

“PUT IT OUT THERE THAT YOU ARE WILLING TO TALK ABOUT ANYTHING”:

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN PROVIDING SUPPORT TO GAY AND BISEXUAL YOUTH

This study examines how gay and bisexual adolescents identify and access support from their school counselor using a phenomenological inquiry approach. Gay and bisexual adolescents were interviewed regarding their experiences with their school counselors and reported that they believed school counselors should be supportive by virtue of their title. Participants used various methods to determine if their school counselor was supportive including ascertaining political beliefs, relying on the past history of the school counselor-student relationship, observing supportive symbols in school counseling offices, and relying on knowledge gained from other students. Students reported that school counselors are most helpful when they simply listen to students' concerns and state directly that they are willing to discuss LGBT issues. Barriers to accessing support from school counselors included student concerns regarding confidentiality and fears of being judged or treated differently by their school counselor. The article also discusses study strengths and limitations.

The American School Counselors Association's (ASCA) Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2010) make it clear that school counselors have an ethical obligation to meet the unique educational, personal/social, and career needs of all students, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). Support from school counselors can be a vital resource for LGBT youth. Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported that LGBT students feel safer and more supported in schools where they can identify supportive staff members (2007). According to research by Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006), support from school counselors serving in a role other than as academic counselors has been linked to lower victimization and suicide rates among LGBT youth. They also found that schools with support groups such as Gay Straight Alliances (GSA) were more likely to have provided training to staff regarding school policies related to the safety of LGBT youth (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006).

By virtue of their training and function within the public school system, school counselors are uniquely positioned to provide LGBT students support that is often lacking. Qualitative research with this population of adolescents that has not been completed retrospectively continues to be rare and has been carried out most often by examining issues faced by LGBT adolescents (Coker, Austin, & Schuster, 2010; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Saewyc et al., 2007), not healthy adolescent development. As LGBT populations are gaining greater acceptance in the general population, opportunities for continued research regarding healthy LGBT adolescent development may increase along with opportunities for school counselors to provide support.

Stuart Roe, Ph.D., is an assistant professor and School Counseling program coordinator in the Department of Counselor Education at The College of New Jersey in Ewing, NJ. E-mail roes@tcnj.edu

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Unfortunately for LGBT adolescents, recent research (Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter & Braun, 2006; Saewyc, 2011) has provided ample evidence that LGBT youth experience poorer outcomes related to overall health and well-being when compared with their heterosexual peers. Eisenberg and Resnick (2006) found that although protective factors such as family connectedness, caring adults, and school safety provide a mediating effect regarding suicidality among LGBT adolescents, these variables accounted for only some of the variance in suicidality among LGBT youth, the largest part of which was unexplained.

A knowledge gap exists in the literature regarding how LGBT youth come to recognize that their school counselor is supportive. The purpose of this study was to examine ways in which LGBT youth determine whether their school counselor will be supportive. Data presented in this article are part of a larger study examining social supports across several life domains including home, school, and the community. This article presents data that is specific to support from school counselors. Additional publications related to support from parents, teachers, and peers are forthcoming. Although no transgender individuals were interviewed for the current study, I have used the initials LGBT throughout this article in an effort to be as inclusive as possible; many of the implications for LGB individuals also may be relevant to transgender individuals.

MOST STUDENTS OPERATED UNDER THE ASSUMPTION THAT ALL SCHOOL COUNSELORS ARE ACCEPTING BY VIRTUE OF THEIR JOB TITLE, SCHOOL COUNSELOR.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study has been framed using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Theory of Development and the Protection-Risk Model (PRM) of health-enhancing behavior described by Turbin and colleagues (2006). Bronfenbrenner's model considers the complicated nature of risk and protective factors when conceptualizing support for LGBT adolescents. Although all adolescents have much in common, environment can play an important role in establishing developmental trajectories for LGBT youth (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). In Bronfenbrenner's model, youth are nested in several successively larger and interconnected systems. The individual (including everything that makes up an individual, e.g., cognitive ability, biology, etc.) operates within a microsystem (e.g., family, friends, school), which operates in a mesosystem (i.e., the relationships between the other systems). The mesosystem operates within an exosystem, which represents connections between settings (political structures, public policy). All of the aforementioned systems operate within a macrosystem consisting of culture, values, and race. This model is consistent with the assertions of Turbin et al. (2006) that the environment (family, school, geography, etc.), sometimes referred to as "context," has a tremendous influence over risk and protective factors, vulnerabilities, and resilience.

