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We Set the Climate: Implications for Rural School Counselors in Creating LGBTQIA-affirming Schools

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Abstract

This phenomenological qualitative study examined a Southern regional sample (N=9) of rural school counselors' perspectives of the procedures and processes that contributed to their ability to create safe zones in an effort to make their schools more LGBTQIA-affirming. The researchers identified five key themes and twelve subthemes. The key themes were: (a) organized support system, (b) collaborations with school leadership, (c) addressing challenges, (d) utilization of professional development resources, and (e) adherence to professional ethics.

It is well documented that students who identify as LGBTQIA face challenges in K-12 schools (Birkett et al., 2009; Dragowski et al., 2016). Student bullying contributes to lower academic outcomes and lower self-esteem (Kosciw et al., 2013). Research has shown higher rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts, substance abuse, and sexual risk behaviors (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Toomey et al., 2010). For transgender youth, nearly half considered suicide and a quarter of have attempted to do so (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). Even with the increasing societal acceptance of LGBTQIA individuals, social exclusion and isolation are continual issues for students in K-12 schools (Ueno, 2005).

Bishop and McClellan (2016) in their study of rural school principals argue that school leaders must develop their advocacy beyond what might be invisible to them and must resist personal complacency. School counselors are leaders in their

schools in the realm of the social and emotional learning and development of all students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2016). While the three areas school counselors are charged to work in: academic, career, and social/emotional, cover a wide range of activities, it can be argued that the social/emotional area has a large effect on the academic and career success (Kosciw et al., 2013). According to ASCA (2016) school counselors must provide support to LGBTQIA students, must affirm all students regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression,

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as well as, must work to create safe and affirming schools. This research study explores the experiences of rural school counselors in creating safe zones for LGBTQIA students in an attempt to make their schools more LGBTQIA-affirming.

LGBTQIA Student Experience

Students who identify as LGBTQIA can have many difficulties associated with the school experience (ACSA, 2016; Birkett et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2015). According to the 2017 Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) report on school climate by the Human Rights Campaign, 91.8% of students who identify as LGBTQIA reported hearing negative remarks that caused distress, 87.3% experienced harassment or assault, and 62.2% reported discriminatory practices within their schools. The responses showed that LGBTQIA students experienced high levels of victimization because of their sexual orientation and this victimization impacted academic success and psychological well-being. The responses of the LGBTQIA students who reported being victims of discrimination, harassment, and assault showed those students to have more absences, lower GPAs, lower self-esteem, higher levels of depression, and a higher likelihood of dropping out of school.

In addition, students who report high victimization are more likely to skip school due to safety concerns, take sexual risks, and experiment with street drugs (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002). These findings on the challenges of school climate for LGBTQIA youth align with previous research

(Dragowski et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2013). The impact of discrimination takes a toll on marginalized students, and unfortunately, feelings of harassment and discrimination increase in rural communities (GLSEN, 2017).

Challenges of Rural Schools

According to the GLSEN 2017 study, LGBTQIA students in small towns and rural communities were more likely to experience anti-LGBTQIA victimization and discriminatory practices, and they were least likely to have access to LGBTQIA supports. Such experiences condition LGBTQIA youth to be less open regarding their orientation. Kosciw et al. (2015) observed openness about sexual orientation in schools and found that being open about one's sexual orientation was different for students' depending on school and community context. The authors found that rural students were more likely to experience higher levels of victimization than urban schools, and rural school students showed higher levels of depression and negative academic outcomes. These findings also showed a greater relationship between victimization and "outness" of rural students, and the authors suggest a safe zone to support and affirm the needs of the LGBTQIA student. However, the ways in which these needs are met may need to look different in a rural community.

Studies have supported that LGBTQIA students in affirming rural schools report higher perceived levels of safety (Kosciw et al., 2015; DePedro et al., 2018). In DePedro et al. (2018), the

researchers found that LGTBQIA support, peer intervention, and teacher intervention were associated with higher levels of safety. The study showed teacher and peer support to be a significant predictor of feelings of safety in school for the LGTBQIA youth and supported past research that an affirming and supportive climate with knowledgeable adults makes a difference. The authors suggest that school staff who are knowledgeable about the needs of LGTBQIA youth may be more likely to create and implement school and classroom procedures that aid in the perception of safety. School counselors are in a position to provide support and safe, affirming places (Robertson, 2015).

