

Creative Approaches to Serving LGBTQ Youth in Schools

Dennis A. Frank II

Roosevelt University

Edward P. Cannon

University of Colorado, Denver

### Abstract

The psychological, social, and emotional needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth often go unmet in schools. These students may be “out and proud” or they may be silent and invisible; either way, providing effective services to them creates unique challenges for professional school counselors. Providing direct services in schools may be difficult; therefore, indirect methods may create a more hospitable environment for LGBTQ youth. It is the purpose of this article to offer a better understanding of the complexities that sexual minority youth deal with in schools and to offer school counselors and others working in the school environment creative ways to work with LGBTQ students.

### Creative Approaches to Serving LGBTQ Youth in Schools

Studies on the experiences of sexual minority youth suggest that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth are a population in schools at-risk for developing academic problems, as well as social psychopathology and maladaptive behaviors (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; McFarland & Dupuis, 2001). This group encompasses any youth “whose sexual orientation is anything other than exclusively heterosexual, and may include aspects of attraction, behavior, or identity” (Hansen, 2007 p. 839). Sexual minority youth must simultaneously navigate through the change of adolescence and the transition between presumed heterosexuality to a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) identity. While these youth face many of the same biological, cognitive, and developmental conflicts as their heterosexual counterparts (Just the Facts Coalition, 2008; Vare & Norton, 2004), there are some significant differences.

Historically schools have mirrored the beliefs of society. Since American society has traditionally viewed homosexuality to be an adult issue, the concerns and needs of LGBTQ students have often been neglected in the curriculum and in student services and planning (Vare & Norton, 2004, McFarland & Dupuis, 2001). However, research (e.g. GLSEN, 2007) shows that, on average, girls have their first awareness of same-sex attraction at age ten while boys are aware of an attraction to other boys by age nine. Over the past two decades there has been a tendency for youth to come-out as LGBT at younger ages that has been seen previously. Currently, both teen boys and girls begin to self-identify as gay or lesbian by age sixteen as opposed to the early- to mid-twenties that was seen during the 1980s (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Lock &

Steiner, 1999; Tharynger & Wells, 2000; UCLA Mental Health Project, 1996). Current research differs on the effects of early self-identification as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Pilkington & D'Augelli (1995) found that youth who self-labeled at a younger age or who have self-disclosed for a longer period of time tended to be more gender atypical and experienced more victimization due to their orientation. However, Edwards (1996) suggested that the “earlier the embeddedness of the support group, the less traumatic the life of the gay adolescent” (p.349). Thus, the experiences of sexual minority youth are varied. Some experience more victimization if they are more open about their lack of adherence to heterosexual norms while others report having fewer traumatic experiences as a result of earlier experiences in supportive and accepting environments.

Many LGBTQ youth experience developmental transitions directly related to their sexual orientation, such as social pressure to deny their feelings, behaviors and cognitions. Many also experience emotional, verbal, and physical victimization related to their orientation (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008, US Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Research has shown that during high school LGBTQ teens are at higher risks for health issues, high-risk sexual behaviors, and problem behaviors such as suicide, substance abuse and truancy than their heterosexual peers (Cannon, 2005). A contributing factor to this at-risk status is membership in a stigmatized minority group. According to Grossman (1997), the mainstream culture considers homosexual individuals to have an underlying moral failure or to have a faulty sexual orientation. Grossman suggested that the impact of homophobia (Logan, 1996) is so great that LGBTQ youth are “at risk for suicide, chemical abuse, dropping out of school, verbal

and physical abuse, homelessness, prostitution, HIV infection and psychosocial developmental delays” (p.45). More than ten years have passed since these findings were published, but for many LGBTQ youth these problems persist (GLSEN, 2007).

Developmental experiences of sexual minority youth may also include issues of identity confusion, in which youth experience inner turmoil as they explore same-sex attractions that conflict with societal expectations. Many youth recognize the presence of parental expectations, either explicit or implicit, and struggle with how to respond. According to Troiden (1989), identity confusion in LGBTQ youth is due to dissonance between previously held self-images and the new awareness of the existence of feelings or behaviors that could be regarded as homosexual. As youth begin to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender they may experience one of three initial responses: 1) a sense of bewilderment or shame, 2) minimization of the impact of awareness of sexual orientation, or 3) denial. The wider social condemnation of homosexuality contributes to identity confusion in LGBTQ youth and often influences them to keep their orientation secret. The tendency to hide non-heterosexual feelings and the negative emotions associated with them such as guilt, fear of stigmatization, and fear of rejection may affect the youth’s relationships at home and school. LGBTQ youth often respond by disengaging, an action that strains the natural developmental phase of separation-individuation that is characteristic of early adolescence.

