Elementary School Leaders' Perspectives on LGBTQ-Inclusive Literacy Instruction K-6: A Quantitative Study

Andrew D. Deacon
School of Education

UNIVERSITY OF BRIDGEPORT

Abstract

Students in American schools who are or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) represent an historically disenfranchised group. They report experiencing bullying and harassment due to their sexual orientation or gender expression or both. Also, LGBTQ students report not having access to curriculum that is inclusive of LGBTQ representations. Elementary students deserve to read texts in which they see themselves in the books they read (mirrors) and have a glimpse into the lives of people that are unlike them (windows). Elementary school administrators, as the instructional leaders of their buildings, are in a critical position to ensure students have access to literacy instruction that is inclusive of individuals who are LGBTQ. This quantitative study sought to determine if a correlation existed between elementary school administrators' beliefs and levels of comfort in leading LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction, their perceptions of the barriers that impede leadership in this area, their actions and behaviors that support change for this group, and their sense of urgency in leading LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction at the elementary level. Furthermore, the study sought to reveal if there were statistically significant differences between groups based on demographic variables of school leaders and characteristics of their schools and administrators' beliefs and levels of comfort, perceived barriers, actions and behaviors, and sense of urgency in leading LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction at the elementary level.

Keywords: Students who are LGBTQ, educational leadership, leadership perspectives, elementary education, literacy instruction, LGBTQ-inclusivity

Introduction

A means in which schools can establish a foundation of respect and understanding of individuals who are LGBTQ at the elementary level is to provide young students with curriculum and instruction that is inclusive of sexual and gender diversity. McGarry (2013) explained that an inclusive curriculum makes students who are LGBTQ feel more connected to their schools. Inclusive curriculum, including representations of LGBTQ people, history, and events informs all students about LGBTQ issues and has the potential to reduce prejudice and intolerance, resulting in a more positive school experience for students who are LGBTQ (McGarry, 2013). In Connecticut, only twenty-six percent of secondary school students who identify as LGBTQ reported being taught positive representations of LGBTQ people, history, or events, better known as "inclusive curriculum" (GLSEN, 2021). Kosciw, Gretyak, Zongrone, Clark, and Truong (2018) remarked:

> Many experts in multicultural education believe that a curriculum that is inclusive of diverse groups – including culture, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation – instills a belief in the intrinsic worth of all individuals and in the value of a diverse society. Including LGBTQ-related issues in the curriculum in a positive manner may make LGBTQ students feel like more valued members of the school community, and it may also promote more positive feelings about LGBTQ issues and persons among their peers, thereby resulting in a more positive school climate. (p. 68)

Examples of an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum includes students being taught positive representations of LGBTQ people, history, or events, as well as exposure to LGBTQ individuals in literary and informational texts.

Bishop (1990) said students deserve mirrors and windows into their lives through exposure to relevant, diverse literature. "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (Bishop, 1990, p. 557). LGBTQ students should see individuals like them reflected in the stories that they read and listen to, and students who do not identify as LGBTQ should have a glimpse into the lives of people unlike them. Hanlon (2009) said, "When students are only reading books with moms and dads, or princes and princesses, they are shown that heterosexuality is the norm. Perhaps if students were exposed to books with gay characters or taught about significant historical figures who were LGBTQ, the idea of two people of the same gender loving each other would seem less abnormal" (p. 43).

The purpose of this quantitative study was twofold. First, it sought to determine if there was a correlation between Connecticut elementary school leaders' perceived barriers, beliefs and levels of comfort, and actions and behaviors in the implementation of elementary literacy instruction that is inclusive of LGBTQ topics, issues, and literature – in particular, diverse families and gender expression. The researcher investigated if leaders' positive or negative beliefs and levels of comfort were indicative of their level of support (measured by their actions and behaviors) of LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction, and the investigator desired to determine if the number of perceived barriers correlated to administrators' supportive actions. Second, the researcher sought to uncover if a statistically significant difference existed between various groups based on attributes of leaders and their schools and their perceived barriers, beliefs and levels of comfort, actions and behaviors, and sense of urgency for the implementation and supervision of LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction. Utilizing a survey research design, the researcher collected and analyzed quantitative data from Connecticut elementary school leaders to draw conclusions that answered the research questions. As a result of the data analysis, the researcher sought to determine if there were certain variables of educational leaders and their schools that were predictive of more supportive beliefs and levels of comfort and actions and behaviors as well as less perceived barriers.

Methodology

Research Questions

1. Is there a correlation between elementary school leaders' beliefs and levels of comfort toward LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction and their actions and behaviors?
2. Is there a correlation between elementary school leaders' perceived barriers to leading LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction and their actions and behaviors?
3. Is there a significant difference between reported demographic variables of a leader (gender, age, race/ethnicity, years as administrator, sexual orientation, leadership preparation program, religious affiliation, level of training, and personal knowledge) and their beliefs and levels of comfort, perceived barriers, actions and behaviors, and sense of urgency toward leading LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction?
4. Is there a significant difference between reported demographic variables of the school (school community, political affiliation of city/town, number of students in the school, anti-harassment and bullying policy, name-calling on the basis of sexual orientation or gender, comfort level of students who are LGBTQ, presence or absence of LGBTQ-themed books in school's library/media center, and presence or absence of district LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum) in which an elementary administrator leads and their beliefs and levels of comfort, perceived barriers, actions and behaviors, and sense of urgency toward leading LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction?