ASCA Professional Standards

According to ASCA (2016), school counselors recognize the difficulties associated with the school experience for marginalized students and should work towards the promotion of equal opportunity and respect for all students identifying as LGTBQIA. In the revised position statement for LGTBQIA Youth, ASCA suggests that the school counselor's role is to work with all students through the stages of identity development with affirmations and support that promote academic success and social and emotional development. In this role, school counselors individually counsel students with acceptance and non-judgment. In addition, school counselors should serve as advocates for equitable opportunities, accessibility to facilities and personal presentation, and promoting knowledge and understanding of sensitivities associated with the student and

family. ASCA's 2012 position also states that school counselors can promote a climate safe from threats and bullying behaviors, model inclusive language, and create a safe space for students and allies of the LGTBQIA community. School counselors can also encourage staff training to foster a safe climate of inclusion and acceptance. However, Robertson (2015) states that training for LGTBQIA issues in rural communities may be limited and non-accessible at local levels. It suggested that school counselors seek opportunities for training at state and national level conferences and learn ways to create safe zones within their schools.

Safe Space Creation in Schools

A fundamental belief for all schools is that schools should be safe- i.e. children and adolescents need to feel and be safe at school in order to learn. Educators and activists in the late 1980s and early 1990s began efforts to improve schools for gay and lesbian (now termed LGTBQIA) youth. These advocates pointed out that gay and lesbian students were consistently verbally and physically harassed on a daily basis at school which led them to not feel safe and therefore the youth were suffering a multitude of academic and health (including mental health) conditions due to this lack of safety (Demissie et al., 2018; Sadowski, 2017).

Henceforth, the idea of building safe spaces for LGTBQIA youth has emerged in three categories. The first is that most schools have universally adopted policies that prohibit bullying and harassment in

schools which has then been linked to positive student outcomes, such as less bullying and fewer suicide attempts (Day et al., 2019; Demissie et al., 2018). But further practices have emerged to support LGBTQIA youth, including Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) and safe spaces, both of which are associated with a further reduced risk of suicide, alcohol and other drug use, prescription drug misuse, and poor academic performance (Day et al., 2019; Fetner et al., 2012).

Gay Straight Alliances were introduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a form of social support for LGBTQIA high school students (Fetner et al., 2012). These alliances are generally student-led social clubs similar to other high-school social groups, such as drama clubs, math clubs, or yearbook clubs. One of the main purposes of GSAs is to provide support to LGBTQIA students in difficult personal circumstances or in hostile school environments, and to advocate for students (Day et al., 2019; Savage & Schanding, 2013). There is overwhelming evidence that GSAs make a tremendous difference in the school lives of LGBTQIA students. In 2013 GLSEN put out a survey where they found that students who attend schools with GSAs are less likely to feel unsafe for reasons associated with their sexual orientation, are less likely to hear homophobic language regularly at school, report considerably higher levels of peer acceptance, and generally feel more connected to their school communities (Sadowski, 2017).

Identifying safe spaces is the third category of support for LGBTQIA students.

These safe spaces are spaces (i.e., the counselor's office, a teacher's classroom or some other designated space) where LGBTQIA youth are able to receive support from administrators, teachers and other school staff. The designation of safe spaces or zones began to appear in the early 1990's and is often displayed by a sticker on a classroom or office door of an individual teacher, counselor, administrator or staff member (Sadowski, 2017). The use of stickers to designate safe spaces allows LGBTQIA students to locate a space that is LGBTQIA- friendly. In a study by Demissie et al. (2018), between 2008 to 2014, safe spaces increased in the majority of states (72.2%) in schools across the United States. According to Sadowski (2017), multiple research studies, including GLSEN's biennial National School Climate Survey, showed that a campaign on safe spaces and anti-bullying spearheaded by GLSEN between 2010 and 2013 positively impacted LGBTQIA students' perceptions regarding the safety of their schools and the belief that there were teachers who could be trusted.

