

Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth in Schools: A Literature Review

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March 19, 2024

Abstract

Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, or any other diverse sexual or gender identity (LGBTQ+) face many challenges in terms of their mental health and wellness. These youth spend most of their adolescent life within a school setting. This review aims to analyze the risk and protective factors of these youth to determine adequate recommendations for setting appropriate supports within schools to help LGBTQ+ youth. Furthermore, this review aims to analyze the role of a school counselor in supporting these youth. By considering state and national laws, best practice, roles, risk and protective factors, and contributing outside factors, LGBTQ+ youth can be better supported in school settings.

Supporting LGBTQ+ Students in Schools

LGBTQ+ youth are at a higher risk for mental health and wellness concerns compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Russel & Fish, 2016). These students have higher rates of suicidality, experiences with violence, and risk for HIV (CDC, 2023). Due to the high disparities in mental health between LGBTQ+ youth and their heterosexual peers, it is critical to examine the spaces that these students are connected to, with schools being a focus. Many youths spend a large amount of time in a school setting, where they may not feel a sense of belonging or security in their safety. Many states in the United States right now are creating laws that affect LGBTQ+ youth while they are in an educational setting, which may cause further disparities. School settings may find it difficult to determine best practices while receiving different messages from state levels in the form of new legislation that directly combats research from mental health professionals. School Counselors have a role in advocating for students and creating an unbiased and supportive environment, making them an essential role when creating an inclusive school environment. Counselors and other supporting staff can play a vital role in supporting and advocating for LGBTQ+ students while at school, while also working to navigate new laws and policies as a school district. Collaborating with administration to review best practices and resources to support LGBTQ+ students to create a safe climate in schools is vital for the mental health and wellness of these students.

Mental Health Disparities

When compared to their heterosexual counterparts, LGBTQ+ youth are at a higher risk for mental health issues such as depression, suicidality, and anxiety. In a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2021) report it was found that 69 percent of LGBTQ+ youth

experienced persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness, while for heterosexual youth this figure was 35 percent. Along with sadness and hopelessness, LGBTQ+ youth were four times more likely to attempt suicide (CDC, 2021). With the recency of the COVID-19 pandemic, these disparities have only risen. A report from The Trevor Project (2023) found that 67 percent of LGBTQ+ youth experience anxiety symptoms and 54% experienced symptoms of depression. Within this data, transgender and nonbinary youth had the highest rates of anxiety and depression (The Trevor Project, 2023).

Along with a higher occurrence of mental health diagnoses, LGBTQ+ youth experience other negative health behaviors and experiences at a high rate. The CDC (2023) has created a ten-year report that highlights the data concerning the overall wellbeing of high school students in the United States. From 2011 to 2021 they found that students identifying as LGBTQ+, or having a same sex partner, were more likely to misuse substances and were also more likely to experience forms of violence. More specifically, these students reported higher rates of bullying, being threatened, or injured with a weapon, dating violence, and sexual violence. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 20 percent of LGBTQ+ youth reported being physically abused at home by their parents, while this number was 10 percent for heterosexual peers (CDC, 2023).

Protective Factors

Knowing that this group of individuals are vulnerable to increased mental health concerns and risk factors, it is important to examine protective factors that may decrease some of these disparities. Creating an awareness of the protective layers that may be added into these students' lives are important for school counselors to consider when working with LGBTQ+ students who may be struggling.

Parental Support

Support from individuals is an important protective factor for LGBTQ+ youth. The Trevor Project completed a national survey, collecting over 34,000 responses from LGBTQ youth. They found that youth that reported having at least one accepting adult were 40 percent less likely to report having attempted suicide within the last year (The Trevor Project, 2019). The form of an accepting adult could come from different systems in a student's life, but it is not always guaranteed that a student will find an accepting adult within their family, making school settings another opportunity for this protective factor to be included in the student's life.

