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# School Social Workers' Perspectives on Working with GLBT Youth

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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# School Social Workers' Perspectives on Working with GLBT Youth

## Abstract

Past research has suggested that GLBT youth are at an increased risk for mental health issues including suicide. The purpose of this study was to examine school social workers' perspectives of their role in working with GLBT youth through an online survey with school social workers currently working in middle and high schools. Most of the participants reported *sometimes* observing homophobic expressions or remarks and *rarely* observing verbal abuse based on sexual orientation in their school environment. Likewise, participants reported *rarely* observing physical harassment and *never* observing physical abuse of students because of their sexual orientation within their school environment. Roles identified by the school social workers included: being an ally, providing counseling, providing referrals, advocating for the implementation of support groups, and being an advocate for GLBT youth. The majority of participants were neutral about their role as facilitators of support groups for GLBT youth, since they identified others such as teachers or students themselves as effective group facilitators. This study has implications for social work practice. School social workers reported their active roles as advocates and service providers as critical ways in which they had a positive impact on the school environment for GLBT youth. In order to further develop our understanding of school social workers' perspectives in working with GLBT youth future research should include a larger sample size and a wider range of school settings.

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## Introduction

Over the past two decades there has been research on suicide risk among gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) youth. The US Government's Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide (1989) revealed that gay youth were two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. This report also found that gay youth composed up to 30% of the completed youth suicides annually. Since these results were published, there have been studies reporting a significantly increased risk for attempting suicide among GLBT youth as well as other mental health issues (Eisenburg & Resnick, 2006; Fergusson, Horwood, & Beautrais, 1999; Goodenow, Szlacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, & Plum, 1998; Russel & Joyner, 2001; Safren & Heimberg, 1999; Zhao, Montoro, Igartua, & Thombs, 2010). The majority of these studies have attributed these increased risks to environmental factors rather than individual pathology.

Specifically, researchers have documented the role of the social environment within the school system as a critical factor in the experience of GLBT youth (GLSEN, 1999; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Schools can be a hostile environment for GLBT youth as noted by one review which estimated that half of GLBT students are physically harassed and 90% are verbally harassed while at school (Batelaan, 2000). GLBT youth often lack healthy exposure to gay or lesbian role models and the support they need within the school system (Rosenberg, 2003). Studies have suggested that hostile environments and lack of support within the school system have been contributing factors to an increased risk for suicide and mental health issues among GLBT youth (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Goodenow et al., 2006). Because GLBT youth are at an increased risk for suicide and research has shown that the school environment can foster such risks, there is a need for implementing prevention and intervention

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strategies for this population in schools (Batelaan, 2000; Callahan, 2000; GLSEN, 1999; Kosciw et al., 2010).

Factors within the school such as identifying a safe adult, having a GLBT support group, having services for GLBT youth, and having non-discrimination policies specifically for GLBT youth have been noted to reduce the risk of suicide and other negative outcomes for GLBT youth (Batelaan, 2000; Davis, Saltzburg, & Locke, 2009; Elze, 2003; Flynn, 1998; Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2010; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Weiler, 2003; Walls, Freedenthal, & Wisneski, 2008). School social workers can play a key role in implementing these protective factors within the school (Flynn, 1998). Throughout the literature the roles of school social workers when working with GLBT youth have been identified as being allies, providing services such as counseling and referrals, and being advocates (Batelaan, 2000; Elze, 2003; Flynn, 1998; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). It is important to understand how school social workers operationalize their roles when working with this population (Elze, 2003; Flynn, 1998). Having a better understanding of school social workers' roles when working with GLBT youth will increase awareness for how social workers can implement prevention and intervention strategies to address the increased risks among this population. The purpose of this study was to examine school social workers' perspectives of their role in working with GLBT youth through an online survey with school social workers currently working in middle and high schools.

<center>**Literature Review**</center>

Multiple studies examining the relationship between GLBT youth and an increased risk for suicide as well as other mental health issues have been conducted. Environmental factors, especially within the school, as well as prevention and intervention factors have also been studied. This review will include studies examining psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, and suicide risk among GLBT youth. Next, this review will include past literature about school environmental factors that may impact GLBT youth. Finally, this review will address the school social worker's role in prevention and intervention to address increased risks of suicide as well as other mental health issues among GLBT youth.

**Risks for GLBT Youth**

Multiple risks factors have been identified for GLBT youth. Studies have noted risks due to environmental factors such as lack of family support, peer rejection, school related problems, runaway and homelessness, sexual exploitation, psychiatric disorders, and substance abuse (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Pilkington, Herberger, & D'Augelli, 1997; Proctor & Groze, 1994; Safren & Heimburg, 1999; Savin-Williams, 1994). In the context of these risk factors, a majority of the literature has focused on the risks for psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, and suicide (D'Augelli, Grossman, Salter, Vasey, Starks, & Sinclair, 2006; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Fergusson et al., 1999; Goodenow, et al., 2006; Jiang, Perry, and Hesser, 2010; Proctor & Groze, 1993; Remafedi et al., 1998; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Safren & Heimberg, 1999; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Zhao et al., 2010). Most of these studies only include gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants in their research. The inclusion of transgender individuals in the research sample will

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be noted in further discussion of risks for psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, and suicide among GLBT youth.

**Psychiatric Disorders and Substance Abuse among GLBT Youth**

Studies have examined the increased risk for psychiatric disorders among GLBT youth (Fergusson et al., 1999; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Russel & Joyner, 2001; Safren & Heimberg, 1999). Fergusson et al. (1999) found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth were at an increased risk compared to their heterosexual peers for psychiatric disorders such as major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, conduct disorder, or being diagnosed with multiple disorders. According to Russel and Joyner (2001) GLBT youth were significantly more likely to experience depression than their heterosexual peers.  Other studies have also reported an increase risk of depression among GLBT youth when compared to their heterosexual peers (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Safren & Heimberg, 1999).

The increased risk of substance abuse has also been noted in past literature (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Fergusson et al., 1999; Russel & Joyner, 2001; Savin-Williams, 1994). Fergusson et al. (1999) found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth were significantly more likely to be diagnosed with nicotine dependence, substance dependence, and substance abuse than their heterosexual peers. Jordan, Vaughan, and Woodworth (1998) reported that of 34 gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth sampled, almost half (16) reported using drugs or alcohol to escape unpleasant feelings. Russel and Joyner (2001) found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth were significantly more likely to abuse alcohol than their heterosexual peers. Walls et al. (2008) found that of 142 GLBT youth who participated in their study, 86% reported having used alcohol at some point in their life, and 71% reported using alcohol in the last 30 days. Increased risk for

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substance abuse among gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth has also been documented in other studies (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Savin-Williams, 1994).

**Suicide and GLBT Youth**

Other risks among GLBT youth including suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and suicide attempts needing medical attention have also been noted in past literature. Studies have documented that GLBT youth have an increased risk for experiencing suicidal ideation. Proctor and Groze (1993) found that 25.8% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants had reported suicidal ideation, having given serious thought to attempting suicide at least once. Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) found that 71% of their participants had considered suicide at some point in their life.

Researchers have also found that GLBT youth are at an increased risk for experiencing suicidal ideation compared to their heterosexual peers. Safren and Heimberg (1999) found that 20% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth reported having suicidal thoughts within the last year either *often* or *very often*, whereas none of the heterosexual participants reported thoughts of suicide. Eisenburg and Resnick (2006) and Zhao et al. (2010) also found that GLBT youth were significantly more likely to report thinking about suicide than their heterosexual peers.