Purpose of the Present Study

Being able to identify the procedures and processes that contribute to successfully building a LGBTQIA-affirming school is critical for school counselors to fulfill their professional responsibility to support all students. School counselors and other school leaders can use the information to create and/or revamp existing student services and programs to better support students who are at-risk of academic, social, or emotional issues which may have a negative effect on

student achievement. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify Southern, rural licensed school counselors' perceptions of procedures and processes that contributed to their ability to create a LGBTQIA-affirming school climate. The following research question was addressed: What are the experiences of school counselors who have created safe zones in their schools to better support the LGBTQIA student population?

Method

Framework

A phenomenology framework was selected for this research study due to the need to describe individuals' experiences as it relates to building safe zones in their schools for LGBTQIA students. Phenomenology is the method which seeks to describe meaning of the lived experience (phenomenon) surrounding those who are involved in the phenomena (Miller & Salkind, 2002; Patton, 2015). The study used a multiple case study design which provided us with a systematic way of collecting data and analyzing the information (Yin, 2013). This study also investigated the different supports and challenges the school counselors encountered within their schools and among their colleagues. The authors sought to understand how the school counselors made meaning of their experiences as they took on the role of LGBTQIA student advocate in their schools.

Researcher Positionality

The lens of the researchers and the lenses of the participants interacted together to create the understanding of the participants' experiences. The first author is a faculty member in a counselor educator program at a regional mid-South public university. The second author is a faculty member in a leadership studies program at a regional mid-South public university. The third author is a faculty member in a counselor educator program at a large mid-South public university and a former school counselor. All authors identify as straight, cisgender, European-American women. The mean age of the research team is 45 years old. The first author conducted and transcribed the interviews. To include independent and consensus coding the first and second authors shared in the responsibility of data analysis.

Trustworthiness Procedure

Following best practices of qualitative research (Patton, 2015), several techniques were engaged in to ensure trustworthiness. Expert external reviewers in counselor education and qualitative research methods were involved in reviewing the interview protocol questionnaire to ensure the validity of the interview questions before participants were contacted. After the interviews were completed member checking of the data was completed to ensure the transcripts adequately represented the participants' perceptions of their lived experiences. The participants believed the transcripts accurately reflected their statements and ideas. The recruitment of

participants ceased once saturation had been completed. The researchers found saturation to be completed when the data received from the interviews became repetitious.

Participants

The following were the criteria for participants to be included in the study: (a) must be a licensed school counselor, (b) with at least one year of school counseling experience, and (c) school counseling experience must be in the middle, junior high, or high school level. The study participant demographic information is outlined in Table 1. All the participants in the study (N=9) reported working in rural schools in a mid-South state. The majority (n=8) of the participants identified as females and the minority (n=1) identified as male. All of the participants (n=9) reported being White or Caucasian for their racial/ethnic group.

The age range of the participants was from 26 to 55 years old (m=44). The grade levels of the schools where the participants worked included: (a) middle school (n=1), (b) junior high (n=2), and (c) high school (n=6). The majority of the participants worked at schools at the high school level. Figure 1 gives the breakdown of grade levels by participants' schools.

Procedure and Data Collection

The researchers obtained institutional review board approval before starting the study. An email was sent to a school counseling listserv inviting school counselors who fit the criteria to participate

in a semi-structured interview. The prospective participants were informed they would be put in a drawing to receive a \$25 gift card as an incentive to participate. The listserv has a membership of 823 school counselors. Nine school counselors emailed the first author and agreed to a semi-structured phone interview. The participants were emailed the informed consent, a demographic form, and the interview protocol before the interview so they could be better prepared to answer the interview questions. The participants returned the informed consent to the researchers.

The demographic sheet collected information including; age, gender, race/ethnicity, job title, type of school (rural, suburban, urban), and grade level of school. The participant names were deleted from the demographic sheet and they were assigned a code to maintain confidentiality. The interview protocol was reviewed by counselor education experts and included nine open-ended questions, such as "What initially motivated you to create a safe zone in your school?" and "What professional development resources do you use to keep current on your knowledge of LGBTQIA student issues?" The phone interviews were conducted by the first author and lasted between 35-50 minutes. To ensure the accuracy of the data collection the interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder. The recordings were uploaded to a secure computer program. The first author listened to each recorded interview and transcribed it verbatim. Each of the transcriptions were given a code which correlated to the code on the demographic sheet.

