

Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Students with Emotional Impairments and Their
Same-Sex Behaviors: A Multiple Case Study

A Research Report Sponsored by & Submitted to

Eastern Michigan University's

Center for the Study of Equality & Human Rights

June 1, 2014

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Abstract

Although recent trends in educational research have addressed the educational plight of LGBT students, a dearth of literature exists about the subpopulation of LGBT youth with disabilities, namely those with verified emotional-behavior disorders (EBDs). Discussions throughout what literature does exist, and as recapped in this article, point to a connection between EBD and LGBT status that often exists. One specific component missing in this discourse has been special education teachers' perceptions and responses to their EBD students who have a concurrent LGBT identity. The present study was an initial attempt to partially fulfill the void with the involvement of nine special education teachers in a multiple case study about the topic that has otherwise not appeared in the literature. Findings revealed that these teachers had little to no professional development relative to the topic, but strive to not treat their LGBT special education students differently than non-LGBT students. Furthermore, they reported their predication that their LGBT students consider their special education status to be more of a stigma than their sexual orientation. Reflections about the research study are provided.

Addressing the emotional wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBT) youth is an ongoing quest that should constitute research efforts, policies, and school practices. Given that suicide is the leading cause of death for LGBT youth, in addition to their high-risk potential for verbal and physical in-school harassment, a variety of adjustment-related disorders, substance abuse addictions, self-destructive behaviors, truancy, and school dropout status justifies such efforts. As Williams, Connolly, Pepler, and Craig (2005) summed, "These youths reported greater feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness, alienation, and extreme loneliness compared to heterosexual youths" (p. 472). Although there is increased risk for the sexual minority population, Morgan, Mancl, Kaffar, and Ferreira (2011) stated, "It is important to note that these elevated risk factors are not attributed to LGBT students' sexual identity but to the societal norms and cultural environments in which students participate" (p. 5). Thus, efforts of intervention should aim at understanding and responding to norms and environments.

With school being a significant social influence of all students' normed behavior, it is essential for research to be conducted that includes both LGBT students and the educational environments in which they participate. It is important to be aware of and address the issues LGBT students face each day. Complementing Williams et al.'s (2005) scholarship, Sherwin and Jennings (2006) conducted a study about programs that included coverage of sexual orientation topics in secondary teacher preparation programs. The authors concluded that the omission of sexual orientation topics may sustain homophobic and heterosexist school environments, and reported that, "Sexual minority students are disproportionately at risk for verbal and physical in-school harassment...a variety of adjustment-related disorders...substance abuse and self-destructive...truancy...and drop out" (p. 207). These findings confirm the negative outcome for

LGBT students if nothing is done to help them. In addition, although some research has been conducted in regards to LGBT youth, the need remains for specific research that includes LGBT youth with disabilities. Morgan (2011) pointed out, "There is minimal research available about the education of LGBT students who have also been identified as having disabilities, and therefore there is not a lot of information regarding the impact their sexual orientation may have on their development" (p. 5). The lack of research about LGBT adolescents identified with disabilities overlooks the most vulnerable subgroup within a school community. We can hypothesize that youth who fall within two marginalized subgroups have an increased risk of victimization and will likely have an extremely difficult time with their social and sexual development. Thus, it is important to identify the challenges and impact from potential feelings of social isolation within this group of students whose members both identify with an LGBT identity and have a disability. The purpose of the present research was to explore special education teachers' perceptions of students with the specific disability of emotional-behavior disorder (EBD) and their same-sex behaviors in order to best create a safe and nurturing environment for this population.

