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# School Personnel Attitudes and Knowledge Towards LGBTQ Students

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School Personnel Attitudes and Knowledge Towards LGBTQ Students

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### **Abstract**

Literature highlights areas of discord for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning/Queer (LGBTQ) students in the school setting as well as teacher, administrator, and school counselor attitudes and knowledge about LGBTQ students. Overall, most LGBTQ students will experience bullying, harassment, and/or a lack of support during their time in the K-12 education system. Educators (N=53) provided their attitudes and knowledge regarding LGBTQ student issues in a high school setting. Respondents indicated that there are a variety of attitudes towards LGBTQ student issues, policies, and identities. Additionally, results demonstrate school personnel knowledge of the subject lacks, which results in unintentional harm to their LGBTQ students. This suggests that more professional development opportunities for educators are necessary to minimize negative LGBTQ student experiences.

### Literature Review

“For Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBTQ) youth, identity development typically involves awareness of one’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity that differs from what one perceives the norm” (Kosciw & Palmer, 2015, p.167). This population is often faced with high levels of homophobia, internalized homophobia, harassment, victimization, and bullying due to their sexual orientation and gender identity (Craig, Austin, & McInroy, 2014). LGBTQ youth are vulnerable to high rates of depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, homelessness, substance abuse, and criminal involvement (Craig et al., 2014). Additionally, at school, it is common to see both direct and indirect harassment, belittlement, bullying, and sometimes even violent attacks (Hansen, 2007). Researchers also note that 49% of LGBTQ students reported that they had been cyber bullied due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression (Kolbert, et al., 2015).

LGBTQ youth are more likely than their heterosexual peers to experience a range of mental and emotional health risks. They are vulnerable to high rates of depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, homelessness, substance abuse, and crime involvement. In addition, they are at risk for school and academic problems, which is heightened by the homophobia, harassment, victimization, and bullying they endure (Craig et al., 2014). Due to their minority status, adolescence becomes a challenging period of life for LGBTQ youth, especially since they are already presented with other stressful circumstances during this time. They face isolation and lack a sense of belonging at home, school, and in their community. Additionally, they are susceptible to low self-esteem and *internalized homophobia* (Craig et al., 2014). “Internalized homophobia is an identity, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral process that involves the personal adoption of negative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality” (Amola & Grimmett,

2015, p. 236). Among LGBTQ youth, low self-esteem and internalized homophobia correlate negatively with anxiety, depression, and psychological distress (Craig et al., 2014). As a result of these daily challenges, this population exhibits the increased need for advocates and allies to stand by them in a school setting. As self-identified advocates, school counselors help create an environment free from abuse, bullying, neglect, harassment, or other forms of violence (Amola & Grimmert, 2015). Therefore, the counselor should provide a support system where LGBTQ youth are treated with dignity and respect, are encouraged to reach their maximum development, and feel safe in the school environment (ASCA, 2010). Additionally, teachers, administrators and other school personnel, who regularly have direct social interactions with students, such as social workers, psychologists, and speech pathologists, should act as supporters of LGBTQ students.

### **Attitudes**

**Teachers.** According to Silveira and Goth (2016), the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been a time of high discrimination against sexual minorities in American schools, which is especially true for the students who do not conform to gender roles. According to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2016), 57% of transgender students reported that they heard negative comments from teachers or other staff about gender expression and reported being targeted by adults at school.

A study of teachers who interact with transgender students revealed that the majority of music teachers seemed supportive of transgender issues (Silveira & Goth, 2016). However, there was variability among some teachers by gender and political persuasion. Teachers who identified as male and more politically conservative tended to be less supportive. Furthermore, 90% of participants believed that it was the responsibility of the school staff to intervene when

confronted with negative comments based on gender identity or expression (Silveira et al., 2016). It is pertinent to realize there are many teachers who agree with the importance of a safe environment for all students, but fail to provide that safety solely because of a lack of training or institutional support (Silveira et al., 2016).

