A SCHOOL'S ROLE IN PROMOTING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR GAY, LESBIAN,

BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER YOUTH

Approved: ___ ~Kith Beesch~ _____ Date: _____11/28/11_____

         Paper/Project Advisor

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A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin – Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

Counselor Education

By

Eryn M. Kjelland

2011

ABSTRACT

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) youth are put a great risk to not only their physical health, but also their psychological well-being (GLSEN, 2009). With the increased awareness of the risk of safety to GLBT youth in the school environment it is very important that schools consider their role in promoting safety to all students. Families are evolving and becoming more diverse which makes it more important for schools to adapt in a changing environment. Homonegativity, homophobia, prejudice, stereotypical views of GLBT families, myths about GLBT individuals, society's taboos, as well as an overall avoidance to discuss the topics of sexuality are limiting the schools ability to maintain a safe environment.

For this paper, literature from various research articles, books and journals will be reviewed to further explore this topic of promoting a safe environment for GLBT youth. The focus of information will be on GLBT youth population, problems affecting GLBT youth, school's response to GLBT issues, and other relevant information supporting the purpose of this study. Conclusions and recommendations will be drawn.

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Kimberly Tuescher

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Research

Research has shown that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth are at risk for serious physical, emotional, and social abuse (Larrabee & Thomas, 2002). This invisible minority group makes up an estimated 10% of the population, meaning there may be up to three million GLBT youth in the world. Until recently, schools have avoided getting involved with any issues pertaining to the GLBT community. Some schools have set up support groups for GLBT youth, whereas some schools still avoid discussing GLBT related issues for several reasons.

Statement of the Problem

Due to societal prejudice, lack of awareness, and overall lack of support, GLBT youth are left feeling isolated, rejected, and unsafe in their school environments (Larrabee & Thomas, 2002). GLBT youth have the right to feel safe in their school environment; however, most are threatened with their safety due to school violence. With the reluctance of some school faculty to discuss GLBT issues within the school, this makes it even more difficult to provide a safe environment for GLBT youth.

Purpose of the Study

This study will evaluate the school's role in promoting a safe environment for GLBT youth as well as the limiting factors in maintaining a safe environment.

Significance or Implications of the Study

All students have the right to feel safe. Schools have a responsibility to provide a safe environment for all students. Defining the school's role in promoting a safe environment should provide insight into any limiting factors that may exist. Doing so can help to develop a plan to combat any necessary measures to ensure complete safety for all students.

Method

For this paper, literature from various research articles, books and journals will be reviewed to further explore this topic of promoting a safe environment for GLBT youth. The focus of information will be on GLBT youth population, problems affecting GLBT youth, school's response to GLBT issues, and other relevant information supporting the purpose of this study.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

GLBT DEFINED

For the purpose of this paper, gay is used to describe a man who is attracted to other men, and lesbian is used to describe a woman who is attracted to other women. Sexual orientation is defined by a person's physical and emotional attraction to other people of either their own sex, the opposite sex, or both sexes. Homosexuality refers to individuals attracted to members of the same sex, where heterosexuality refers to individuals attracted to members of the opposite sex (labeled straight). Individuals attracted to members of both sexes are labeled as bisexual. Sexual identity refers to an individual's internal expression and definition of one's sex (which may be different from one's physical sex). Transgender refers to an individual whose sexual identity may be different from his or her physical sex.

GLBT FAMILIES

No longer is the idealized "modern nuclear family" the norm for children in the United States (Walsh, 2003). Parents may be in a couple, single, divorced, widowed, married, remarried, or in a partnership. Also, they may be gay, straight, or transgendered. Another consideration schools need to make is whether the parent is biological, adoptive, foster, or step. Families are diverse and constantly evolving which has left a real need for change within the school environment to collaborate for adaptation.

