

Rural School Counselors and LGBTQ Students

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Abstract

The pathways employed school counselors take for continuing their education beyond graduate school on issues of diversity may be somewhat limited in rural areas and the perception may be that few lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning students exist in rural schools. School counselors have an ethical and legal obligation to create safe and welcoming environments for LGBTQ students. This paper provides a brief examination of traditional approaches to professional development on sexual minority issues and a proposal for alternative educational opportunities for rural school counselors.

Keywords: rural school counselors, LGBTQ students, advocacy, professional development

Rural School Counselors and LGBTQ Students

Supportive school counselors can be a positive attribute to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) student success by providing a counter-balance to possibly harsh treatment in the school environment. LGBTQ students, who report having supportive school personnel have better attendance, are more likely to declare plans for post-secondary education, and report higher grades than their counterparts with no or few supportive staff members (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). School counselors have a unique opportunity to help LGBTQ students by serving key roles in a school-based support system as school counselors and teachers were favored over other school personnel when students were asked which types of educators they felt most comfortable talking with about LGBTQ-related issues (Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2014). Perhaps the ethical requirements of confidentiality and the availability of individual counseling sessions create a more LGBTQ-affirming atmosphere where students can find comfort expressing their concerns and challenges with school counselors.

Even though school counselors along with other helping professionals in the schools are seen as supportive by LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2012), in the past many school counselors have indicated they come into contact with few LGBTQ students in counseling (Fontaine, 1998). School counselors in rural settings may especially be limited in LGBTQ contacts as fewer community supports exist for sexual minorities to express their orientation without fear of retribution. The degree and amount of homophobic, sexist, and negative gender expression-based remarks and harassment

reported by LGBTQ students in rural areas is much higher than for students in suburban or urban schools (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2014).

Furthermore, religious conservatism that exists in many rural environments may create barriers to acceptance of LGBTQ affirming programs in schools or communities (Hiller & Harrison, 2004; Varjas et al., 2007). School counselors who have graduated from accredited programs and adhere to ethical guidelines are expected to demonstrate cross cultural counseling competencies of knowledge, awareness, and skills across diverse populations (ASCA, 2010; CACREP, 2009; Sue & Sue, 2013). The pathways that employed school counselors take for continuing their education beyond graduate school on issues of diversity may be somewhat limited in rural areas (Morrissette, 2000) and the perception may be that few LGBTQ students exist in rural schools since these students may try to remain invisible as a means to avoid harassment (Kosciw et al., 2014). This paper provides a brief examination of traditional approaches to training on sexual minority issues and a proposal for alternative educational opportunities for school counselors in rural areas.

A Call to the Profession

School counselors have a unique role in equality advocacy as they are charged with the responsibility for meeting the needs of all students. The American School Counselor Association's ethical guidelines endorse the inclusion of all students, especially minority students in a comprehensive developmental model (ASCA, 2012). Furthermore, recognition and support in human growth and development for LGBTQ students is supported in an association position statement.

Professional school counselors promote affirmation, respect and equal opportunity for all individuals regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Professional school counselors also promote awareness of issues related to sexual orientation/gender identity among students, teachers, administrators, parents and the community. Professional school counselors work to eliminate barriers that impede student development and achievement and are committed to the academic, personal/social and career development of all students. (ASCA, 2014, p. 36).

School counselor attitudes and practices toward LGBTQ students have seen a positive trend over the past 20 years. In the early 90's Price & Telljohann (1991) and Sears (1991) recorded derogatory attitudes of school counselors toward sexual minorities while more recent studies indicate school counselors are inclined to support and seek training on work with sexual minorities (Monier & Lewis, 2000; Satcher & Leggett, 2007; Sawyer, Porter, Lehman, Anderson, & Anderson, 2006; Whitman, Horn, & Boyd, 2007) The barriers placed on students by bullying and the legal obligations to address discrimination in the schools is furthering the efforts of school counseling programs to be more proactive in advocating for safe and welcoming environments (McFarland, 2001; Singh & Burnes, 2009; Stone, 2003).