Kolbert et al. (2015) noted that teachers felt the least comfortable confronting a bullying situation related to sexual orientation as opposed to another special population, such as students with disabilities or students with body image issues. Teachers identified that they did not address bullying behaviors related to LGBTQ issues as a result of apprehension of job loss, fear of personal discrimination, their own judgmental thinking, and because of the potential negative reactions from parents, students, or other staff members. Additionally, teachers who identified as LGBTQ reported that they felt the school was less supportive towards LGBTQ students than did their heterosexual colleagues at the same school.

**School Counselors.** Supportive school counselors are instrumental to all students' success and safety. More specifically, counselors have a greater impact on LGBTQ students as it has been found that these students typically attend school more regularly, are more willing to create post-secondary plans, and perform better academically when they can identify with a supportive counselor (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). Researchers Kosciw et al. (2014) found that LGBTQ students reported counselors and teachers as favored adults to talk to about their sexual orientation and gender identity over other school personnel. GLSEN (2016) reported that approximately 52% of students reported that they would feel comfortable talking to a school counselor about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Conversely, although it is known that LGBTQ individuals begin to recognize their gender identity and sexual orientation in adolescence, counseling

professionals typically report having little to no LGBTQ individuals on their caseload (Luke et al., 2011), suggesting discomfort on the part of students to share with their counselors. In fact, 51.7% of American children reported being “somewhat or very comfortable talking about LGBTQ issues with a mental health staff member” (GLSEN, 2016, p. 56); thus, just under half of LGBTQ students would not seek out support from a school counselor due to a perceived lack of understanding or competence in responding to LGBTQ concerns.

**Administrators.** Most students look to administration (principals and assistant principals) as leaders of their school. Administrators “may serve not only as caring adults to whom the youth can turn, but they also set the tone of the school and determine specific policies and programs that may affect the school’s climate” (GLSEN, 2016, p. 56). In the 2016 school climate survey, only 36.8% of LGBTQ students reported viewing their administration as either very or somewhat supportive, while 28.5% expressed that they felt very or somewhat unsupported by their administration. In addition to the long-standing cultural belief that incorporating any form of LGBTQ inclusive curricula is inappropriate, participation of educators in creating supportive school environments continues to be inconsistent (Payne & Smith, 2011).

### **Level of Knowledge**

**Teachers.** According to Payne and Smith (2011), few college or graduate level preparation programs require future teachers to learn about LGBTQ issues and how to handle them in a school setting. Additionally, there are no states that require multicultural competence training to qualify for teacher certification. According to their research, teachers enter the classroom with very little knowledge about how to handle LGBTQ issues. This lack of knowledge can be detrimental to student success if not recognized, since 58% of American LGBTQ students reported that they would be somewhat or very comfortable talking with a

teacher (GLSEN, 2016).

**School Counselors.** A school counselor's job description calls for addressing "personal/social, career, and academic needs of all students, as well as to affect the overall school climate" (Luke, Goodrich, & Scarborough, 2011, p. 80). Due to LGBTQ students remaining underserved and at a high risk in schools, counselors become instrumental in the safety of LGBTQ students. According to researchers (Green, Murphy, Blumer, & Palmanteer, 2009 as cited in Luke et al., 2011), there was a lack of focus on LGBTQ clients in counselor training; professional counselors reported being inadequately trained in graduate school and feeling ill-equipped to work with LGBTQ clients/students. Only 65% of graduate students reported learning about LGBTQ issues in class and 46% reported having addressed it in supervision. With 35% and 54% stating they are not learning or addressing LGBTQ issues in graduate work, it may become problematic for practitioners when faced with an LGBTQ student or client, especially because they will lack crucial knowledge, awareness, and skills to intervene effectively (Green et al., 2009). A significant lack of LGBTQ awareness and knowledge was found among school psychology, school counseling, and teacher education graduate students in 2008 (Citation as cited in Luke et al., 2011). A study four years later revealed that school staff still recognized their lack of training in the "knowledge and skills necessary to address personal and systemic issues and how is affected their ability to effectively intervene with LGBT students" (Luke et al., 2011, p. 83). Lack of knowledge, skills, and awareness could lead to unintentional harm and/or ethical and legal breaches (Luke et al., 2011).