As conceptualized by Carrion and Lock (1997), the coming out process is a complex phenomenon that begins with initial consciousness of sexual orientation and moves through to the next phase of exploration of same sex attraction. The types of personal and social support available to LGBTQ youth affect their movement through

this phase. LGBTQ youth often experience the coming out process and the transition from childhood to young adulthood simultaneously. This is an additional factor that strains the sexual minority youth's psychological resources to a greater degree than his/her heterosexual peers. This transition from a presumed heterosexual identity to an LGBT identity is often a solitary journey.

LGBT individuals are the only cultural minority to typically grow up in families and communities that are outside of their cultural group. There are often few, if any, visible LGBT men or women available to help these youth learn how to cope with the societal realities of being a sexual minority. This creates a situation where the LGBTQ youth are not developmentally capable of dealing effectively with the pressures to conform. This is most clearly seen in the schools.

LGBTQ students frequently find the school environment to be not only unwelcoming but also often outright hostile. Verbal harassment is the most frequent form of abuse reported, with up to 89% of students in public schools reporting that they hear homophobia remarks from peers daily (Kosciw and Diaz, 2006; Massachusetts Department of Education, 1999; Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1999). Also, 83% of LGBTQ youth report being verbally harassed, while 6% of nongay youth experience anti-gay harassment at school due to perceived sexual orientation or gender identity (Kosciw and Diaz, 2002; UCLA Mental Health Project, 1996). On average, LGBTQ students hear anti-gay remarks 26 times per day, which breaks down to about once every 14 minutes during the average school day (GLSEN, 2001). Approximately 67% of the LGBTQ students report that these derogatory remarks cause them serious distress (Kosciw and Diaz, 2006).

According to GLSEN's 2007 school climate survey, verbal harassment (e.g., being called names or threatened) was reported by just over 86% of LGBTQ students, of which 72% of the comments were sexual in nature. This type of harassment is often ignored or tolerated by school staff. Students report that teachers or other school personnel were present 43% of the time when homophobic remarks were made and that these comments went unchallenged nearly 83% of the time (Kosciw, Diaz, & Gretak, 2008). Allowing verbal persecution to go unimpeded provides a climate where harassment can escalate into more serious and violent behavior.

This same survey reported that nearly 61% of LGBTQ students said they feel unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation. These students have good reason to fear for their safety in school because in the past year 44% of sexual minority youth reported being physically harassed (e.g. being shoved, pushed) and 22% reported being physically assaulted (e.g. being punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) because of their perceived sexual orientation. In fact, one in six gay youth will be beaten up so badly that they require medical attention (Kosciw, Diaz, & Gretak, 2008).

LGBTQ youth who have been verbally or physically harassed may naturally attempt to protect themselves by avoiding situations where they have been victimized. Feeling unsafe in school has a direct negative impact on their ability to learn. Many gay youth spend every day in survival mode just trying to complete the school day without being injured. In fact, 29% of LGBTQ youth reported skipping at least one class per month because they were afraid to attend out of fear for their safety. An equal number had missed an entire day of school for the same reason (Kosciw, Diaz, & Gretak, 2008).

### The Professional School Counselor's Role With LGBTQ Youth

Whether it is due to academic problems, developmental difficulties, emotional distress, fear of violence, or substance abuse, LGBTQ youth frequently come to the attention of school counselors. Unfortunately, many school counselors have negative feelings about diverse sexual orientations (Beischke & Matthews, 1996; Doherty & Simmons, 1996; Eliason, 2000). However, school counselors are not entirely at fault, as few graduate programs provide any significant formal training to help neophyte counselors understand sexual minorities. Bieschke, Eberz, Bard, & Crouteau (1998) found that “the majority of counseling trainees and professionals have received little or no training about gay and lesbian issues” (p. 735-6). Additionally it has been found that educational training programs have failed to train students in the area of gay and lesbian issues, and that graduates of counseling programs reported feeling incompetent to work with sexual minorities (Flores, O'Brien, & McDermott, 1995; Phillips & Fischer, 1998; Stone, 2003). School administrators and school boards also frequently interfere with the dissemination of positive LGBTQ information due to fear of the backlash from more conservative parents (Pope, 2003). However, research has shown that 4 out of 5 parents support positive interventions that address the day-to-day abuse faced by LGBTQ youth in schools (Kosciw & Diaz, 2002).

