



Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth: Limited representation in school support personnel journals☆



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ABSTRACT

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth experience harassment and discrimination in schools and these experiences lead to increased negative social-emotional outcomes. Youth who can identify at least one supportive adult at school report better outcomes than youth who cannot identify a safe adult. Yet, many educators report feeling uncomfortable or unprepared to support LGBT youth. One reason for educators' discomfort may be that content related to issues unique to LGBT youth is sometimes missing or covered minimally in university training programs. We hypothesized that LGBT content may be covered minimally in school support personnel journals, as well. This study analyzed eight school support personnel journals across the disciplines of school counseling, school nursing, school psychology, and school social work for LGBT content published between 2000 and 2014 to gain a better understanding of the visibility of LGBT issues in the research. Results suggested that there has been a lack of presence of LGBT issues in journals across disciplines. These results also suggest a need for an intentional focus on issues relevant to LGBT youth in school support personnel journals. Thus, the article concludes with an introduction to two articles in this special topic section, including Russell, Day, Ioverno, and Toomey's (in this issue) study on teacher perceptions of bullying in the context of enumerated school policies and other supportive sexual orientation and gender identity related practices and Poteat and Vecho's (in this issue) study on characteristics of bystanders in homophobic bullying situations. The broad goal of these three studies is to increase visibility of critical LGBT issues in school support personnel journals.

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1. Introduction

Attending school is a pivotal experience for most youth. It is where they develop friendships, learn social norms, and prepare for adulthood. For many youth, attending school is a positive experience. They learn in safe and supportive environments, develop trusting relationships with educators, and have access to many of the opportunities their educational environment provides. Yet, for youth who experience systematic harassment, discrimination, and bullying, school can be an unsafe place in their lives (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). Indeed, numerous studies document that schools can be hostile and unsafe environments for LGBT youth (Heck, Lindquist, Machek, & Cochran, 2014; Kosciw et al., 2014). For instance, Poteat, O'Dwyer, and Mereish (2012) studied 380 adolescents' use and hearing of homophobic comments over time and found that while females reported a

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decrease, males reported an increase in hearing homophobic epithets as they progressed through high school. Those males who reported using homophobic epithets also reported engaging in sexual orientation-related bullying (Poteat, O'Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012). In Kosciw et al.'s (2014) national survey of over 8500 LGBT youth, 71.4% reported hearing "gay" used in a negative way frequently or often by other students at school and 51.4% reported hearing homophobic comments from school staff. Unfortunately, 61.6% of LGBT youth who reported bullying or harassment to adults in schools said that the adults did nothing in response (Kosciw et al., 2014). This is particularly concerning because rates of absenteeism, poor academic achievement, lower self-esteem, depression, and suicidal ideation all increase among LGBT youth who attend unsafe schools (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Hostile climates for LGBT youth are not unique to the school setting. A recent study of LGBT youth service accessibility within health and human services suggested that lack of acceptance, discomfort disclosing sexuality, and lack of adult awareness of services were significant barriers to youth accessing much needed services (Acevedo-Polakovich, Bell, Gamache, & Christian, 2013). LGBT youth face other challenges as a result of discrimination. They are at an increased risk for homelessness often because of parent rejection (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012). Data suggest that mental health outcomes such as depressive symptomatology, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts are higher among LGB youth (Seil, Desai, & Smith, 2014). Seil et al. (2014) analyzed the Youth Risk Behavior Survey from 8910 youth in New York City. Their results suggested that the prevalence of each mental health outcome measured was higher for LGB youth than it was for their heterosexual peers. Further, Burton, Marshal, and Chisholm's (2014) analysis of the mental health and academic outcomes of 108 youth, of which 26% identified as sexual minority, suggested that depression and anxiety were stronger predictors of absenteeism for sexual minority youth than for their heterosexual peers.

Disparities in mental and physical health within LGBT communities persist into adulthood (Mayer, Garofalo, & Makadon, 2014), mostly as a result of social determinants such as limited enumerated laws that protect against bullying and discrimination in schools, a shortage of healthcare providers who are culturally competent in LGBT health, and until recently, legal discrimination in access to marriage, employment, and adoption (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014a). There are emerging data suggesting that LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth may experience disparities in discipline experiences such as being punished more severely for public displays of affection and not conforming to gender norms (Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell, 2015). While educators cannot eliminate all disparities experienced by the LGBT community, educators have the power to improve the school climate for LGBT youth and therefore aid in reducing some of the negative short- and long-term outcomes for this population.

1.1. Role of school support personnel

Educators serve a critical role in the school experiences of all youth (Spilt, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012). Having a positive relationship with an educator can directly relate to academic success and indirectly relate to social-emotional regulation (Spilt et al., 2012). Relationships with educators are especially important for LGBT youth, who may be alienated by their peers (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; McGuire Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Ploderl, Faistauer, & Fartacek, 2010). Elze (2003) surveyed 136 LGBT youth about their perceptions of their own sexual orientation, their experience with school violence, and supportive factors in their lives. The majority of these youth experienced some form of victimization and sought support and safety from school staff. In an analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health data, Russell and colleagues (2001) found that same-sex attracted youth who reported positive relationships with their school staff also reported fewer school troubles than their peers who reported less positive relationships with school staff. McGuire and colleagues (2010) examined school climate for transgender youth specifically and found that these youth experienced persistent harassment, yet support from school personnel increased the students' feelings of safety (McGuire et al., 2010). Feelings of school safety among gay and bisexual males have been significantly related to access to supportive educators (Ploderl, Faistauer, & Fartacek, 2010). In a 10-year review of the National School Climate Data, LGBT youth consistently reported that access to resources such as a supportive adult or a gay-straight alliance mitigated the effect of orientation-based harassment and discrimination (Kosciw, Bartkiewicz, & Greytak, 2012). The results of Duong and Bradshaw's (2014) study of 951 LGB youth suggested that youth who experienced bullying were more likely to report engaging in aggressive behavior and suicidal behaviors, while youth who reported feeling connected to an adult at school were not as likely to report aggression and suicidal ideation. Seil et al. (2014) reported that LGBT youth who did not have a supportive adult connection at school reported the poorest mental health outcomes. The data from all of these studies highlight the need for educators to have the knowledge, skills, and competence to support LGBT youth in schools.

1.2. Lack of training for educators

Although research suggests that educators may serve as a protective factor for LGBT youth, data indicate that educators may feel underprepared or uncomfortable supporting LGBT youth in schools (Mahdi, Jeverson, Schrader, Nelson, & Ramos, 2014; Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006). Educators report that LGBT issues may be underrepresented in university training programs and professional development (Savage, Prout, & Chard, 2004; Brener et al., 2011). Underrepresentation of LGBT issues in training opportunities may result in a lack of competence to work with LGBT youth. Educators may lack the resources necessary to increase their knowledge and skills to create a supportive and affirmative school environment. For this reason, it is imperative that education about LGBT youth begins in pre-service programs, both through training and research. In general, LGBT youth

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