Empowering LGBT Teens: A School-Based Advocacy Program

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of social justice initiatives developed within a high school support/ally group for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students to address inequities in power, privilege, and access to resources for LGBT students in the school and community settings. Quantitative research results illustrate the impact on student and teacher participants in the areas of attitude change, level of participation in social justice action, and willingness of participants to advocate in the future. A survey of both students and teachers illustrated a positive impact on attitudes towards acceptance of LGBT students.

Keywords: Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgendered Questioning (LGBT), Safe Schools, Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), empowerment, advocacy

“I didn't think that there was anyone to talk to or anyone to share my thoughts with, not even you” (M. Mims, personal communication, September 20, 2005). This quote came from a student, who as a last resort, turned to a high school counselor for assistance. This article summarizes the state of the climate for LGBT youth in the school setting, what is known to help, and one school counselor’s journey in becoming an advocate for LGBT youth.
School Climate for LGBT Youth

For an adolescent coming to terms with the fact that his or her sexual orientation might not be heterosexual, the process of accepting oneself in a heterosexist society is an integral aspect of identity formation (Cooley, 1998; Zera, 1992). Yet lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth often encounter negative attitudes, severe isolation, rejection, and hostility (Peters, 1997). Even school, a predominant environment for LGBT youth, can be an unsafe and even dangerous place (Hansen, 2007; Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1997; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008). In fact, according to a report conducted by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in 2011, two-thirds of LGBT youth felt unsafe in school, where it is common to hear homophobic or negative comments regarding gender expression and non-dominant sexual orientation. Almost 82% reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression and over 38% reported that they are bullied frequently and are physically harassed. Three-quarters reported being sexually harassed, and for nearly one-fourth of these youth, victimization reached the point of being physically assaulted at school. More than half of these students reported experiencing some form of electronic harassment or “cyberbullying” as well as having personal property stolen or deliberately damaged at school (GLSEN, 2011). Transgender students, in particular, report feeling vulnerable because of their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2008).

Response of Peers and School Personnel to Victimization

Unfortunately, this in-school victimization of LGBT students remains largely unchallenged. According to Kosciw et al. (2008), only a small percentage of LGBT students reported that their peers intervene when hearing homophobic remarks (7.7%) or negative comments about someone’s gender expression (10.6%). School personnel are not always responsive to the needs of these students either. Several studies indicate that teachers and other school authorities rarely intervene or challenge students when they make derogatory comments about gender expression in their presence (GLSEN, 2011; GLSEN, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2008, Omizo, Omizo, & Okamoto, 1998). For example, a study in the public high schools of Des Moines, IA, found that anti-gay comments were heard by the average student every 7 minutes, yet teachers intervened only 3% of the time (Carter, 1997). Even when informed of actual incidents of harassment and assault, school staff do not respond effectively or many do not respond at all (GLSEN, 2011). Not only do school staff not intervene to support LGBT students, some school personnel contribute to the heterosexist atmosphere in schools. Nearly two-thirds of students report hearing homophobic remarks from school personnel (Kosciw et al., 2008).

The lack of support for LGBT students extends beyond individual teacher or administrator response to the institutional level of policies designed to assure a safe school environment for students. Nearly all principals responding to the 2013 National School Climate Survey (GLSEN, 2013) reported that their school or school district currently has policies endorsing “safer school” anti-bullying or anti-harassment procedures, yet the majority did not specify sexual orientation or gender identity or expression as protected categories. Although the majority of principals admitted that LGBT students were least likely to feel very safe at their schools, only 20% had
developed policies or anti-harassment procedures specifically designed to promote a safe school climate for LGBT students or their families. (GLSEN, 2007b; GLSEN, 2011).