Studies have examined GLBT youths' risk for attempting suicide. Proctor and Groze (1993) reported that, of their 221 participants from support groups across the United States and Canada, 40.3% had attempted suicide. Similarly, Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) found 39% of 51 participants recruited from a support group reported attempting suicide. D'Augelli et al. (2006) sampled gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth and found that nearly one third of 528 participants reported a past suicide attempt. Jiang et al. (2010) also found that one of the

strongest predictors for attempting suicide among youth was being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or unsure of sexual orientation.

Other studies have compared GLBT youths' risk for suicide with their heterosexual peers. Remafedi et al. (1998) found that 28.1% of bisexual/homosexual males and 20.5% of bisexual/homosexual females reported an attempted suicide compared to 4.2% of heterosexual males and 14.5% of heterosexual females. Safren and Heimberg (1999) also found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth had a significantly higher risk for suicide attempts; approximately 30% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth reported that they had attempted suicide at least once compared to approximately 13% of heterosexual youth. Fergusson et al. (1999) surveyed 1,007 participants in Christchurch, New Zealand and found that 32% of lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth had reported attempting suicide compared to 7% of heterosexual youth. Using a national sample of youth in the United States, Russell and Joyner (2001) reported that male and female GLBT youth were two times more likely to attempt suicide than their male and female heterosexual peers. Eisenberg and Resnick (2006), Goodenow et al. (2006), and Zhao et al. (2010) also found that GLBT youth were significantly more likely than their heterosexual peers to report a past suicide attempt.

The severity of suicide attempts have also been noted in past research. D'Augelli et al. (2006) found that of 528 gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants, 15% reported a serious suicide attempt, half of which needed medical attention (D'Augelli et al., 2006). Goodenow et al. (2006) also found that GLBT youth were significantly more likely than their heterosexual peers to report a suicide attempt that required medical attention.

As noted above, many studies have reported that GLBT youth are at an increased risk for psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, and suicide when compared to their heterosexual peers (Eisenburg & Resnick, 2006; Fergusson et al., 1999; Goodenow et al., 2006; Remafedi et al., 1998; Russel & Joyner, 2001; Safren & Heimberg, 1999; Zhao et al., 2010). The majority of these studies have attributed these risks to environmental factors rather than individual pathology. Although multiple environments have been addressed in past literature such as family, community, and societal environments, a major focus within the research has been the role of the school environment (Batelaan, 2000; Callahan, 2000; Davis et al., 2009; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; GLSEN, 1999; Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2010). For the purpose of this study, only literature focusing on the school environment will be included in this review.

**School Environment**

Schools are an important social context for adolescent development (Elze, 2003). Experiences within the school environment can have an impact on an individual's mental health and overall well-being (Elze, 2003). The school environment can be a hostile place for GLBT youth (Batelaan, 2000). Past literature has examined the school environment for GLBT youth in regards to verbal abuse, physical harassment, physical abuse, and social support.

**Verbal Abuse**

According to the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth (1993) 98% of verbal abuse found in schools was anti-gay. Based on a national survey, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported that 90% of students throughout the United States had heard anti-gay remarks at school and that many times these remarks were reported as coming from teachers (GLSEN, 1999). A more recent national survey by GLSEN documented

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that 72.4% of GLBT youth had heard homophobic remarks such as "faggot" or "dyke" (Kosciw et al., 2010).

Savin-Williams (1994) and D'Augelli et al. (2002) found that over half of lesbian, gay, and bisexual participants reported verbal abuse in school directed at their sexual orientation. Elze (2003) also found that 59.6% of GLBT students experienced verbal abuse at school at least once. Likewise, the 2009 GLSEN survey noted that 84.6% of GLBT students reported being verbally abused because of their sexual orientation while at school (Kosciw et al., 2010).

**Physical Harassment**

Studies including reports from GLBT youth have documented physical harassment within the school environment. For example, Jordan et al. (1998) documented that 47% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth in their sample reported being physically harassed while at school. Elze (2003) found that 17.7% of GLBT youth had objects thrown at them, 19.8% had property damage; likewise, 10.2% reported being chased, and 6.6% reported being spit on while at school. Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002) documented that GLBT youth were significantly more likely than their heterosexual peers to have their property deliberately stolen or damaged. More recently the national GLSEN study documented that 40.1% of GLBT students reported being physically harassed, such as being shoved or pushed (Kosciw et al., 2010).

**Physical Abuse**

Physical abuse such as being punched, kicked or injured with a weapon has been documented in GLSEN's report; 18.8% of GLBT students reported being physically abused

while at school (Kosciw et al., 2010). D'Augelli et al. (2002) also documented that 11% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth reported being physically abused while at school.

Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002) found that GLBT youth reported being threatened or injured by a weapon at a significantly higher rate compared to heterosexual students. Goodenow et al. (2006) also found that GLBT students were significantly more likely than heterosexual students to be threatened or injured with a weapon on school property.

**Lack of Social Support**

Other factors that affect the experience of GLBT youth within the school environment include level of support and the presence of positive role models (Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). Often GLBT youth do not experience a healthy and positive discussion regarding GLBT orientation within the school environment (Rosenberg, 2003). Adolescents may have little or no experience with adult role models who identify as GLBT, which can lead to feelings of shame and anxiety (Rosenberg, 2003). Goodenow et al. (2006) found that GLBT youth were significantly more likely than their heterosexual peers to report not having a single adult within the school they felt they could talk to about a problem.

Receiving social support through support groups such as a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) has also been mentioned in past research (Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2010; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Weiler, 2003; Walls et al., 2008). When interviewing GLBT youth, Davis et al. (2009) found that youth reported a need for a safe environment within the school such as a support group specifically for GLBT youth. According to Goodenow et al. (2006) gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth who had a support group at their school also reported significantly lower rates of victimization and suicide attempts than students who did not have a support group

at their school. Walls et al. (2008) found that GLBT students who had a GSA at their school were significantly less likely to report suicidality and suicide attempts than GLBT students who did not. Having a GSA organization within the school was associated with reports of more positive school experiences among GLBT youth (Kosciw et al., 2010).

Lack of support regarding health and sexual education is another area that has been examined (Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). Concern for the exclusion of GLBT curriculum during health education has been noted fairly early within the literature (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997). The omission of homosexuality from health and sexual education classes and presentations contributes to a negative school context, which can result in a message to GLBT youth that there are no gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people in society, that they do not matter, or that there is no support for GLBT students within the school environment (Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003).

**School Social Workers' Role as Protective Factors**

School social workers are in an ideal position to implement suicide prevention and intervention measures for GLBT youth within the school (Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). There have been suggestions throughout the literature about how school social workers can work with GLBT youth as well as within the school environment to promote health and safety for students (Batelaan, 2000; Callahan, 2000; Elze, 2003; Flynn, 1998; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). Roles of school social workers that have been documented include being an ally, service provider, and advocate for GLBT youth.

**School Social Worker as an Ally**

One role identified for school social workers is that of being an ally to GLBT youth. As mentioned previously, the school climate for GLBT youth can be hostile (Batelaan, 2000). Researchers have documented that GLBT youth hear homophobic remarks while at school (Kosciw et al., 2010) and experience verbal abuse, physical harassment, and physical abuse at school (D'Augelli et al., 2002; GLSEN, 1999; Goodenow et al., 2006; Jordan et al., 1998; Kosciw et al., 2010; Savin-Williams, 1994). In order to be an ally for GLBT youth, school social workers must have zero tolerance for homophobic remarks, harassment, or abuse and be competent in addressing these issues when they arise (Elze, 2003; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). Being able to identify allies within the school plays a critical role in making the school environment a safe place for GLBT youth (Flynn, 1998). Likewise, allies address the need documented by GLBT youth for adults in the school who stand up for GLBT youth (Davis et al., 2009).