Traditional Training Methods

Traditional training methods of graduate school coursework and staff development have aimed at increasing the cultural counseling competencies of school counselors but gaps exist in the acquisition and scope of knowledge, awareness, and skills. A majority of graduate programs report that they infuse issues of sexual minorities

across the curricula but issues affecting bisexual, transgender, and intersex identity is lacking (Luke, Goodrich, & Scarborough, 2011). Proposals for incorporating LGBTQ issues into core curricula for training school counselors suggests the use of role plays, panel presentations by LGBTQ community members, experiential activities around privilege, locating local resources and support programs, and attending Gay Pride marches (Arnold, Cutler, Myers, Campbell, Long, & Davis, 2002; Besner & Spungin, 1998; Luke et al., 2011; Rands, 2009; Whitman, 1995). Several of these recommended approaches to teaching cultural competency encourage exposure and immersion into LGBTQ culture requiring communication with LGBTQ people. The number of acquaintances or family members a counselor has with LGBTQ minorities is positively correlated with affirmative attitudes and reduced homonegativity (Dillon et al., 2004; Satcher & Leggett, 2007). An approach to increasing the number of contacts with minorities could lead to greater awareness of personal biases, dispel stereotypes, and increase awareness of discrimination experiences (Sue & Sue, 2013). Challenges to the infusion of LGBTQ issues into counselor training programs include the need for self-examination of trainer biases (Iasenza, 1989) and for staying updated on the rapidly emerging literature and research on sexual diversity and queer theory in the profession (Bahr, Brish, & Croteau, 2000; Carroll & Gilroy, 2001).

In regards to professional development opportunities beyond graduate coursework, it is estimated that fewer than 30% of school districts provide training regarding issues faced by LGBTQ students (Rienzo, Button, Sheu, & Ying, 2006). Counselors who have received some type of formal graduate coursework, seminars, or school in-service report having talked with at least one student about sexual orientation,

had prepared GLB educational materials, discussed sexual minority student issues in staff meetings, examined their own heterosexist views, and confronted heterosexist and homophobic remarks (Monier & Lewis, 2000). Educational opportunities at state and national conferences exist for school counselors but opportunities in rural settings may be more limited as less support exists in more socially conservative areas for addressing sexual minority issues. Many of these opportunities do not allow for dialogue with LGBTQ students that would facilitate growth in cultural awareness (DePaul, Walsh, & Dam, 2009). Therefore there is a need for rural school counselors to create a wider social and professional network beyond those associated within their school districts (Morrissette, 2000). School counselors in rural settings may need to access opportunities for professional development beyond the traditional forms of school in-service in order to access collaborative work with LGBTQ affirmative professionals. We propose four other avenues for school counselors-in-training and those employed in rural areas to consider in their efforts to become more culturally competent in serving LGBTQ students: becoming affiliated with a community youth support group; consulting with student support group leaders in a school setting; accessing information through a college or university diversity education group, and contacting a local cultural advocacy group. These strategies take school counselors outside the box for identifying self-education resources and are guided by the cross cultural competencies for attaining knowledge, awareness, and skills in counseling with LGBTQ minorities.

Community Collaboration Education (Taking It One Step Further)

The Human Rights Campaign, Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN), and Lambda Legal are all national organizations that provide support for

LGBTQ individuals and allies and further education through their websites on issues affecting the LGBTQ community. For school counselors, accessing these websites may provide guidelines and ideas for conducting workshops, methods of advocacy for social justice, and direction for further online resources. These organizations also provide information on safe, affirming online resources for LGBTQ youth. However, accessing resources that allow rural school counselors opportunities for face-to-face contacts may pose some obstacles requiring efforts to look beyond the internet and into neighboring communities for support resources.

