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Article 81

School Counseling for Systemic Change: Bullying and Suicide Prevention for LGBTQ Youth

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By October 1st, 2010 the occurrence of five deaths by suicide of adolescent and young adult males, all the victims of anti-gay bullying and harassment, prompted the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), and the Trevor Project (a national suicide prevention organization specifically for LGBTQ Youth and their allies) to call for action at the school and community level to improve the social climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth (GLSEN, PFLAG, and the Trevor Project Joint Statement, 2010). The national media attention surrounding the tragic deaths of the identified youths underscores research findings related to both the stresses that LGBTQ Youths face in schools (Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers, & Bogaert, 2008; Elze, 2002; Varjas et al, 2006), as well as the use by bullies of homo-negative slurs and related behaviors against their intended victims regardless of the victims' sexual orientation (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2007). According to a press release from the Trevor Project: "In order to end the destructive behaviors that lead to bullying, harassment and rejection of young people who are or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning, it takes a cultural change." (Trevor Project, 2010). Similarly, the GLSEN-PFLAG-Trevor Project joint statement asserts that: "The horrible instances of school bullying that have led young people to take their own lives reflect the growing need for a change in our culture to value the differences of our youth". (GLSEN, PFLAG, & Trevor Project, 2010). These assertions by prominent advocacy groups highlight the need for

action at both the individual-interpersonal level of interaction and also within the domain of systemic, social change.

School counselors unsure of their efficacy at what appears to be political advocacy for a highly stigmatized population may feel overwhelmed in communities and school districts where homo-prejudice dominates the thinking of invested stakeholders; we assert that in such contexts, intervention at the systems-wide level to augment anti-bullying and suicide prevention efforts is essential to advocating for the needs of LGBTQ students. As anti-bullying (Olweus, 2005) and suicide prevention (Whitted & Dupper, 2005) are important needs for all school-aged youth, adopting a systemic focus encourages strategic thinking aimed at working within and through local contexts on the path toward creating a social climate supportive of safety and success for all students. For the purposes of this discussion, the authors will use the common term LGBTQ to signify our focus on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youths as well as youths questioning of their sexuality or that experience same-sex physical and romantic attraction but that do not self-identify. We wish to acknowledge that many youth (and adults) may avoid self-identifying as LGBTQ while simultaneously disavowing exclusive other-sex sexual and relational attraction or hyper-patriarchal gender conformity (Diamond & Lucas, 2004; Hammack, 2005). First, let us consider the specific stressors that LGBTQ Youth face.

Risk and Stress for LGTBQ Youth

Childhood and adolescence can be difficult developmental periods for any person, and common difficulties associated with this life phase may be compounded due to oppressive socio-cultural attitudes such as sexism, heterosexism, and homo-prejudice (Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers, & Boghaert, 2005; Konik & Stewart, 2004). This is problematic due to findings that children and adolescents that experience and or express same-sex sexual and relational attractions or that do not conform to hyper-patriarchal gender norms are at higher risk for being bullied (Kosciw et al., 2007), suffering hopelessness, low self-worth, and suicidal ideation (D'Augelli et al., 2005), and other negative outcomes both in terms of internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors (Busseri et al., 2005, 2008; Elze, 2002). The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (Kosciw et al., 2007) issued a report titled *The School Climate Survey*, which focused on describing the common challenges LGBTQ students face in the U.S. when navigating their developmental and educational needs during the K-12 years. According to this comprehensive survey of 6,209 students from across the 50 states of the U.S., LGBTQ students report more absenteeism and lower educational goals in terms of future college plans (Kosciw et al., 2007). Results from the survey also indicate that 90% of respondents reported having heard homo-prejudicial remarks, 86% of respondents reported being verbally harassed, and 44% of respondents reported physical harassment (Kosciw et al., 2007). Of the respondents reporting verbal or physical harassment or that overheard homo-prejudicial remarks, 60% report not informing school personnel. Of the respondents reporting that disclosure of harassment or homo-prejudice to school personnel, 31% reported that school personnel took no action (Kosciw et al., 2007).