Support

Support protection means having family members, adults, and peers who are caring and available for support at home and at school. In their

PRM, Turbin et al. (2006) describe three types of both protective and risk factors. Protective factors include (a) models protection, (b) controls protection, and (c) support protection. Models protection includes having positive role models from whom adolescents learn behaviors. Models could be school counselors, family members, teachers, coaches, and so forth. Controls protection refers to rules and regulations set up by adults or the environment that lower risk. Examples of such protection include a school counselor arranging meetings between parents and teachers of any student with a grade below a B in algebra or intervening when he or she hears a rumor that a student is planning to fight another student. Support protection refers to having others in your life that you can turn to when difficult situations arise or when challenges occur. School counselors, by virtue of their training, are well situated to provide this type of support protection. By developing relationships with students, school counselors can be the adults that LGBT youth seek for support.

Risk factors associated with the PRM include models risk, opportunity risk, and vulnerability risk. Turbin et al. (2006) posit that the aforementioned protective factors, along with the individual characteristics of each adolescent, work to moderate the effects of individual risk factors, leading to health enhancing behaviors. As Blum, McNeely and Nonnemaker (2002) found, non-familial adults who care about a student can also serve as protective factors and these adults most likely come in the form of school counselors, teachers, coaches, clergy, and so forth. In short, schools are an important place for adolescents to connect to positive adult role models such as school counselors.

RATIONALE AND METHOD

A phenomenological inquiry research approach was chosen for this study over other qualitative approaches be-

cause (a) there is a paucity of research regarding how LGBT students access support from their school counselors, (b) I sought to accurately represent the lived experiences of LGBT adolescents in high school, and (c) I was not trying to quantify a truth, but rather discover variations that may exist within the individual lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994) of LGBT youth. My hope is that the findings and implications presented here will aid school counseling practitioners, supervisors, and policy makers to assist LGBT youth in their efforts to identify and access support from school counselors.

Recruitment

After receiving IRB approval, participants were recruited via purposeful sampling (Silverman, 2010) at a central Pennsylvania It Gets Better Project community event and via snowball sampling from those recruited at that event. The inclusion criteria, self-identified as LGBT, was used because the phenomenon under examination (school counselor support for LGBT adolescents) was theorized as most present in adolescents who have self-identified and are open/out about their sexual orientation. Additional participant criteria included being currently enrolled in high school and having parental permission to participate. Only those participants currently enrolled in high school were selected because I aimed to complete a prospective research study with high school students who are currently accessing services from their school counselor. Once consent and assent forms were returned from both parents and participants, I contacted adolescents using their preferred contact method to schedule an in-person interview in a study room at a local library. Participants were given \$15.00 in cash as an incentive for participating.

Participants

Participants consisted of 7 gay males and 1 bisexual female between the ages of 16 and 19 and in grades 10-12. All participants self-identified as White and were from suburban central Penn-

sylvania. Participants lived in a variety of home situations that included married parents, divorced parents, single parent households, foster care, and living with a grandparent. Participants reported a variety of experiences in which they needed support from their school counselor; these ranged from verbal teasing and harassment by peers to coping with hurtful comments made by parents.

