Over the Rainbow: A Career Development Group for LGBTQ+ Teens

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ABSTRACT

LGBTQ+ teens' career decision-making processes are confounded by LGBTQ+ identity development and negative experiences in school. The authors present literature identifying specific needs of LGBTQ+ teens involved in career planning and propose a specialized career group counseling model designed to address those needs. Potential application for counselors in schools and the community are discussed.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ career planning, group career counseling

It is not surprising, given the consistently high rates of campus violence, harassment, and bullying, (GLSEN, 2019; Rockenbach et al., 2017; Strear, 2017; Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016) that many LGBTQ+ students report not feeling safe in their high schools (GLSEN, 2019). More than half of LGBTQ+ students are battling symptoms of depression (Singh & Kosciw, 2018), and these stressors only amplify already difficult career decisions that adolescents face. These barriers put upon LGBTQ+ students directly interfere with their abilities to engage in comprehensive career decision making (Chen & Keats, 2016). Administrators and educators are aware of the problem but often report being afraid to intervene, even when they want to (Strear, 2017). School counselors and administrators have been encouraged to collaborate to make improvements for LGBTQ+ students (Beck, 2017; Boyland et al., 2018; Strear, 2017). Specific training for faculty and staff (Boyland et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2017), as well as mentoring programs have been discussed providing education and guidance (Singh & Kosciw, 2018). Scholars have also highly recommended integrating anti-LGBTQ+ bullying into curricula (Boyland et al., 2018; Strear, 2017) and normalizing the use of pronouns and inclusive language (GLSEN, 2019; Rankin et al., 2019; Simons et al., 2017). Despite these efforts, challenges persist. As gender identity becomes further understood as a spectrum of identities, individuals who identify outside of historically dichotomous features become increasingly marginalized (Rankin et al., 2019). Transgender students may struggle with a lack of support, which can leave them feeling both invisible and buried beneath heteronormative power structures (Rockenbach et al., 2017). This has generated cycles of underrepresentation and little social support (Beck, 2017; McMahon et al., 2017; Rankin et al., 2019; Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016) Moreover, LGBTQ+ populations typically find themselves needing

to discern when it is safe to disclose aspects of their identity (Rockenbach et al., 2017), as others' adverse responses may put them at risk of harm (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016). It is within this context that LGBTQ+ students must also consider post-secondary career decision-making.

Understanding these barriers to positive identity development allows educators to support LGBTQ+ youth and further understand the diversity of services required to meet their specific needs (Singh & Kosciw, 2018). At a time when teens are discovering their identities (e.g., sexual and gender identities), educators must analyze the impact of how biopsychosocial dimensions like gender norms have been socialized into their self-concept (Rockenbach et al., 2017). The aim of educators should be to expand opportunities; while little is really known about the career needs of LGBTQ+ youth (Chen & Keats, 2016), career planning is more of a challenge given the safety and security threats to LGBTQ+ people in the workplace (Baker & Lewis, 2017). Due to this stigma, LGBTQ+ adults must continually assess risk/safety of coming out (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2016). Additionally, in the presence of a polarizing political climate, corporations are increasingly taking stands on issues, adopting more conservative religious values or more liberal secular values, depending on the organization (Brown & Scott, 2019). Thus, LGBTQ+ students face difficulty in their current high school environments and can reasonably expect

continued challenges, which further complicates the career decision-making process.

Career Planning and LGBTQ+ Teens

Almost 70% of students surveyed by Owen and colleagues (2020) reported wanting career information from school counselors, suggesting that today's students are possibly not receiving that information. Students' readiness to make career decisions has been seen to be largely influenced by how aware they are of opportunities and timelines (Gu et al., 2019). Student preparedness is also supplemented by trusted advisors facilitating conversations about careers and career decision-making that increase student confidence and motivation (Bolat & Odacı, 2017). Inclusive representation is one way to improve this, as LGBTQ+ students lack out role models when making decisions about college (Cheng et al., 2017). Bolat and Odacı (2017) also emphasized that students of higher socioeconomic standing made career decisions more confidently, and while funding may be available, LGBTQ+ students are especially affected by hurdles such as finances due to reduced access to grants and scholarships (Rockenbach et al., 2017). Complicating the financial issue, many teens lack appropriate financial literacy for moving into adulthood (Johnston-Rodriguez & Henning, 2019).