Having access to school staff members that are supportive of their needs and issues is an important resource for LGBTQ youth. School counselors are often ideally situated to advocate for and provide services to LGBTQ students (Kosciw and Diaz, 2006; Stone 2003; Whitman, Horn, & Boyd, 2007). However, school counselors often have an inadequate level of knowledge related to LGBTQ issues and a lack of



understanding of how to help LGBTQ youth in their schools (Bieschke, Eberz, Bard, & Crouteau, 1998; Flores, O'Brien, & McDermott, 1995; Phillips & Fischer, 1998). This creates a situation where the school counselor may have the desire to assist the LGBTQ students in their school but may not know how to be effective. The remainder of this article will provide specific recommendations that school counselors can implement to ensure that the school experience is positive for LGBTQ students.

### *Challenge Homoprejudice & Biased Remarks*

Studies on the experiences of LGBTQ youth in schools have identified verbal harassment as being the most prevalent type of abuse experienced. Three-quarters of students report that they hear disparaging comments such as “faggot” or “dyke” many times during the school day. In addition, 90% of students report hearing the expressions “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay” frequently throughout the school day. These terms are used to identify something or someone as stupid or worthless (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytek, 2008). LGBTQ students report that hearing these negative comments at school is distressing to their sense of well-being and safety (Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002).

Students have also reported that school personnel are three times less likely to challenge homoprejudice comments than racist comments (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytek, 2008). Sporadic intervention by school personnel to homoprejudice language may send a message to students that this type of discrimination and bias are not only tolerated but accepted. By demonstrating that anti-gay verbal harassment is unacceptable, school counselors can send a strong message to the student body and create an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance for all students. Interrupting, confronting and disciplining

students who are violating school and societal rules is the responsibility of all school personnel and can be used in a manner that helps to create a more positive climate in their schools not only for LGBTQ students but for the entire school population as well (Reynolds & Koski, 1995). Additionally, LGBTQ students who have supportive school personnel also have higher grade point averages and are more likely to pursue post-secondary education than LGBTQ students who do not have the support of school staff (GLSEN, 2007). The *Think Before You Speak Campaign*, created by the Ad Council, is a valuable resource for school counselors, and can be found at <http://www.thinkb4youspeak.com/>

### *Biblioguidance*

Biblioguidance, frequently referred to as bibliotherapy, is the use of books to help the reader deal with social, emotional, or personal problems. The underlying premise is for clients to identify with literary characters similar to themselves, an association that helps the clients release emotions, gain new directions in life, and explore new ways of interacting (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). School counselors working with LGBTQ adolescents have a duty to address the needs of their students; using biblioguidance is one way in which this may be accomplished.

Currently, LGBTQ teens rarely, if ever, see their history or stories reflected in the literary selections or textbooks used in their classes. This failure to acknowledge the existence and contribution of LGBT people can be destructive to the student's development (Vare & Norton, 2004). The lack of visibility and the inability for students to "see" themselves in the curriculum sends an alienating message of denial and despair. School counselors can combat these messages by building a professional library of

LGBTQ titles to break through this barrier of silence and to create a more hospitable environment. There are a large number of suitable fiction and nonfiction books written for LGBTQ youth, though school counselors need only a small selection of well-chosen books available to recommend to students. Appendix A includes recommendations that represent a cross-section of the literary titles available for LGBTQ students at elementary, middle and high school grade levels. Appendix B includes a brief selection of recommended books for school counselors.

### *Safe Spaces*

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) developed the *Safe Space* concept to visibly identify people and places that are “safe” for LGBTQ students. Typically, the ally places a sticker, banner, or sign with a pink triangle, rainbow flag, or other recognizable gay symbol on their office door, bulletin board, filing cabinet, or desk as an affirmation of LGBTQ people and to let others know that they are a safe person to approach for support and guidance. The *Safe Spaces* program helps to encourage an inclusive environment that is accessible and friendly to all students. This program increases the visible presence of allies who can help shape a school environment that is welcoming to all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, religion, or other differences.