Another way school social workers can be an ally is to appear approachable and safe for GLBT youth to utilize them for support. This demonstration of support within the school environment may mitigate increased risk for suicide attempts and other mental health issues (Morrison & L'Heureux, 2001) and provide GLBT students with access to an adult within the school to whom they felt they could come with a problem (Goodenow et al., 2006). Goodenow et al. (2006) demonstrated that GLBT youth, who could identify a school staff member that they could go to, were about a third as likely as GLBT youth who did not have their support, to report being threatened or injured by a weapon at school, or make multiple suicide attempts over the past year.

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**School Social Worker as a Services Provider**

Another important role for social workers is providing services for GLBT youth (Batelaan, 2000; Elze, 2003; Flynn, 1998). School social workers are often responsible for providing services to students such as individual counseling and can use this position to help reduce the risk of suicidality among GLBT youth (Batelaan, 2000, Elze, 2003; Flynn, 1998). Building a therapeutic alliance as well as having knowledge about the array of risk factors within the family, community, and the school are other important factors when providing counseling for GLBT youth (Callahan, 2000; Flynn, 1998; Weiler, 2003). When counseling GLBT youth it is also important to consider the youth's adjustment needs, coping strategies, and willingness to bring up issues of sexuality (Callahan, 2000). The physical environment of counseling services such as the display of gay friendly posters and flyers as well as literature regarding differing sexual orientations is also important to consider (Batelaan, 2000; Flynn, 1998; Weiler, 2003).

Social workers are also in a position to provide resources and referrals to GLBT youth (Batelaan, 2000). Connecting youth to resources within the community is a vital role for social workers (Batalaan, 2000; Flynn, 1998). By being aware of and having connections to GLBT specific resources social workers can be more effective in working with this population (Flynn, 1998). Not every community has GLBT specific resources, and therefore being aware of appropriate websites and literature that may provide support is also important (Batelaan, 2000). Offering crisis and suicide prevention phone numbers is another resource to consider (Proctor & Groze, 1994).

**School Social Worker as an Advocate**

School social workers have an obligation to advocate for GLBT youth in order to promote social justice (Batelaan, 2000). School social workers can use their role to advocate for other teachers and staff members to become GLBT allies. Warwick, Aggleton, and Douglas (2001) interviewed teachers regarding homophobic bullying within the schools and found that 82% of the teachers interviewed were aware of instances of homophobic verbal bullying and 26% were aware of homophobic physical bullying (Warwick et al., 2001). Further findings indicated that although most teachers in this sample were aware of homophobic bullying, participants were either confused, unable, or unwilling to address the needs of GLBT students (Warwick et al., 2001). According to Elze (2003) social workers are in a position to educate faculty about how to address GLBT issues and to provide support for GLBT youth. If social workers themselves are unable to provide this education, social workers can advocate for education and training for teachers and staff on how to address homophobic remarks and bullying (Batelaan, 2000; Elze, 2003).

Advocating for services specifically for GLBT youth is another identified role of the school social worker. Stressing the need for individual counseling, group counseling, as well as having GLBT support groups available for GLBT students is important (Batelaan, 2000). Having some sort of support group for GLBT students in school has been shown to have positive results for GLBT students (Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2010; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Weiler, 2003; Walls et al., 2008). School social workers can use their role to advocate for implementation of GLBT support groups.

Advocating for non-discrimination policies specifically for GLBT youth in schools may also be a role for school social workers. Non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation can act as a safeguard for GLBT students (Morrison & L'Heureux, 2001). Warwick et al. (2001) found that 99% of schools surveyed had an anti-bullying policy; however, only 6% of these school policies mentioned lesbian or gay issues. GLSEN's report found that GLBT students whose school had an anti-bullying policy for GLBT youth were more likely than those who did not, to report teachers intervening when hearing homophobic remarks (Kosciw et al., 2010). This study also documented that GLBT youth whose schools had an anti-bullying policy for GLBT youth were more likely to report harassment and or assault to school staff (Kosciw et al., 2010). Social workers can advocate for policy change within the school by stressing the importance of including specific content of sexual orientation in anti-bullying policies (Elze, 2003; Flynn, 1998).

The studies reviewed have documented that there is a relationship between an increased risk for suicide and sexual orientation (Eisenburg & Resnick, 2006; Fergusson et al., 1999; Goodenow et al., 2006; Remafedi et al., 1998; Russel & Joyner, 2001; Safren & Heimberg, 1999; Zhao et al., 2010). Environmental factors especially within the school system have been recognized for their contribution to both protection and risk factors (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli et al., 2002; GLSEN, 1999; Kosciw et al., 2010; Zhao et al., 2010). School social workers have been working to implement prevention and intervention strategies within the school, particularly in their roles as allies, service providers, and advocates (Batelaan, 2000; Elze, 2003; Flynn, 1998; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003).

The purpose of this study was to examine school social workers' perspectives of their role in working with GLBT youth through an online survey with school social workers currently

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working in middle and high schools. Questions were focused on areas identified in the literature such as prevention and intervention strategies to address risks for GLBT youth in the school environment and social workers' contributions in their role as allies, service providers, and advocates.

## Conceptual Framework

### The Ecological Perspective

The ecological perspective conceptualizes and helps explain human behavior within the social environment (Miley, O'Melia, & DuBois, 2009, p.35). The person and the environment are interrelated and the person cannot be understood independently of the relationship to their environment (Forte, 2007, p.128). This perspective emphasizes the complexity of human beings and acknowledges the diversity in physical and social environments (Forte, 2007, p. 133-134). This perspective also states that humans are constantly interacting with their environment and all behavior can be described as adaptive or logical within context (Miley et al., 2009, p.35).

Urie Bronfenbrenner, creator of the ecological theory for human behavior, describes the environmental system through various levels including the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem (Forte, 2007, p.136). The microsystem consists of immediate settings and the roles that the person plays within these settings. The mesosystem is more complex and describes the relationship between two or more immediate settings. The exosystem includes all of the systems that the person may not directly participate in, but is still influenced by. The macrosystem refers to more generalized patterns that may exist within the culture (Forte, 2007, p. 136).

### An Ecological Perspective of the Social Worker's Role

The ecological perspective is one model that can be used to better understand school social workers' roles in working with GLBT youth at each level. The ecological perspective was utilized within the current study by examining system levels and incorporating them into survey questions for participants. School social workers were asked how they perceive the microsystem of GLBT students such as the students' experience within school environment. Past research has

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documented that the school setting often includes verbal abuse, physical harassment, and physical abuse for GLBT youth (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Goodenow et al., 2006; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Warwick, Aggleton, & Douglas, 2001). Questions asked in this study strived to examine the school setting and how school social workers intervene with issues in that setting such as verbal abuse, physical harassment, and physical abuse.

The mesosystem was also addressed when exploring school social workers' roles in working with GLBT youth. This was done by asking social workers about the relationship between their immediate environments such as the school and the community. Past research has documented that school social workers provide referrals and outside resources within the community for GLBT youth (Batelaan, 2000; Proctor & Groze, 1994). School social workers were asked about their role in providing referrals within the community when working with GLBT youth. This was done using the statement, "As a school social worker it is my role to provide referrals to GLBT youth," where participants rated how strongly they agree with this statement ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

The exosystem was also addressed in exploring school social workers' roles in working with GLBT youth. This was done by asking school social workers about their perception of their exosystem such as school policies. Past literature has documented that social workers can play a role in advocating for policy change within the school (Elze, 2003; Flynn, 1998). In this study school social workers were asked how they perceive their role in advocating for policy change within the school.