Parental support, including acceptance and loving/caring attitudes towards LGBTQ+ youth, has been found to be incredibly important. However, a lack of this support comes with negative outcomes for these youth. Ryan et al., (2019) examined the relationship between parental rejecting behaviors and the use of illegal drugs, depression, attempted suicide, and sexual health risk. They found that individuals who had higher levels of family rejection when they were adolescents, were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to have higher depression levels, and 3.4 times more likely to use illicit drugs and engage in dangerous sexual behavior, when compared to LGBTQ+ peers that had low or no levels of family rejection.

Ryan et al., (2019) researched how family acceptance, rather than rejection, serves as a protective factor. To measure acceptance, researchers questioned things such as how often family or caregivers openly discussed sexual orientation, how often LGBTQ+ friends were invited to join family activities, and if parents and caregivers brought their youth to any LGBTQ+ events. They found that family acceptance behavior towards LGBTQ+ young adults predicted higher

self-esteem, social support, and general health status. It also was a protectant against depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation and behaviors.

Abreu et al., (2022), examined impact of parental support on depressive symptoms with a diverse sample of LGBTQ adolescents. They found that LGBTQ+ specific support (support specific to sexual identity) was negatively associated with depressive symptoms. They found that youth of color receive less LGBTQ+ specific support than their white counterparts and that transgender and gender queer individual had the highest number of depressive symptoms. Lastly, they found that there was the strongest correlation between parental specific support and depressive symptoms for LGBTQ+ youth of color. While working with LGBTQ+ youth, these are critical factors for school counselors to assess, especially when looking at the intersectionality of a student's identity. Keeping this in mind is crucial for the counselor and other collaborating staff to create the best methods of support or interventions to meet students' needs.

Peer Support

Another source of support for LGBTQ+ youth is through friendships and peers. This support may be especially important for students lacking the protective factor of family support and acceptance, knowing the negative risk factors associated with a lack of it. D'Augelli, (2003) highlights the importance of support through friendships for sexual minority youth. It was found that youth that identified as a lesbian or as bisexual with friends that accepted their sexuality, had higher self-esteem, lower symptom scores (from the Brief Symptom Inventory), and less suicidal ideation in comparison to those that lost friends because of their sexuality. The loss of friends was strongly associated with suicide attempts in the past.

In a study examining family and friends support on LGTBQ+ youth, the importance of supportive friends displayed another component of importance. Shila and Savaya (2011) found

while parents support had more of an impact on LGBTQ+ youths' mental health, friendship support was significant regarding the disclosure of sexual orientation to others. They found that friendship support can help in facilitating the disclosure of sexual orientation to family or others. If disclosure is met with positive reaction and support, this will be an overall benefit to the individual's well-being.

School Curriculum

A study using an Ecological Systems theoretical lens has indicated that curriculum taught in schools could potentially be an important protective factor for students who identify as LGBTQ+. The author notes that inclusive educational curriculum in classrooms has the power to help students connect their real life to classroom curriculum, promoting authenticity and genuineness among students (Leung et al., 2022). This authenticity has been shown to increase students' psychological well-being and decrease homophobic oppression within the classroom (Leung et al., 2022). Furthermore, LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum has led to decreased victimization and negative socioemotional outcomes for students, as well as an overall increased sense of safety (Leung et al., 2022). Students who took courses that taught with LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum also were able to identify their teachers as safe and supportive adults in the school who they felt comfortable sharing information about sensitive topics with (Leung et al., 2022). Unfortunately, not all classrooms have taken to inclusive curriculum, but this study has pointed out that it can mostly be found within humanities, health, and social science classrooms (Leung et al., 2022).

School Policies and Procedures

School policies and procedures regarding discrimination and bullying are protective factors that may have a strong impact on LGBTQ+ students. A recent study has shown that schools with inclusive and anti-discriminatory policies have lower levels of reported discrimination among LGBTQ+ youth (Leung et al., 2022). Some policies may also be considered inclusive and effective when they allow for inclusive events which may celebrate differences among students, such as a “pride prom.” Inclusivity allows for students identifying as LGBTQ+ to feel accepted and safe in their school environment (Leung et al., 2022). Unfortunately, school policies can also be considered a risk factor for these students if they are not inclusive and may have opposite and consequential effects on student’s wellbeing, safety, self-concept, and more.