Prior to the present understanding that research efforts should address norms and environments, scholars focused on LGBT students' human development, an important precursor to what should constitute present day research pursuits. Most notably, twenty years ago (1995), a special issue in *Developmental Psychology Journal* discussed sexual orientation and human development. One contributing author, Patterson (1995) stated, however, that it had been an underdeveloped topic: "Most of the classic works on human development [prior to 1995] have focused primarily or exclusively on heterosexual patterns of development" (p. 4). It was understood at the time that LGBT individuals had to navigate their sexual development within a

heterosexual society. Yet, as Patterson further explained, such awareness lacked empirical backing: “Despite the potential value of considering lesbian, gay and bisexual issues and experiences, such perspectives have often been missing from research and theory. As a result, gay and lesbian lives have often been rendered invisible” (p. 4). Patterson continued, “While lesbian women, gay men, and bisexuals have not been omitted entirely from the literature of developmental psychology, their existence has often been acknowledged only in the context of pathology” (p. 4). The special issue ended with Patterson posing questions that had yet to be answered and included: “How does an adolescent’s growing acceptance of lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity affect his or her experience of adolescence, and how is this shaped by cultural and other contexts in which the adolescent lives” (p. 7)? The question called for more research about the relationship between the adolescent experience and sexual orientation/identity while looking at “adolescents” as a setting and a culture. It was an invitation that has yet to be completely fulfilled.

In addition to revisiting Patterson’s (1995) plea and those of other scholars at the time who also identified a need to move beyond a simple focus of LGBT youth’s human development (e.g., Savin-Williams, 1995), a concurrent present need exists for accounting for the nuances of gender (non)conformity in relation to and separate of sexual orientation. Jennings (2012) explained:

Since there is so often confusion between sexual orientation and gender non-conformity, students may feel driven to embrace limiting sex/gender roles and behaviours in order to avoid homophobic abuse. In short, students may be discouraged from seizing academic, social, or vocational opportunities if they perceive such explorations put them at risk for

harassment based upon the notion (actual or perceived) that one is gay or lesbian because one is gender non-conforming. (p. 3)

Whereas sexual orientation refers to sexual attraction to the opposite and/or same sex and sexual identity is one's identity based on his/her attractions, gender non-conformity refers to the expression of gender roles that do not conform to socially/culturally accepted norms. LGBT individuals are considered the sexual minority and may or may not conform to gender norms and might be viewed as behaviorally deviant as result. Williams et al. (2005) explained, "Sexual minority adolescents have been found to report more emotional and behavioral adjustment difficulties than heterosexual youths" (p. 471). It was their assertion that society's norms of expected behavior is the "problem," not the actual youth who express fluid gender and sexual identities:

In the past, the emotional and behavioral problems of sexual minority youth were often viewed as a direct consequence of a 'deviant' sexual orientation. More current perspectives focus on the presence of risk factors and lack of protective processes, within homophobic environments, as primary contributors to these emotional and behavioral problems. (p. 472)

Their position statement served as the foundation for the present study.

In addition to rigid norms of culturally accepted sexual behavior that might stigmatized LGBT youth and those who assert alternative gender expressions, school-based sexuality curriculum has typically perpetuated a sole focus on heterosexual identity and expression. Duke (2011) conducted a meta-synthesis of LGBT youth with disabilities and concluded, "While the school experiences of [non-disabled] LGBT youth have been under-documented, the experiences

of LGBT youth with disabilities have been virtually ignored. At present, only a handful of studies explore the intersection of disability, [homo] sexuality, and gender identity/expression” (p. 3). One study the author examined that was pertinent to the present study included Morgan’s (2011) findings about school safety for LGBT youth: “Special education professionals did report that students with disabilities did engage in same-sex behavior, but were quickly taught that the behavior was inappropriate” (p. 6). Morgan’s study suggested that LGBT students with identified disabilities are vulnerable to a different form of maltreatment, psychological manipulation from their teachers. While students often are considered rebellious within high schools, they often perceive their teachers as authority figures who provide both academic and emotional support, when requested. Students with identified disabilities will be more likely to experience alienation from their peers. With such an outcome being the possible case, peer influence could be minimized if teachers’ influence were be magnified. Yet, if teachers express that LGBT behavior is deviant, students will be more likely to experience a heightened internal struggle. Morgan also concluded, “There is minimal research available about the education of LGBT students who have also been identified as having disabilities, and therefore there is not a lot of information regarding the impact their sexual orientation may have on their development” (p. 6). A need for more research that includes students with impairments and who claim a LGBT identity still exists. Specifically, scholarship must address the ongoing bleak portrayal of LGBT youth with disabilities in certain school contexts that still perpetuate and what Duke (2011) recapped: “LGBT students with disabilities are considered a ‘minority within a minority’ who simultaneously occupy multiple devalued positions” (p. 1).