Career Group Counseling

Career group counseling can normalize experiences that contribute to career anxiety, efficiently deliver career interventions, and foster enjoyment and connection among members and leaders (Pyle & Hayden, 2015). As a counseling intervention, career group counseling provides a setting for participants to experience Yalom's (2005) curative factors of instilling hope, universality, imparting of information, altruism, corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, development of socializing techniques, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis, and existential factors. Additionally, Falco and Shaheed (2021) suggested that career group counseling may be especially applicable in school settings, and Pyle and Hayden (2015) provide specific recommendations using their Group Career Counseling model with high school students (p.33).

Leaders of career group counseling should be intentional and specific about developmentally appropriate goals for the group, in addition to facilitating exploration, reflection, and decision-making (Falco & Shaheed, 2021). When considering implementation of career group counseling interventions, Falco and Shaheed (2021) further cautioned that "how a career counseling intervention is implemented is just as important as what is accomplished as a result" (p. 10). Brown and Ryan Krane (2000) suggested that successful career interventions include the use of written exercises, interpretations and feedback, world of work information, modeling, and building support. Additionally, by focusing on both cognitive and affective aspects of career decision-making, career group counseling may be particularly effective at reducing some of the real and perceived sociocultural barriers to career exploration and decision-making (Falco & Shaheed, 2021, p. 15).

Pyle and Hayden (2015) proposed a four-stage model for career group counseling that addresses both affective and cognitive goals at each stage. During the Encounter stage, group norms are established, the importance of participation is stressed, and members get to know one another. Affective goals include putting members at ease and cognitive ones include clarifying the purpose and expectations of the group. In the Exploration stage, leaders help facilitate increased self-disclosure among group members. The affective goals are for members to pay more attention to each other than to their own anxiety, and cognitive goals are geared toward exploration of self and the world of work. The third stage is the Working stage, during which members report on their out-of-group tasks and bring problems to the group in a confident manner. Affective goals include openness to change and acceptance of factors outside members' control, while cognitive goals include provision of specific occupational information and evaluation of pros and cons for various careers. Stage four is the Action stage, during which members

begin taking steps toward realizing the decisions they've made. Affective goals include a sense of accomplishment and closeness with other members; cognitive goals include understanding what is meant by "learning how to learn," in addition to gaining clarity regarding individual strengths and skills.

Proposing "Over the Rainbow" Career Group Counseling Plan

Based on the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth and the importance of post-secondary career decision making, we propose an extension of Pyle and Hayden's (2015) Group Career Counseling model. We envision Over the Rainbow (OTR) as a career group counseling intervention specifically designed for LGBTQ+ high school youth. Pyle and Hayden (2015) presented their group career counseling model to take place over three, 90-minute sessions. In customizing their work for this purpose and in keeping with the importance of both how and what (Falco & Shaheed, 2021), we suggest a six-session group that will include both career and LGBTQ+ specific activities in each group session. We envision several foundational elements for the group, including engaging LGBTQ+ identified volunteer guest speakers from the local community, imploring group

"We envision Over the Rainbow (OTR) as a career group counseling intervention specifically designed for LGBTQ+ high school youth."

members to come to each session with two or three new ideas for possible realistic career options, and utilizing/customizing a variety of activities freely available online. In setting goals for a group like this, Pyle and Hayden (2015) highlighted the importance of group members developing an understanding of (1) the connection between their interests, abilities, and values to the world of work, (2) how to best make career decisions, (3) at least five potential realistic career options, and (4) action steps to take after the group has terminated. We would add that group members also experience increased: (5) sense of social support and (6) awareness of post-secondary support resources for members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Pre-Group Planning

OTR could be led by a school counselor, a pair of school counselors, a local career practitioner familiar with the needs of LGBTQ+ students, or by some combination of these and other qualified personnel. Group leaders who are new to this type of leadership should seek out an experienced group leader to co-facilitate with for their first time. Master's degree programs provide training in group facilitation skills and knowledge, but unless they received strong supervision for group work during their internships, many counselors report a lack of confidence in

leading groups (Midgett et al., 2016; Springer et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2013). Given the vulnerabilities experienced by LGBTQ+ students, competence for group leadership is an important consideration. We recommend that the Association for Specialists in Group Work's (ASGW) (2021) *Guiding Principles for Group Work* be utilized for tracking competency.

Group leaders should garner institutional support for OTR prior to any plans being formalized to ensure that school administrators are on board. The location where the group meets should be carefully considered. LGBTQ+ students may feel more comfortable attending a group like this if it was held in a community location away from school grounds. At the same time, parents may question a school-sponsored activity that doesn't take place on school grounds. The program should be presented and promoted to faculty members first, before recruiting students, so that faculty are equipped to answer questions posed by their students. Eligibility criteria should be established, as well as plans for group size. We recommend this group for LGBTQ+-identified high school juniors and seniors and agree with Pyle and Hayden's (2015) recommendation that the group not exceed eight members so that appropriate space for reflection and processing can be provided.