Lastly, a way to increase inclusivity in schools is by advocating for and implementing a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) club. This organization works in schools and communities to build a sense of belonging and a safe place for LGBTQ+ students to be affirmed in schools. In a Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) report from 2021 they found that student involvement in GSA increased the overall wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students. For students involved in GSA, they reported increased feelings of school belonging, self-esteem, and decreased levels of depression (Truong et al., 2021). Additionally, Day et al. (2019) found that a GSA increased perceptions of peer support for LGBTQ+ students and the presence of a GSA has also been found to decrease bullying experiences (Di Stasio et al., 2023). Lastly, Day et al., (2019) found that schools having positive LGBTQ+ policies increased perceptions of teacher support, and when in the presence of positive policies and a GSA, there was less bullying reported.

Risk Factors

Lack of Social Support

It is known from the above review on protective factors, that social support and acceptance can be instrumental in helping LGBTQ+ children and adolescents feel safe and supported in their everyday environments. However, the opposite must also be examined as a risk factor. Many families adhere to cultural norms specific to their beliefs and practices, which in turn may mean having their own expectations about gender identity and gender roles (SAMHSA, n.d.). These expectations often lead to a difficulty in tolerating gender nonconformity, leading to lack of social support and acceptance for LGBTQ+ youth (SAMHSA, n.d.). Without acceptance and support in these homes, youth identifying as LGBTQ are at risk for suicidal tendencies, mental health disparities, and may even be denied the right to proper health care due to their parents' duty to give them access to it (SAHMSA, n.d.).

Bullying and Victimization

As has been proven repeatedly, LGBTQ+ students are more vulnerable than other students (Robinson and Espelage, 2011). One risk factor that makes these students more vulnerable is often being the target of bullying and cyberbullying. A significant percentage of bullying that occurs today in schools uses language that is consistent with homophobic and transphobic ideations, using slurs and other teasing to bully other students (Robinson and Espelage, 2011). In a study conducted in 2010, it was found that “bullying and homophobic victimization occur more frequently for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth than heterosexual identifying youth” (Robinson and Espelage, 2011, p. 1179). In 2018, a national school climate survey reported similar findings. This survey reported that 98.5% of students who participated had heard the term “gay” being used in a negative and hurtful way, while 70.1% of

these same students had reported being verbally harassed given their sexual orientation (Elife et. al., 2021). In a 2021 study, it was found that rates for bullying victimization and homophobic verbal victimization were three times higher for students who identify as LGBTQ+ than their counterparts (Elife et. al, 2021). It has been concluded that bullying and victimization have a direct strong emotional impact on students and even lead to negative health outcomes (Elife et. al, 2021).

Laws, Policies, and Procedures

In recent years there has been an increase in legislation that directly affect LGBTQ youth. As of April 2024, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is tracking 479 anti- LGBTQ bills in the United States. Some of these laws directly affect LGBTQ students while in school. Some of the areas in schools being targeted are curricula, school facilities, sports, and confidentiality of student's pronouns and sexuality. Movement Advancement Project reports that there are currently seven states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, and North Carolina) that have laws in place that censor the discussion of LGBTQ topics in school curricula (MAP, 2024).

Along with this, there are several laws that are affecting transgender youth in K-12 schools. There are six states (Arkansas, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Tennessee) with a law that ban transgender individuals from using the bathroom and other facilities consistent with their gender identity, if it does not match the sex on their birth certificate (MAP, 2024). The last example are laws that are requiring school staff to let families know if their child is identifying as transgender. These laws are different by state, so while some schools require staff to disclose to parents, other schools just promote the disclosure. This promotion occurs through blurred language in law requirements to report any “health or behavioral” concerns, which could

be interpreted as gender identity and expression, dependent on the school's interpretation (MAP, 2024). There are five states that require schools to inform parents of any inconsistencies of gender identity such as the student asking to be called a different name or pronoun. There are six states (Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Montana, and Utah) with a law that promotes the outing of students to parents, but does not require it (MAP, 2024).