**Impact of Harassment**

Researchers have suggested that teachers do not intervene when they witness verbal harassment because they may identify terms such as “gay” to be ordinary language and consequently believe they are unable to effectively address it on a regular basis or do not perceive it as overly offensive or necessary of intervention (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009). Mudrey and Medina-Adams (2006) found that even teachers with knowledge regarding LGBT issues are not necessarily more likely to have more positive attitudes and perceptions of homosexuality, and they may be reluctant to talk about the issues confronting sexual minority youth. In short, they are often unresponsive to the needs of LGBT youth due to their own pre-conceived biases and being uninformed about the special needs and problems of this group (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). According to the 2013 National School Climate Survey (GLSEN, 2013), students having six or more supportive educators reported fewer academic issues as compared with those students who did not have staff members they considered supportive. These students were less likely to miss school due to perceived safety concerns, had higher grade point averages, planned to pursue post-secondary education, and reported a greater sense of belonging to their school community (GLSEN, 2013).

Being subjected to an oppressive school climate requires a constant state of vigilance that can contribute to mental health concerns for LGBT youth, including depression, poor self-esteem, alcohol or drug abuse, academic underachievement or social isolation, and elevated suicide risk (Fontaine, 1998; GLSEN, 2007b; Gonsiorek, 1988; Griffin & Ouellett, 2002; Omizo et al., 1998; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). The oppressive school environment not only causes safety and emotional concerns for LGBT youth, but also puts the students’ right to an education and ability to benefit academically at risk (GLSEN, 2011). LGBT youth who have been harassed or assaulted in school due to their sexual orientation or gender expression have a harder time focusing in class and participate less in an attempt to avoid potential harassment (Holmes & Cahill, 2004).

It is critical that school professionals have an understanding of their biases, attitudes, and feelings regarding homosexuality before they can effectively teach or counsel LGBT students (Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006; Slater, 1988). They must reject the illness perspective and regard homosexuality as an orientation that involves all aspects of the person and is not limited to only sexual behavior (Slater, 1988). Those working with these youth must educate themselves about diverse sexual minority communities and lifestyles. School professionals must have accurate and objective information regarding the typical developmental and coming-out processes experienced by their LGBT students in order to be more effective with this population.

GLSEN (2011) compiled a report of the laws and policies regarding students, especially LGBT students, in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Currently only 15 states and the District of Columbia have statewide laws against bullying that include protections for LGBT students regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. Fourteen states and the District of Columbia have laws against discrimination for sexual orientation and gender identity, while one state, Wisconsin, has laws against sexual
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orientation only. The GLSEN report illustrates that two states, South Dakota and Missouri, have laws prohibiting the passing of discrimination policies that protect sexual orientation and gender identity. Eight states have laws prohibiting a positive portrayal of homosexuality in school (GLSEN, 2011). Such policies would include implementing safe schools policies, teaching sexuality/HIV/STD education, including positive portrayals of homosexual individuals in the curriculum, educating students about the LGBT population accurately, and prohibiting policy which stigmatizes LGBT individuals (GLSEN, 2011; GLSEN, 2013).

Gay Straight Alliances

Unsupportive school climates have a negative impact on LGBT youth’s academic achievement and mental health; however, there is a national movement by students and school personnel to address the needs of LGBT youth. Schools with clubs, also known as Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs), help to improve the school environment by addressing the harassment, discrimination, and prejudice experienced by these students. According to Griffin and Ouellett (2002), GSAs are one of the most significant and effective approaches for addressing the needs of LGBT students.

GSAs are student-led, school-based clubs open to all members of the student body regardless of sexual orientation that advocate for improved school climate by challenging homophobia. GSAs promote respect for the larger school community, educate all students and faculty about LGBT issues, and provide support for LGBT students and their allies (GLSEN, 2011; Griffin & Ouellett, 2002; Lee, 2002). Heinze and Horn (2009) found that heterosexual adolescents who had a gay or lesbian friend were more likely to condemn harassment and exclusion of their LGBT peers than students who merely had contact with an LGBT individual. This research supports the establishment of GSAs in schools because these organizations help adolescents to gain adequate knowledge and experience to form less biased and more tolerant attitudes toward LGBT people.

