will realize that they are not alone and that life is worth living. Sharon Bergman, 18, said it best at the Massachusetts public hearings:

That is the first step: When the teachers and the principals and the superintendents are not afraid, then the students are not afraid. And when

the students are not afraid, they will live. The question is not a matter of a smoother high school experience. What school support gives kids is life. (Massachusetts' Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993, p. 15)

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