In evaluating the school's role for promoting a safe environment for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth, it is important to consider the families as well as the students. Through research it has been found that children with GLBT parents often face similar safety concerns as the GLBT youth in a school environment (GLSEN, 2008). According to the

research collected by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network in 2008, GLBT parents play a more active role in their children's education, more so than the general population. In a national sample, GLBT parents of high school students were more likely to be members of the school's parent-teacher organization, 41% vs. 21% (GLSEN, 2008). Unfortunately, students with GLBT parents may be also subjected to harassment in the schools. Being open about a family structure in an anti-GLBT school environment could lead to bullying behaviors by other students. In a study conducted by students with GLBT parents, half (51%) reported feeling unsafe in school because of actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender, or race/ethnicity. 21% of students were based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation and 23% was due to having GLBT parents (GLSEN, 2008).

Negative comments and mistreatment was reported from a teacher by a small percentage of students. It was found that 36% of school personnel refused to recognize that the student had a GLBT family. With the feeling of isolation, 30% of students feel they cannot fully participate in school due to having a GLBT parent (GLSEN, 2008). Due to fear of discrimination, there are many GLBT families that choose to not disclose their sexual orientation (Fish & Jeltova, 2005).

THE DIFFERENT FACETS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE

When evaluating a school climate, three components to be evaluated are context, school behaviors, and psychosocial variables. These three facets of school climate are all closely related and affect each other (Hernández & Seem, 2004).

Context is a major component of school climate, which is made up of the people in the school community and their societal influences on the school board and in the local community. There are unspoken beliefs about how school faculty and students treat each other and such

beliefs are brought forth into policies and school rules regarding codes of conduct. These codes of conduct are influenced based on social norms and values of society in the local community and are brought into the school as rules to follow. Therefore, school policy will reflect attitudes such as the society view toward homosexuality and the treatment toward students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered.

The second component of school climate is psychosocial variables. A large component in providing a safe school environment is providing an understood definition of violence that is clear and encompassed by all. Behavioral expectations should also be clearly defined through school rules and codes of conducts to prevent any confusion of what is deemed as acceptable and unacceptable behavior. This creates a zero tolerance environment for bullying behaviors while setting high expectations for students' behavior. There should also be clearly defined consequences for violations of the code of conduct which should apply to all students and faculty. Faculty needs to a model appropriate behavior for all students to show what they expect from students.

Students are challenged by clearly defined high academic expectations and feel more connected when academically successful, thus leading to less acts of violence (Hernández & Seem, 2004; Furlong & Morrison, 2000). When more focus is put on academics, there are less violent acts (Hernández & Seem, 2004; Griffith, 2000).

To further support a safe school climate, a student's locus of control needs to be supported. Locus of control is described as "an individual's expectations of ability to control his or her experiences" (Hernández & Seem, 2004; Dykeman, Daehlin, Doyle, & Flamer, 1996). By stimulating the internal locus of control in students, schools can help to maintain responsibility in students and encourage a safe climate (Hernández & Seem, 2004; Dykeman, Daehlin, Doyle, &

Flamer, 1996).

Rituals and traditions in school provide a way to show support to students and faculty. It creates and positive atmosphere and a sense of belonging. When students feel bonded to the school, they feel respected and connected and see the fairness in the rules. In a school where the students feel safe and respected they feel more apt to take a stand and share when another student is being violent.

Early signs of violent behavior are excessive feelings of isolation and social withdrawal (Hernández & Seem, 2004; Giggans & Levy, 1997). Having positive peer relationships could potentially reduce the risk in dangerous behaviors, also helping to promote a safe school climate.

Students ultimately need the perception of school safety. If there is perceived fear among students, confidence in the administration will decrease, and the control over the violence will diminish. Students may respond in fear by bring weapons for protection or retaliate behaviorally. In order to maintain a safe climate, the administration must communicate and cooperate effectively.

The third component of school climate is school behaviors. Students must have a sense of belonging through the behaviors at school. It is important that the students are not only treated respectfully from the students, but also from the faculty. For example, if a student is criticized in gym class every day for not being as athletic as the other students by the gym teacher, the student is not going to want to attend the class. The class may be perceived as unsafe to the student and no longer a place of support.