Finally, the macrosystem was addressed, where broader cultural issues and values can affect how school social workers are able to work with GLBT youth. This was explored through open-ended questions regarding the school social worker's role and perceived barriers when

working with GLBT youth. Incorporating survey questions that include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem provided an understanding of the complex environment in which school social workers are a part of. Exploring all levels of systems instead of limiting the focus to the relationship between the social worker and the adolescent also provided an understanding of the different roles social workers have on multiple systems in working with GLBT youth.

## Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine school social workers' perspectives of their role in working with GLBT youth through an online survey with school social workers currently working in middle and high schools. Questions used in this survey focused on areas identified in the literature such as prevention and intervention strategies to address risks for GLBT youth in the school environment and social workers' contributions in their role as allies, service providers, and advocates.

### Sample

The participants in this study were school social workers currently working in a school setting in Minnesota in and around the Minneapolis metro area who were identified by a search of public websites for high schools (Appendix A). Emails of school social workers were obtained from online school websites. First, a list of high schools from Hennepin, Ramsey, Anoka, Wright, Carver, Scott, Dakota, Washington, and Sherburne counties was obtained through an internet search. If there was an accessible school website, then the staff directory was searched for emails of school social workers. If the directory had a school social worker with an accessible email account, that email was copied and pasted in to a separate document. A list of 75 emails of school social workers was developed (Appendix A). Using this list from public websites, social workers were invited to participate by sending a cover letter (Appendix B) outlining the study's purpose and procedure along with a link to the online survey (Appendix C). Of the 75 school social workers who were invited to participate, 22 completed the survey for a response rate of 29.3%.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

This study was reviewed by a research committee and by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. Catherine University prior to the beginning of data collection. Participants were invited to participate in this study through email (Appendix A) by sending a cover letter (Appendix B). This cover letter included the purpose of the study, a description of the possible risks or benefits for participating, and emphasized the voluntary nature of the study

After obtaining consent from the IRB, the Qualtrics Student User Agreement form was completed and submitted for approval. This software also allowed for completed online surveys to be sent to the researcher anonymously insuring that no one will be able to identify participants. The survey results were kept in a password protected computer which only the researcher had access to. All survey results saved on the password protected computer will be destroyed after June 1, 2012. Access to Qualtrics software will also be deactivated after the school year has ended on May 21, 2012.

**Data Collection**

### Instrument Development

The instrument used for this study was an online survey utilizing both quantitative and qualitative questions (Appendix C). Quantitative questions were used in this survey to categorize information based on demographics such as gender, social work license, work setting, length of time working as a school social worker, and whether they have received training on working with GLBT youth. Other quantitative and qualitative questions were used in this survey in order to get more information regarding the school environment and how school social workers perceive their role in working with GLBT youth (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2008).

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This instrument was developed using themes from the literature review as well as from the Local School Climate Survey: School Based Version (GLSEN, 2009). In regards to the literature review, concepts such as homophobic remarks and harassment in school, school social workers' responses to remarks and harassment, and school social workers' perceptions of their role in working with GLBT youth were used in the development of this survey.

Questions 1 - 7 included close-ended questions designed to gather demographic information about the participants. These questions include gender, social work license, setting worked in (rural / urban / suburban), level of school worked in (high school only / middle school only / high school and middle school / other), type of school worked in (public / private), length of time working as a school social worker, and whether they have received training on working with GLBT youth.

Questions 8 - 12 related to the school environment. It was noted in the literature review that homophobic remarks as well as homophobic harassment are often a part of the school environment (Batelaan, 2000; Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli et al., 2006; GLSEN, 1999; Kosciw et al., 2010; Savin-Williams, 1994). How often homophobic remarks were heard as well as how often homophobic harassment was observed by school social workers in the school were recorded in this survey. The frequency of homophobic remarks / harassment noted by school social workers were measured using questions adapted from the Local School Climate Survey: School Based Version (GLSEN, 2009). The questions in the Local School Climate Survey: School Based Version was designed for student participants. The wording was changed so they would apply to school social workers. Question # 8, "In your school environment how often do you hear the expression "That's so gay," or "You're so gay" at school?" using a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*frequently*) was adapted from the Local School Climate Survey:

School Based Version (GLSEN, 2009) (Appendix C). Question # 9, "In your school environment how often do you hear other homophobic remarks used in school (such as "faggot," "dyke," "queer," etc.)?" using a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*frequently*) was also adapted from the Local School Climate Survey: School Based Version in order to apply to school social workers (GLSEN, 2009) (Appendix C).

Other questions from GLSEN's Local School Climate Survey: School Based Version (2009) were adapted such as question #10, "Since your time working at your current school, how often have you encountered students being verbally harassed (name calling, threats, etc.) because of their sexual orientation?" using a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*frequently*) (Appendix C).

Questions 13 - 17 related to the social worker's response to their observations in the school environment. How school social workers intervene in response to homophobic remarks and harassment has also been noted in the literature review (Davis et al., 2009; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). Questions developed by the researcher were included in the survey to obtain information in this area. An example is question #13, "Have you ever been in a situation to intervene when hearing homophobic remarks in school? If so how did you handle the situation?" (Appendix C).

The last set of questions focused on the perceived role of the school social worker. The role of school social workers in working with GLBT youth was a theme throughout the literature review (Batelaan, 2000; Callahan, 2000; Elze, 2003; Flynn, 1998; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). Questions that measure school social workers' perceptions of their roles in working with GLBT youth were addressed in questions #18- #23 of the survey (Appendix C). These questions specifically address the following roles that were identified in the literature: being an ally,

providing counseling, providing referrals, facilitating a support group, advocating for the implementation of a support group, and being an advocate to GLBT youth. These questions ask participants to rate how much they agree with the statements using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). An example statement is "As a school social worker, it is my role to be an ally to GLBT students."

The open-ended question #24, "As a school social worker, what barriers do you identify when working with GLBT youth?" identified school social workers' perceived barriers to working effectively with GLBT youth. An open-ended question #25, asks the participants if there is anything else they want to add regarding their role in working with GLBT youth to get direct input from school social workers regarding their work with GLBT youth (Appendix C).

### Data Collection Process

The research was conducted using an online survey sent directly to school social workers' school emails. This was done using a web-based survey software called Qualtrics. Qualtrics is available for use for the School of Social Work staff, faculty, and students at St. Thomas University. Using an email survey is one of the easiest ways to reach school social workers. It was deemed likely that school social workers would check their school emails at least once a work day as standard practice. Answering an online survey is also less time consuming than setting up a meeting time to conduct a survey or interview face to face.

After the approval by St. Catherine University's IRB, the process to be approved for utilizing Qualtrics began. The Qualtric Student User Agreement form was completed and submitted to the brand administrator for approval. Once approval was obtained, Qualtrics was utilized for data collection. On January 25<sup>th</sup> 2012, the survey was sent to emails using Qualtrics

with a response period of one week. On February 1st 2012, a reminder email was sent to participants with a response period of one week. On February 8th 2012, the survey was deactivated and participants could no longer have access to completing the survey. After this time no more data was collected and data analysis began.