Ignoring the LGBT identity of students with impairments hinders further knowledge of how sexual development affects disability, especially the specific disability of emotional-

behavior disorders (EBDs), which was the focus of the present study. Williams (2005) stated, "Dealing with the experience of identifying as a sexual minority may also result in behavioral attempts to mask this status through acting out behaviors, in an effort to detract or mitigate the stress of the questioning process" (p. 479). Thompson (2008) explained that the result of not educating LGBT youth with impairments results in their "ill-informed [status] about relationships, dating, sexuality and identity" (p. 41). Not only may this outcome perpetuate LGBT students acting out ill-informed ideas, Schofield (2008) warned, "Childhood conduct problems may also increase risk for early sexual activity due to co-occurring impulsivity and attention problems, which are frequently associated with aggression and reflect deficits in inhibitory control, planning, and decision-making skills" (p. 1176). Despite the dearth of research about LGBT youth with EBDs, a consistent theme about this population's high risk for victimization appears in the few studies that have addressed this population of students.

Twenty years ago Patterson (1995) made a call for research to be conducted and asked, "How does an adolescent's growing acceptance of lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity affect his or her experience of adolescence, and how is this shaped by cultural and other contexts in which the adolescent lives" (p. 7)? This call has not been fully answered. One missing gap that still exists regards special education teachers of students with EBDs and their accounts of LGBT and gender non-conforming youth's sexuality. In response, I pursued with the present research.

Method

The aforementioned missing gap that the present research sought to resolve pointed to a need for engaging special education teachers in in-depth conversations to serve as an initial

response and subsequent foundation for follow-up research pursuits. A hermeneutical phenomenological method best matched the process. As Creswell (2013) described:

Hermeneutical phenomenology is oriented toward lived experience (phenomenology) and interpreting the “texts” of life (hermeneutics). Researchers first turn to a phenomenon, an “abiding concern,” which seriously interests them. In the process, they reflect on essential themes, what constitutes the nature of this lived experience. This approach is often selected because when a researcher maximizes differences at the beginning of the study, it increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives- an ideal in qualitative research. (p. 79)

We ensued with interview questions needing to be designed. In order to do so, we revisited the literature review findings to inform the topics we wanted special education teacher participants to discuss about LGBT youth and those with gender expression (GE) considered being outside of expected norms:

1. Describe your understanding of the similarities or differences between heterosexual and LGBT/GE adolescent sexual development [not restricted to special education populations]. (Based on Jennings, 2012; Savin-Williams, 1995; Smith, 2004; Strickland, 1995).
2. Tell me what you think influences your LGBT/GE special education students' expression or repression of their sexuality. Furthermore, tell me what that expression looks like. (Based on Duke, 2011; Smith, 2004).
3. Do you think students with disabilities are accustomed to being discriminated against and, therefore, choose the “category” (e.g., disability, sexuality) of discrimination they

will deal with? Which category trumps others? Why do you think this is so? (Based on Duke, 2011).