HOSTILE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Evidence has shown that GLBT youth are being put in a hostile school environment,

putting great risk to their psychological well-being. GLSEN conducted the National School Climate Survey in 2009 involving 7,261 middle and high school students. From this study it was found that 84.6% (9 out of 10) GLBT students reported being verbally harassed. Physical harassment was reported by 27.2%, and physical assault by 18.8% of the students at the school due to their sexual orientation. 72.4% of the students had homophobic remarks frequently or often called out to them at their school, and 61.1% (nearly 2/3) of the students reported that they generally felt unsafe in the school due to their sexual orientation. Due to safety concerns, 29.1% of the students missed a class and 30% actually missed a day of school in the survey. Students who were more frequently harassed due to their sexual orientation were found to have lower grade point averages (2.7 vs. 3.1) than students who were less often harassed. Increased levels of depression and anxiety and decreased levels of self-esteem have been linked to the increased levels of victimization, which puts the student's psychological well-being at high risk (GLSEN, 2009).

In a previous National School Climate Survey conducted in 2001, a contributing factor to students' feeling unsafe was the lack of corrective action by the school staff. It was found that faculty sometimes ignored the harassment that takes place in school buildings. The resources failed to be provided to students, which often led to the students feeling unsafe, disassociate, and often times drop out. GLBT students were more likely to feel safer and have a sense of belonging (38.1%) when the school provided positive portrayals of gay people (35.1%). Also, when the school staff provided support through groups, such as gay-straight alliances, 62.9% of GLBT youth felt more safe (GLSEN, 2001).

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT FOR GLBT YOUTH

Since this study and the more current study done in 2009 the harassment has seemed to made progress in some areas. GLBT youth has been exposed to more verbal abuse (83.2% vs. 84.6%), however there has been a decrease in the areas of physical harassment (40% vs. 27.2%), and physical assault (21% vs. 18.8%), (GLSEN, 2001; GLSEN, 2009). GLBT-related resources and supports have been increased in some school districts in the United States, which may contribute to the decrease in harassment between 2001 and 2009 (GLSEN, 2009). Student support groups such as the Gay-Straight Alliances have been formed in some high schools addressing GLBT issues. This allows GLBT youth to have a safe place at school to discuss GLBT issues without worry of judgment. Also, libraries and counselors are providing more GLBT-related materials. This provides GLBT students with a sense of belonging to the school environment and no longer makes them feel like outcasts (GLSEN, 2009).

BULLYING PREVENTION PROGRAMS WITH GLBT STUDENTS

Schools have been trying to address bullying for decades with varied success. For years researches have examined various anti-bullying programs and their effectiveness in schools. All the programs have been categorized into three groups, 1) Social Skills Training programs, 2) Curriculum interventions, and 3) Whole School Interventions. The focus of Social Skills Training programs is to provide social and behavioral group interventions to the victimized children of the bullying. The Curriculum interventions are done in the classroom and include videos, discussion and presentation on different topics related to bullying. Whole School Interventions is a school-wide approach that goes beyond curriculum changes and includes teacher training, conflict resolution training, individual counseling, and changes to the school

sanctions and policies to ensure a safe environment free of bullying behaviors (Lopez-Duran, 2010).

After being evaluated it was found that of the four social skills training programs, only one displayed significant benefit with students (3rd grade). It was found that curriculum-based interventions did not typically work and in certain situations it made the problem worse. Some children became more aggressive after being exposed to the curriculum. The whole school interventions were quite effective in reducing bullying, anti-social behavior, and victimization. Of course, this was the case only when staff members were actively involved in the program (Lopez-Duran, 2010).

LIMITATIONS

SCHOOL FACTORS HINDERING EQUALITY

Not until recently have schools addressed the issues surrounding multiculturalism and diversity. The resistance to accepting and recognizing diversity can be understood as it is complex and needs to be supported to overcome the extreme pressures involved.

There are barriers that have been in place for a long time that serve as an obstacle for GLBT youth and families when it comes to promoting a safe environment in schools. Homophobia, prejudice, stereotypical views of GLBT families, myths about GLBT individuals, society's taboos that have been place on discussing topics such as sexuality, as well as an overall avoidance to discuss the topics of sexuality and diversity in sexual expression have made an impact on preventing adaptation to occur. School professionals are overwhelmed by the issues related to sexual orientation; therefore try to avoid it (Fish & Jeltova, 2005). Many myths and lack of information have been found to fuel the homophobia in the school environment (Fish &

Jeltova, 2005). For example, the thought that "Children that have gay or lesbian parents are going to be gay or lesbian because they lack appropriate role models" is an inaccurate statement. Without provided accurate information about GLBT issues, individuals may be more apt to believe stereotypes and myths. Providing the school community with resources will be a start to restructuring and reframing individual's thoughts and beliefs. Misconceptions sometimes come from a lack of information, so by providing resources, misunderstandings can be worked through (Fish & Jeltova, 2005).

