



## Commentary

## Sexual orientation and gender identity in schools: A call for more research in school psychology—No more excuses



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## ABSTRACT

Research focused on sexual orientation and gender identity among youth is scarce in school psychology journals. Graybill and Proctor (2016; this issue) found that across a sample of eight school support personnel journals only .3 to 3.0% of the articles since 2000 included lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT)-related research. It appears that special issues are a mechanism for publishing LGBT-related scholarship. This commentary includes a call for more research in school psychology and other related disciplines that intentionally addresses experiences of LGBT youth and their families. Two articles in this special section are summarized and critiqued with clear directions for future scholarship. Researchers and practitioners are ethically responsible for engaging in social justice oriented research and that includes assessing gender identity and sexual orientation in their studies and prevention program evaluations.

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When I was asked to write this brief commentary to this special section of *Journal of School Psychology*, I jumped at the opportunity to use this platform to call for more research on sexual orientation and gender identity issues in general and certainly more work published in school psychology and other related disciplines. As the author of a 2011 White House Brief on bullying among lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) and transgender youth experiences in K–12 settings, I called for additional research and prevention programming that address the experiences of these youth. After conducting research for 20 years on bullying, to have the attention of the President and the administration felt like a major victory. However, in November of the same year, I was reminded of how much work needs to be done to minimize the adverse effects of bullying and peer victimization on LGB and gender non-conforming youth (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, and Koenig, 2008; Hong, Espelage, and Kral, 2011; Robinson and Espelage, 2011). As a keynote speaker at a state-wide School Psychology conference, I presented my work on bullying and homophobic name-calling among LGB youth to over 500 school psychologists (Espelage, 2015 for review). At the break, I was approached by a few audience members who asked what LGBT stood for. When my talk resumed, I asked the audience to raise their hand if they knew what LGBT stood for, only a few hands were raised. “Yes, we have a lot of work to do,” I said out loud. These moments are very powerful to me, and fuel my drive to conduct research on sexual orientation, gender identity, homophobic name-calling, and gender-based peer victimization and to promote greater knowledge and sensitivity among the vary practitioners that are charged to protect all youth.

What if these practitioners opened their school psychology journals and read more titles with terms like: lesbian, gay, bisexual, homophobia, gender identity, gender non-conformity, transgender, and/or gender-based harassment? Well, it appears that from the years 2000–2014 this would have been an infrequent event (Graybill and Proctor, 2016—in this issue). Graybill and Proctor (in this issue), presented results of a content analysis of titles published in eight school support personnel journals (e.g., school counseling, school psychology, social work) across the 15 year period. Even surprising to me, only .3 to 3% of the articles were

LGBT-related. How can we expect school-based practitioners to effectively intervene and protect youth that are experiencing discrimination, victimization, and prejudice because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity if these practitioners are not exposed to this applied research? Combine this with the lack of LGBT-related content in their training programs (Graybill, & Proctor, in this issue; Choi, Thul, Berenhaut, Suerken, and Norris, 2005), it seems as if these practitioners are ill-prepared for working within LGBT youth and their families.

Further, focusing on the two school psychology journals, Graybill and Proctor (in this issue) found that the *Journal of School Psychology* included two articles (.5%) and *School Psychology Review* included 14 articles (3%) covering LGBT-related research. To understand these findings more completely, I ran my own search using the terms: bully, victimization, transgender, homophobia, gay, and LGB. Some interesting trends were noted. *School Psychology Review* published a special issue in 2003 on bullying prevention and intervention, where LGB-related issues were addressed in passing with no manuscript directly on the topic (Swearer and Espelage, 2003). We ended the introductory article with this recommendation “Bullying needs to be examined within special populations such as GLBT youth, students in special education, and ethnically diverse youth” (p. 378; Espelage and Swearer, 2003). Both journals continue to publish articles on bullying and peer victimization generally, but have not moved toward LGB-related scholarship at the same rate. For example, one article was found with the key term “homophobic” in *Journal of School Psychology* (Poteat and Vecho, (2016–in this issue)) and six were found in *School Psychology Review*. The six articles that addressed homophobia in schools were part of a special issue in *SPR* on addressing research gaps on homophobia and bullying (Espelage and Swearer, 2008). At that time, we concluded “It behooves the field of school psychology to forge a research agenda in this area in order to facilitate prevention and interventions programs. This special issue represents an important first step in this direction” (p. 158; Espelage and Swearer, 2008). Of note, *School Psychology Review* has published 7 articles that included discussions about transgender youth, which is a good start, but more work needs to directly target transgender populations. None of these articles included discussions related to experiences of transgender youth. As is true of all peer-reviewed outlets, there needs to be increased attention to transgender youth.