Community Youth and Family Support Groups

Locating a youth or family support group sponsored by a church, community, or agency within a reasonable distance from the school counselor's community may allow for consultation with LGBTQ affirmative professionals and students that could illuminate examples of how to support students in the school environment. YouthOUTright is a LGBTQ youth support group located in a rural area in the south that originated from an identified need to provide youth with a safe place to go for educational and social purposes (YouthOUTright, n.d.). The support group meets weekly offering guest speakers, discussion groups, and social activities for LGBTQ youth ages 14 through 23. Group facilitators are trained to provide structure and safety for the weekly meetings typically held in a church building. School counselors and other educators have chosen to attend professional development workshops offered by facilitators and have become involved as guest speakers in the education of the students on issues especially relevant to academic success, career exploration, and college life expectations (J. Faucett, personal communication, December, 2012).

Other support groups that provide education and dialogue are those affiliated with Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). There are over 350 chapters and 200,000 supporters throughout the United States including rural areas (PFLAG, 2013). These grassroots groups provide support, education, and advocacy for the rights of LGBTQ individuals through weekly meetings, workshops, lesson plans, and resources for straight allies in the creation of a respectful community environment. Volunteering as a weekly facilitator of a support group may be too daunting for a school counselor, especially if the group meetings are located several hours away, but activities sponsored by a support group may be open to visiting professionals and the websites maintained by these groups offer testimonials and creative works of LGBTQ youth and their families that would enhance a school counselors' knowledge and awareness of the issues they face. These groups can also be referral resources for students, parents, family, and friends that may help to relieve some of the isolation felt by individuals who are supportive of LGBTQ youth.

University Affiliated Organizations

School counselors can connect with established college and university organizations that are already working to promote diversity appreciation and respect within the surrounding communities. Organizations such as these are familiar with the culture of the communities and most likely have relationships with other resources hosting similar missions. One example is the Center for Diversity Education at the University of North Carolina in Asheville which addresses the needs of many various cultures, but in the last 5-10 years they have seen a greater focus on LGBTQ issues through requests from the school staff and parents of LGBTQ students (D. Miles,

personal communication, January 3, 2013). The center drafted an inventory for schools to use as a reference in creating LGBTQ-friendly environments and loans out multiple exhibits for display in the schools regarding bullying and LGBTQ family issues. Many students in the surrounding area are now using these exhibits for senior projects bringing awareness to their peers and educators in the school system. The center also participates in the promotion of No Name Calling Week and other community awareness events (Miles).

School-Based Support Groups

School-based support groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) can impact change in a school environment by creating a central location for students to support one another and more easily identify a support system within the school (DePaul et al., 2009; Kennedy & Fisher, 2010). Collaboration with students, teachers, and other supportive personnel benefit the students and faculty with the ability to engage and learn from one another as everyone involved works towards common goals supporting LGBTQ students. Students attending schools with a GSA heard homophobic remarks less frequently, were less likely to feel unsafe because of sexual orientation, and experienced less severe victimization than their non-GSA counterparts (Kosciw et al., 2012, Kosciw, et al., 2014). In schools with GSAs, 54.8% of students surveyed reported the ability to identify more than ten supportive staff members which is positively correlated with LGBTQ student academic achievement and motivation for post-secondary education. LGBTQ students in rural schools are less likely to have a supportive student club than students in suburban and urban schools therefore these students identify fewer allies and support among school professionals (Palmer et al.,

2012). The positive presence of a GSA and LGBT-related resources also affects the ambition of staff to intervene in incidents of harassment resulting in lower levels of victimization. (Kosciw et al., 2012; Palmer et al., 2012, Kosciw, et al., 2014).

Communicating with the sponsors of GSAs could provide some insight into how they originate, what obstacles had to be addressed, and how the school community has responded. One high school in a rural area in the southeast experienced a great deal of success through the development of a club formed through a counseling group addressing bullying.

“We transitioned from a counseling/support group to a club, SAFTE= Students Advocating for Tolerance & Equality. Initially the club was introduced to the administration as an anti-bullying group. Bullying prevention had become a hot topic or focus for our school district and this approach made it appealing to faculty, staff, and administration. As the group developed its identity, they voted to transition to the ‘Ally’ group focusing on advocacy for LGBTQQ students by educating faculty and students about issues the community faces. Ally sponsored ‘Ally Week’ at the school, partnered with the state department of public instruction, and the state department of public health to create a video and students attend monthly support and social group meetings” (L. McCreary, personal communication, December 20, 2012).