In an ideal world the school administration would formally organize and publicize the program, provide the allies with basic training, and educate the greater school community about the meaning of the stickers and the importance of making the school safe for LGBTQ students. However, this does not need to be formally organized or officially backed to be successfully implemented. Any person committed to equality and

safety for all students can turn their office or classroom into a safe place. In these situations it is very likely that word of mouth will spread the news that there is an ally and a safe place for LGBTQ youth. On their website, GLSEN offers a free how-to kit for developing the *Safe Space* program (<http://www.glsen.org>).

### *Gay-Straight Alliances*

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are student-led, school-based clubs that address LGBTQ issues. One of the unique qualities of these clubs is that membership is open to all students, regardless of their sexual orientation. (Frankfurt, 2000; Hansen, 2007). GSAs typically provide support and foster a sense of belonging for LGBTQ students and their allies. In addition, GSAs help to educate the school community about LGBTQ issues, and advocate for an improved school environment for all students (GLSEN, 2007). Research has shown that the presence of a Gay-Straight Alliance is the strongest indicator of a supportive environment for LGBTQ students (Hansen, 2007).

Sexual minority youth need contact with other teens like themselves in order to minimize the feelings of being alone and alienated (Schneider, 1991). A study from the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth in New York City found that 95% of the youth that they served expressed feelings of being alone, or being the only one who felt the way they did, and of having no one with whom to share feelings (Gover, 1994). Schneider reported that contact with other sexual minority youth helped to develop a positive feeling about being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. However, LGBTQ youth tend to withdraw from typical adolescent experiences because of their fear of being discovered and ridiculed (Grossman, 1997). Students in schools with a GSA were less likely to feel unsafe, less likely to miss school, and more likely to feel like

they belonged at their school than students in schools with no such clubs (GLSEN, 2007).

### *Positive Role Models*

LGBTQ youth are in need of role models who can help counter negative messages and can help to create a more positive, supportive environment. School counselors must be willing to be this role model (Reynolds & Koski, 1995). LGBT counselors who are “out” in the school can serve as role models for the sexual minority youth in their school. By being visible as a LGBT individual, the counselor can help to dispel many of the myths and stereotypes about LGBT people. If the counselor is heterosexual or unable to “come out of the closet” because of the climate, he or she can still be a role model by actively combating heterosexism and homophobia (Cannon, 2005).

School counselors are the natural choice for students looking for someone to talk to about their concerns and feelings. Research has shown that if LGBTQ students are going to see the school counselor they will take the initiative themselves (Fontaine, 1998). Counselors who are seen as welcoming and understanding will find that the LGBTQ students will seek them out.

### Discussion

Blatant harassment and discrimination in schools contributes to a repressive environment that results in LGBTQ students becoming an at-risk population for educational difficulties, social isolation, psychological pathology, and physical harm. The school counselor is ideally positioned to intervene and assist these students. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) adopted a position statement on Gay,

Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth (1995, 2007) that calls for school counselors to affirm LGBTQ youth and to reduce the discrimination and harassment that impedes student development and achievement. This statement provides an outline of the school counselor's role in working with LGBTQ students. Using this outline and the suggestions provided above will assist school counselors with creating a safe and affirming environment for LGBTQ students.

#### Directions for Future Research

This article has presented a variety of recommendations that professional school counselors can implement to improve the day-to-day experiences of LGBTQ students, and to facilitate their continued academic achievement and interpersonal growth. However, there is a need for continued research in this area. Future researchers could investigate the impact that the implementation of these recommendations has on the academic, professional, and personal development of LGBTQ students in the school setting. Additionally, research on the degree to which there is a reduction of LGBT discrimination and harassment within the school themselves due to implementation of these interventions is warranted. Another burgeoning area for exploration is the ever-growing population of middle school students (and younger) who are coming out as LGBTQ. A systemic investigation of school counselors' awareness of, and experiences with, this demographic is need.

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## Appendix A

*Recommended Books for LGBTQ Students**Elementary School (Ages 4-9 years)*

*ABC: A Family Alphabet Book* - by Bobbie Combs (2001). Each letter of the alphabet is assigned a family activity, which is portrayed by a gay or lesbian family.