For the purposes of this article, we have grouped LGBTQ+ all together. At the same time, we recognize the unique needs of people identifying as trans or gender non-binary separate from those with a minoritized affectional orientation. Trans people can be silenced when grouped with other minoritized groups (Beauregard et al., 2016; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). Therefore, we recommend as a best practice that intentional efforts are made to include trans voices. The group might be planned as half LGB and half trans, or if there are enough trans people known to the group leaders, a separate group could be established specifically for them. In any case, group leaders should be well versed in the important differences between sexual orientation and gender identity. Such knowledge will improve leaders' ability to be helpful to individual members of the group, which will also help representatives from both populations to better understand each other.

As a part of the planning process for the group, leaders should reach out to LGBTQ+-identified adult members of the local community to identify appropriate and available local resources for group participants. Additionally, guest speakers should be recruited to address the topics of being out at work, LGBTQ+ initiatives on college campuses, and basic money management skills. Guest speakers should be encouraged to connect students to various resources and supports for LGBTQ+ students in the community, on college campuses, and in the workplace. Finally, LGBTQ+ individuals who are willing to be contacted by group members should be recruited for

referrals to group members. The group leader should meet with each prospective member of the group to screen for appropriateness for group participation, answer any logistical questions, and conduct a pre-assessment. The questions asked on the pre-assessment should be the same for the post-assessment so that the success of the group can easily be measured and areas for improvement are easily identified. A suggested list of questions for this purpose is offered in Appendix A. In addition to summative evaluation, group leaders can conduct formative evaluations by gathering anonymous feedback from each session via a simple form asking the questions, "What did you like best/least about this session?" and "What reactions did you have to the group process today?" This feedback can help group leaders evaluate the efficacy of each week's interventions and respond to any identified trends week to week.

Session #1: Program Expectations, Career Decision-Making, and LGBTQ+ Identity Development

The first session marks the beginning of the Encounter stage of the group (Pyle & Hayden, 2015). We suggest starting the session with a fun icebreaker activity that helps participants learn one another's names and pronouns. Group norms should be collaboratively established, and confidentiality and its limits should be carefully explained. The goal of the career decision-making element is to help participants understand the complexity of

and stages involved in career decision-making, including exploration, crystallization, choice, and clarification (Pyle & Hayden, 2015). Participants should be affirmed that making career decisions is not easy for anyone, and that many feel confused about their options before focusing in on a small number of options and eventually gaining clarity. The second part of the session should be focused on LGBTQ+ identity development. We recommend a review of key concepts and identities within the LGBTQ+ umbrella and a discussion of outness and decision-making about coming out to certain people. Again, participants should be affirmed that career decision-making is further complicated with the realities of LGBTQ+ identity development. Following a brief demonstration of the O*Net online, the session should end with two assignments: the first to complete a personality inventory before the next session, and the second to come back with one or two realistic career options. Utilizing the O*Net online, members should note for each career option selected the median wage, projected growth, education and training requirements, and other types of jobs that could be possible with similar education and training.

Session #2: Personality Type and Career Preferences and the Continuum of Outness

In Session #2, the group should be moving into Pyle and Hayden's (2015) Exploration stage. The session should open with a discussion of the personality assessment process and identification of what members

agreed or disagreed with and what surprised them the most, followed by a discussion about how personality type can impact the kind of work a person is drawn to, the influence of type on relationships in the workplace, and impact of type on long term career management. Group members should discuss the career options they chose for consideration and how these seem to fit or not fit with what they learned about their personality type preferences. The LGBTQ+ part of this session should be a continuation from the first session, focused on the risks and benefits associated with being out. Leaders can use tools such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Foundation's Corporate Equality Index (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2021) to inform students about workplaces that are actively promoting policies that benefit LGBTQ+ employees. The HRC website can be accessed to explore specific work-related issues, particularly for insurance for gender affirming healthcare. An LGBTQ+-identified guest speaker should be invited to this session to discuss their experiences of being out at work and the various considerations they weighed in making those decisions. The homework assigned at the conclusion of this session should be to complete interest and values surveys as an additional part of the self-exploration process and to select an additional one to two career options to explore using the O*Net online resource.