4. Tell me how you view/react to the sexuality of special education students who identify as LGBT/GE versus other students? Do you consider your stance comparable to your colleagues? Parents? What happens in general education settings? (Based on Duke, 2011).
5. Describe for me the training you received before becoming a teacher and now, as a teacher, to address special education students' LGBT/GE sexuality. What additional professional development for this topic do you want/need? (Based on Morgan, 2001; Schofield, 2008; Sherwin, 2006).
6. Tell me your opinion about whether or not a student's behavioral impairment correlates with his/her LGBT/GE status. That is, does one cause/influence the other? (Based on Morgan, 2001; Williams, 2005).
7. Describe the manner/context of special education LGBT students' verbal and/or physical bullying towards each other. (Based on Williams, 2005).
8. Tell me how you react when you see peer-to-peer bullying among your LGBT students. (Based on McCready, 2008).

Given that participants did not deviate into topics beyond the scope of these questions as is typical and often encouraged in qualitative research, we were able to sort responses according to the 8 posed questions. Then, for each question and the collected data, we were able to note consistencies among responses, while also accounting for unique outlying data. We identified 6 themes that best captured the collective summaries within and across each question: (1) sexual

development, (2) sexuality expression/repression, (3) impairment versus sexual orientation, (4) teachers' stance on LGBT versus heterosexual students, (5) training, and (6) bullying.

Participants

Creswell, Hanson, Clark, and Morales (2007) pointed out, "Many case studies focus on an issue with the case selected to provide insight to the issue" (p. 245). The authors further stated that "the focus in case study research is not predominantly on the individual as in narrative research, *but on the issue with the individual case selected to understand the issue*" (emphasis added) (p. 245). For the present study, the issue of addressing intervention needs of LGBT youth with EBDs was explored with special education teachers within the broader context of the culture through which they have developed their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about intervening on behalf of these students.

Yin (2003), Creswell (2013), and other qualitative scholars suggest an N of 5 cases for multiple case studies, such as the one I conducted. We disagreed with the recommendation because we knew that since the specific topic and focus has otherwise not appeared in the literature, we would be unable to corroborate participants' accounts with other forms of qualitative data and artifacts; the proposed topic is not something to "see," but to understand. Therefore, we proposed an N of 9 participants to offset this shortcoming, an amount almost double than what is recommended for a first-time exploration of a topic through a multiple case study approach.

Participants included 9 public secondary special education teachers from Southeast Michigan. We asked them to volunteer for a confidential, audio-recorded interview. Eight out of

the nine educators agreed to do so; one educator declined, but agreed to participate in a non-audio-recorded interview. Participants included (pseudonyms provided):

Anne: A female high school special education resource room teacher. Anne has less than 5 years of teaching experience at a school with approximately 2000 students. This school was the largest one of those involved with the study.

Megan: A female high school special education teacher in an academic support environment. Megan educates both general education students and students in special education. Megan has more than 5 years of teaching experience at a school with approximately 1600 students.

Peyton: A female middle school special education teacher with high school experience. Peyton has more than 5 years of teaching experience and has taught for both general education and special education in environments ranging from 600-1400 students.

Michelle: A female high school special education academic support teacher in a school with approximately 1600 students. Michelle has more than 5 years of teaching both general education and special education.

Samantha: A female high school special education teacher with less than 5 years of teaching experience. Samantha is in a school with approximately 1500 students.

Mark: A male middle school special education resource room teacher. Mark has less than 5 years of experience with both general education and special education in a school with approximately 600 students.

Daisy: A female special education resource room teacher with more than 5 years of teaching experience in both middle and high school.

Sam: A male high school special education resource room teacher. Sam has more than 5 years of experience with both general education and special education in a school with approximately 300 students.

May: A female middle school special education resource room teacher with less than 5 years of experience in a school with approximately 700 students.

Findings

Findings are reported by the 6 themes that I identified when sorting all responses to the 8 interview questions: (1) sexual development, (2) sexuality: repression and expression; (3) impairment versus sexual orientation, (4) teachers' stance towards LGBT students, (5) professional development, and (6) bullying. As such, certain themes encompass responses from more than one interview protocol question. Within each theme, findings of the nine participants are reported while pointing out whenever a participant was an outlier.

