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Advances in Research With LGBTQ Youth in Schools

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Introduction to the Special Section

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in scholarship devoted to the topic of sexual and gender minority youth in schools (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning; LGBTQ). This research has highlighted encouraging improvements in the school-based experiences for some LGBTQ youth, such as the growth of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs; or as some now refer to themselves, Gender-Sexuality Alliances), the passage and implementation of enumerated antibullying policies, the identification of factors that promote resilience and thriving among LGBTQ youth, and increased visibility of heterosexual and cisgender youth allies (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Lapointe, 2015; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Russell, Day, Ioverno, & Toomey, 2016; Shilo, Antebi, & Mor, 2015). At the same time, other studies underscore continued instances of systemic

discrimination and hostile climates that many LGBTQ youth experience, limited attention to academic risks and disparities faced by LGBTQ students, and additional unique barriers to academic and social development that are encountered by specific populations of LGBTQ youth (Craig & Smith, 2014; Kann et al., 2016; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Poteat, Scheer, & Mereish, 2014; Watson & Russell, 2016).

Schools are a primary social context where most LGBTQ youth spend the preponderance of their time. However, schools present a major dilemma for youth who traverse them each day. Namely, schools are a setting in which LGBTQ youth remain at risk for experiencing adversity, but at the same time they are also one where LGBTQ youth could receive critical support and resources from their peers and adults. As noted by Stephen Russell in the opening of his Presidential Address to the Society for Research on Adolescence, "Can we imagine our research and our field as being in the service of realizing the potential of young people?" (Russell, 2016, p. 4). To resolve this dilemma, we must continue to push our research and field in ways that will realize the potential of all young people, including LGBTQ youth.

Such a resolution will not come easy; researchers face numerous barriers to conducting LGBTQ-related research in schools that exceed the already complex interpersonal, bureaucratic, and logistical processes inherent in the conduct of school-based research. Scholars focusing on LGBTQ issues must also contend with additional challenges that include identifying schools that will allow this topic to be covered; fielding concerns or opposition from administrators, parents, or other adults wary of or opposed to these issues on political or religious grounds; and ensuring that LGBTQ students themselves remain protected and supported in this process (e.g., when considering whether active parental consent may inadvertently "out" an LGBTQ student to their parent). Nevertheless, there is urgency for LGBTQ-focused research in this setting. Scholarship can aid in identifying and evaluating policies and practices that support LGBTQ youth in this setting. As psychologists, we have a professional and ethical obligation to ensure that our schools support the growth and development of all youth, including those that identify as LGBTQ (American Psychological Association & National Association of School Psychologists, 2015).

Given the importance of conducting research with LGBTQ students that can inform practices and policies at the individual and systems levels, and the growing efforts of researchers to conduct such work, as coeditors for this special section we felt it essential that the scholarly community within the American Psychological Association's Society for

the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues (Division 44) offer an opportunity to highlight exceptional research that advances our contemporary understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ youth in schools.

Leading off this special section are findings from a multicohort study that draws upon population-level data to examine whether sexual orientation differences in school bullying and violence exposure have changed over time (Goodenow, Watson, Adjei, Homma, & Saewyc, 2016). Using four waves of Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System data from Massachusetts, the researchers found that rates of school bullying and violence exposure have generally declined within the general population of high school students between the years of 1999 and 2013. Among gay and bisexual males, there were significant declines in experiencing school bullying, skipping school as a result of feeling unsafe, and carrying a weapon at school. Gay males also evidenced decreases in their likelihood of being threatened or injured with a weapon at school and being involved in a physical fight at school. Fewer improvements over time were observed for lesbian and bisexual females; however, they did evidence lower risk for being involved in a physical fight at school, and lesbian students experienced a decline in risk for being threatened or injured with a weapon at school. Although these findings are encouraging, the magnitudes of the disparities between lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students and their heterosexual peers generally did not decrease. Overall, these findings related to historical trends add to the extant literature documenting changes for individual students over the course of their own educational experience (Birkett, Newcomb, & Mustanski, 2015; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Hazel, Vazirabadi, & Gallagher, 2013; Wang & Fredricks, 2014) and highlight the importance of targeted efforts to reduce school-based violence among LGB youth.

The second paper in this special section is, to our knowledge, the first prospective study to consider associations between attending schools with, and participating in, GSAs and victimization. Although numerous cross-sectional studies have documented benefits associated with attending high schools that have GSAs (for a review, see Marx & Kettrey, 2016), the results of Ioverno, Belser, Baiocco, Grossman, & Russell (2016) revealed that the presence of (but not participation in) a GSA within a school was associated with experiencing less homophobic victimization at follow-up (9–13 months). However, the presence of and participation in a GSA were associated with greater perceptions of school safety at follow-up. Notably, gaining a GSA (i.e., not having one at baseline, but having one at follow-up) or becoming a GSA participant (i.e., no participation at baseline but participation at follow-up) were both associated with increases in self-reported perceptions of school safety at follow-up. That said, significant differences in depression

and self-esteem scores were not detected as a result of increased GSA availability or participation. We hope this study prompts future longitudinal work on GSAs over an even greater timespan with attention to multiple social-emotional and academic outcomes.