Session #3: The College Question, Support Networks, and Social Media Profiles

By the time this session begins, the group will have entered Pyle and Hayden's (2015) Working stage. The leader should keep the group in the working stage until Session #5. At the beginning of the session, the leader should facilitate a discussion similar to the one at the beginning of Session #2, focusing on what was learned from the values and interests surveys. In this session, the group leader should stress the importance of soft skills for success in career and other important areas of life. In response to the earlier discussions about the potential risks and benefits of coming out, the leader should facilitate a discussion stressing the importance of building a strong network of people who they can trust will be supportive of them, and the importance of building appropriate social media profiles should be discussed in this session. The guest speaker for this session should be an LGBTQ+-identified person (or persons) who represent local colleges to explain the LGBTQ+ initiatives and supports on their campuses. The group leader should open a discussion about post-high school options, such as going to college right away, deferring college entrance, or choosing not to go to college. For homework, participants should continue to consider reasons to go to college or not and should conduct some of their own online research to help answer this question for their own unique situation. Participants should start a list of personal strengths they identify during the group process which they will use when preparing

for interviews. Finally, members should select one or two more career options utilizing the O*Net online system.

Session #4: Networking and Safe Dating

At the start of this session, the leader should facilitate a follow-up conversation addressing participants' thoughts and feelings about going to college. The conversation should include a report out from group members on any pertinent information they found regarding the college decision, along with the additional career options they identified. Participants should discuss the importance of networking and informational interviews as a method for continuing to build a support network, learning about new opportunities, finding solutions to career planning setbacks and other problems, and ultimately identifying potential job opportunities. The LGBTQ+ focus for this session is on safe dating practices and identifying general safety strategies. The safety information provided should include material on sex, substance use, and intimate partner violence. An LGBTQ+ guest speaker could discuss LGBTQ+-identified career role models. The homework for this session should be to note any personal strengths identified in this session and also research one or two more career options via the O*Net online system.

Session #5: Cover letters, Resumes, and Money Management

In this session, leaders should help the group

transition to Pyle and Hayden's (2015) Action stage. The leader should help members construct a resume focused on the transferable strengths and skills of each individual student. A simple cover letter format should be provided for students to later customize for their own use. The LGBTQ+ portion of this session should address intersectionality, inviting students to discuss the various features of their identities. They may also choose to include facets of their status at school, such as team participation, leadership positions, or extracurricular activities. The guest speaker invited to this session should be an LGBTQ+-identified person from the community who is equipped to teach students about basic money management strategies, such as checkbook balancing, use of credit cards, and budgeting basics. The homework for this session should be for participants to identify their top 3 career options among all the careers they investigated during the course of the program and to note any additional strengths they identified about themselves during the session.

Session #6: Mock Interviews, Wrap-Up, and Next Steps

In this final session, participants will prepare for how they will individually move forward from having participated in the career group counseling process. Reflecting on identified strengths, the leader should facilitate a discussion about best practices for interviewing. Mock interviews might be

conducted like a "speed-dating" exercise. Participants should be given the post-assessment questionnaire and some time to complete it. The leader should facilitate a discussion of the major takeaways from the program, specific things participants enjoyed and learned from, and any specific things they would recommend be changed. As participants leave, the leader should give each member a list of local resources they can use as they move forward in their own career development process.

Post-group Analysis and Evaluation

Group leaders should soon conduct a program evaluation to identify program strengths and areas for improvement. The most basic approach to program evaluation is to analyze the degree to which the program did what it was designed to do (Cresswell, 2018). Utilizing their own observations during group sessions, verbal reports from participants during the wrap-up session, and analysis of pre-.and- post-assessments completed by students, leaders should be able to identify the degree to which the program met its goals, along with strengths in the program and areas needing improvement.

Discussion

It is our hope that participation in a group such as OTR will help LGBTQ+ students feel more confident in themselves in terms of staying safe in their environments and will leave them better equipped for career

planning. OTR may provide an effective response to the call for more career information for high school youth (Owen et al., 2020) and addresses the importance of role models for LGBTQ+ youth navigating college decision making (Cheng et al., 2017). This group structure provides an opportunity for collaboration amongst school counselors and administrators to improve the climate for LGBTQ+ students, which has been called for by previous scholars (Beck, 2017, Boyland et al., 2018, Strear, 2017).