The presence of GSAs in schools often provides physical safety for LGBT students in many ways (GLSEN, 2011). Primarily GSAs send the message that biased language and harassment will not be tolerated; thus, LGBT students are less likely to hear homophobic comments as often compared to schools without GSAs (57% compared to 75%). LGBT students are less likely to feel unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation (61% vs. 68%) and gender expression (38% vs. 43%). LGBT students in schools with GSAs are less likely to miss days of school because they are afraid to go (GLSEN, 2011).

The presence of GSAs also contributes to an improved school experience for LGBT students, by increasing access to education and having a positive impact on LGBT students’ academic achievement and aspirations (GLSEN, 2007a; GLSEN, 2011). Lee (2002) found that GSA student participants believed their academic performance improved due to being involved in a GSA. They reported an increase in grade point averages and an overall sense of hope for their future education. Participants of Lee’s study (2002) attributed these improvements to an increase in confidence and being secure about identifying with a label of gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The students were able to be more honest with others rather than hiding or pretending to be heterosexual.
The Role of the School Counselor as Advocate for LGBT Youth

When asked about their level of comfort talking one-on-one with various school personnel about LGBT-related issues, students reported that they would be most comfortable talking with school counselors (GLSEN, 2011). It should be no surprise then that Fontaine (1998) found that more than half of junior/senior high school counselors and 21% of elementary school counselors reported that they have experience working with questioning or self-identified gay or lesbian students in their schools.

Certainly there is a professional and ethical imperative for school counselors to work to eliminate oppression and create socially just and supportive environments for LGBT individuals. The *ACA Code of Ethics* (American Counseling Association, 2014) directs counselors to “advocate at individual, group, institutional, and societal levels to examine potential barriers and obstacles that inhibit access and/or the growth and development of clients” (p. 5). The American Counseling Association’s Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003) detail a counselor’s responsibility to act as change agents to eliminate oppression and establish socially just environments. The ASCA National Model (American School Counselor Association, 2003) endorses the advocacy role of school counselors by specifically charging them with the responsibility to remove barriers to student development and promote institutional change that supports the academic achievement of all students.

As has been suggested, school counselors, with their developmental training, systems perspective, and commitment to diversity, are uniquely positioned to be leaders in advocating for LGBT students through supporting student empowerment, advocating for and providing staff development, promoting change in school policies and curriculum, and establishing collaboration with community resources (DePaul, Walsh, & Dam, 2009; Erford, House, & Martin, 2003; Hernandez & Seem, 2004, Marinoble, 1998; McMahon, Mason, & Paisley, 2009). Hernandez and Seem (2004) pointed out that “...school counselors can serve as an epicenter of catalytic change not only with individual students, but also within entire school and community systems” (p. 261).

One School Counselor’s Journey to Advocacy

The efforts of a single school counselor acting as advocate can have far reaching impact. The following section chronicles the efforts of one school counselor in a Midwest high school of 2,000 students to advocate on several levels for the LGBT students in his school.

As I sat in my office that day and listened to the pain in the voice of the student in front of me, I realized that I had a responsibility to provide support for this student and others who were questioning their sexual orientation. I had a responsibility to provide services for all of my students. (M. Mims, personal communication, September 20, 2005)

Program Description

The formation of the Human Sexuality Group within a Midwest high school aimed to offer youth of all sexual orientations affirming peer interactions and a forum to
voice their needs and desires for their personal identities within the school community. The format of the group, sponsored by a high school counselor, was semi-structured with open membership ranging from 20–80 students. It was convened during the day for 50 minutes, bi-monthly, throughout the academic year. The students were excused from classes and the period in which the group met was rotated throughout the day so that the education in one subject was not greatly affected. The open group format provided a neutral, flexible platform for students to meet others with similar issues and problems and work together to solve related issues. The group identified goals that focused on an integration of psycho-educational, social, crisis intervention, and advocacy initiatives.