Procedure and Data Collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to gather data for this study. Interviews were conducted in person by the primary investigator and ranged from 40 to 75 minutes in length. Interview questions were developed based on a literature review related to providing support for LGBT adolescents. Example interview questions included: How did you know you could seek support from your school counselor and how has your school counselor been helpful to you as an LGBT adolescent? In keeping with phenomenological inquiry methods, several variations of the question within the semi-structured interviews were used to elicit responses from participants. Example variations of the standard interview questions included: When you think about your interactions with your school counselor,

as an adolescent and in my work as a school counselor in the public school system leaves me well situated for this investigation. Consistent with Morrow's (2005) discussion of objectivity in qualitative research, I began by acknowledging that I am part of the research and, although I will strive to remain objective, objectivity is not something that can be achieved. Several methods described below were used to establish rigor and trustworthiness. In their guidelines for qualitative research, Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999) recommend that researchers own their perspective and I have done this by detailing the research paradigm and methodology (see rationale and methodology), and by examining my personal assumptions via bracketing, consistent with Creswell's (2013) recommendation. Methods for bracketing my assumptions included being interviewed by a colleague regarding my biases and assumptions, checking in with research team members throughout the process regarding unexpected reactions as they arose, and journaling. I assembled a team of colleagues consisting of school counselors and college faculty members who are well versed in the phenomenon under investigation, in addition to my faculty advisors who served as a sounding board throughout the analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

SUPPORT FROM SCHOOL COUNSELORS CAN BE A VITAL RESOURCE FOR LGBT YOUTH.

what have they done to be supportive?; Can you think of anything that your school counselor could have done to be supportive?; and Can you think of anything school counselors have done that has not been helpful?

DATA ANALYSIS

As the researcher, I believe it is important that I understand my philosophical assumptions and how they may be reflected in my results. Having experience with the phenomenon first-hand

Consistent with a postmodern viewpoint, findings detailed here are not presented as the only interpretation of the data, but as one possibility (Ponterotto, 2005). As noted by Singh and Shelton (2011), building credibility and trustworthiness checks into qualitative designs is extremely important, and even more so with oppressed groups because of the danger of perpetuating that oppression; this has been done via member checks (described later). As with any research, it is open to misinterpretation and minimizing this is important.

As with all phenomenological qualitative research, data analysis and interpretation was ongoing. As Creswell (2013) notes, data analysis is recursive in that it is continuously being both gathered and analyzed and that analysis informs subsequent interviews. Yeh and Inman (2007) refer to the process of data analysis as deconstructing evidence, which they describe as, “an examination and reexamination of the data, refining, and modifying the data at multiple levels of complexity (individual, group) in order to locate the main essence or meaning underlying volumes of data” (p. 389).

IN SOME INSTANCES, STUDENTS DID NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE SEEKING SUPPORT FROM THEIR SCHOOL COUNSELORS.

Specifically, I started by transcribing the interviews myself and then began reading and rereading interview transcripts to become further immersed in the data (Morrow, 2005). As transcripts were read for the second and subsequent times, I reduced the information via a process referred to as horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). During this process, significant statements and quotes that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon under investigation, support from school counselors, were highlighted and then arranged into themes. I then developed textural descriptions (a description of what the participants experienced) of the themes and structural descriptions (context), which were informed by demographic questionnaires completed by participants before the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). During the data analysis, I also relied on the use of analytic memos (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The memos and notes about what I thought might be happening were kept in this format and became another data source used to bolster credibility and trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005).

Verbatim participant statements that illustrated the themes being described,

as recommended by Yeh and Inman (2007), were then used to present the findings. To avoid bias, I asked research team members to review the themes and exemplar quotes and we discussed any areas in which they did not agree in order to arrive at a consensus regarding the themes. According to Patton (2002), having a team such as this discuss themes and interpretations is important to improve the trustworthiness of the findings because it helps to eliminate bias by individual research team members.

Two member checks were built into the research design as part of the tri-

angulation process used to increase the credibility of the results (Silverman, 2010). Completed interview transcripts and a list of themes were provided to participants to ensure that their words were accurately captured. Participants did not suggest any changes or additions to the transcripts or themes. Helping to ensure rigor, I took care to include the actual words of participants in the presentation of findings, helping to balance the interpretations of the researcher and the participants (Yeh & Inman, 2007) and to give participants a “voice” in the research process (Hunt, 2011).