**Data Analysis**

Descriptive analysis and content analysis were used for this study. Using Minitab, a statistical software used for data analysis, descriptive statistics such as the count, percent, mean, standard deviation, and median were calculated on all closed-ended questions. This included questions regarding gender, social work license, setting worked in, level of school worked in (high school / middle school / high school and middle school / other), type of school worked in (public / private), length of time working as a school social worker, and whether they have received training on working with GLBT youth. These statistics were calculated using the *Tally Individual Variables* and *Display Descriptive Statistics* functions under the Stat tool bar in Minitab. Descriptive statistics including the count, percent, mean, standard deviation, and median were also conducted using the same functions regarding interval questions on the survey such as #8-#12 and #18-#23 using Minitab (Appendix C).

Content analysis for open-ended questions such as #13-#17 and #24-#25 was used to analyze the data. Content analysis is a thorough interpretation of material to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings (Berg, 2009, p. 338). The researcher reviewed the responses for each open-ended question and identified themes within the responses. Direct quotes from participants which were obtained through this process are presented in italics in the findings section.

**Strengths/Limitations**

A major strength of this study was that findings allowed for a better understanding of school social workers' perspectives of their work with GLBT youth. Specifically focusing on school social workers allowed their voices to be heard in regards to the school environment for GLBT youth. Another strength in the research design is using a mixed-mode survey, which allowed for the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

There are some limitations that should be noted. Using only school social workers in this study excluded other important perspectives within the school setting such as teachers, principles, and other school staff. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, not using a qualitative interview is a potential limitation. Using a qualitative interview could offer a greater depth of understanding (Berg, 2009). Another limitation is that using a non-probability sample does not allow the researcher to generalize findings to the general population (Monette et al., 2009).

<center>**Findings**</center>

This study sought to examine school social workers' perspectives of their role in working with GLBT youth through an online survey with school social workers currently working in middle and high schools. This section will display the findings of this study including the demographics of participants, observation and interventions of participants regarding the school environment, and participants' perceived roles as social workers in working with GLBT youth. Perceptions of school social workers' role in working with GLBT youth, identified barriers in working with GLBT youth, and additional information participants added in regards to working with GLBT youth will also be addressed in this section.

**Demographics**

Of the 75 school social workers who were invited via email to participate in an online survey, 22 responded, resulting in a response rate of 29.3%. As noted on Table 1, most of the participants were female and almost half of the participants had an LICSW (n=10). Over half of participates (n=13) reported working in a suburban school setting. The majority of participants (n=17) reported working in high school only settings and in public schools (n=20). Participants' length of time working as a school social worker ranged from 3 to 28 years with an average of 13.34 years (SD=8.21).

Table 1. Demographics

| | Count N=22 | Percent (%) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | | | |
| Female | 18 | 81.8 | |
| Male | 4 | 18.2 | |
| License | | | |
| LICSW | 10 | 45.5 | |
| LISW | 4 | 18.2 | |
| LSW | 3 | 13.6 | |
| LGSW | 2 | 9.1 | |
| Other | 3 | 13.6 | |
| School Setting | | | |
| Suburban | 13 | 59.1 | |
| Urban | 6 | 27.3 | |
| Rural | 3 | 13.6 | |
| School Level | | | |
| High School | 17 | 77.3 | |
| High School and Middle School | 4 | 18.2 | |
| Middle School | 1 | 4.6 | |
| School Type | | | |
| Public | 20 | 90.9 | |
| Private | 1 | 4.6 | |
| Other | 1 | 4.6 | |
| Length as a School Social Worker | | | |
| <5 years | 5 | 22.7 | |
| 6-10 years | 4 | 18.2 | |
| 11-15 years | 4 | 18.2 | |
| 16-20 years | 5 | 22.7 | |
| 21-30 years | 4 | 18.2 | |
| M=13.34 (S.D. = 8.21) | | | |
| GLBT Training | | | |
| Received Training | 16 | 72.7 | |
| No Training | 6 | 27.3 | |

The majority of participants (n=16) reported receiving training in working with GLBT youth.

Table 1 displays these results.

**Observation and Intervention**

Table 2 summarizes participants' description of their observations and interventions

regarding the school environment. These observations include how often participants have heard

homophobic expressions, how often they have heard homophobic remarks, and how often they

have encountered students being verbally harassed, physically harassed, or physically abused

because of their sexual orientation. Table 2 also includes how many participants have been in a

position to intervene in response to these observations as well as identifying a student with no social support.

Table 2. Observations / Interventions in the School Environment

| | Often | Sometimes | Rarely | Never | Interventions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Homophobic Expression ("That's so gay" / "You're so gay") | 7 | 10 | 5 | 0 | N/A |
| Homophobic Remarks ("faggot" / "dyke" / "queer") | 1 | 14 | 6 | 1 | 21 |
| Verbal Harassment (name calling, threats, etc.) | 0 | 8 | 13 | 1 | 8 |
| Physical Harassment (shoved, pushed, etc.) | 0 | 3 | 11 | 9 | 2 |
| Physical Abuse (punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) | 0 | 0 | 6 | 14 | 0 |
| No Social Support | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 16 |

**Homophobic Expression**

About half of participants (n=10) reported that they *sometimes* heard homophobic expressions such as "That's so gay," or "You're so gay," while at school (Table 2). Participants were not asked whether they had been in a position to intervene when observing homophobic expressions in the school environment.

**Homophobic Remarks**

The majority of participants (n=14) reported hearing homophobic remarks such as "faggot," "dyke," or "queer," *sometimes* while at school (Table 2). Almost all of the participants (n=21) reported that they had been in a position to intervene when hearing homophobic remarks.

Of the 21 participants who reported being in a position to intervene when hearing homophobic remarks, all provided examples of the situations. Participants (n=17) reported that they had verbally addressed students. One participant working in a suburban setting described doing this by *verbally acknowledging the homophobic comments.* Another participant working in an urban high school stated she has *intervened verbally, saying, "that's not okay."* Verbal intervention was a common response to homophobic remarks among participants, especially verbal intervention including education and discussion of different word choices.

Educating the student who had made the remark and discussing different word choices with the student was reported by five participants. For example one participant working in a suburban high school reported [I] *had a talk with the student about it not being OK. We have a big "use another word" campaign that's been around for several years*. Another participant working in urban middle and high schools reported his intervention stating: *When students use language such as "That's gay" I always ask them to choose a different word to describe what they are feeling…* Besides verbal intervention and education, taking administrative measures were also reported among participants.

Seven out of the 21 participants reported sending the student who made the remark to the principal's office or reporting the remark to an administrator. One participant working in an urban high school has responded by *sending the harasser to the office;* [the student] *was then suspended*. A participant working in a suburban high school reported that he *made sure the assaulting student had followed up with an administrator.* Another participant working in an urban setting stated that she *sent* [the student] *to principal for discipline consequences.* Another statement such as: *referring to the office for appropriate consequence* was also reported.

**Verbal Harassment**

As displayed in Table 2, the majority of participants (n=13) reported that they *rarely* observed verbal harassment; eight participants reported *sometimes* observing verbal harassment while at school. Of the 22 participants, eight reported being in the position of intervening in response to verbal harassment. Six participants' responses included verbal intervention, such as *I said it was not appropriate*. One participant working in suburban middle and high schools stated she has *talked with the harassing student about how disrespectful the words were*. Five participants also reported using administrative consequences through statements such as [I]*sent* [the student] *to the principal for discipline consequences*. Another participant working in a suburban high school stated he has *reported the incident for further discipline and parent contact*. In addition to verbal harassment, physical harassment and physical abuse were also addressed.