As can be surmised from the GLSEN report and from other sources (Busseri et al., 2005, 2008; Varjas et al., 2006), LGBTQ Youth in K-12 schools face overt and subtle forms of physical and relational aggression that negatively impact their academic

achievement and personal development. The threat or experience of being bullied has a well-documented negative impact on not only the achievement of LGBTQ Youth (Varjas et al. 2006) but all students within a school system (Whitted & Dupper, 2005), hence the need for comprehensive and evidenced-based anti-bullying programs. As homo-prejudicial language and motivations for physical violence are often a tool used by bullies against their intended victims regardless of the victim's actual sexuality or gender identity (Goodrich & Luke, 2009), removing homo-prejudicial behavior as a vector for bullying can benefit both LGBTQ Youth and other potential victims of physical and relational aggression within the same school system.

Closely related to the threat or experience of physical violence and social harassment is the increased risk for suicide that LGBTQ Youth face as a result of alienation, marginalization, and stigma related to homo-prejudice (Sullivan & Wodarski, 2002). According to D'Augelli et al. (2005), suicide remains the third leading cause of death for LGBTQ Youths. Members of this highly stigmatized population are twice as likely to report suicidal ideation, behavior, or self-harming behavior (Massachusetts Dept. Of Education, 2005). The hopelessness and self-deprecation that many LGBTQ Youth experience are associated with fear of harassment and bullying (D'Augelli et al., 2005) at school and with isolation and alienation from family and friends due to real or imagined rejection (Sullivan & Wodarski, 2002). As fear of violence is not the only cause of suicidal ideation in LGBTQ Youth, anti-bullying programs should be coupled with school-wide suicide prevention programs and the development of sound crisis response strategies. The needs of LGBTQ Youth, particularly in the areas of anti-bullying and suicide prevention, are well-documented. Being aware of affirmative advocacy practices is important for school counselors who are committed to supporting the development of LGBTQ Youth; let us turn now to a consideration of how affirmative LGBTQ advocacy itself might be improved through incorporation of a systemic perspective.

Affirmative LGBTQ Advocacy

Useful scholarship has been generated that focuses on integrating an LGBTQ affirmative perspective into school counseling practice. Scholars like Goodrich and Luke (2009) and Varjas et al. (2007) assert that LGBTQ affirmative school counseling practices can be infused across the domains of a comprehensive developmental school counseling approach. Practices such as both avoiding heterosexist language and using salient examples of sexual and relational diversity (Goodrich & Luke, 2009) seem well-grounded in the literature on LGBTQ counseling competence (Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Issues in Counseling, n.d.; Carrol & Gilroy, 2001; Israel & Hackett, 2004; Lemoire & Chen, 2005). Counseling practice that is aimed at promoting the internalization of same-sex sexual affirming attitudes is supportable ethically (ACA, 2005; ASCA, 2004) and empirically (APA Task Force, 2009) for work at the individual and group counseling levels (Lemoire & Chen, 2005). Other practices, such as including LGBTQ specific examples across all levels of school-programming (Goodrich & Luke, 2009; Varjas et al., 2007), seem de-contextualized from the realities of school climate without more specific articulation of how best to negotiate both local cultural norms and the implementation of school-wide interventions that meet the needs of multiple student populations. For example, Varjas et al. (2007) found that issues of willful ignorance by

school personnel, local attitudes towards non-heterosexual people based in anti-gay religious views, and not being able to expressly identify non-heterosexual youths were socio-cultural, systemic barriers to the implementation of LGBTQ affirming school counseling practices. The empirical findings related to school personnel's deliberate avoiding of advocacy for LGBTQ Youth that face harassment and bullying (Varjas et al., 2007) are problematic from legal (McFarland, & Dupuis, 2001) and ethical (ACA, 2005) perspectives, and are further troubling given other findings that victims of anti-LGBTQ bullying who feel they have the support of at least one adult are more likely to report bullying and to seek support (Kosciw et al., 2007).