Data Analysis

The phenomenological data was analyzed and interpreted using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method. This data analysis method is important to identify patterns across the data sets which are consistent to the phenomenon being explored. The seven steps of Colaizzi's method requires the researcher to: (a) repeatedly read the interviews, (b) extract significant statements, (c) formulate meanings for each significant statement, (d) move the meanings into theme clusters, (e) write descriptions for each theme cluster, (f) use member checks to validate descriptions, and (g) identify fundamental structures and relationships between structures.

The first and second authors completed the data analysis steps using the following steps. In step 1, the authors read through the transcripts several times to get a feeling for the content before they began coding. As the authors read through the transcripts, they made notes in the margins as to words that could be potential themes. In step 2, the authors reread the transcripts and took note of recurring words, phrases, and sentences that became significant statements. In step 3, the recurring words, phrases, and sentences were formulated into meanings for each significant statement. In step 4, the authors shifted the formulated meanings into clustered themes which were common to all participants. The authors compared the individual analysis of the data and found a high degree of consensus among the clustered themes. In step 5, exhaustive descriptions for each theme cluster were written. In step 6, the

descriptions were validated using member checks. In step 7, fundamental structures and the relationships between the structures were identified. Themes and subthemes were identified as outcomes of the study.

Results

The results below revealed rural school counselors' perspectives of the factors they have experienced in creating safe zones in an effort to make their schools more LGBTQIA-affirming. Five main themes emerged: (a) organized support systems, (b) collaborations with school leadership, (c) addressing challenges, (d) utilization of professional development resources, and (e) adherence to professional ethics. Each theme has subthemes which provide greater detail in the following paragraphs. At the end of the results section, Table 2 provides a descriptive representation of the findings.

Organized Support System

All participants identified a need for an organized support system for LGBTQIA students among school staff and community organizations. These school counselors noted a lack of community resources available to students: which put more pressure on schools to provide support. Within this larger theme, two subthemes emerged: (a) an increase in LGBTQIA students (especially transgender), and (b) a lack of community resources.

Increase in LGBTQIA Students

One hundred percent (N=9) of the participants noted there was an increase in the number of students who were identifying as LGBTQIA in their schools. One school counselor commented, “We had our first, outwardly expressive transgender student. We took real effort to make sure we did everything by the book for his sake.” School counselors felt with the increase in the number of students identifying themselves there needed to be more support. While the literature shows nationwide there is more societal acceptance of LGBTQIA students, this does not always trickle down to K-12 schools (Ueno, 2005).

Lack of Community Resources

The majority of the participants (n=8, 89%) lived in communities that did not have community organizations nor resources which served LGBTQIA students. Due to the lack of community resources, the school counselors interviewed felt it was their duty to purposefully reach out. One participant reported, “We purposely wanted to make sure all our LGBTQ students could have a spot because we are in a rural community and there’s not really a lot of support in our community.” Another school counselor commented:

Some families come from blue collar workers and talking about any LGBTQ issues gets pushed under the rug. I wanted to put the word out there and let students know that if this is something they are struggling with or trying to identify, I wanted this to be a safe space for them to not only talk about it but eventually

get to a place where they are accepted and able to express that to other people in their lives.

Collaborations with School Leadership

A second theme that emerged from the study was the importance of collaborative relationships with school leadership. Within this larger theme, three subthemes emerged: (a) other school counselors, (b) mixture of experiences with administrators, and (c) supportive teachers.

Other School Counselors

All of the school counselors (N=9, 100%) reported leaning on other school counselors for knowledge and support. One participant reported, “The most support has come from other school counselors. We have our meetings and talk about student contact and how we can be more accessible to all students.”

Mixture of Experiences with Administration

Just over half of the school counselors (n=5, 56%) acknowledged having a mixture of experiences with administration when it came to receiving the support they needed to successfully work with LGBTQIA students. In particular, it was noted that administration provided school counselors with the go-ahead to counsel the students when students appeared to be in a stressful situation. One school counselor reported their administration’s response to counseling with students as meeting the minimum of what one would

expect in terms of support. This school counselor reported, “administrators have to okay students leaving a classroom when they are in a stressful situation to come see us and, so far, they are supportive of this.” Another school counselor reported:

I wouldn't say they've not been supportive, but they've wanted the counselors to handle it. You know anything of this sort. It's just they don't know what to do. There wasn't a barrier with the admin, it's just like, 'y'all do what you need to do'.