The decision was made to form an educational group rather than a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) Club. Even though the administration was supportive, the school counselor soon discovered that a GSA club could only meet before or after school. A psycho-educational group could provide support and education to the students and meet during the typical school day. The formation of the group was not without dissention, as a few parents called with negative comments as well as one visit from a local minister. One drawback of this arrangement was that the group took a non-political stance, and any political discussions or activisms must were required to take place through associated groups outside of the school. The Human Sexuality Group within the school partnered with a grant-funded community counseling center designed to serve the LGBT population as a means of connecting students to the LGBT community and its culture. The group also connected with a state advocacy and policy group that works on LGBT issues to design and deliver educational training and presentations. The school counselor provided activities to create a safe environment and allow the students to provide support to each other. The group generated a number of advocacy initiatives and three of them will be described.

The group sessions were attended by 15–30 students. The agenda was set by the school counselor and the group always concluded a session with personal reflections by the members. Passes to the group were generated by the school counselor and educational information was also provided to the teachers throughout the year. Five sessions were held in which outside speakers came and presented to the group of high school students. Overall, the group sessions were highly successful and members felt that their issues were being heard by others and that they belonged to a group supportive of their personal growth.

**Advocacy by High School Students**

Three advocacy activities were generated by the group, with a special emphasis on the development of advocacy training and social justice presentations connected with a national Day of Silence sponsored by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). The purpose of the events were four-fold: (1) to raise awareness among the high school teacher and student population of the need to establish a school climate that promotes safety, legitimacy, and belonging for sexual minorities, (2) to illustrate how oppression isolates LGBT teens and silences them from expressing and exploring their social and sexual identities, (3) to empower LGBT teens through providing awareness of ally support and development of self-advocacy skills, and (4) to establish collaborative relationships between school and community advocates to enhance the impact of social
change initiatives related to LGBT issues. The major event of the group was to organize members of the group and other students who volunteered to participate in a “Day of Silence.” On the same day as the national event, the Human Sexuality Group members were joined by other students who took a pledge to be silent, except when answering a teacher’s question or participating in an educational activity, from first bell to last bell to illustrate that LGBT youth had no voice in their school environment. This student-organized educational event attracted over 120 student participants.

Social Justice Presentations

Various social justice-focused presentations were made as a part of the pre- and post-training of participants. The school counselor, a counselor from the local gay community center, and a sociology professor who discussed historical examples of passive and active protests, made presentations on sexual orientation and being active within the community. The group worked hard to gain and train students to be allies for all sexual orientations. The group also effected changes in the school’s dance admission policy. A student panel was created which spoke to classes and community groups. Joint events were also hosted with other university GSA’s in the state. The group created passive programs through posters and other displays to help create an environment of acceptance.

Response to Anti-Gay Bias

The Human Sexuality Group also took steps to respond to anti-gay bias expressed by some parents, students, and religious organizations. One religious based group even provided t-shirts and information cards to students under the concept of a “Day of Truth,” which presented the concept that all gay behaviors were sins. The Human Sexuality Group discussed that all personal opinions should be accepted and that each student deserved respect and honor. The differing views provided opportunities for discussion and debate from many different perspectives while raising awareness with students and teachers.

Over a short period of time, the group grew and became an established organization in the school. The events were having an impact on attitudes and students were feeling safer in their Midwest high school.

Research and Methods

Research was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the event and to see if it had an impact on the participants and the school environment. Two short surveys were created with one for the students who participated in the Day of Silence and the other survey for teachers to assess their perspectives regarding the participating students and the event. The survey utilized a Likert-type scale of 1–5, with five being high and 1 being low. The survey questions were created by the high school counselor who possessed a doctorate in Counselor Education and a senior who had been a founding member of the group. The survey questions were then piloted by being presented to two students and two school counselors to see if the questions were clear and appropriately written.
Participants
Sixty-seven of the over 120 students who participated in the Day of Silence picked up a survey to be completed at the end of the event. Forty-four students completed the survey for a return rate of 36%. Ninety-seven teachers had the survey placed in their mailbox with 31 teachers completing the survey for a return rate of 32%.