Sexual development

The first topic of discussion revolved around sexual development. Respondents were asked to describe the similarities or differences between heterosexual and LGBT/GE adolescent sexual development. In order to obtain more feedback, this question was not restricted to special education population. While describing their understanding of similarities or differences between heterosexual and LGBT/GE adolescent sexual development 2 out of 9 teachers thought LGBT development was more challenging when compared to heterosexual development. Samantha explained sexual development for heterosexual adolescents as easier because it is the "norm"

when compared to LGBT adolescents who must navigate what their different feelings mean and what to do with them. Samantha's response that LGBT have a more difficult time with their sexual development centers around the fact that they are forced to reconcile the differences in their individual sexual development and expression versus what is projected to be the norm. Samantha discussed how LGBT youth are forced to have an internal debate about how to proceed with their development and expression, taking into account multiple factors and potential outcomes, whereas more times than not, heterosexual youth are able to proceed without such angst. Another teacher, Mark maintained that at the middle school level, being LGBT is stigmatized versus acceptance of heterosexual development. He stated that within his school, LGBT status is not only different from the norm, but LGBT students would likely face ridicule if they were to publicize their sexual development and expression similar to that of their heterosexual peers.

While two educators thought LGBT development was more challenging than heterosexual development, only 1 educator out of 9 thought LGBT development was easier than heterosexual development. Anne described how LGBT adolescents differ in their sexual development with their heterosexual peers because they (LGBT students) are more willing to share their sexual experiences when they feel comfortable. Anne's response suggests that heterosexual development comes easier and expression comes more frequently amongst heterosexual students, being that it is the "accepted" behavior. Conversely, the comfort level of the student, likely dictated by the school environment and possibly their home environment, mostly influences LGBT development and expression. Anne's response suggests that fear of ridicule is likely an important factor in the sexual development and expression of LGBT adolescents.

Of the nine participants, one teacher thought there was no difference between LGBT and heterosexual development, whereas 2 of the 9 did not know or have any observations about any similarities or differences. The other three had different responses, as exemplified in Peyton's retort: "LGBT adolescents are aware earlier of their sexuality versus heterosexual adolescents because their feelings differ from the "norm," although they may not know what to do with or about their feelings." Peyton's response suggests that LGBT students' realization that their sexual development and identity is different from the "norm" creates an awareness at an earlier state than their heterosexual peers. Furthermore, her account suggests that LGBT adolescents are more likely to be confused with how to proceed with their development and expression in an environment where heterosexual behavior is expected, unlike heterosexual adolescents who are able to develop and express their sexuality without a second thought

Sexuality: Repression and expression

When asked what influences special education LGBT students' expression or repression of their sexuality, 4 of 9 teachers spoke about witnessing both expression and repression. Peyton, a middle school participant was 1 of the 4 teachers. She perceived middle school as a setting in which LGBT students oscillate between expression and repression, a process that morphs into strict repression at the high school level. Although at first her account paints an optimistic picture of middle school as a safe setting for broaching one's LGBT identity, she was equally vocal about how the process can only occur to the extent to which middle school students consider it "acceptable" behavior. She further elaborated that middle school students equate "acceptable" with their interpretation of how media, home life, and community standards portray the norms of gender roles. As a result of these codes of acceptable behavior, Peyton predicted that LGBT middle school students are more likely to abandon their LGBT expression as they navigate

middle school and fully repress it by the time they enroll in high school. Based on Peyton's discussion we can assume this repression is influenced by the students' experience at the middle school level coupled with the anticipation of the reprisal that will await them in high school.

Unlike Payton who had witnessed both expression and repression of LGBT identity among her middle school students, three other participants could only report incidents of expression, albeit degrees of it. For example, Anne stated, "Most expression is not done in front of teachers, but I have overheard my special education students saying it's 'cool' to be LGBT. There are two extremes: introvert and flamboyant." Anne's response alludes to two interpretations about LGBT expression within her high school special education program. First, students may not feel comfortable conveying their sexual expression in front of their teachers; however, they may be comfortable to do so among their peers. Second, LGBT expression occurs at either of two extremes: flamboyant or reserved (introverted).