Other school counselors noted that everything they do must be approved by the administration and, so far, the administration had been supportive. In one high school, students wanted a Gay-Straight Alliance Club. This school counselor sought approval from administration and she reported “they approved it and did not ask many questions about what would be happening in the club.” A positive experience came when a principal assisted a school counselor work with a transgender youth. The school counselor reported:

Definitely my primary support would have been my high school principal. She did a lot of the legwork to make sure we were following the law. As well as to make sure we were meeting his needs. She and I worked with the teachers and learned from the student the different ways that he wanted to be addressed.

With a transgender student, one of the school counselors worked with the school

principal and the school nurse to make sure that the student had access to two single bathrooms which were not labeled male or female.

Supportive Teachers

Having access to supportive teachers was important to all of the participants (n=9, 100%). The teachers in the schools were the people who spent the most time with students and they were able to see and hear student behavior more often than school counselors. One school counselor credited supportive teachers with being crucial to their ability to find struggling students:

Even if a student doesn't ask to see us, if a teacher overhears a conversation and they feel a student may need someone to talk with they shoot us an email or catch us and say 'you may need to talk to so and so, I got an uneasy feeling or they were crying in class'.

Addressing Challenges

The school counselors encountered similar challenges as they attempted to create safe zones and LGBTQIA-affirming environments in their schools. The challenges emerged as the third theme in the study as each school counselor had barriers to overcome to make their schools more LGBTQIA-affirming for all students. Within the theme of challenges, three subthemes emerged: (a) resistance due to faculty religious affiliation, (b) parental resistance, and (c) lack of awareness of importance.

Resistance due to Faculty Religious Affiliation

A large percentage of school counselors (n=8, 89%) reported faculty being somewhat resistant to co-creating a more supportive school for the LGBTQIA students due to faculty religious affiliation. It is noted that the schools were all located in rural school districts in the Southern region of the United States. Several school counselors shared the region is commonly referred to as the Bible belt, and for one school counselor, “many of the faculty follow the teachings of the Bible.” Another school counselor noted:

There has been some resistance of faculty due to religious affiliation. I have seen some adult bullying with regard to and that was another motivator to tell you the truth I have seen teachers who have said to me, ‘these kids would not suffer the hardships they are suffering if they would not act the way they are acting.’ So that was a motivator. I have a gay son.

Parental Resistance

All of the school counselors (N=9, 100%) had experienced some amount of parental resistance when they had to communicate with parents regarding counseling with their children. The school counselors were quick to point out that parents oftentimes did not know how to talk with their children about sexuality and this led to them not really wanting to have

conversations with school counselors about the topic. One school counselor reported:

Oftentimes parents don’t want to acknowledge or talk about their kid’s sexuality or gender issues. We had one kid who was a girl and she wanted to be a boy and wanted us to call him a boy’s name. The parents did not want us to do this.

Working with the student and the parents when issues related to how the student wanted to be referred to at school was an ongoing issue that the school counselors were trying to work through.

Lack of Awareness of Importance

The majority of the school counselors (n=7, 78%) felt like the faculty and administrators had a lack of awareness about how important it is to create safe spaces for LGBTQIA students in their schools. The statistics on the issues that LGBTQIA students face in schools, such as, homelessness, increased levels of dropping out, and increased levels of depression, were not well known to all school staff. Research has shown these kids face more victimization in schools which results in higher rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts, as well as, increased drug abuse (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Toomey et al., 2010). A school counselor remarked:

We have a ‘why do we need this’ attitude among some of our faculty. Our teachers over the years have not seen a need on our campus. It is not necessarily against a safe zone, just a lack of awareness.

Professional Development Resources

The fourth theme that appeared was the importance of professional development to increase their own knowledge of LGBTQIA issues and strategies on better serving this population. This importance of professional development for, not only school counselors, but for all school staff was repeated during the interviews. Within this theme two subthemes developed: (a) attendance at professional development counseling conferences, and (b) using internet resources.