Study Participants

Population Size: 578   Sample Size: 80   Response Rate: 13.8%
Gender: 68.8% female, 28.7% male, 2.5% undisclosed
Sexuality: 1.3% bisexual, 93.8% heterosexual/straight, 1.3% homosexual/gay/lesbian, 3.8% undisclosed
Age: 19.5% 25 – 44 years of age, 50.6% 45 – 54 years of age, 29.9% 55 years of age or older
Race or Ethnicity: 6.3% Black or African American, 5.0% Hispanic or Latino, 81.3% White, 7.5% undisclosed
Years of Experience as Administrator: 63.6% 0 – 10 years, 26.0% 11 – 20 years, 10.4% 21 years or more
Religious Affiliation: 75.0% Christian, 17.5% unaffiliated, 1.3% spiritual, 6.3% undisclosed
Level of Training & Professional Development: 1.3% very high, 10.0% high, 48.8% low, 40.0% very low
Level of Knowledge & Skill: 10.0% very high, 31.3% high, 52.5% low, 6.3% very low
Community Setting: 17.5% rural district, 47.5% suburban district, 35.0% urban district
Political Orientation of City/Town: 22.5% conservative, 48.8% moderate, 28.7% liberal

Data Collection

Electronic Survey consisting of 56 items divided across 5 sections
Section 1: Demographic variables of the school leader – 10 items (e.g., gender, age, years of experience as admin)
Section 2: Demographic variables of the leader's school – 13 items (e.g., community setting, size of school)
Section 3: Actions and behaviors – 10 items, 6-point Likert scale from "never" to "always"
Section 4: Beliefs and levels of comfort – 12 items, 6-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"
Section 5: Perceived barriers – 11 items, "yes" or "no"

Data Analysis

A significance level, or *p*-value, of less than 0.05 was utilized.

Research Questions 1 & 2:
Pearson's *r*

Research Questions 3 & 4:
T-tests or Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), followed by Post hoc test: Tukey and Fisher's LSD
Crosstabulation
Chi-square Tests of Independence

Implications & Recommendations

Implications

- Increased training and professional development in the area of LGBTQ issues and topics for elementary school leaders.
- Inclusion of LGBTQ topics and issues in school leadership preparation programs.
- Adoption of district-level inclusive policies with language specific to sexual and gender minorities.
- Purchase of LGBTQ-themed literature for schools' library/media centers.
- Engagement in curriculum revision and development process to ensure elementary curriculum is LGBTQ-inclusive.
- Legislation in Connecticut that mandates local boards of education to integrate LGBTQ topics and issues in curricula.

Recommendations

- Qualitative research, in the forms of semi-structured interviews and observations, to formulate a more comprehensive narrative of this phenomenon, including a deeper understanding of elementary school leaders' beliefs and levels of comfort, perceived barriers, and actions and behaviors in leading LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: *CT Elementary Administrators' Total Scores on Measured Constructs*

	Possible score range	N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mode	Standard deviation
Total Beliefs and Levels of Comfort Score	12 – 72	76	63.93	27	72	65	65	8.034
Total Perceived Barriers Score	0 – 11	76	6.16	1	11	6	n/a	2.795
Total Actions and Behaviors Score	10 – 60	77	40.57	11	57	42	45	8.764

Table 2: *Leaders' Level of Agreement with "There is a Sense of Urgency in Leading LGBTQ-Inclusive Instruction"*

Strongly agree		Agree		Somewhat agree		Somewhat disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
15	19.7	35	46.1	17	22.4	1	1.3	7	9.2	1	1.3

Research Question 1

Connecticut elementary administrators' beliefs and level of comfort and their actions and behaviors were found to be strongly positively correlated at a significant level, *r*(74) = .686, *p* < .001. Increases in leaders' beliefs and levels of comfort were correlated with increases in administrator's action and behaviors that are supportive of LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction. Conversely, decreases in leaders' beliefs and levels of comfort were correlated with decreases in administrator's action and behaviors that are supportive of LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction at the elementary level.

Research Question 2

Connecticut elementary leaders' perceived barriers did not appear to be associated with their actions and behaviors. There was a modest, negative correlation between the two variables, *r*(74) = -.168; however, the relationship was not significant (*p* = .147).

Research Question 3

Table 3: *Summary of Significance by School Leader Variables*

School Leader Variable	Beliefs and Levels of Comfort	Perceived Barriers	Actions and Behaviors	Urgency
Gender	No significance	No significance	No significance	No significance
Age	No significance	No significance	No significance	No significance
Race or ethnicity	No significance	No significance	No significance	No significance
Years of experience	No significance	No significance	No significance	No significance
Preparation program	No significance	No significance	No significance	No significance
Religious affiliation	No significance	No significance	No significance	No significance
Training and PD	Significance	Significance	Significance	No significance
Knowledge and skill	Significance	No significance	No significance	No significance

Research Question 4

Table 4: *Summary of Significance by School Variables*

School Variable	Beliefs and Levels of Comfort	Perceived Barriers	Actions and Behaviors	Urgency
Community setting	No significance	No significance	No significance	No significance
Political orientation	No significance	No significance	No significance	No significance
Number of students	No significance	No significance	No significance	Significance
Anti-bullying policy	Significance	No significance	Significance	No significance
Name-calling LGBQ	No significance	No significance	No significance	No significance
Name-calling gender	No significance	No significance	No significance	No significance
Comfort LGBQ	No significance	No significance	No significance	No significance
Comfort gender	No significance	No significance	No significance	No significance
Texts in library	Significance	No significance	Significance	No significance
Inclusive curriculum	No significance	No significance	Significance	No significance

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