Throughout my conversation with Anne, I learned that more flamboyant LGBT students might be taking a pre-emptive strike approach at society's acceptance or refute of their sexual expression rather than being "outed" by a potential bully within and outside of their special education program. Their expression is one that is more than obvious, resisting stereotypes of normed expectations for dress, demeanor, and conversation. In addition, they may have a purposeful quest for changing their school culture for LGBT populations by serving as visual reminder that such students are enrolled at the school.

Anne explained how the "no middle ground" mentality that exists within the school culture regarding LGBT students forces those who would rather not be flamboyant to take a more reserved, "introverted" approach to their expression, to the point of almost being non-expressive.

She said this group of students' attempts to assimilate into popular school culture and navigate beneath the LGBT radar, with hopes of graduating without being publically outed.

The remaining 2 of 9 teachers spoke only of witnessing repression of one's LGBT identity among special education students. Sam succinctly summed, "If they are in special education, they do not express it." Sam was adamant that all special education LGBT students repress their sexuality. While Sam did not go into detail about non-special education LGBT students' expression of sexuality, I interpreted his response as suggesting that students in his EBD special education program are less willing to express their LGBT sexuality than students in the general school population.

Participants further discussed influences that inform their special education students' expression or repression of LGBT identify that were not bound to special education programs or the overall school culture and environment. Specifically, they mentioned family, media, athlete, celebrity, religious, cultural / societal, race, and influences. . For example, they argued that students of color were more likely to repress their sexuality due to cultural norms. Likewise, if idolized celebrities discouraged LGBT lifestyles, their LGBT students would be more likely to repress their sexual identity. They expressed these opinions as universally applicable to all high school students without exemption of or solely bound to special education populations.

Impairment versus sexual orientation

When asked if LGBT students with disabilities are accustomed to discrimination and, if so, what students would say the cause is, 6 of the 9 nine participants identified the EBD special education label versus LGBT identify. The other two participants identified LGBT status as the impetus of their special education students' encounters with discrimination. .

Participants justified their predictions based on their perception that less stigma and more acceptance is attached to special education or because of special education program delivery models, such as inclusion, that make it harder to identify a student's special education status. One of the participants, May had a different response. She was unsure and said high school students would rather have a LGBT label than to be considered "dumb" or have a special education label. Peyton's account contradicted that of the other middle school teacher, May who noted that middle school students embrace their special education identity because they enjoy the extra academic attention and/or perceived privileges that come with it.

Probing further with my interview protocol, I inquired if the participants thought a correlation between a students' LGBT status and their emotional-behavioral impairment exists; eight of them affirmed as such. As Payton bluntly stated, Peyton maintains, "LGBT students are more likely to be [inadvertently] diagnosed with disabilities because of their struggle with sexuality. Although it is incorrect to state that a student's self-identified LGBT status equates with a behavioral/ emotional impairment, it is professional and necessary to note the relationship that may exist between the two, as my participants observed.

Teachers' stance towards LGBT students

When asked about their stance on their treatment of LGBT students and if colleagues and parents had similar views, eight participants said they do not treat LGBT students differently than heterosexual students. One participant could not answer the question because he was unaware of any LGBT students in his school. Despite their initial claims of impartiality, they did allude to purposeful monitoring of their LGBT students' wellbeing. For example, Daisy claimed neutrality when comparing her LGBT and non-LGBT special education students' academic performance. Yet, she immediately followed with a statement of needing to be more aware and

sensitive to issues LGBT students may encounter, even in a liberal community, such as the location of her high school.