Incorporating a systemic change perspective into existing models would also address the issue that said models are tacitly focused on being able to effectively and accurately identify LGBTQ Youth and other victims of anti-gay bullying. The tacit focus of advocacy and prevention efforts on students that self-label may alienate students for which LGBTQ self-identification may not seem valid (Diamond & Lucas, 2004; King & Smith, 2004), however, and may restrict school counselors' efforts to counseling on the one-to-one level with those students that are able to and choose to self-identify. Issues of school climate, contextualizing sexual and gender diversity within an existing socio-cultural milieu, and framing LGBTQ student concerns as developmentally appropriate may be overlooked if affirmative practice is limited to work with self-identified LGBTQ students alone.

Though many calls for increased attention to the needs of LGBTQ are focused on those able to self-identify as LGBTQ, there is correlational evidence that those able to self-identify may have a well-developed sense of self (King & Smith, 2005; Konik & Stewart, 2004), have higher amounts of hope, optimism, and sense of purpose in life (Moe, Dupuy, & Laux, 2008), and can more easily access resources and capabilities accrued while on the journey to open self-identification (Moe et al., 2008; Singh, Dew, Hayes, & Gailis, 2006). Being able to self-identify as LGBTQ has been shown in same-sex attracted adults to be predictive of higher levels of overall well-being (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Singh et al., 2006) and personal faith/spirituality exploration (Roseborough, 2006; Tozer & Hayes, 2004). Self-identification has also been shown to be predictive of lower levels of depression and suicidal ideation (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Rutter, 2006) and alienation from significant relationships (Sullivan & Wodarski, 2002) in samples of same-sex attracted adults.

Promoting the internalization of self-affirming attitudes is best practice for work with LGBTQ Youth (ALGBTIC, n.d.; APA, 2009), but assuming that school counselors have unlimited abilities to work directly with or even to accurately identify all LGBTQ Youth in a school is unrealistic. Hence, creating school-wide programs that address both the critical needs of LGBTQ Youth and of potential victims of suicide and bullying creates spaces where the promotion of self-worth can be communicated (Goodrich & Luke, 2009; Lemoire & Chen, 2005; Varjas et al., 2006). Advocacy for the needs of LGBTQ Youth then is supported by the infusion of attitudes and beliefs that encourage the development of self-worth for all students into the culture of the school. To inculcate the value of student self-worth, vital to the overlapping populations of LGBTQ Youth and potential victims of bullying and suicide, school counselors may need to engage in a systemic change effort that require shifts in the cultural logic of a local school. Now we will outline elements of the systemic change perspective that pertain to creating a school-

wide climate that addresses the critical, anti-bullying and suicide prevention needs of LGBTQ Youth.

Promoting Systemic Change

A systemic perspective coupled with specialized knowledge of the needs of LGBTQ Youth helps to flesh out models of advocacy and counseling for use at engendering systemic change. Counseling practice at the systemic level includes: viewing oneself as part of an interrelated set of component elements that influence each other reciprocally, identifying vested stakeholders and key allies, assessing the readiness of a system for change, and linking the change effort with the systems' overall mission or purpose (Moe & Perera-Diltz, 2009). One important idea from the systemic perspective is that a change in any constituent element of a system changes the way that all the remaining elements interact, and subsequently changes the operation of the system as a whole (Moe & Perera-Diltz, 2009). Thus, while direct approaches to promote an LGBTQ affirming environment are warranted, indirect approaches, such as encouraging students to avoid homo-negative language as part of an anti-bullying program, also have their place and are supported by the systemic philosophy.

Assessment of whether or not a system is ready to change is a crucial practice grounded in the systemic perspective (Brown, Pryzwansky, & Schulte, 2010). When members of a system seem more focused on internal, interpersonal dynamics than accomplishing the mission or purpose of the system, then the system could be considered *closed-cultured* or unready to change (Moe & Perera-Diltz, 2009). The goal of the LGBTQ affirmative school counselor in such a system is to promote the idea of change itself by identifying like-minded allies, communicating the need for change to key stakeholders (e.g., veteran teachers, senior administrators, influential parents, etc.), and highlighting how the change supports the system's overall mission. Engaging in this type of systemic-change effort also encourages strategic, long-term planning; a successful change effort, for example, helps ensure that LGBTQ advocacy, anti-bullying, and suicide prevention values would persist should the school counselor responsible for championing these principles leave the school system. The American School Counselor Association (2003) endorses systems support as one of the four domains of practice for school counselors. Let us now further explore how promoting LGBTQ advocacy through anti-bullying and suicide prevention is further supported by integrating systemic thinking into the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs.