There is a strong heterosexual bias that remains in the school's curricula despite the mission to educate and empower with knowledge. There is a general lack of discussion of homosexual or bisexual sexual orientation when it comes to human sexuality and gender development in the curriculum. Some schools refuse to include topics about alternative families. Possibly this is because they are uncertain as to how to include such topics into the curriculum (Fish & Jeltova, 2005).

It is important that the school and the families collaborate to effectively adapt to the changing families. Teachers can no longer assume every child has a mother and a father at home. I talked with a local Kindergarten teacher regarding this issue and she told me about a parent-teacher conference she had with a student. When the parents arrived, the teacher was confused that there was a third person. There was Stacy, the mom the teacher had previously met, Rick, and Lisa. After the meeting she found out that Lisa was Stacy's partner and that Rick was Stacy's brother. The teacher had just assumed Rick and Stacy were married based on the "norms" that exist (Informal interview on September 30, 2011, with a Kindergarten teacher).

Intervention among teachers is not perceived or not done when students are being bullied due to their sexual orientation. The reason for this could be lack of knowledge as to how to effectively intervene (Whitman, Horn, & Boyd, 2007). People may use the excuse "that's just boys being boys" or "girls being girls," which normalizes the bullying behavior in their own mind and promotes self-confidence in the child being victimized. Another reason could be a way to act on the teacher's own biased aggressive tendency toward homosexuality (Conoley, 2008).

Homonegativity is defined as the prejudice against people who identify as lesbian or gay, which is typically manifested as negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Leggett & Satcher, 2007). An exploratory study was conducted by Satcher and Leggett in 2007 to measure homonegativity among professional school counselors. The study consisted of 215 school counselors from a single school in a southern state in the United States. Different factors were compared including, having a friend or acquaintance that identifies as gay or lesbian, participation in a sexual orientation awareness training program, frequency of church attendance, counseling experience with gay or lesbian students, political affiliation, and race. The study found that men held more negative attitudes than women toward homosexuality. In the comparison of political affiliation, Republicans were found to have more negative attitudes toward homosexuality than Democrats. Negativity was also found to be more common amongst people that attended church on a more frequent basis than those that attended infrequently, or did not attend church.

With this study, Leggett and Satcher were able to identify characteristics that positively affected attitudes toward homosexuality. When counselors attended sexual orientation training about GLBT issues there was a positive influence on their attitudes. Race, in this study showed

that Caucasians had a more positive attitude toward homosexuality. It was also noted that there have been mixed results.

School counselors have an ethical and professional obligation to provide a safe environment for all students within a school, including GLBT students. This obligation is detailed in the Ethical Standards for School Counselor (ASCA, 2010). In general terms it states as follows the duties the counselor has to the students, "Professional school counselors are advocates, leaders, collaborators and consultants who create opportunities for equity in access and success in educational opportunities by connecting their programs to the mission of schools and subscribing to the following tenets of professional responsibility: Each person has the right to be respected, be treated with dignity and have access to a comprehensive school counseling program that advocates for and affirms all students from diverse populations including: ethnic/racial identity, age, economic status, abilities/disabilities, language, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity/expression, family type, religious/spiritual identity and appearance" (ASCA, 2010). This standard explains how the counselor's role is to provide an equal opportunity for all students, regardless of their diverse background, while being an advocate for those students.