Results
The quantitative research results on the impact of the event on student and teacher participants is included, focusing on attitude change, level of participation in social justice action, and willingness of participants to advocate in the future are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1
Student Responses
Mean rating (1 = low/none, 5 = high) of four survey questions assessing student perceptions of personal experience in the Day of Silence (N = 44).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I perceive this event to be important to stand up for the rights of students regardless of sexual orientation.</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I believe this event has a positive impact on student awareness.</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I was able to maintain my silence except when participating with a teacher or educational activity.</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I would participate in this activity again if given the opportunity (WHS, college, etc.).</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>0.25</td>
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</table>

Discussion
School counselor advocacy can make a difference and the results of this research illustrate that the students felt that the event had an impact, while teachers also agreed that social advocacy events were important. Advocacy on multiple levels with multiple audiences are necessary to have a long-term impact. Events such as those described are important to raise awareness within the school environment. The Day of Silence event increased teacher/student awareness and willingness to respond to discrimination. The results (M = 4.10) indicate that the students believed that the event had a positive impact on student awareness. The students believed that the Day of Silence was important and
that students should stand up for the rights of students. Increased supports for LGBT students are important to illustrate that negative comments will not be accepted and a bullying environment will not be tolerated. There was a difference of perceptions regarding silence as the students rated their ability to be silent at 4.40 while the teachers rated that silence at 3.94. The highest rated item (M = 4.93) highlighted that the students who participated in the event would select to participate in the event again. Furthermore, programs such as the Day of Silence help the development of self-advocacy skills by LGBT students, which can have an impact on future events. Strengthened connections for LGBT students with community resources will also assist to create environments within the schools and the communities.

Table 2

_Teacher Responses_

Mean rating (1 = low, 5 = high) of five survey questions assessing faculty perceptions of students who participated in the Day of Silence (N = 31).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do you think that students should participate in social justice activities (equal treatment and opportunity for all individuals)?</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Did the students who participated in the Day of Silence remain silent, except for classroom educational activities?</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Rank your perception of respect given to gay or lesbian students at WHS.</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Do you support the concept of this activity (respect for people who are gay or lesbian)?</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Do you confront students who express negative or derogatory views about homosexuality in your classroom or in the halls?</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results from the teacher survey regarding respect for LGBT students were only 3.3 out of 5, which would indicate that there was a lower level of respect and the issue continued to need additional work. The teachers responded at the 4.32 level that they thought it was important for students to participate in social justice activities. A high level of support for the activity was given by the teachers who responded to the survey. It could be argued that teachers who did not support the event did not complete the survey.
The results also rated higher than similar research, suggesting that teachers within this school were more likely to confront negative or derogatory comments made by students.

School climate is not just about safety, but also about a student’s ability to learn and right to an education. LGBT students who experienced frequent harassment based on their sexual orientation were more likely to report missing school and had lower GPAs than students who were not as frequently harassed (GLSEN, 2011). Therefore, improving school climate not only facilitates student safety, but also enhances a student’s ability to learn and educational outcomes.

**Implications**

There is clearly an urgent need for action to create a safer school climate for all students. There are steps that all concerned stakeholders can take to remedy the situation. The National School Climate Surveys conducted by GLSEN in 2007b and 2011 illustrated the ways in which the presence of effective legislation or policy and in-school resources and supports can have beneficial effects on school climate, students’ sense of safety, and, ultimately, on students’ academic achievement and educational aspirations. GSA’s and high school youth groups can serve as a vital role in overcoming these challenges. Groups provide a safe space for working out the various problems surrounding the stigma of growing up gay. There are also activities, such as the Day of Silence, which can help to educate students, teachers, and school personnel about the issues and have an impact on their school environment.

**References**


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