Professional Development Conferences

All school counselors (N=9, 100%) noted the importance of attending professional development training and conferences as being crucial to their continued understanding of the best practices for serving LGBTQIA youth. These conferences were at the national and state level and were organized by the national and state school counseling and mental health counseling professional organizations. One school counselor responded:

I think all school counselors, teachers, and principals should be required to attend professional development training on how to better work with LGBT youth. After all they have the highest suicide rates of all the kids. You would think that would be more important than some of these other trainings we have to go to.

Another school counselor remarked, “I have resources from the American Counseling Association available for counseling LGBTQ students. I went through a five-part training series on how to best work with LGBTQ students.”

Internet Resources

All of the school counselors (N=9, 100%) reported their most important educational resources as being the internet. This was noted for being important because funding was not always available to go to conferences and websites which focus on LGBTQIA issues are continually updated. The school counselors used LGBTQIA resources to locate information for themselves, for faculty, and for students. One school counselor remarked, “One of the big things I have is a list of resources that I turn students towards, *It Gets Better*, GLSEN, *Teaching Tolerance*, those sites have a lot of information.” Several school counselors shared they have a hard time keeping up with the “alphabet soup.” They want to stay knowledgeable and know they need to refer to students as how “they want to be referred to.”

Adherence to Professional Ethics

The fifth theme which emerged from the study was the importance of adhering to professional counseling ethics. This was echoed by all of the school counselors (N=9, 100%) and was felt to be the most crucial element in the motivation to create safe zones and LGBTQAI-affirming school environments. Within this larger theme, two

subthemes appeared: (a) professional school counseling ethics, and (b) just do it.

Professional School Counseling Ethics

The school counselors (N=9, 100%) felt like it was imperative that other school counselors, faculty, and administration serve students in an equitable manner. School counselors are required to follow ethical guidelines to serve all students. Also, school counselors can provide staff training to foster a safe climate of acceptance for all students. One school counselor reported, “I don’t care what your personal beliefs are, you have to set them aside, that’s an ethical issue you have to be there for every one of your students.” Other school counselors noted the need to be able to leave their “personal beliefs, including religious and parenting beliefs, at the door” when they entered the school building.

Just Do It

The majority of school counselors (n=7, 78%) felt like school counselors needed to “just do it” meaning they needed to take action steps in their schools to create safe environments for their students, even if they were not getting support from administration or faculty. They felt that taking the “first steps” was important even if they felt unsure and did not know what the result would be. One school counselor reported:

You have to be very diligent in being non-judgmental towards anybody. In your school you should not have a climate of judgment. You have to be accessible to all, which you do

through your personality and your communication with them.

Another school counselor remarked:

Counselors need to just do it. We set the climate in the schools. It is imperative that LGBTQ students have a space which is safe for them. You look at the suicide rate. You look at the hardship these children are suffering. If no one else is going to reach out to them we have to be the one.

Discussion

The goal of our research was to document the experience of rural school counselors’ perceptions of procedures and processes that contribute to their ability to create safe zones and a LGBTQIA-affirming school environment. The authors maintain that creating LGBTQIA-affirming school environments in K-12 schools is important to the success of students who have been historically marginalized. Our findings indicate that creating LGBTQIA-affirming school environments in rural schools is the result of a combination of internal motivation by the school counselor to provide ethical school counseling, access to professional development resources which can be difficult to find in rural areas, and supportive collaborations with faculty and staff.

This study highlights the unique skills, knowledge, and abilities of the school counselors to be in positions to affect the climate and create supportive schools. It also outlines the importance of a whole school

approach in creating these safe zones and organized support systems. The findings support previous literature regarding creating a supportive climate for LGBTQIA students through fostering school leaders to be advocates (Bishop & McClellan, 2016) and assisting school staff to be more knowledgeable in how to be supportive to the needs of the LGBTQIA identifying student (DePedro et. al, 2018).

All school counselors in this study reported an increase in the number of students who are outwardly identifying as LGBTQIA, but they also acknowledged a lack of community resources in rural areas. In addition to lack of community supports, the findings of this study also support the concern of homophobic attitudes in rural communities in that most of the school counselors reported that supports to identifying students are oftentimes restricted by the religious values of the staff. These findings support previous research (DePedro et al., 2018; GLSEN, 2017) and suggest that students who identify as LGBTQIA risk the negative impacts associated with low supports, such as depression, academic deficits, and high absenteeism (Kosciw et al., 2013).