**Administrators.** Although there is little research on administrators' level of knowledge about LGBTQ issues, 65.3 % of American LGBTQ students reported that they had concerns about how administrators would react if they reported an LGBTQ related bullying or harassment



incident. Students stated that they felt embarrassed, ashamed, or worried the staff member would blame or discipline them for reporting an incident. Additionally, 29.3% of students reported that they thought certain adults were homophobic or transphobic, which clouded their potential relationship with that adult (GLSEN, 2016). The most troubling statistic is that 10.3% of students reported that adults at school were engaging in harassment behaviors towards the students. Not only is this behavior unacceptable according to school policy, but it also sends a message that bullying and/or harassment is a norm for the school setting (GLSEN, 2016). Harassment of students by school personnel also serves as a reminder that safer school efforts must address all members of the school community, and not just the student body (GLSEN, 2016, p. 30). Perhaps these statistics suggest that administrators are lacking the knowledge to appropriately react and respond to certain LGBTQ student issues. By participating in education related to LGBTQ issues, perhaps adults would handle these situations differently and more appropriately.

Based on the aforementioned statistics regarding general teacher, school counselor, and administrator knowledge about LGBTQ issues, it is pertinent to explore options for all school personnel to engage in to better understand the complexities of LGBTQ issues, policies, student experiences, and how to better support and LGBTQ inclusive environment.

### **Continued Education**

During the past decade, there have been multiple organizations pushing for LGBTQ inclusive curriculum (e.g., Safe Space Ally Programs, Reduction of Stigma Programs, Safe Zone programming), all of which aim to educate students, faculty, and staff about LGBTQ issues in schools. By educating school personnel, it is more likely they are supportive, perceptive, and understanding of their LGBTQ students' concerns (GLSEN, 2016). The goal of *Safe Space Ally Programs* was to organize and administer a program to staff of schools and colleges about

LGBTQ issues (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008). Creators proposed that an “advisory board consisting of staff, faculty members, and students [may] have the responsibility of coordination, recruitment, and training” (p. 123) and determine how to properly organize safe space programming for the school, college, or university. The *Safe Space Ally Program* was designed to include introductions, ground rules, campus and local resources, terminology, LGBTQ and ally panel discussion, LGBT development theory and ally/majority developmental theory, role plays and case exercises, video scenarios, and conclude with signing a contract, values statement, and receive a Safe Zone sticker (Poynter & Tubbs, 2008).

There are also organizations, such as the LGBTQ Academy at the Out Alliance in Rochester, New York that aim to foster LGBTQ inclusive education— a program very similar to *Safe Space Ally Program*. “The goal of the LGBTQ Academy at the Out Alliance is to encourage all of our social systems to become inclusive and welcoming to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (LGBTQ) and allied individuals. Our 43 years of experience offering LGBTQ education and our quality trainings have us presenting to a wide variety of clients all around the country. Our sessions are custom designed and continually updated to remain relevant” (Out Alliance, 2017). The LGBTQ Academy at the Out Alliance offers trainings that include, but are not limited to, Safe Zone, Safe Schools, Transgender Basics, and LGBTQ 101. One hundred percent of participants that trained with the Out Alliance state that the trainings were educational, beneficial, engaging, and interactive (Out Alliance, 2017).

Another approach was an activist-driven programming delivered outside of school, building on an educator-to-educator program inside the school (Payne & Smith, 2011); the intent was to create opportunities to share knowledge and tools with more educators who may be hesitant to learn about the topic. The Reduction of Stigma in Schools (RSIS) was born through

Payne and Smith's ideas of a more engaged and connected school community. This program was based on five components— (1) educator-to-educator model, (2) professional development in house so that educators who are resistant have a better chance of engaging in a training, (3) connections between examples from the school and the training will be made, (4) program is research-based, and (5) adequate time for the training. The trainings were designed to be tailored to the experiences of each individual school and to be evaluated in order to improve the training each time.