This special section also contains two important articles focusing on school policies for reducing homophobic bullying; improving student connectedness; and enhancing the school climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. First, Kull, Greytak, Kosciw, and Villenas (2016) conducted a rigorous review of 9,296 school districts' antibullying policies and found that 42.6% of districts with an antibullying policy included specific protections for students based upon their sexual orientation whereas only 14.1% of antibullying policies included protections on the basis of gender identity or expression. Furthermore, their results revealed that LGBT students in districts with antibullying policies that were inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression were less likely to feel unsafe, to experience victimization, and to experience social aggression at school relative to peers in districts that had only generic antibullying policies or no identifiable policy. Of particular relevance for transgender and gender-nonconforming students are findings demonstrating that students in districts with inclusive antibullying policies were significantly less likely to report experiencing verbal harassment and physical assaults related to their gender expression when compared with peers in districts without an identifiable policy. Such robust findings add to others (Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2013; Russell et al., 2016) and clearly support the enumeration of antibullying policies (as well as federal nondiscrimination legislation) that protect students on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

Day, Snapp, and Russell (2016) investigated whether supportive (vs. punitive) approaches to disciplinary practices were associated with less frequent experiences of homophobic bullying and greater school connectedness. Using teacher- and student-level data from 745 California schools, they documented support for both cases. These findings add to the literature that also indicates that LGBTQ students face disproportionately higher rates of punitive discipline than their heterosexual peers and that this may be due to bias (Himmelstein & Brückner, 2011; Palmer, Greytak, & Kosciw, 2016; Poteat, Scheer, & Chong, 2016; Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell, 2015). Thus, the findings point to additional concerns underlying the use of highly punitive and exclusionary discipline over more constructive and holistic forms of intervention.

Moving from the policy level to the individual level, an article by Peter, Tasker, and Horn (2016) investigated the predictive and mediating roles of cognitions in the

perpetration of sexual- and gender-based harassment. Specifically, their study showed that adolescents' beliefs about whether a particular form of harassment was harmful or wrong was associated with less engagement in the harassing behavior. Furthermore, beliefs that a particular harassing behavior was harmful often mediated the relationship between judging a harassing behavior as wrong and the actual perpetration of the behavior. These findings may help explain why policies that attempt to reduce harassment may produce changes in attitudes but not reductions in the actual perpetration of harassment. They suggest that helping adolescents understand the emotional consequences of harassment as causing harm (as opposed to, e.g., being amusing or innocuous) may enhance the effectiveness of policies aimed at reducing school-based harassment. The authors contend that the effectiveness of antiharassment policies would be enhanced by increasing intergroup contact, such that the rationale behind such policies can be coupled with dialogue about the harms that come from homophobic and misogynistic bias and discrimination.

The empirical research in this special section concludes with two studies examining populations and questions that are significantly underrepresented in the literature. First, Toomey and Anhalt (2016) examined the relationships among mindfulness, well-being, and school victimization specific to one's ethnicity and sexual orientation among LGBTQ Latina/o students. They found that mindfulness attenuated the associations between school victimization (specific to sexual orientation) and depression and self-esteem. Furthermore, mindfulness attenuated the associations between school victimization (specific to ethnicity) and self-esteem at low levels of victimization; however, this effect was weaker when victimization levels were high. Such findings are important because they begin to incorporate the construct of mindfulness into the knowledge base regarding the effects of school victimization on LGBTQ youth, a topic that to our knowledge has received little if any attention in the peer-reviewed literature among youth and only limited attention among adults (e.g., Gayner et al., 2012). Given that the school experiences of LGBTQ Latina/o students are woefully understudied in and of themselves, we hope that Toomey and Anhalt's work will set the stage for more research on the topics of mindfulness and the school experiences of LGBTQ youth of color.

Second, Farr, Oakley, and Ollen (2016) studied the school experiences of adoptive children of lesbian and gay parents, a focus of which has received limited attention but is gaining greater visibility (Goldberg, Sweeney, Black, & Moyer, 2016). Using a mixed-method approach with teacher-, child-, and parent-level data, they evaluated the behavioral adjustment of the children and the level of support their parents felt they received from

their children's schools. Teacher and parent reports of child adjustment were generally similar, the children's adjustment was comparable to population averages, and nearly all parents felt supported by their children's schools. The results are encouraging in that they suggest that children of same-sex parents generally adjust well to the school environment. Such initial findings lay the groundwork that is necessary to begin investigating similar outcomes at later educational levels to ensure that the children of same-sex parents continue to receive the support they need to thrive within their schools.