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Data presented here are organized by themes that emerged from the interview questions. Fictional names have been used to humanize the words of LGBT youth throughout the presentation of findings.

How LGBT Students Knew Their School Counselor was Supportive
School counselors were described as

accepting by interviewees. Most students operated under the assumption that all school counselors are accepting by virtue of their job title, school counselor. Jason said, “Counselors in the high school are mature. I guess they have to be as a counselor...they know how to talk to students. I guess they are a counselor for a reason, whether it’s about being gay or not.” Sam, a high school senior, wanted to start a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) and decided to ask his school counselor to be the advisor because, “I was like, counselor, in my mind, I think counselors, they have to be accepting of everything. She’s not gonna tell me no...and I felt like a counselor is a safe resource, I feel like they can’t be biased.” Others got to know their school counselor a bit before making any assumptions regarding the level of support they could expect.

Determining if a school counselor is supportive. Those participants who did not automatically believe that their school counselor was supportive by virtue of their title used several methods to determine if their school counselor was supportive. Three themes related to determining if their school counselor was supportive emerged from the data including (a) ascertaining school counselor political views, (b) relying on the past history of the school counselor-student relationship or the recommendation of other students, and (c) observing supportive symbols in the school counselor’s office.

In determining if his school counselor was safe to talk with, Jason said that his school counselor has, “slipped in her religion from time to time thinking that it is discreet, but it is not very discreet to me anyway.” Another student, Marco, simply asked his school counselor if she would describe herself as liberal or conservative, democratic or republican, as part of his decision-making process regarding whether or not she was safe to talk to. Marco believed that those who labeled themselves as liberal or a democrat would be more supportive. The school counselor in this instance responded that she considered herself to be conservative. After learning this,

Marco decided to discuss his sexual orientation with her anyway, and stated that she was,

OK with it [his sexual orientation] and I do not know to what extent. We didn't go into detail about it because I didn't want to make my guidance counselor uncomfortable, but I know she is accepting of other things because she doesn't mind talking about it and she will give me information on things.

In this case, Marco used another piece of data, his past relationship with his counselor, to make the decision to talk to his counselor about his sexual orientation. Others used relationships that their peers had established to make that decision. If participants knew that other students had found their school counselor to be supportive in the past, they believed they could expect the same level of support. Michael said, that based on comments from other students, he believed another school counselor at his school would be more supportive so he just went to his assigned school counselor, "to get my schedule and make my schedule at the beginning and the end of the year."

Other participants used LGBT supportive symbols to determine if their school counselor was supportive. Jane noticed that her school counselor had an LGBT supportive rainbow sticker posted in his office, demonstrating his support for the school GSA, but Jane mentioned that she only noticed the sticker during the last month of her senior year. Michael eventually came to realize what a supportive rainbow symbol in his counselors office meant by looking online but stated, "I didn't even know until my freshman year of high school, I did not understand rainbows were [a symbol of LGBT support]."

Barriers to school counselor support

Fear of judgment. Fear of judgment or rejection was a theme that was prevalent throughout each of the interviews. Participants were often fearful of the

reaction that they might receive from their school counselor after disclosing their sexual orientation. In some instances, students did not feel comfortable seeking support from their school counselors. Devin reports, "When I did have problems, I didn't really go to the counselor to talk about it. I usually just talk to my friends and I remember, like if I ever talked to a counselor, it was usually about school." When asked what Devin thought prevented him from talking to a counselor versus friends, he reported, "When I was younger I didn't talk to anybody about it, like adults and I didn't want them not to like me because of something I couldn't change. I didn't want them to feel weird around me."

Marco reported that he was also concerned about making his counselor uncomfortable because, "You could say the wrong thing and they treat you differently." Jason said that he did not seek help from his school counselor for fear that, "They would stop helping me with school or whatever. I just wanted to be accepted."