When discussing their treatment of LGBT students versus how colleagues treated LGBT students, 5 of the 8 teachers said that other colleagues do not have the same neutrality and acceptance as they do. Perhaps their self-dispositional rating spurred their willingness to participate in the research project at time of recruitment, if they thought that other educators would not be as willing as they were to discuss LGBT sexuality among special education populations. At the very least, their evaluation of peers allude to the possibility that LGBT adolescents may not have the necessary support structure both within special education programs and general education settings.. If true, the finding corroborates other scholarship that identifies certain educators as a hindrance and not as an ideal avenue for protection and support (see, for example, May, 2014).

Peyton self-identified as one of few middle school educators who embraces the complexity of LGBT expression among students, including those who receive special education services:

Academically, my stance is the same, regardless of a student's sexual orientation. Am I more sensitive, gentle with LGBT students? Probably. If you have gone most of your life feeling, real or perceived, attacked, judged, or otherwise uncomfortable, you simply cannot and will not be able to put those fears aside to truly learn. If you have spent every school day of your childhood protecting yourself against perceived threats, it's going to take a bit more from your teachers and peers to develop the sense of safety and trust needed to adequately learn. Do all teachers, parents, adults feel this way? Unlikely.

Sam claimed he does not react differently towards his LGBT students other than when their statue interferes with school policy, such as requesting a name change (e.g., transgender identity) or dress code (e.g., a male student wearing female clothing). He even boasted about being less bias and more accepting than other colleagues and parents. Yet, he admitted that his affirmation is bound to school policy and its mandate regarding how he is to interact with LGBT students. However, he is not willing to go outside the scope of what the school policy states. His reference to name changing and dress code tension illustrated his personal comfort level and expectation of how students (heterosexual and LGBT) should operate. Sam said he would not support nor tolerate a deviation from his version of societal norms, yet would fulfill his employer's expectation to not discriminate against LGBT students.

Professional development

When asked about the professional development they have received about addressing the needs of LGBT students, both in general and special education programs, all nine of the participants said they had received none before becoming a teacher. After becoming a teacher, two of them opted to attend a professional development regarding LGBT students. This finding illustrates how teachers may be left to their own interpretation of how to interact with LGBT students.

When asked if they would like to receive training, 6 of 9 teachers stated they wanted it, but did not know what should constitute it. They were unaware of the best practices for which they should request training. While their desire could be perceived as a promising response, it also points out that they are left to their own understanding of how to interact with and assist LGBT youth, especially when specific matters are entangled with special education intervention needs

One of the three teachers who did not want any professional training was May who asserted that middle school is not the setting in which LGBT matters should or need to be addressed.

Bullying

Teachers were asked if they have witnessed peer to peer bullying among their LGBT students within their special education programs and their responses. One problem they had in answering the question was uncertainty about confirming a student's LGBT status. Thus, without knowing a student's LGBT status, they were not able to label certain bullying-type behaviors as LGBT-based, further perpetuating a need for professional development. For example, Daisy detailed incidents of bullying behavior between her special education students about gender and sexuality, but was sure if what she had witnessed was bullying or "calling each other out" for something entirely different. Her enigma illustrates how common behaviors of establishing what she called a "law and order hierarchy" in an EBD special education program may involve gender and sexuality taunts as a means, but not as a target.

The lack of dialogue about this topic confirms the lack of awareness the participants had about what does and does not constitute LGBT bullying among their special education students, and their ability to decipher it.

Conclusion

Upon completion of this study, a common theme arose around challenges teachers face during their career regarding how to deal with LGBT students who fall in the special needs category. My participants stated that there was no training or policy procedures in place of how to deal with special needs students within the LGBT community. If generalized to a larger population, my study presents a massive hurdle regarding LGBT students' development and

achievement of this population, primarily because special education teachers may be left to their own devices on how to serve them.