Despite the lack of resources available in rural communities, this study supported the previous literature (Robertson, 2015) that school counselors should extend into national, state, and regional professional organizations for guidance, training, and support on how to meet the needs of LGBTQIA students and create safe zones. All school counselors in this study commented to the importance of further

training and networking with other school counselors regarding issues related to LGBTQIA students. They also remarked on the importance of access to free resources such as the GLSEN due to constricted professional development budgets. However, all of the school counselors in this study demonstrated a level of internal motivation to genuinely want the knowledge to help the students and a determination to get all information available. This finding suggests that more free and accessible resources and supports for LGBTQIA students in rural communities would be well received, valued, and utilized.

In addition to the genuine motivation to assist all students, the school counselors in this study also spoke to their professional responsibility and ethical standards in regard to “just doing the right thing” for LGBTQIA students and setting the climate in their schools. According to ASCA (2016), it is considered a part of the school counselor’s role to affirm students in all stages of identity development and to help foster an environment that is safe, including, and accepting. The school counselors in this study spoke to the challenges associated with creating a climate of acceptance as being resistance from staff and parents regarding acceptance and from a general lack of awareness from school staff on the importance of making safety a priority. These findings on resistance from the community via parents and staff support the findings that feelings of victimization and discrimination toward LGBTQIA students are higher in rural communities which in turn lead to less “outness” (Kosciw et al.,

2015). These findings also support the limited trainings and understanding of staff regarding the needs, issues, and challenges for students who identify as LGBTQIA. At this time, not all staff are required to participate in such trainings at the school level.

Implications

While this study supported much of the previous literature on the challenges associated with students who identify as LGBTQIA in rural communities, it also has a number of implications for school counselors who work in rural school districts. First, this study highlighted the need for more accessible LGBTQIA resources for administration, counselors, staff, and parents, as well as, a safe place for such information to be accessed by all stakeholders. The rural communities could benefit from availability of more internet resources that provide support to those who identify as LGBTQIA and to those who are supporting the LGBTQIA community.

Second, the need for increased mandatory professional development for school counselors, teachers, and administration was reported as important to increase the awareness of the challenges that LGBTQIA students have in school settings. All school counselors noted the importance of collaborating with other school counselors, supportive teachers, and administration. With increased knowledge among all school staff, collaborations to create inclusive school environments can be more successful.

A third implication of this study suggests there exists a gap in data tracking within the schools as it relates to identifying the needs of LGBTQIA students. The need for more evidence-based decision making through data tracking to demonstrate the growing need for services for identifying students was felt among the participants. All school counselors interviewed stated that the population of identifying students was increasing, but few had evidence to support the growth. Such evidence could demonstrate the need for whole staff trainings and could lend itself to funds designated to create safe zones.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There were several limitations of this study. The first limitation is the study was vulnerable to examiner bias because the first author developed the interview questions, recruited participants, helped analyze the data, and helped develop the findings. Second, the participants were all school counselors from one Southern state. The findings are not necessarily representative of all school counselors who work in rural communities as there is the possibility that rural school counselors in other states have access to different resources and have had different experiences. Future research should expand our data gathering to rural school counselors in different states and regions as this will strengthen the study by gaining a broader sample of the school counselors' experiences. While the findings were focused on the experiences of rural school counselors, future research into creating LGBTQIA-affirming school

environments should also include school counselors working in suburban and urban school districts for the purpose of comparison. These limitations serve as a starting point for future research studies which look at the procedures for creating LGBTQIA-affirming schools.

Conclusion

Because of the increased risks and challenges of LGBTQIA students attending rural schools it is important to gain information on methods to create inclusive environments which may lead to more positive student outcomes. This study provides an enhanced understanding of how school counselors can support youth to succeed in school. Collaboration among school staff and parents plays a critical role in creating a climate where all students can thrive. A key takeaway of this study is the importance of professional development of school staff to create increased knowledge of LGBTQIA issues and strategies for becoming advocates to support the needs of LGBTQIA-identifying students.