**Physical Harassment and Physical Abuse**

Participants reported *rarely* (n=11) and *never* (n=9) observing physical harassment at school. Subsequently, the majority of participants (n=20) reported *never* being in a position to intervene when observing physical harassment regarding sexual orientation. Of the two participants who reported intervening in physical harassment, one participant working in an urban high school indicated she handled the situation through *office referral and suspension, and education*. As noted in Table 2, 14 participants reported that they *never* observed physical abuse while at school and six participants reported *rarely* observing these incidents. Thus there was no reason to intervene.

**Lack of Social Support**

A majority of participants (n=16) reported that they had identified a student with no social support (Table 2). Of the 16 participants who had identified a student with no social support, 12 described how they handled the situation. Six participants reported that they provided individual support. A participant working in a suburban high school stated she *met with him* [the student] *regularly*. Another participant working in a suburban high school stated that he has *attempted to engage the individual with me* [school social worker] *or school activities.* Another theme identified was providing referrals to relevant services and resources.

Of the 12 participants who addressed social support, six reported that they provided the student with referrals by *linking them to services both in and out of school setting.* Another said that she *gave the student resource information and encouraged them to join the schools Gay Strait Alliance*, while another participant *tried to look for outside support systems to help them.* In addition to their observations and interventions, school social workers' perceptions of their roles in working with GLBT youth were also addressed.

**School Social Workers' Roles**

Participants were asked to answer questions regarding their perspectives of school social workers' roles in working with GLBT youth in the following areas: being an ally, providing counseling, providing referrals, facilitating support groups, advocating for the implementation of support groups, and being an advocate. These results are displayed in Table 3.

**Being an Ally**

As noted in Table 3, 19 participants reported that they felt it was their role as a social worker to be an ally for GLBT youth and provided examples illustrating how they engaged in this role. One theme that was identified throughout participants' responses (n=9) was referring students to a GLBT support group or being a part of a GLBT support group through statements such as: *am affiliated with GLBT support group*. One participant working in a suburban high school reported that her *school has a very large and active Gay Strait Alliance, Open Minds Diversity Club, etc*. Another participant working in a suburban high school stated that she *co-facilitates a GLBT support group at school*.

Table 3. Social Workers' Roles

|  | Agree | Neutral | Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|
| Begin an Ally<br>Count (n=20) | 19 | 0 | 2 |
| Providing Counseling<br>Count (n=19) | 15 | 2 | 2 |
| Providing Referrals<br>Count (n=19) | 18 | 1 | 0 |
| Facilitating Support Groups<br>Count (n=20) | 9 | 10 | 1 |
| Advocating for Support Groups<br>Count (n=20) | 15 | 3 | 1 |
| Being an Advocate<br>Count (n=20) | 19 | 1 | 0 |

Another theme identified throughout the responses was providing a safe and confidential place for students. Of the 20 responses, four participants mentioned using safety and confidentiality to be an ally. For example a participant working in a suburban high school and transitional school stated that she provides students with *a safe place to talk*. One participant *makes sure students know she is safe*. Another participant working in a suburban high school

stated: [I] *practice confidentiality*. Another way participants identified being an ally was utilizing GLBT affiliated icons or symbols.

Three participants reported using GLBT banners or rainbow icons to symbolize being an ally. A participant working in a suburban high school reported that she *posts GLBT welcoming signs in* [her] *office*. Another participant working in a suburban high school reported that she has *the GLBT sticker outside* [her] *door indicating that* [she is] *a safe person to come talk to.* Using support groups, safety, confidentiality, and GLBT affiliated icons were all noted by participants as being an ally to GLBT youth.

### Providing Counseling

As noted in Table 3, 19 participants addressed the role of providing counseling for GLBT youth. A majority (n=15) either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that it was their role to provide counseling for GLBT youth and 18 participants described ways that they provide this counseling such as personally providing counseling, giving information and resources during counseling, and providing a safe environment during counseling.

Nine participants reported conducting individual therapy through statements such as: *meet individually with student* and *individual counseling*. Another participant stated: … *provide counseling to all students*. Eight participants made statements such as: *I might refer them to GSA group in our school.* One participant highlighted providing community resources during counseling by stating she would *make sure they have connections to the community*. Another participant working in a suburban high school *encourages their* [students] *participation in GSA, assists in talking with parents, and provides community resources*. Participants also highlighted the importance of safety and support when providing individual therapy for GLBT youth.

Six participants noted being safe and supportive through statements such as: *Provide a safe environment for them to talk*. Another participant highlighted providing support as: *listen to their stories, provide information; be a safe place*. A participant working in a suburban high school stated that she provided support by *listening to them and offering them help with problem solving. Also, being just a supportive, caring adult in their lives*. Providing individual counseling, referrals during counseling, and a safe and supportive environment were all identified as a themes among participants regarding this role.

**Providing Referrals**

Eighteen participants reported that it was their role to provide referrals to GLBT youth and one participant was *neutral*. Of the 19 participants who responded to this question, 15 participants also provided examples as to how they engaged in this role. Of the 15 responses, 12 participants reported using school and community resources for referrals through statements such as: *connect them with community resources*. One participant stated that she *might refer them to services in or outside of school*. Another participant highlighted community resources by *giving them contact information for the different GLBT resources in the community*. A participant working in an urban high school mentioned her use of other social service agencies: *By offering information on social service agencies equipped to provide support*. In addition to school and community resources, participants also identified referrals for support groups and individual therapists.

Three participants specifically mentioned referring students to GLBT support groups through statements such as*: I have provided information about support groups*. Another participant stated she *encourages participation in our GSA*. Three participants also specifically mentioned referring students to individual therapists: *Referrals to GLBT-friendly therapists*. A

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participant working in a suburban high school stated she has *referred students who are greatly struggling for either medical intervention or for an outside therapist*. Participants mentioned a variety of referral options for GLBT youth including school, community, group, and individual services.

### Facilitating Support Groups

As noted in Table 3, 20 participants addressed group facilitation. Half reported being *neutral* regarding their role as being a group facilitator and almost half of the participants (n=9) *agreed* that it was their role to facilitate GLBT support groups. Participants (n=13) provided examples how they engaged in this role.

Five participants reported that they were currently facilitating a GLBT support group or would be willing to facilitate a group. One participant stated that she *assists with the GSA group*; another participant stated: *We currently have a GSA, which I do not run, but I am willing to do more as the need arises.* In addition to facilitating or being willing to facilitate groups, other possible group facilitators were also noted by participants.

Four participants reported that other individuals or outside agencies would be more appropriate for facilitating groups. One participant working in urban middle and high schools stated *I feel that some kinds of support groups, such as grief, abuse, GLBT, etc. have better response when they meet outside of school*. Another participant identified other professionals who have roles as group facilitators: *There is a non-therapy support club that is run by teachers*. A participant working in a suburban high school highlighted her belief about students facilitating their own support group: *From what I've heard in the past, the students prefer more of a student led organization than a support group.* A lack of possible participants was also noted by participants.

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Three participants identified that there was not a large enough need at their school to have a GLBT support group: *There is not an identified group of GLBT students, but if the need arose, it would be my role to facilitate a group*. One participant working in a rural high school stated: *We currently don't have enough students to have a support group and we would also have a hard time promoting and getting the word out about it*. Another participant working in a rural middle school also highlighted the lack of possible group participants: *I would* [facilitate] *if I had a large enough group of kids, we have low incidence of kids needing GLBT support*. In addition to the role of group facilitation, respondents addressed advocating for support groups.