The Trevor Project has conducted research to begin to understand the negative impacts of anti-LGBTQ policies on youth. In a 2022 poll, they surveyed 716 LGBTQ+ youth on their perceptions and the effects of new policies. The Trevor Project (2023) found that 86% of transgender and nonbinary youth reported that the debates about state laws restricting their rights has negatively impacted their mental health, with 55% percent reporting it impacted them “very negatively.” They also reported that a range of survey questions resulted in a significant amount of transgender youth and nonbinary youth feeling angry, stressed, scared, nervous, and sad. These question topics included, laws banning gender affirming care, policies banning transgender students from playing on sports teams to which they identify, schools disclosing to parents or guardians about pronoun and name changes, laws that ban books from schools, and laws that ban LGBTQ topics in school curricula (The Trevor Project, 2023). Overall, the addition of harmful laws and policies regarding LGBTQ+ youth is creating increased feelings of stress and anxiety for LGBTQ+ youth. It is important to consider that this poll was conducted in 2022, and since this time frame an increasing number of policies and bills have been introduced or have advanced. In 2023 The Trevor Project completed another survey and found that 1 in 3 LGBTQ youth reported that their mental health challenges were most of the time or always due to anti-LGBTQ policies and legislation (The Trevor Project, 2023).

An important area for consideration for school counselors and helping professionals is the possibility of LGBTQ+ youth to not disclose information out of fear or from confusion about what laws are in place and what they mean. The Trevor Project Survey reports that 47% of LGBTQ youth that want mental health support are afraid to talk to someone about their mental health concerns. 41% did not want to have to get their parent's or caregiver's permission, and 27% were afraid that they would be ousted (The Trevor Project, 2023). On a positive note, the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) offered a national climate survey where they reported that more than half of the LGBTQ+ students would feel most comfortable talking with school based mental health professionals (Kosciw et al., 2018). However, in 2019 researchers found that 76% of mental health professionals in schools have had no preparation in working with LGBTW youth (GLSEN et al., 2019). Based on these results, it is important that school counselors are prepared and familiarize themselves with issues related to LGBTQ+ youth.

School Counselor Role in Counseling LGBTQ+ Students

Often, the role of a school counselor can be unclear to many individuals including students, administrators, teachers, and even to the school counselor themselves. When working with a population that is as vulnerable as the LGBTQ+ population, it is important to understand what role school counselors have in working with these students. According to the American School Counselor Association, attempting to change an individual's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender forms of expression is *not* a part of the school counselor's role in working with their students (American School Counselor Association, 2022). Instead, a school counselor's role is to work with all students to support them through all parts of identity development, including students who identify as LGBTQ+ (American School Counselor Association, 2022). School counselors are expected to act as an advocate in their role to support

students who are part of the LGBTQ+ population (American School Counselor Association, 2022).

Advocacy

A critical part of the school counseling role is advocacy. Some effective and important ways that a counselor in a school setting can advocate for their LGBTQ+ students includes ensuring these students have access to appropriate facilities on campus, such as adequate bathrooms, promoting policies that will use more inclusive language and can reduce instances of harassment and bullying, as well as educating themselves to understand intersectionality between a students' sexual orientation, gender identity, and race and how these may affect students differently (ASCA, 2022).

One way school counselors may advocate for their students, no matter their identity, can take place through language used in classrooms through restorative circles, and teaching curriculum. Likely this type of advocacy will have an open dialogue facilitated by that counselor. School counselors may use their unique position and expertise to facilitate open dialogue with students or even staff that covers topics such as appreciation and acceptance of individual differences among peers (Leung et. Al. 2022). Classroom-based intervention has been proven to create acceptance within classroom climate, build a positive outlook on students' views of their uniqueness, and create increased willingness and intention to advocate for peers and for self (Leung et. Al., 2022).