Now, we are in 2015 and it does not appear that we have made progress in this direction, and interestingly, Graybill and Proctor (in this issue) concluded that “The articles in this issue of JSP move us one step closer to having an advanced understanding of LGBT youth experiences in schools and how to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for these youth.” Indeed, two manuscripts in this special section address understudied topics. Poteat and Vecho (in this issue) examined the extent to which high school students witness homophobic behavior at school (and online) and what individual factors predict whether they engaged in active bystander actions to stop the homophobic behavior. Participants included 722 high school students from a largely white (87%) school that “had a Gay–Straight Alliance and affirming administrators” (pg. XX). The majority of the sample (66.8%) had observed at least one instance of homophobic behavior in the last 30 days. Results indicated that gender (girls), leadership skills, courage, altruism, justice sensitivity, and number of LGBT friends were associated with more active bystander behavior in response to observing homophobic behavior. A strength of this study is the assessment of witnessing homophobic behavior only, which is a type of assessment that could be used in school districts where it is challenging to ask about actual homophobic experiences. Another strength is the assessment of individual characteristics of youth (e.g., courage, justice sensitivity) that can be “cultivated” into prevention programs in high schools. Despite the strengths, the gender and sexual orientation differences that are highlighted in the Results and Discussion are quite modest and call for replication of these findings with a larger sample of LGBT youth. Also, it would be important to also examine these variables in schools with no GSA or non-affirming administrators. Finally, the models tested explained from 15 to 28% of the variance in bystander behaviors, suggesting that other factors should be considered, including consideration of the youth's peer groups (Birkett and Espelage, 2015) and the larger school climate (Espelage, Polanin, & Low, 2014; Rinehart and Espelage, 2015). In our multi-informant study of over 3600 youth and over 1400 teachers/staff across 35 middle schools, we found that 73% of variance in students' willingness to intervene in bullying incidents was explained by student characteristics, school characteristics, and staff/teacher intolerance of sexual harassment (Espelage et al., 2014). Future research (as the authors note) need to consider information from multiple contexts.

That is exactly what Russell, Day, Ioverno, and Toomey (2016–in this issue) did in their manuscript on merging principal-level data (100 principals) with teacher-report data (over 3000 teachers) across two large California datasets. Their results indicated that school policies and practices focused on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) or the presence of bully prevention program as reported by principals were not related to teachers' reports of bullying problems in their schools. However, SOGI-focused policies are associated with less bullying in schools where teachers feel unsafe. Of course, a strength of this manuscript is the creative combining of two state-wide datasets. Creating data systems that would allow for merging of data systems is essential to understanding the complexity of school safety concerns. Indeed, I have encouraged the National Center for Educational Statistics to continue to think about ways in which researchers can merge the rich data they collect from teachers, staff, administrators, and school districts (Espelage, in press). Another strength of this manuscript was the finding that teachers' perceptions of bullying as a problem in their school varied from school-to-school. This finding is consistent with the most recent NCES report that found in 2013 an overall decrease in bullying and cyberbullying rates in the US; however, these reductions were less in schools where students saw guns, gangs, drugs, alcohol, and hate-related graffiti in their school (Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, and Morgan, 2014). Taken together, it is important for researchers to understand that rates of bullying and the impact of policies vary from school-to-school. Not surprising, there are some concerning limitations to the survey design, including the use of 1-item to measure perceptions of bullying as problem, and the reliance on collecting data from administrators. As I spend a lot of time in schools, it is evident that the knowledge of principals of what is happening in their classrooms varies, especially when you ask them about prevention programs that are in active implementation. It is critical that we think of creative ways to get to this information from multiple informants at scale.

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