Another important standard states "Professional school counselors respect students' values, beliefs and cultural background and do not impose the school counselor's personal values on students or their families" (ASCA, 2010). With the results of the study above showing that homonegativity exists among school counselors, it makes this standard important to remember that despite a school counselors own personal beliefs and worldview, a school counselor's role is to be an advocate for the student (ASCA, 2010). With that role comes the responsibility of putting one's own views aside to help the student without bias.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Families are diverse and constantly evolving and there is a need to establish anti-harassment and GLBT-friendly environments in schools to adapt to such changes. Schools need to communicate that issues of discrimination and harassment are taken seriously and enforced (Fish & Jeltova, 2005). It is also important to maintain good communication between the school and the families to ensure safety is promoted. Schools that have anti-bullying policies in place that include protections based on sexual orientation, students were more likely to report incidents than were students in a school with a general policy or no policy. In 2009, it was reported that 18.2 % of students reported that they attended a school that did not have an anti-bullying policy in place (GLSEN, 2009). With stricter guidelines on anti-bullying policies in schools, requiring sexual orientation to be addressed, along with stricter enforcement of violations, it would be expected to see a decrease in overall bullying behaviors. School faculty could take shifts being present in the hallways, staircases, school play yards, etc. in order to monitor child safety. In order to promote a safe environment for all students, the zero-tolerance bullying program needs to be adhered to and enforced by all students, faculty, parents, and administration. Having effective communication and cooperation will provide a safe school environment for all students, including GLBT youth.

Support is very important for GLBT youth in promoting a safe environment in the schools. A good way to ensure this is through a Gay-Straight Alliance. Having these support groups provide a more positive experience for GLBT students including less concerns with safety, less harassment and victimization, less absenteeism due to safety concerns, and an overall increased sense of belonging to the school. Only 44.6% of GLBT students have reported having a Gay-Straight Alliance available at their school (GLSEN, 2009). It is my belief that all GLBT

youth would benefit from a support group like the Gay-Straight Alliance. I think all schools should be required to offer either a support group or information on where a student could attend a group. Also, all counselors should make it known that their office is a safe haven for GLBT youth if they have questions or concerns.

GLBT youth have also found it also useful when the faculty is also supportive. This was evidenced through fewer days missing from school, a decrease in reports of feeling unsafe, overall increase in academic achievement, an increased sense of belonging at school, and higher educational goals (GLSEN, 2009). Unfortunately, only slightly more than half (53.4%) felt there were at least six supportive faculty at the school they attended. Diversity training may be necessary for the school faculty and administration. This ensures that all consistent when adhering to the anti-bullying program. Many people avoid discussing issues such as sexual orientation due to a lack of knowledge and experience. According to the Ethical Standards for School Counselors, "Professional school counselors: Acquire educational, consultation and training experiences to improve awareness, knowledge, skills and effectiveness in working with diverse populations" (ASCA, 2010). By gaining knowledge in issues related to sexual orientation school counselors can be better prepared when working with GLBT students.

Updating the school's curriculum to include famous members of the GLBT community and history will increase students' awareness. Having GLBT books and resources in the library and counselor's office will better educate the student body concerning GLBT related issues.

How can a safe environment be promoted if the school leaders have homonegativity? In order to maintain a safe environment for all students, educators must resist stereotyping a student or parent based on their own biases or a label due to sexual orientation. Many variables contribute to a child's learning and a teacher's focus should be on the needs of the child, not the

sexual orientation. Due to their extensive knowledge and training, school counselors can provide a leadership role for catalytic change in the school environment. By providing a safe learning environment school counselors can be advocates for the GLBT students and provide the support needed. Providing knowledge through classroom guidance educating students on diversity, character education, and value statements can be an effective way to develop positive behaviors and values in students and faculty in the school environment (Hernández & Seem 2004; Gysbers, Hughey, Starr & Lapan, 1992; Peterson & Skiba, 2001). School counselors can provide interventions based on behavioral problems identified during classroom activities and based on faculty or parent recommendations.

To be effective catalysts for systemic change, school counselors work not only with students, but also with the parents, teachers, school faculty, district officials, and the entire community to maintain a safe environment for all students. Mentoring programs can be an effective way to assist with students having a difficult time with different problems (Hernández & Seem 2004). Mentoring could be a good tool also with GLBT youth in normalizing their experiences and helping with any questions or feelings they may want to explore.

With the increased awareness of the risk of safety to GLBT youth in the school environment it is very important that schools consider their role in promoting safety to all students. As families evolve and the issues surrounding diversity become the norm, it becomes more important for schools to address such issues and be proactive in promoting safety in the school environment.

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