The activities we propose for OTR directly address the original goals of the group and were suggested as a way of supporting the cognitive and affective goals proposed by Pyle and Hayden (2015). We purposefully utilized free online sources for session activities (shown in Appendix B) to make the group easy to adopt. By participating in the group, members will engage in a self-discovery process that includes inventories of their personality preferences, values, and career interests, and they will engage in meaningful discussion about how these relate to their own career development process. Through teaching and modeling, the group leaders and guest speakers will provide important information addressing career decision-making, and participants will engage in identifying a minimum of four to eight possible career options and ultimately choosing their top two to three. Participants will learn about important job search skills in preparation for future actions necessary in expediting career plans. They will have the

opportunity to both provide and receive social support and would have been introduced to a variety of resources. Beyond the basic goals of the program, students will be connected with important information about financial aid to support their potential college education.

Counselors and other helping professionals interested in leading an OTR group may face barriers to executing their plans. Resistance may come from school administrators, school faculty, parents/caregivers, or some combination of these. Potential sources of resistance might include fear, denial, lack of awareness, conflicting priorities, and intentional/unintentional prejudice. We recommend that schools adopt the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) (2012) National Model to ensure that school counselors' roles are clearly defined and understood by various stakeholders in the system. The quality of the school counselor-to-school administrator relationship cannot be understated when considering potential success or failure of new program efforts (Edwards et al., 2014). Counselors may need to provide some education around the experiences of LGBTQ+ students as a precursor to proposing the OTR group. Proceeding with the group without stakeholder support could lead to a variety of negative consequences for the group leaders, and especially for LGBTQ+ students.

Limitations

Students choosing to join OTR would be outing themselves to other group members who they may or may not know and also to the group facilitator(s) who they may or may not know. We hope that the benefits of mutuality and shared experience associated with group interventions outweigh the risks of students outing themselves to others who identify as LGBTQ+. As confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in group counseling, students should carefully consider their decision to participate, and leaders should emphasize the importance of respecting individual privacy at each session.

Implications

The unique combination of LGBTQ+ and career activities presented in OTR could provide a road map for practicing school counselors providing services to LGBTQ+-identified students. The interventions may also be useful to community based clinical mental health counselors working with LGBTQ+ adolescents individually or as a part of family counseling. Counselor educators and supervisors can utilize the OTR career group counseling intervention to support inclusive training of mental health and school counselors. The information could also be used in preparing doctoral students as they become educators of future practitioners. Since there is very little scholarship addressing the career needs of LGBTQ+ identified teens, and very little scholarship

evaluating group career counseling interventions, researchers should conduct empirical inquiry to identify the efficacy of OTR in achieving its desired results.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ teens face significant challenges in navigating both identity development and career development. In this article we presented a career group counseling intervention to address both identity development among LGBTQ+ teens and improve their college and career decision making. We encourage utilization, testing, and refinement of this model. JCA

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Appendix A: Questions for Use on Pre-and Post-Assessment

Name at least 2 interests you have when it comes to your future career.

Name at least 2 of your best skills/abilities.

Name at least 2 work values you have.

Do you understand the relationship between your interests, abilities, and values and the world of work? If so, please summarize. If not, what questions do you have?

What do you know about career decision-making?

Name at least 5 realistic career options that you have considered.

What actions are you aware of that you can take to learn more about certain careers?

Please rate the amount of social support you feel you have, with 1 being the lowest amount and 10 being the highest.

What resources in your community or in a college that you are considering are available to support your identity as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?

Appendix B: Suggested Resources for Session Activities and Homework

Assessments

Barrett Values Centre. (n.d). *Personal Values Assessment*

https://www.valuescentre.com/tools-assessments/pva/

My Next Move. (n.d). *O*NET Interest Profiler. https://www.mynextmove.org/explore/ip*

NERIS Analytics Limited. (2021). *16 Personalities. https://www.16personalities.com/*

College Information

McKay, D.R. (2019, June 25). *Should I go to college? 6 reasons to get a degree and 3 reasons not to. The Balance Careers.*

https://www.thebalancecareers.com/should-you-go-to-college-525564

United States Government. (n.d). *Federal Student Aid. https://studentaid.gov/*

General Career Resources

Mulvahill, E. (2021, March 19). *12 awesome classroom activities that teach job readiness skills. We Are Teachers.*

https://www.weareteachers.com/9-awesome-classroom-activities-that-teach-job-readiness-skills/

Reality Works (n.d.) *20 key soft skills that all students need.*

https://www.realityworks.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/20-soft-skills-infographic.pdf

U.S. Department of Labor. (n.d). *O*NET Online. https://www.onetonline.org/*

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Job Search Skills

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