Recommendations for New and Future Counselors

New and future school counselors are coming into a challenging role in terms of working with LGBTQ+ youth due to new laws, under-educated staff and administrators, communities that

push back loudly on policies supporting these youth and increasing social rejection amongst school communities and families. It is important for counselors to remember that fostering connectedness and a supportive environment is key to helping students feel safe and as though they belong (GLSEN, 2024). Setting and reinforcing a comprehensive counseling program's vision and mission statements is a standard part of a school counselor's role. Now, it is vital that these statements emphasize values such as equality, safety, and empathy for all students (GLSEN, 2024). Furthermore, school counselors can assess the school climate regularly to track inconsistencies and monitor how well these vision and mission statements are being implemented (GLSEN, 2024). By implementing a school climate survey, counselors will be able to track anonymously how students and staff see the environment in which they work or learn.

Along with being committed to protecting the school climate and fostering an inclusive and safe environment, school counselors should advocate on student's behalf for equality, fairness, and respect amongst staff and administration. Urging administrators to be fair and equal with punishment as well as implementing restorative practices in punishment can be life changing for many of these at-risk youth (GLSEN, 2024).

School counselors may also be asked to help administrators with professional development among staff. This would be a chance for a school counselor to ensure staff are educated on best practices when working with sexual minority students, including fostering inclusive learning environments which may include the curriculum and policies that have been mentioned previously in this review (GLSEN, 2024). School counselors may educate faculty on risk factors that LGBTQ youth face and to enforce the importance of visibility for these students. Simple gestures such as having a pride pin, lanyard, or symbol in an office or classroom can show students that you are a safe and supportive adult in the school.

As mentioned above, school counselors can also use inclusive language when pushing into classrooms to help foster an equitable environment. It may also be a good idea for school counselors to advise Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs in their schools or advocate for the implementation of a GSA. These are two things that school counselors can do to ensure that their students feel safe, and their school climate is inclusive. School counselors may also choose to implement counseling groups that are LGBTQ+ inclusive. Groups like these may be used to help at-risk youth feel social support but to also educate students on equity and inclusion. The same may be said for classroom lessons ran by a school counselor, where topics such as inclusive environments, negative impact of bullying and cyberbullying, positive impact on sense of community, and more would be appropriate topics to bring to classrooms to advocate for minority students, in this case LGBTQ youth.

While navigating how to best advocate for LGBTQ youth it is also critical to look at the legislation and school policies that are in place in your state and the schools you serve. These recommendations are based on the ideal environment, where school counselors and staff can be open with their students on LGBTQ issues. It is known that this is not always the case and is especially difficult in certain states, especially as the political and legislative climate is always changing. If states have laws such as banning correct bathroom and facilities for transgender youth or a requirement to inform parents about pronoun and name changes, it is important to make sure students understand the rules in place. School counselors can advocate for students to have a separate or gender-neutral bathroom to use in the school or in the nurse's office. It is also crucial for school counselors to be upfront on the limits of confidentiality. If working with a student, you can let them know you are a safe and supportive person but if they disclose any information related to gender identity or sexuality, you are required by law, in some states, to

inform their caregiver. Creating a space with clear expectations can keep students safe, so they do not disclose something that they fear may put them at risk or affect their mental health.

Conclusion

Along with the standard developmental and social challenges that adolescents face, LGBTQ+ youth also encounter a myriad of barriers and difficulties in their everyday life due to their sexuality. Many conditions in these students' lives may be serving as either risk factors or protective factors. While working with these students it is important to consider the intersectionality of identities and experiences, when determining how to best support them. It is critical to remember as school counselors that our job is to advocate for the safety and wellbeing of all students regardless of their sexuality, gender identity, or gender expression. Advocating for a safe and affirming school environment and climate is crucial and may take time and dedication. This can take place within the school setting but may also require advocating at local and state levels for fair and safe legislation for LGBTQ+ students. However this advocacy is performed, it is critical that it occur for this group of students who are at risk and must be taken seriously when working in a school setting, especially as a counselor.

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