Confidentiality. Concerns about confidentiality were also raised by participants. Students wondered what the limits of confidentiality might include. Participant concerns regarding confidentiality are summed up by this quote from Michael,

Confidentiality is a little difficult because I wanted to tell my guidance counselor before I told other people, but I was afraid she was going to tell home or something and I didn't know if confidentiality here was real or not because I have heard they [school counselors] do call home in some cases. So I didn't exactly feel safe telling an adult for a long time.

In addition to concerns of confidentiality, several participants mentioned

that they had concerns about how their counselor might treat them differently. Another student mentioned his worry that, "You could say the wrong thing and they [school counselors] could treat you differently."

How School Counselors Are Supportive

Listening. Listening was the most often mentioned form of support offered by school counselors. Listening was referenced by all participants. Participants mentioned that they were not expecting that support come in the form of complicated interventions, but rather having a school counselor who would simply listen to their concerns was important. Several statements from participants illustrate this point. Devin, regarding support from school counselors stated, "They help by always being there for you and accept you for who you are and give you advice on how to react in some situations." Others mentioned that they couldn't think of anything they wanted their counselors to do "besides listening." Another participant, when discussing how his counselor listened, took it a step further and stated, "He listens and doesn't make false claims." This student appreciated that his counselor did not offer false reassurance that everything would be fine.

School Counselors Can Be More Supportive

Broach the topic. Several barriers to optimal support from school counselors emerged as participants responded to the question, how can school counselors be more supportive? Barriers included hesitancy and directness on the part of school counselors to discuss sexual orientation, concerns about confidentiality, and fear that school counselors would judge them and no longer help with other tasks

SEVERAL PARTICIPANTS MENTIONED THAT THEY HAD CONCERNS ABOUT HOW THEIR COUNSELOR MIGHT TREAT THEM DIFFERENTLY.

HAVING A SCHOOL COUNSELOR WHO WOULD SIMPLY LISTEN TO THEIR CONCERNS WAS IMPORTANT.

such as college applications. Regarding hesitancy and directness, Jane said, “I think [pause] be there, not even just with school, home, everything [continuing] I mean put it out there that you are willing to talk about anything I guess I should say.” Both Jane and Marco really wanted counselors to be more direct. Marco said,

I wish she [his school counselor] would have asked I guess, before when she suspected that I was [gay]. I wished she would have just asked instead of waiting for me to tell her because it was kind of hard to tell her because she was conservative and from older, well older school, but I wish she would have asked. I know that would probably offend some people, but I would’ve been okay with it. It would have been kind of nice.

He continued, “I know it is a difficult boundary line for some, I know it is different for different people. Me, I would have preferred to have been asked.” In one way or another, each participant mentioned that they would like their counselor to be more direct in stating that they are willing to discuss anything.

Listen. Just as participants believed that taking the time to listen was important for school counselors, they could also reference examples of poor listening by school counselors that formed a barrier to support. Brian gave an example of poor listening by making a comparison between his current school counselor and one that he had in the past. Brian said,

The biggest thing I have against her [previous school counselor] is that she doesn’t listen when talked to. She will let me get twelve words of whatever I’m saying and she will have something to say and ... Mrs. Smith [his current school counselor]

will actually let you talk and not just, she will interject and ask questions and make comments, but she will listen to my story, to my complaints, whatever, to its completion.

Another student who attended a school with more than one school counselor discussed his desire to switch to a different school counselor because he heard from other students that this particular school counselor was better at listening to concerns of LGBT students.

DISCUSSION

Participants believed that school counselors are supposed to be supportive by virtue of their job title. Students believed that, for a school counselor, being accepting of all students is one of the job responsibilities. However, even though LGBT students believed that school counselors would be supportive because of their role, many LGBT students either did not disclose their sexual orientation to their school counselor for fear of being judged or fear that their relationship would be negatively altered in some way. LGBT youth used other cues such as political party affiliation, previous conversations with their counselor, and supportive symbols such as LGBT safe zone stickers to determine if their counselor would be supportive. In some cases, students sought assistance from a school counselor not specifically assigned to them based on the opinions of other students regarding the level of support they could expect. Although students believed that counselors are supportive based on their job title, it is not necessarily the case that all counselors are accepting or supportive. In Fontaine’s 1998 study, the four counselors with the most negative attitudes toward LGBT youth reported never having worked