### **Literature Review Conclusion**

Based on the several programs proposed to foster LGBTQ inclusive education for educators, it is promising that as time progresses, more education, knowledge, and positive attitudes will arise surrounding LGTBQ issues in schools. These programs are not only to help educators understand the content of LGBTQ identities, but to assist them in finding ways to support LGBTQ students in schools through empathy, LGBTQ inclusive curriculum, providing Safe Zones, and realizing that LGBTQ issues should be a part of professional development opportunities.

Due to research that indicated high levels of harassment led to lower levels of educational attainment, lower income, and other outcomes such as homelessness or suicide (Silveira & Goth, 2016), it is critical that teachers and other school staff be sensitive and knowledgeable about LGBTQ students needs and experiences.

It seems as though teacher attitudes towards LGBTQ students vary. As noted above, some teachers demonstrate strong support, which is noticed by students, and in other cases there have been teachers that think they are supportive but the way LGBTQ students perceive them differs. In order to examine the differences in attitudes across all positions in a school, it is

important to highlight the attitudes of school counselors and administrators, as well. Encouraging the school environment to be more inclusive will be most reliant on the administrators implementing changes.

### **Research Questions**

This research project aims to answer the following questions: What are the attitudes and amount of knowledge of school personnel towards LGBTQ student issues? Based on the results, would it be beneficial for the participants to engage in further professional development regarding LGBTQ students?

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

All high school staff at a suburban high school in western New York were invited to participate in the study. The respondents represented a convenience sample of those from the total population of high school educators. A total of 53 participants completed the survey. Sixty-six percent (n = 35) identified as female, 26.4% (n = 14) identified as male, and 7.5% (n = 4) did not identify gender. Ninety point six percent (n = 48) identified as white, 1.9% (n = 1) as Asian American, and 7.5% (n = 4) did not identify race. Eighty-four point nine percent (n = 45) identified as straight, 1.9% (n = 1) identified as gay, 1.9% (n = 1) identified as lesbian, 1.9% (n = 1) as bisexual, and 9.4% (n = 5) did not identify sexual orientation.

#### **Instrument**

The instrument was comprised of 20 multiple-choice questions and five open-ended demographic information questions; ten questions were about the participants' attitudes and ten questions about their level of knowledge. Each multiple-choice question had the options of *true*, *false*, or *unsure* as responses. The ten attitude items were adapted from Hebl (2000). The

instrument was developed as an electronic survey through Google Forms. All participants received a link to the survey via their staff email.

### **Procedure**

All staff at the school were invited to participate in a survey; first through verbal communication by the researcher, and then via a link attached to a staff email. The instrument required approximately 10 minutes to complete. A follow-up email was sent out after 2 weeks reminding participants to complete the survey. Another reminder was sent 2 weeks after the first reminder alerting participants that there was one week left to complete the survey. In total, the participants had 5 weeks to complete the survey. The survey responses were automatically recorded in the secure Google Forms database.

### **Results**

The data was analyzed descriptively. The results are reported in two tables; Table 1 (see Appendix A) consists of the responses to the ‘attitude’ questions and Table 2 (see Appendix B) consists of the ‘knowledge’ questions. The following responses were used for the analysis: *true*, *false*, and *unsure*. The attitudes that the greatest number of participants identified as *true* were item 11: “I am comfortable confronting a student who harasses another student because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression” (92%), followed by item 13: “Openly LGBTQ staff members are important role models for our students” (87%). The questions that greatest number of participants identified as *false* were item 3: “LGBTQ students never get harassed or bullied at school” (91%) followed by item 7: “My personal values make me uncomfortable with the school policy that prohibits any form of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression” (87%). The question that the greatest number of participants identified as *unsure* was item 9: “Name-calling or harassment on