Comprehensive School Programs

In an effort to serve students and other vested stakeholders, the members and leaders of ASCA developed guidelines for a comprehensive, developmental, result based national model (ASCA, 2003). This model dictates attending to the needs of all children in the domains of academic, career, and personal/social development to maximize student academic achievement (ASCA, 2003). In designing "programs and services to meet the needs of students at various growth and developmental stages" (ASCA, 2003, p. 14), it is necessary to create a school climate in which all students feel safe to explore and develop a healthy personal identity (Goodrich & Luke, 2009; Sullivan & Wodarski, 2002).

Comprehensive developmental programs can be utilized by school counselors to implement school counseling activities that will enable all students to learn, work, and live (Lewis & Borunda, 2006). A major goal of a comprehensive developmental program is to cultivate healthy and safe schools and learning environments (ASCA, 2004; Hernandez & Seem, 2004; Leggett, 2008; Sink & Spencer, 2005) for all students within a school.

In schools with school counseling programs based on the ASCA national model, there are many opportunities for school counselors to support and promote healthy identity development of LGBTQ Youth. In response to “how are students different as a result of what we do?” (ASCA, 2003, p. 9), school counselors should consider removing barriers to identity development of non-heterosexual youth and reducing the oppression experienced by such youth at school. The ASCA national model provides four service delivery components: guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system support. Each of these service delivery components provides an opportunity for school counselors to support healthy identity development and acceptance of all youth. For instance, guidance lessons could include components of sexual identity development of both heterosexual and non-heterosexual youth (Goodrich & Luke, 2009). Individual student planning can provide information and support for LGBTQ Youth and related parental concerns. Responsive services can be used to open dialogue on identity development, school climate, and other aspects relevant to LGBTQ Youth, and system support could include different forums through which parents of LGBTQ Youth and non-LGBTQ Youth can dialogue about self-worth, identity development, and the value of creating a safe school climate. As violence and harassment is a significant and prevalent negative influence on the experiences of LGBTQ Youth in terms of how school climate affects these students’ abilities to achieve socially and academically (McFarland & Dupuis, 2001; Varjas et al., 2006), school counselors can make the case that addressing the self-worth needs of LGBTQ Youth is part and parcel of operating a comprehensive school counseling program. School counselors that link the self-worth needs of LGBTQ Youth to their academic achievement, and contextualize how anti-bullying and suicide prevention support the achievement of all students make a strong case for systemic change based on national standards for the delivery of comprehensive school counseling. Now let us turn to specific school-wide best practices identified in the literature that support bullying and suicide prevention efforts.

Bullying and Violence Prevention

Thanks in part to the scholarship of Olweus (2005), counselors can easily access guidelines and resources that outline best practices for the design and implementation of school-wide anti-bullying programs that would help address both the specific needs of LGBTQ Youth as well as students across the school system. When creating anti-bullying programs that operate at the school-wide level, school counselors should include bullies, students that are bullied, and other stakeholders like students that witness bullying, parents, school personnel, and other community members (Olweus, 2005). Implicit in the design of school-wide anti-bullying programs is an expectation of leadership and support from school administration and senior faculty or staff, especially in terms of creating a school-based bullying prevention team and a published and consistently enforced code of

conduct for students and school personnel (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). A comprehensive and school-wide approach to bullying prevention is based on the development and implement of consistent behaviors and messages from school personnel (Frey et al., 2005), including the modeling of anti-bullying attitudes and the use of immediate and fair consequences when dealing with bullying incidents (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Consistent with both best practices in anti-bullying and in affirming LGBTQ Youth would be the avoidance of homo-prejudicial language by school personnel and challenging such language if heard from students (Varjas et al., 2007).