Absence of policy based on scientific research, teachers are forced to implement what they deem “appropriate” support. Unfortunately, an individual’s opinion of “appropriate” support may not always be the best method of service. Further, it is likely that this haphazard approach will lead to discrepancies within a district regarding teacher interaction, support, and developmental practices, which in turn, is likely to result in a significant detriment to the special education LGBT student who warrants and deserves a purposeful and concise response from their teachers.

The teachers involved in my study alluded to a correlation existed between a student’s LGBT status and behavioral impairment. However, they were unaware of the exact relationship. Of the multiple hypothesis presented regarding this relationship, the prevailing thought centered on bullying, social alienation from family and peers, and possibly an internal struggle involving religion and sexual orientation operating as catalysts for behavioral problems.

The lack of policy backed by research leaves teachers (with no formal psychological or sociological training) to operate as experts. While a teacher may consider her/himself politically correct using the “appropriate” tools from their teaching arsenal, personal beliefs on sexual orientation is very likely to influence her/his interaction with special education LGBT students. Such a portrayal was consistent among my participants. Fortunately, most of them stated a desire for training and policy (based on research) on how to appropriately interact with special needs students within the LGBT community.

My findings support the need for ongoing reexamination of the inclusion of LBGT issues as part of a special education teachers’ pre-service preparation, as well as a part of their ongoing

professional development. Newly practicing special education teachers, as well as experienced ones, will likely encounter special education students within the LGBT community and may have no formal instruction on how to proceed in addressing their sexuality. Based on the findings of this research, I would recommend to new and existing teachers to first, identify professional development opportunities with credible organizations/universities that center on servicing the LGBT students, both in the special education population as well as the general population. Second, attempt to work with the local school administrators and peers on developing a protocol of how to serve special education students within the LGBT community with consistent practices. Third, utilize teacher unions to petition boards of education at local, state and federal levels about the sense of urgency surrounding policy and procedures for serving LGBT students, especially youth in special education programs, and to do so based on scientific research and best practices within comparable districts.

Upon completion of this study, key findings arose around methodology that I would recommend to anyone replicating my phenomenological method with a follow-up and comparable population of participations. When drafting the questions ensure each question is asked more than once and worded in multiple ways, it is definitely insightful to have both close ended and open-ended questions. While conducting the interviews, it was clear that close-ended questions were likely to receive the answers that are deemed politically correct and what the interviewee assumed I wanted to hear. However, the open-ended questions addressing the same topic was more likely to draw out the more accurate response.

This reality brings me to my next finding—developing a rapport with the interviewee. The better the rapport the more likely the interview will transform into a conversation that will produce more in-depth data to work with. In addition, keep all personal feelings and surprises

suppressed during the interview. If the interviewee thinks she/he is being judged, she/he is more likely to resort back to what assumedly politically correct answers a genuine, albeit possible judgmental response. This line of research requires honest answers that expose strengths and shortcomings in order to identify ways to empower special education teachers' best practices of serving students in the LGBT community, while concurrently offering professional development opportunities to address gaps in their advocacy and/or shortcomings.

If one were to replicate this analysis, there are a few recommendations that I would provide. First, understand the delicacy of this topic. Special education students within the LGBT community are not the only ones who feel a sense of vulnerability; teachers are also very susceptible and hence, skeptical about participating. Teachers' vulnerability relates to their professional reputation. Given that no policy currently exist, teachers are left to their own interpretation of how to serve and could easily be labeled as insensitive, biased, or "unprofessional." In addition, if a teacher has obtained professional development about this issue, but is at odds with how to interpret the district or principal's stance, she/he could come under scrutiny. There may be no safety net for her/his professional reputation. The unique and necessary support LGBT special education students need and warrant require teachers who are poised and supported to navigate such advocacy. To this end, I invite other scholars to further the research conversation that I started in this present study. I would like to thank the Center for the Study of Equality and Human Rights for accepting my proposal and supporting my research. I would also like to thank Eastern Michigan University as well as give a special thanks to my advisor Dr. John Palladino for assisting me through this research process.

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