with LGBT youth, suggesting that LGBT youth are able to determine if their school counselor is a supportive resource. Satcher and Leggett (2007), based on their examination of homonegativity among school counselors, believe that school counselors with negative attitudes regarding LGBT students will be less likely to advocate for and appropriately meet the needs of LGBT students. Fortunately, students in the current study had more than one school counselor in their respective schools and could seek help from the counselor with whom they felt most comfortable.

School counselors were found to be supportive in expected ways. Primarily, LGBT students reported that counselors are supportive when they simply listen. Students reported that interventions did not need to be complicated or necessarily result in a specific change or action, but that just listening to their concerns was often enough. Conversely, some students reported that their counselors did not listen as well as they would have liked, but instead interrupted the student’s story by interjecting frequent comments as they shared their concerns.

Concerns about confidentiality between LGBT students and their school counselor were discussed as a potential barrier to a supportive relationship with school counselors. LGBT students expressed confusion about the limits of confidentiality between them and their school counselors. Specifically, students wondered if information they shared with their school counselor would be shared with their parents or others. Ruebensaal (2006) found that school counselors who felt uncomfortable working with LGBT students were more likely to refer students to outside counseling agencies and, in order to make these referrals, breaching confidentiality was necessary. When outside agencies are involved, parents are also involved, which is consistent with concerns raised by students in the current study regarding the limits of confidentiality with school counselors. This practice further marginalizes students who may

not have the financial means to access support via counseling outside of the school system.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

School counselors are well positioned to provide support for LGBT adolescents. If most LGBT adolescents view school counselors as those in the current study do, as supportive, it is important that school counselors live up to students' expectations of them. The PRM model by Turbin et al. (2006) shows clearly how school counselors can serve as a form of both models and support protection. Not only can school counselors serve in these roles, LGBT students clearly have an expectation that they will. Knowing what LGBT youth expect of them, school counselors must seek appropriate training and become familiar with and provide access to resources that are available to LGBT youth both locally and nationally.

Expectations that school counselors assist LGBT youth will only increase because LGBT youth have started coming "out" in greater numbers while in high school, increasing the need for school counselors to provide support for these youth (Rosario et al., 2006). Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, and Braun (2006) also found that LGBT youth are coming out at a younger age, which implies that opportunities for elementary and middle school counselors to provide support may be increasing.

Counselors should be careful about self-disclosing information that could be deemed as unsupportive by LGBT youth. As described earlier in this article, a student believed that those who considered themselves conservative will not be supportive of LGBT students, but after his counselor disclosed that she considered herself conservative, he decided to disclose his sexual orientation anyway, based on

his previously established relationship with his counselor. Other students may have received this disclosure from their school counselor and determined that they may not be someone who would be supportive and chosen not to seek their assistance. The students' belief that political party affiliation is indicative of attitudes toward LGBT individuals is supported by the work of Rainey and Trusty (2007), who found political and religious views to be a predictor of attitudes toward lesbians and gays among counselors in training. School counselors must consider the ramifications of seemingly harmless self-disclosure. School counselors must be careful about self-disclosure with all students, knowing that students may be using this disclosure to make decisions about seeking support and knowing that students discuss their school counselor with other students, which can potentially multiply the effects of self-disclosure.

LGBT YOUTH USED OTHER CUES SUCH AS POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATION, PREVIOUS CONVERSATIONS WITH THEIR COUNSELOR, AND SUPPORTIVE SYMBOLS SUCH AS LGBT SAFE ZONE STICKERS.

LGBT students used their past relationships with school counselors and second-hand information from other students about their school counselor; therefore, school counselors must continue to find ways to establish relationships with all students as a way to encourage LGBT students (and others) to seek their assistance in the future. School counselors who serve as the only school counselor in a school will need to be especially diligent about making themselves available to students, as they may be the only option available to that student.