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Table 1*Demographics of Study Participants*

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>School Type</i>	<i>Grade Levels</i>
1	55	W	F	Rural	7-12
2	49	W	F	Rural	10-12
3	51	W	F	Rural	6-8
4	47	W	F	Rural	10-12
5	48	W	F	Rural	6-8
6	46	W	F	Rural	10-12
7	38	W	M	Rural	10-12
8	40	W	F	Rural	8-9
9	26	W	F	Rural	10-12

Figure 1

Distribution of Participants by Grade Level

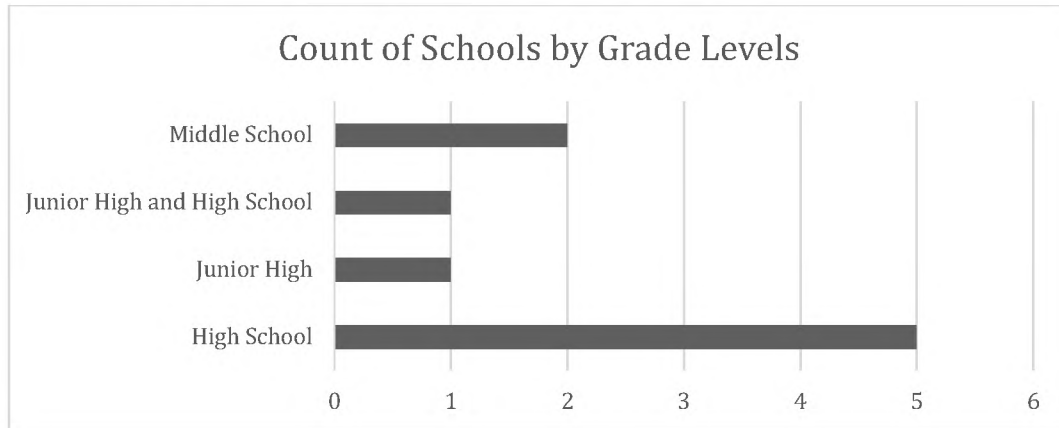


Table 2*Representation of Study Findings*

Themes and Subthemes	Example Quotes
<p>Organized support system</p> <p>More LGBTQIA students means more support is needed.</p> <p>Lack of community resources means we need to purposefully reach out.</p>	<p>“I noticed more LGBTQ students at my middle school level who seem to be exploring and there was nothing available to them.” (Participant 1).</p> <p>“Due to my geographical location there are not any local resources.” (Participant 4).</p>
<p>Collaborations with school leadership</p> <p>Other school counselors provide the most support.</p> <p>Mixture of experiences with administration</p> <p>Supportive teachers</p>	<p>“I have two other school counselors that I lean onto for support and ideas.” (Participant 6).</p> <p>“No one else in the school would ever consider creating a safe zone, at least not administration.” (Participant 9).</p> <p>“I have had a handful of teachers who have been supportive and I rely on them greatly.” (Participant 3).</p>
<p>Addressing Challenges</p> <p>Resistance due to faculty religious affiliation</p>	<p>“The biggest issue I have seen and heard about are faculty who don’t agree or what have you with homosexuality and that comes through to the students and that’s very concerning for me.” (Participant 9).</p>

Themes and Subthemes	Example Quotes
<p>Parental resistance</p> <p>Lack of awareness of importance</p>	<p>“I have parents who are opposed to the LGBT community and I listen to them with respect and keep my mouth shut.” (Participant 5).</p> <p>“There is not a lot of initiative to understand how important it is to understand what’s going on in these kids’ lives. It’s more of, let me take you to the counselor. And that’s it.” (Participant 8).</p>
<p>Professional development resources</p> <p>National and state conferences/professional organizations</p> <p>Internet resources</p>	<p>“I believe all school faculty and staff need to be required to go to training to better understand the LGBTQ community. So many of them think it is a choice and I believe people are who they are from birth and we need to accept them.” (Participant 7).</p> <p>“Since we live in a rural community, we rely on getting information from websites. I have lists I can refer students to if I think it will be helpful.” (Participant 7).</p>
<p>Adherence to professional ethics</p> <p>Professional school counseling ethics</p> <p>Just do it</p>	<p>“You need to create safe spaces for these kids regardless of your political stances. It is our job and we need to accept and take care of these kids.” (Participant 1).</p> <p>“Do it. Do it no matter what the kickback or whatever. Our office should be the safe space for them to come to.” (Participant 1).</p>