the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression has been an issue at this school” (57%). In the second table, the knowledge question that the greatest number of participants identified as *true* was item 16: “There is a Gay Straight Alliance club at Arcadia High School” (92%) followed by item 10: “An ally is someone who is not a member of the LGBTQ community, but advocates for their rights” (75%). The questions that greatest number of participants identified as *false* were item 4: “Biological sex and gender identity are the same thing” (94%) followed by item 6: “Sexual orientation and gender identity are the same thing” (89%). The question that the greatest number of participants identified as *unsure* was item 20: “LGBTQ students report feeling more comfortable talking to an adult with a SAFE ZONE sticker or pin displayed” (75%).

### **Discussion**

High school educators prepare young individuals to be contributing members of society. Much of the work done by high school educators determines whether students will complete high school, engage in post-secondary plans, and be well-rounded individuals. The initial question that guided this research sought to understand the attitudes and knowledge of school personnel towards LGTBQ students. If there is a perceived negative attitude and/or lack of knowledge about LGBTQ issues, educators are doing the LGBTQ student population a disservice. This study provided an opportunity for high school educators to report on their attitudes and knowledge about LGBTQ student issues. The findings reflect much of which was found in the literature— high levels of perceived bullying/harassment towards LGBTQ students (GLSEN, 2016; Kolbert et al., 2015), lack of educational training/preparedness on LGBTQ student issues (Payne & Smith, 2011; Green et al., 2009), and high level of need for professional development on the topic (Poytner & Tubbs, 2008; Payne & Smith, 2011)

### **Attitudes**

The survey found that 61.8% of educators believe the school as a whole provides a safe environment for LGBTQ students. Conversely, 90.9% of staff answered ‘true’ for the question, “LGBTQ students never get harassed or bullied at school.” While it seems like a majority of responders believe the school provides a safe environment, they also admit that LGBTQ students are victims of bullying/harassment. Based on the results, there is a clear disparity between the responders’ perception of a safe environment and the actual needs of the LGBTQ population. Although a safe school environment cannot prevent outright any bullying or harassment, the overwhelming majority affirming the existence of bullying suggests it is a regular and acknowledged aspect of school life. Relating back to Kolbert et al. (2015), faculty might easily accept that challenges exist for the LGBTQ population, but not have the appropriate knowledge on how to best approach them. Similarly, they might believe the school is already doing its best to create the safest environment possible.

### **Knowledge**

The survey found that majority of staff chose the correct answer to the knowledge based questions. These questions aimed to gauge the level of knowledge educators had about factual information within the LGBTQ identities. For example, item 1 stated “Gender identity and gender expression are the same thing,” which is a false statement according to the Out Alliance (2017). Seventy-two percent of staff chose the correct *false* response indicating that they understand that gender identity and gender expression are separate entities. While not a perfect score, having faculty knowledgeable about the characteristics of the LGBTQ identity is helpful for building a safer environment.

There was uncertainty, however, in the response for the last question— item 20, which

stated “LGBTQ students report feeling more comfortable talking to an adult with a SAZFE ZONE sticker or pin displayed.” Twenty-five percent of participants were uncertain if this statistic is true, but according to the Out Alliance (2017), individuals have reported feeling more comfort with those who outwardly denote their support for LGBTQ individuals. Outward support can be a simple way to help foster a safer environment this underserved population, yet it is unclear whether the faculty is unaware of its effectiveness, or resistant due to other, more personal reasons. Again, it is beneficial for faculty to have an understanding of the LGBTQ populations, but the next crucial step is knowing how to improve the safety of the school environment.