Along with the consistent and immediate challenging of homo-prejudicial language, attitudes, or behaviors school counselors can integrate anti-bullying guidance lessons with examples of acceptance for sexual and gender diversity, reinforce pro-social conflict resolution and other behaviors, indicative of anti-bullying attitudes, and encourage discussion around fears related to being bullied, including the report of bullying to appropriate school personnel (Kosciw et al., 2007). As programs like the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus, 2005) and *Steps to Respect* (Frey et al., 2005) are costly to implement and to maintain, school administrators and other stakeholders can be encouraged to appreciate how altering a school's climate to be more open and affirming of LGBTQ Youth helps to ensure that resources committed to anti-bullying are well spent. A school system whose personnel do not address prevailing homo-prejudicial attitudes but that are attempting to reduce bullying will not be operating by the guidelines of consistency and of encouraging respect for all students identified by anti-bullying scholars as essential for effective intervention to promote an overall safe and open climate within a school (Olweus, 2005).

Suicide Prevention

Best practices for suicide prevention and intervention identified by Rutter (2006) include depression screening, the organization of school-wide crisis response teams, and targeted intervention with identified at-risk youths such as close friends of a suicide victim. These types of school-wide screening efforts could also be used to assess self-worth attitudes related to multiple developmental domains including sexuality. The collective harmful effects associated with the tragic occurrence of a suicide within a school can be moderated by a school-wide crisis team that has developed and disseminated a plan with clearly articulated responsibilities, such as who is responsible for contacting parents, who else is responsible for talking to friends of deceased students, and how best to utilize small group and one-to-one processing and disclosure (Aseltine & DeMartino, 2004; Rutter, 2006).

Since LGBTQ Youth are more likely to experience suicidal ideation a school counselor would do well to link identified youth with crisis support resources and to normalize the isolation, alienation, and struggle with low self-worth that these students may face. As suicide is an issue for all children and adolescents, a comprehensive suicide prevention program implemented at the school-wide level, such as the empirically supported *Signs of Suicide* (Aseltine & DeMartino, 2004) serves multiple populations and stakeholder groups. Instilling a suicide prevention ethic into the culture of school can be linked to related anti-bullying and LGBTQ advocacy efforts; again, these three problem areas share a common solution in the promotion of student self-

affirmation and self-worth capabilities (Goodrich & Luke, 2009; Rutter, 2006; Whitted & Duper, 2005).

Conclusion

While separately practices that support anti-bullying (Frey et al., 2005; Olweus, 2005), suicide prevention (Aseltine & Demartino, 2004), and the internalizing of self-affirming attitudes for LGBTQ people (APA, 2009) have been validated empirically, little data-driven research has been generated that investigates how these issues can be addressed systemically and in tandem. Formative and summative research would be helpful to identify the varying effects of synchronizing anti-bullying, suicide prevention, and LGBTQ advocacy efforts. Qualitative approaches, such as intensive case study or ethnography, could be used to identify aspects of lived experience salient to students and other stakeholders for improving systemic change efforts to promote the needs of LGBTQ Youth through anti-bullying and suicide prevention efforts. Childhood and adolescence can be a difficult developmental period for any person, and may be especially difficult for LGBTQ Youth developing in oppressive socio-cultural climates. School counselors are at an opportune position as agents of systemic change to improve school climate for all students' academic, career, and personal/social development by reducing oppressive attitudes that may contribute to bullying and/or suicide. School counselors have an ethical duty to provide competent and affirmative services to LGBTQ Youth, and counselors that operate from a systemic perspective may feel better equipped to negotiate local dynamics such as homo-prejudicial attitudes held not only by students but also teachers and other school personnel. Adopting a systemic-change perspective facilitates the integration of LGBTQ advocacy, anti-bullying, and suicide prevention into both the system-wide and individual services provided by school counselors and ensures that effective, competent, and ethically sound counseling is being provided to a highly stigmatized and at risk group. Implementing effective systemic and school-wide approaches for meeting the needs of LGBTQ Youth will also help address common developmental challenges experienced by youth in general and help make schools safer for all students.

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