School counselors, through facilitating GSAs, can help students develop the ability to address LGBTQ issues with others, as well. When asked what their group had done about LGBTQ issues in the school culture, one member said, “We found that

people are put off by things that they don't know about, so we worked to answer their questions and make LGBTQ members not such a foreign concept" (12th grade Ally member). Consultation with gay affirming educators either by email, phone, or personal visitation with the GSA sponsors can provide insight into the means for creating GSAs and understanding their mission within the school.

Broader Focus Cultural Advocacy Groups

Community-based groups that advocate for individuals who have experienced discrimination or harassment of any form may provide information and support for understanding the unique experiences of minority groups. Advocacy groups can assist parents by educating them on the school's legal obligations and individual legal rights and by assisting parents in school conferences. Grassroots organizations such as the WNC Citizen's for an End to Institutional Bigotry (WNCCEIB) work with parents in rural areas to address the needs of their LGBTQ students. "We believe that people who stand up for their rights in schools are less likely to experience repercussions. Often parents will find strength and resilience within them by knowing they have support and allies in their efforts to ensure a safe learning environment for their children" (M. Gilmore, personal communication, December 15, 2012). A purpose of this type of advocacy group is to put pressure on systems by bringing discriminatory practices to public awareness. Identification of legal advocacy organizations that serve rural areas can be a resource for school counselors with which to refer parents to and may provide consultation services in creating staff development on discrimination and harassment within the school.

Conclusion

The legal and social movement of equality continues to grow in the US, yet we still hear and read about desperate attempts of LGBTQ youth to be heard or accepted by their family, peers, and communities (Coolidge, 2014). The 2011 National School Climate Survey conducted by GLSEN provided another round of alarming evidence that LGBTQ students are still undergoing harsh treatment in their school environment. The results are especially disconcerting in regards to LGBTQ students in rural areas who reported the highest levels of victimization based on gender expression and sexual orientation (Kosciw et al., 2014). Over 60.4% of LGBTQ students in rural schools reported being verbally harassed in the past year and 25.7% were physically harassed because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw et al., 2014). Of the rural youth participating in the survey, 81% felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. Building relationships with community organizations outside the school environment can allow for growth in knowledge, awareness, and skills of rural school counselors in the development, delivery, and maintenance of programs addressing the needs of LGBTQ students. School counselors have the ability to actively learn how to support LGBTQ students within their communities by connecting with and establishing local resources. Through engagement in organizations, programs, and support groups counselors will be able to more accurately identify student needs and connect with resources for student support and advocacy.

Research into the issues LGBTQ students face has been forthcoming with identification of challenges and needs of these students in the schools (Kosciw et al., 2012; Palmer et al., 2012). However, strategies for assisting rural school counselors in

implementing affirming programs and empirical research into effective interventions is not as evident (Luke & Goodrich, 2009; Meyers, 2015). Rural school counselors have expressed concerns about access to adequate professional development opportunities and accessible referral services for students (Morrissette, 2000; Sutton & Southworth, 1990). Community support in advocacy for LGBTQ students may be a challenge unique to school counselors in rural districts and research into effective methods for introducing prevention and intervention strategies may be the first step in promoting safe, healthy environments for these students. Future research on strategies and programs in service and advocacy for LGBTQ student needs to reflect the rural school counselor's perspective and address the needs of these students in rural communities.

Connections with gay affirming programs and people may require rural school counselors to seek outside of their local area for a LGBTQ community network and professional training opportunities. Becoming involved in various levels of support and advocacy for LGBTQ students can create a learning experience for school counselors beyond any classroom lecture or in-service training. This active learning approach can provide a holistic awareness of the needs of LGBTQ students within a specific school environment and local community that conventional education is unable to present.

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