### **Limitations**

It should be noted that there are three noticeable limitations to this study: (1) value of the questions, (2) time constraint, and (3) sample size. The response options for the questions were limited; because participants were only given three responses as an option, there left little room for scaled responses, which could have lead to greater meaning of the responses. A Likert scale format might have been a better option. The survey was only open for five weeks. In future research, more time for participants to complete the survey may be beneficial in order to ensure all participants have ample time to complete it. Lastly, it is important to note that the participants were chosen by a convenience sample and is not representative of all high school personnel populations. In a different district, high school personnel’s responses could vary based on the experiences, attitudes, and knowledge they have gained throughout their career. To develop a greater understanding of regional high school personnel, a county-wide survey might be a productive next step.

### **Implications for Counselors**



Every School Counselor is ethically responsible to support 100% of students in their academic, career, and social/emotional development (ASCA, 2016) It is pertinent that counselors insert themselves and advocate for students when they are being harassed/bullied based on gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or gender expression. Counselors should also engage in professional development opportunities to better understand the complexities of the LGBTQ student body, as the topic is rapidly changing. Additionally, it is important that counselors advocate for and encourage all school personnel to seek appropriate professional development.

### **Conclusion**

This study confirms the existing discord between school faculty and LGBTQ students due to wide-ranging attitudes and levels of knowledge towards the marginalized population. The surveyed personnel were found to have generally positive attitudes toward LGBTQ students and were knowledgeable about basic characteristics of the LGBTQ students. There was, however, some discrepancy between the social-emotional challenges this group currently faces and the faculty's perception of an adequately safe environment. In order for high school educators to serve 100% of their students, professional development opportunities are crucial for strengthening their knowledge on how to best assist LGBTQ students. Further research should focus on expanding the sample to account for faculty with a greater variety of personal experiences.

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## Appendix A

Table 1: School Personnel Attitudes about LGBTQ Students

Item	Attitude	TRUE		FALSE		UNSURE	
		%	n	%	n	%	n
1	I believe our school as a whole provides a safe environment for LGBTQ students	64%	34	2%	1	34%	18
3	LGBTQ students never get harassed or bullied at school	2%	1	91%	48	8%	4
5	LGBTQ issues should be integrated into the school curriculum	68%	36	8%	4	25%	13
7	My personal values make me uncomfortable with the school policy that prohibits any form of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression	9%	5	87%	46	4%	2
9	Name-calling or harassment on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression has been an issue at this school	28%	15	15%	8	57%	30
11	I am comfortable confronting a student who harasses another student because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression	92%	49	4%	2	4%	2
13	Openly LGBTQ staff members are important role models for our students	87%	46	2%	1	11%	6

	I have been personally consulted by a student about their						
15	sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression and felt comfortable addressing the issue	42%	22	8%	4	51%	27
17	All students should be able to use the bathroom in which they identify with	58%	31	13%	7	28%	15
19	Transgender students should use a private bathroom	8%	4	47%	25	45%	24

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*Note:* The instrument was adapted from Hebl, J. L. (2000)

## Appendix B

Table 2: School Personnel Knowledge about LGBTQ Students

Item	Knowledge	TRUE		FALSE		Unsure	
		%	n	%	n	%	n
2	Gender identity and gender expression are the same thing	4%	2	72%	38	25%	13
4	Biological sex and gender identity are the same thing	0%	0	94%	50	6%	3
6	Sexual orientation and gender identity are the same thing	0%	0	89%	47	11%	6
8	The Q in LGBTQ can mean both Questioning and Queer	55%	29	11%	6	34%	18
10	An ally is someone who is not a member of the LGBTQ community, but advocates for their rights.	75%	40	0%	0	25%	13
12	I have been SAFE ZONE certified by an accredited training	9%	5	87%	46	4%	2
14	I have a SAFE ZONE sticker on my door or somewhere in my office/classroom	25%	13	66%	35	9%	5
16	There is a Gay Straight Alliance club at Arcadia High School	92%	49	0%	0	8%	4
18	The Gay Straight Alliance club advisors should always identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning	8%	4	74%	39	19%	10
20	LGBTQ students report feeling more comfortable talking to an adult with a SAFE ZONE sticker or pin displayed	23%	12	2%	1	75%	40