School counselors will need to be direct and up front with students regarding the limits of confidentiality within the school setting and the limits of confidentiality that may be imposed by specific state and federal laws. The

complicated nature of confidentiality in school settings is an example of the interconnectedness of systems described by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development (1979) that school counselors must be aware of when working with LGBT youth. Adolescents are not yet legal adults and not quite children and therefore exist in a series of interconnected systems (home, school, peers).

In addition to being explicit about the limits of confidentiality within the school setting, school counselors will need to find ways to be more explicit regarding their willingness to assist LGBT students. Counseling offices should create brochures listing any number of issues that counselors are willing to discuss, explicitly listing LGBT issues, among others. Posters or other symbols which can be viewed as affirming of LGBT students should also be displayed within counseling offices. However, it is not enough to

simply post affirming literature as many students may not know what those symbols represent or if they are a clear indication that their specific school counselor will be supportive. School counselors must be verbally supportive in their individual interactions with students as well as their group and school-wide interactions on behalf of all students.

School counselors should not be afraid to broach the subject of sexual orientation with students as hesitation related to discussing sexual orientation with the students could be construed as a lack of support. Day-Vines et al. (2007), while addressing race, ethnicity, and culture, discussed broaching behavior and defined it as, "a consistent and ongoing attitude of openness with a genuine commitment by the

counselor to continually invite the client to explore issues of diversity” (p. 402). These authors believe that broaching behaviors contribute to an environment of emotional safety. Being viewed by students as a school counselor who is open and genuine will not only benefit LGBT students, but will also serve as a measure of model protection (Turbin et al., 2006) for all students.

STUDENTS WONDERED IF INFORMATION THEY SHARED WITH THEIR SCHOOL COUNSELOR WOULD BE SHARED WITH THEIR PARENTS OR OTHERS.

Although the participants in the current study appear to have at least some measure of support in their lives, this is not universally the case. Schools may have more, perhaps many more, youth that self-identify as LGBT but are afraid to come out or seek support. School counselors must be cognizant of this population and can best meet their needs by advocating for inclusive practices within the school system. Contemporary authors describe interventions such as working to include sexual orientation in anti-discrimination policies, providing workshops to faculty regarding fostering a safe classroom environment, and helping to establish and maintain GSA organizations within the school (Goodenow et al., 2006; Savage & Harley, 2009; Stone, 2003). As students in the current study noted, school counselors “have kind of limited amounts of power,” underscoring the need for school counselors to advocate for LGBT youth by collaborating with others within the school system who may have power in specific situations, including principals, teachers, school board members, parents, peers, and community stakeholders.

Some school counselors may be uncomfortable counseling students related to issues of sexual orientation for moral, ethical, or religious reasons, as suggested by Fontaine (1998) and

as evidenced by the recent *Ward v. Wilbanks* (2010) court case regarding a counseling student. DePaul, Walsh and Dam (2009) state that this “uncomfortableness” may be related to fear of the unknown. School counselors have an ethical obligation to learn as much as they can about how to meet the needs of LGBT youth. This recommendation is consistent with the work of Aldeson, Orzeck, and McE-

wen (2009), who found that increased knowledge regarding LGBT topics correlated with positive attitudes toward LGBT individuals. Still other school counselors may be hesitant to discuss the topic with students based on feelings of inadequacy related to addressing the issues, as suggested by Anchen and Chao (2006). School counselors should continue to seek training related to working with LGBT youth and counselor educators must continue to incorporate working with LGBT youth into their curricula.

As students in the current study suggest, school counselors do not need to have a perfect response or solution to a given problem, but can simply listen empathetically. Lemoire and Chen (2005) give support to this assertion in their analysis of applying Carl Rogers’s person-centered therapy when working with LGBT youth. They believe that a person-centered approach can mediate issues such as stigmatization by proving unconditional positive regard, acceptance, and empathy. School counselors work with students over multiple years, which gives them the opportunity to build strong relationships with their students.