**Advocating for Support Groups**

As noted in Table 3, of the 19 participants responding the majority (n=15) *agreed* that it was their role to advocate for the implementation of GLBT support groups. Among these respondents, 13 provided examples of how they engaged in this role. Six participants reported that they already had a GLBT support group in place at their school and therefore did not have to advocate for one. Three participants reported not having enough identified GLBT students to advocate for a group but otherwise would be willing. For example one participant working in a suburban high school stated: *I don't currently do this, but if I saw or heard of a need from students, I would certainly advocate for it*. In addition to advocating for support groups, being a general advocate for GLBT youth was also addressed by participants.

**Being an Advocate**

As reported in Table 3, 19 participants *agreed* that it was their role to be an advocate for GLBT youth and 15 illustrated ways in which they have engaged in this role. One theme identified was that of intervening when hearing anti-gay comments or bullying. Four participants advocated for GLBT youth in this way: *Intervene on a personal level if I hear anti-gay*

*comments.* Another participant *addresses homophobic language or actions*. Participants also noted the importance of education and training when being an advocate for GLBT youth.

Four participants identified that they advocated for GLBT youth through educating others such as staff and students. Another participant highlighted the importance of *staff development and trainings*. Four participants also identified that they advocated for GLBT youth *in the same ways I advocate for all students*. Another participant stated: *I am a strong advocate for every student.* In addition to advocacy roles, perceived barriers when working with GLBT youth were also addressed among participants.

**Perceived Barriers in Working with GLBT Youth**

Participants were asked questions about barriers to working with GLBT youth and 17 participants responded. Seven of the 17 participants identified that one barrier to working with GLBT youth was knowing who they are since students do not identify themselves as GLBT due to fear of stigma and social consequences. One participant noted that there is *very much a stigma to be identified. I think many high school students don't identify themselves*. Another participant noted that *students feeling safe or comfortable identifying outwardly they are GLBT* as a barrier to self-identification. One participant stated: *Some people have less accepting attitudes. Some gay students do not wish to be identified or feel that they do not need support. I want to be sure to respect their wishes and not over-intervene*. Another participant working in a suburban high school noted the perceptions of others such as *fear of peer and adult perception* as being a barrier for students to identify themselves as GLBT.

Another theme identified as a barrier was lack of family support or fear of parental responses by youth. Of the 17 participants who answered this question, seven identified this as a barrier. For example a participant working in a suburban high school stated: *…the students that I*

*have worked with who identify as GLBT have trouble not only telling their parents but when they do, they don't always find the support and acceptance that they want and deserve. I think anytime parents aren't on board with what is going on, that is a huge barrier.* Another participant working in a suburban high school also highlighted this barrier: [Students have a] *fear that parents will be told and* [do not know] *how to tell parents.* Another participant stated that *little family support and students feeling alone* were possible barriers in working with GLBT youth.

Five of the 17 participants identified a lack of GLBT resources in their community. A participant working in a suburban high school noted a *lack of resources for students who have limited support outside of school.* Another participant also referenced *access to resources in our area.* The issue of transportation when resources are not available in the community was also noted: *Most community resources for GLBT youth are several miles away and transportation is an issue.*

Three of the 17 participants reported that living in a conservative community was a barrier to working with GLBT youth. One participant working in a rural high school stated: *I work in a very conservative community and sexuality in this community is seen as a choice. Many do not believe in this choice so it can be a very uncomfortable environment for GLBT youth to be raised in.* Two out of the 17 participants also reported that living in a small community was a barrier to working with GLBT youth. Another participant working in a rural high school stated that *there is a lot of keeping it a secret because of the small town* [therefore] *being really unaware of who these students are.* In a rural middle school *stigma in a small community*, was another barrier noted.

**Additional Information**

Of the 22 participants, eight participants commented on additional information about their experience in working with GLBT youth. Three thought it was their *role to support and advocate for all students to include GLBT youth*. Another participant indicated that *GLBT youth should be treated with the same unconditional positive regard as straight counterparts*. Two participants also identified specifically that it was a professional responsibility to recognize and work with GLBT youth: *I think it's a very important part of my job and I'm glad I am here for these young adults*. Another participant stated: *It is a personal passion in addition to being a work responsibility*. Other issues including administration and progress of the school environment for GLBT youth were noted by participants.

One participant identified the importance of administrative and school support by stating: *I have great support from the administration and counseling department and we take a school wide approach to addressing the issue*. Another participant who has worked as a school social worker for 20 years in a suburban setting identified the progress of treatment of GLBT youth by stating: *As one who has been in a school setting for a long time, I notice that each year gets better for gay students. Current high school students are much more tolerant and accepting of differences compared to even a few years ago*. Findings in comparison to past research as well as implications will be addressed in the next section.

<center>**Discussion**</center>

The purpose of this study was to examine school social workers' perspectives of their

role in working with GLBT youth through an online survey with school social workers currently

working in middle and high schools. This section will discuss the findings of the present study in

comparison to past research highlighted in the literature review. This section will also discuss the

present study's implications for social work practice, policy, and future research.

**Findings in Comparison to Literature Review**

The present study consisted of 22 participants currently working as school social workers

in middle and high schools in Minnesota.  The participants in this study are different than the

majority of studies noted in the literature review, where the research samples consisted of

students or GLBT youth. One study noted in the literature review also examined teachers'

perspectives on homophobic bullying within the school system (Warwick et al., 2001). Past

literature has also noted social workers' roles in working with GLBT youth; however, did not

specifically include school social workers as a research sample (Batelaan, 2000; Elze, 2003;

Flynn, 1998; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). The present study specifically targeted school

social workers in order to get their personal perspectives of their roles in working with GLBT

youth. These differences in perspectives may contribute to some differences found in the results.

Differences were noted in observations of the school environment such as homophobic

expression or remarks, verbal abuse, physical harassment, physical abuse, and lack of support

among GLBT youth compared to the literature review.  School social workers in this study

reported *sometimes* hearing homophobic expressions and remarks (Table 2). Participants also

reported r*arely* hearing verbal harassment directed at GLBT youth because of their orientation

(Table 2). Past research has noted that GLBT youth often hear homophobic expressions or

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remarks as well as experience verbal abuse because of their sexual orientation while in school

(D'Augelli et al., 2002; Elze, 2003; Kosciw et al., 2010; Savin-Williams, 1994). The majority of

school social workers in this study also reported *rarely* observing physical harassment and *never*

observing physical abuse (Table 2). Past literature has noted that GLBT students report

experiencing physical harassment and abuse ranging from 11 (D'Augelli et al. 2002) to 47% of

research samples (Jordan et al., 1998). These findings are likely a direct reflection of who is

responding: professional staff versus students.

Findings related to social support were consistent with past literature. The majority of

participants reported identifying a student with no social support (Table 2). This was a theme in

past literature regarding GLBT youth (Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2010; Radkowsky

& Siegel, 1997; Weiler, 2003; Walls et al., 2008). However, the question used in the present

study regarding identifying a student with no social support did not specifically mention sexual

orientation. Therefore, it is impossible to assume the students that participants identified who had

no social support were GLBT. In hindsight the wording of this question should have specifically

included sexual orientation in order to distinguish whether participants were referring to all

students or students who specifically identified as GLBT.

There were also similarities and differences in participants' responses regarding the

perceptions of school social workers' roles in working with GLBT youth compared to the

literature review. The majority of participants *agreed* upon roles in a number of areas noted

throughout the literature review including being an ally, providing counseling, providing

referrals, advocating for the implementation of support groups, and being an advocate for GLBT

youth.