Collectively, these seven data-driven articles are reflective of the innovation that is occurring in our field as we continue to study the experiences of LGBTQ youth in schools. They also highlight how there is room to expand our research efforts to better ensure that the social, educational, and developmental needs of LGBTQ students are met by our schools.

Resolving to Address the Needs of Transgender Students

It is also clear from the current state of research in this field that transgender students are severely underrepresented in school-based research. The final article in this special section discusses the Resolution on Gender and Sexual Orientation Diversity in Children and Adolescents in Schools (American Psychological Association & National Association of School Psychologists, 2015). Recognizing the lack of scholarship on the topic of transgender and gender-nonconforming youth in schools, this article calls upon psychologists to expand their roles beyond the provision of clinical services to becoming involved in advocacy, policy, and research activities that will ultimately further our knowledge about how we as a profession can best support transgender students.

In an effort to ensure that the health, well-being, and educational needs of transgender students in schools are not compromised, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice recently offered guidance to schools receiving federal monies about how they can best support transgender students. Most notably, the guidance explains schools' obligations for handling instances of harassment that are based on a student's gender identity. It also indicates that when students participate in sex-segregated activities and utilize sex-segregated facilities, students, including those who identify as transgender, should participate in activities and utilize facilities in a manner that is consistent with their gender identities (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, 2016). Finally, the guidance also included examples of policies and emerging practices for supporting transgender students in schools, with emerging practices being defined as "operational

activities or initiatives that contribute to successful outcomes or enhance agency performance capabilities . . . [the practices] have been successfully implemented and demonstrate the potential for replication by other agencies” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016, p. i). The U.S. Department of Education goes on to note that the emerging practices they identify have not typically been subjected to rigorous evaluation. The absence of rigorous evaluation is especially problematic because 13 states, as well as two additional school districts, have successfully obtained a preliminary injunction from the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas to block any efforts to enforce the guidance set forth by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice (State of Texas v. United States, 2016).

As this case moves through the judicial system, the scientific community must remain aware that the lives of transgender and gender-nonconforming youth will be substantially affected by the court(s) rulings. Rigorous empirical research to identify best practices for supporting transgender youth in schools is sorely needed to bolster policy efforts. As in the case of other areas of LGBTQ health research, the “T” is perpetually left behind, and unfortunately this problem is also reflected within this special section. Although there have been important advances within the mental and public health professions aimed at improving the lives of transgender and gender-nonconforming people (Dickey & Singh, 2016; Reisner et al., 2016; Winter et al., 2016), there remains an imminent need to expand our school-based research portfolios to address challenges and questions that pertain specifically to this unique student demographic.

Remarkable Progress in an Ever-Changing Sociopolitical Landscape

As this special section goes into print, citizens of the United States will have elected a new president; however, this election will have taken place in a society and world undergoing rapid changes. One notable change involves the demographic composition of our country. In the year 2000, 78% of eligible voters were White whereas 12%, 7%, and 2% were Black, Hispanic, and Asian, respectively. The 2016 electorate is now 69% White, 12% Black, 12% Hispanic, and 4% Asian (Pew Research Center, 2016). Another change is reflected in the fact that sexual orientation diversity is more accepted today than ever before (Meyer, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2014). Landmark gains for LGBTQ people can be found in the Supreme Court’s decisions pertaining to the Defense of Marriage Act and in the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges*; they can be found in the repeal of *Do Not Ask, Do Not Tell* and the subsequent decision to allow transgender people to serve openly in the military.

With research showing that LGBTQ people are at elevated risk for developing chronic diseases (Bostwick, Boyd, Hughes, & McCabe, 2009; Cochran & Mays, 2007; Corliss et al., 2010; Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, & Slopen, 2013; Institute of Medicine, 2011), passage of the Affordable Care Act has also benefited LGBTQ people by ending lifetime limits on health-care spending, ensuring parity in health-care coverage options for same-sex couples, increasing access to insurance by ending preexisting condition exclusions, and providing greater access to preventive care services. We have come a long way in a short period of time.

Much of this work came through grass-roots and large-scale coalition building across our communities. For instance, heterosexual allies from other marginalized backgrounds have been strong supporters of the LGBTQ community, which itself is diverse across many other sociocultural identities, and it is critically important that we do our part to educate and commit ourselves to being allies for other sociocultural groups that continue to face oppression and vitriol within today's social and political climate. In this special section, we highlight one group in particular that needs as many allies as possible, a group that lacks the social standing, the financial capital necessary, and the rights afforded to adults to directly influence the political climate in ways that affect their lives—LGBTQ youth. We all must be allies for LGBTQ youth, just as we need to continue to be allies to youth from other sociocultural groups that face marginalization and systemic forms of discrimination. We must recognize the complex intersectionality of youths' and our own sociocultural identities in this process. Finally, we must be allies for LGBTQ youth in all of the settings they inhabit, and schools represent one such preeminent setting.

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