Finally, I completed this study while I was a practicing school counselor and it is the type of study that can be replicated by practicing school counselors. Fear of methodology or statis-

tics does not need to prevent school counselors from conducting meaningful research to improve their own practice and inform others. School counselors can use the methodology described, phenomenological inquiry, or other approaches to answer questions that are specific to their school or to answer broader questions about the needs of particular groups of students. For example, research could involve interviewing teachers and administrators regarding improving collaboration to meet student needs or discovering ways in which English language learners seek support from adults within the school system. School counselors engaging in this type of research may find new ways to assist students that have been previously overlooked.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Participants in the current study are all students who are open about their sexual orientation or out while in high school, and this study has revealed details about how these students identify support available from their school counselors. This study did not investigate student who have not self-identified. Those students who are out may have higher levels of family support or internal coping skills that affect how they access support. Another limitation includes an overall lack of diversity in the sample. For example, all students identified as White, only one participant was female, and all participants were from suburban central Pennsylvania, where support may be more readily available when compared to more rural areas. In addition, all participants attended schools where more than one school counselor was available, thus increasing the chances that they could find a supportive school counselor. Finally, all students had parent permission to participate in

the current study and this may be an indicator that these participants live in more supportive home environments, which perhaps mediates the effects of adverse events in their school environment. Given the phenomenon under investigation, support, this is one of the strengths of the current study.

In the future, finding ways to engage a more diverse population of LGBT youth will be important in studies of this type. Additional studies examining the specific needs of transgender students and students of various racial and ethnic identities are needed. Furthermore, future research must examine why some LGBT students continue to do well, regardless of the obstacles they face (Russell, Seif & Truong, 2001; Savin-Williams, 2001). This may be best accomplished by research that answers questions related to how LGBT youth access support from others in their lives including peers, parents, and teachers. Researchers and practitioners can also benefit LGBT youth by determining which protective factors can be changed through intervention as recommended by Savin-Williams (2001). Discovering links between risk and protective factors will help human service providers maximize potential for individuals (Blum, McNeely, & Nonnemaker, 2002).

Although the primary focus of this study was to examine ways that LGBT youth recognize the availability of support via specific relationships with school counselors, other forms of support are undoubtedly also being accessed by participants, such as internal coping skills and intrapsychic strengths (self-esteem, cognitive abilities). As Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Theory of Development illuminates, we all operate within interconnected systems which include our unique personal attributes. These forms of support are consistent with the work of Grotberg (2003), who discusses the ways in which adults can foster resilience in youth. Future studies should examine how these protective factors work specifically with LGBT youth, including how they may

interact with social support provided by school counselors.

CONCLUSION

Findings from the current study are consistent with and lend additional support to the work of other authors. LGBT students in the current study used political and religious views as a way to determine if their school counselor would be supportive. This finding is supported by the work of Rainey and Trusty (2007), who found that those who view gay men and lesbians more positively had less conservative political views and lower levels of religiosity. Although not studying adolescents, Hunt, Milsom, and Matthews (2009) found that lesbian couples were not always comfortable accessing services from service providers, similar to LGBT students in the current study who had concerns that they would be treated differently by their school counselor or make their counselor uncomfortable. Satcher and Leggett (2007) found that school counselors who participated in training related to LGBT issues and those who have previous experience helping LGBT individuals had more positive attitudes toward LGBT individuals. This finding is encouraging as more students are coming out at younger ages (Rosario et al., 2006) and access to training opportunities are more readily available via such organizations such as GLSEN.

The goal of this study was to examine the experiences of LGBT youth regarding accessing support from their school counselor. The findings suggest that LGBT students view school counselors as individuals from whom they can seek support and that LGBT students have sophisticated methods of determining if their school coun-

selor might be supportive, even if they sometimes make incorrect assumptions about support based on these methods. Given the ethical mandates of the profession and more important, the apparent expectations of LGBT students, school counselors must continue to find ways to make themselves available to LGBT youth. ■

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