The role of being a facilitator for GLBT support groups was not universally recognized as relevant (Table 3). Having some sort of support group for GLBT students in school has been shown to have positive results for GLBT students (Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2010; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Weiler, 2003; Walls et al., 2008). Some participants in this study questioned whether a professional social worker was the person to lead the group rather than a teacher or a student.

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

The majority of school social workers who participated in this study identify with multiple roles in working with GLBT youth including being an ally, providing counseling, providing referrals, advocating for the implementation of support groups, and being an advocate for GLBT youth. This study has implications for future social work practice. School social workers reported their active roles as advocates and service providers as critical ways in which they had a positive impact on the school environment for GLBT youth.

The present study also has implications for policy. The majority of participants in this study *agreed* that it was their role as social workers to advocate for GLBT youth (Table 2). School social workers can use this role to advocate for policy change within the school system to better meet the needs of GLBT youth. This may include advocating for non-discrimination policies within the school that specifically address sexual orientation. As noted in the literature review non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation can act as a safeguard for GLBT students (Morrison & L'Heureux, 2001; Kosciw et al., 2010). Policies relating to training and educating school faculty and staff about prevention and intervention regarding homophobic harassment and providing support for GLBT youth could be advocated for by school social workers.

**Implications for Research**

This study elicited a need for future research in a variety of areas. This study had a small sample, which makes it difficult to conduct analyses other than descriptive statistics. This study also used a nonprobability sampling method, which makes it impossible to generalize these results to school social workers outside this research sample. In order to further develop our understanding of school social workers' perspectives of their role in working with GLBT youth future research with a larger sample size and the utilization of a probability sampling method would be needed.

This study did examine school social workers' perspectives, where the majority of past literature has only focused on student perspectives. As mentioned previously this may have contributed to the discrepancy between the results in this study compared to past literature. In order to further examine the discrepancy between the perception of school social workers and students about the school environment, future research specifically using school social workers should be conducted. Also using a qualitative method in order obtain a more in depth understanding of school social workers' roles in working with GLBT youth would be beneficial in future research. Having a better understanding of school social workers' perceptions of the school environment and their roles in when working with GLBT youth will help with the implementation of prevention and intervention strategies to address the increased risks among this population.

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## Research Information and Consent

**School Social Workers' Perspectives on Working with GLBT Youth**

**Dear School Social Worker,**

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating school social workers' roles in working with GLBT youth. This study is being conducted by Jamie Schley, graduate student in the School of Social Work at St. Catherine University / University of St. Thomas supervised by Dr. Carol Kuechler, a professor at the school. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you are a school social worker currently working in a school in the Twin Cities and surrounding areas and because your email information was accessible on your school website. Please read this form and ask questions before you decide whether to participate in the study.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to examine school social workers' perspectives of their roles in working with GLBT youth through an online survey with school social workers currently working in middle and high schools. Questions will focus on areas identified in the literature such as prevention and intervention strategies to address risks for GLBT youth in the school environment and social workers' contributions in their role as allies, service providers, and advocates. Approximately 20-45 people are expected to participate in this research.

**Procedures:**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey that includes questions about your work experience with GLBT youth, including your perception of their needs and the services in place at the school to address those needs. This study will take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. There are no known risks or direct benefits for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

There will be no identifying information collected during this research study. The software used to administer the survey allows for completed online surveys to be sent to the researcher anonymously insuring that no one will be able to identify participants. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identifiable and only group data will be presented.

I will keep the research results in a password protected computer in my residence and only I will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by June 1, 2012 and will then destroy all original reports.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University, or University of St. Thomas in any way. If you decide to participate you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships, and no further data will be collected. Completion of this survey implies consent.

**Contacts and questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Jamie Schley, at (320)-424-0183 or via email at schl9109@stthomas.edu. You may also contact my research chair Carol Kuechler, Ph.D. at (651) 690-6791 or via email at cfkuechler@stkate.edu. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact John Schmitt, PhD, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739.

**Completion of Implied Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate.  By clicking to continue to the survey, you are indicating that you have read this information and your questions have been answered.  Even beginning the survey, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time and no further data will be collected.

Thank you for considering participation.


Jamie Schley




Click Here to Indicate Consent and be directed to the Survey

**School Social Workers' Perspectives on Working with GLBT Youth**

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability by clicking on the answer you agree with or typing in your answer in the space provided.

The following questions focus on demographic information

1. What is your gender?

    Female            Male            Transgender            Other: _____

2. What is your license?

    LSW            LGSW            LISW            LICSW            Other: _____

3. How would you describe your school setting?

    Rural            Urban            Suburban

4. What level of school do you work in?

high school only        middle school only        high school and middle school        Other:_____

5. What type of school do you work in?

    Public            Private            Other: _____

6. How long have you worked as a school social worker? _____

7. Have you ever received training in working with GLBT youth?

    Yes            No

The following questions focus on the school environment

|  | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Frequently |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8. In your school environment how often do you hear the expression "That's so gay," or "You're so gay" at school? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. In your school environment how often do you hear other homophobic remarks used in school (such as "faggot," "dyke," "queer," etc.)? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. Since your time working at your current school, how often have you encountered students being verbally harassed (name calling, threats, etc.) because of their sexual orientation? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. Since your time working at your current school, how often have you encountered students being physically harassed (shoved, pushed, etc.) because of their sexual orientation? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. Since your time working at your current school, how often have you encountered students being physically abused (punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

The following questions focus on your response to the school environment

13. Have you ever been in a situation to intervene when hearing homophobic remarks in school?

    Yes          No

    If so how did you handle that situation?
    _____
    _____

14. Have you ever been in a situation to intervene when observing homophobic verbal harassment?

    Yes          No

    If so how did you handle that situation?
    _____
    _____

15. Have you ever been in a position to intervene when observing homophobic physical harassment?

    Yes          No

    If so how did you handle that situation?
    _____
    _____

16. Have you ever been in a position to intervene when observing homophobic physical abuse?

    Yes          No

    If so how did you handle that situation?
    _____
    _____

17. Have you ever identified a youth with no social support?

    Yes          No

    If so how did you handle that situation?
    _____
    _____

The following questions focus on your role as a social worker in working with GLBT youth

To what extend do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

18. As a school social worker, it is my role to be an ally to GLBT students.

Strongly Disagree                                        Strongly Agree

1                2                3                4                5

In what ways do you do this?

_____
_____

19. As a school social worker, it is my role to provide counseling to GLBT students.

Strongly Disagree                                        Strongly Agree

1                2                3                4                5

In what ways do you do this?

_____
_____

20. As a school social worker, it is my role to provide referrals to GLBT students.

Strongly Disagree                                        Strongly Agree

1                2                3                4                5

In what ways do you do this?

_____
_____

21. As a school social worker, it is my role to facilitate support groups for GLBT students.

Strongly Disagree                                        Strongly Agree

1                2                3                4                5

In what ways do you do this?

_____
_____

22. As a school social worker, it is my role to advocate for the implementation of support groups for GLBT students.

Strongly Disagree                                          Strongly Agree

    1                    2                    3                    4                    5

In what ways do you do this?

_____

_____


23. As a school social worker, it is my role to advocate for GLBT students.

Strongly Disagree                                          Strongly Agree

    1                    2                    3                    4                    5

In what ways do you do this?

_____

_____


24. As a school social worker, what barriers to you identify when working with GLBT youth?

_____

_____


25. What else would you add in regards to your role in working with GLBT youth?

_____

_____