*Flying Free* - by Jennifer C. Gregg (2004). The story follows the firefly's attempt to escape from a jar after being caught by Violet, the daughter of a lesbian couple.

*Jack and Jim* - by Kitty Crowther (2000). This story follows Jack, a blackbird, who befriends Jim, a seagull, as they deal with the intolerance from other birds and gain acceptance because of Jack's ability to read.

*One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads* - by Johnny Valentine and Melody Sarecky (2004). A story of two children comparing their families and coming to realize that a father is a father, regardless of discerning factors.

*The Different Dragon* - by Jennifer Bryan, Bobbie Combs, and Danamarie Hosler (2006). A bedtime story about a boy with two lesbian mothers who goes on a magical adventure with an unforgettable dragon.

*Uncle Bobby's Wedding* – by Sarah Brannen (2008). Chloe, a young guinea pig, worries that she won't be Uncle Bobby's favorite person anymore after he marries his boyfriend Jamie. Chloe learns she will not be losing an uncle, but gaining one.

*Middle School (Ages 8 – 12 years)*

*And Tango Makes Three* - by Peter Parnell, Justin Richardson, and Henry Cole (2006). Based on a true story, this story follows two male penguins that fall in love and adopt an orphaned penguin named Tango.

*Asha's Mums* - by Rosamund Elwin, Michele Paulse, and Dawn Lee (2000). Asha, an African-Canadian girl, and her classmates discuss what it means to have two mothers.

*The Sissy Duckling* - by Harvey Fierstein and Henry Cole (2005). Elmer the duck is taunted for his non-gender conforming behavior and is rejected by his family. However, his differences are accepted when he becomes a hero by saving his father.

*Totally Joe* - by James Howe (2005). Joe is a 7<sup>th</sup> grader who has the assignment of writing an alphabiography (presenting his life from A to Z), helps him to come to terms with his sexuality and the discrimination of others.

*Junior & High School (Ages 12 years +)*

*Am I blue? Coming out from the silence* - by Marion Dane Bauer (1995). A collection of GLB short stories touching on topics such as coming out, first love, homophobia, and gay parents.

*Annie on My Mind* - by Nancy Garden (New Edition 2007). Considered a classic of lesbian teen literature, this is the love story of two high school girls who swear to stay true to their love despite outside pressures.

*Breathe* - by Blair Poole (2005). An African-American teenager living in urban hip-hop culture must keep his sexuality a secret in the face of his homophobic friends and extremely religious family.

*Eight Seconds* - by Jean Ferris (2003). A story about two teenage rodeo competitors coming to terms with and coming out as being gay.

*Empress of the World* - by Sarah Ryan (2001). A teen girl must sort out her feelings toward other girls and toward boys at summer camp when she finds herself in love with another female camper.

*Figure It Out* - by N. S. B. (2007). A true coming of age story following the struggle of coming to terms with and coming out as lesbian, as detailed in nine years of collected journal pages.

*GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Queer and Questioning Teens* - by Kelly Huegel (2003). For teens questioning their sexuality or gender identity (or their close friends & family), this book is Queer 101, and covers a vast array of topics and includes advice and quotes from GLBTQ adults.

*Hear Me Out!: Lesbian, Gay, and Transgender Teens Tell Their Stories* - by Planned Parenthood of Toronto (2004). Teens of diverse cultures and backgrounds tell their own stories about being different.

*Hero* - by Perry Moore and TK (2007). High school basketball star Thom Creed isn't just coping with being gay – he's also coping with being an undercover superhero in a heterocentric world.

*Lavender Teasers: Fifteen Gay and Lesbian Mystery Puzzlers* - by Hugh Havtikess (2000). Fifteen mystery stories centering on LGBT characters and themes.

*Not the Only One: Lesbian and Gay Fiction for Teens* - by Jane Summer (2004). A collection of coming of age stories dealing with coming out, love, independence, and homophobia by many of today's most popular authors.

*Out Law: What LGBT youth should know about their legal rights* - by Lisa Keen (2007). An analysis of the legal issues affecting GLBTQ teenagers in the USA.

*Revolutionary Voices* - by Amy Sonnie (2000). A collection of writing by youth who are a part of the queer movement and culture, who discuss topics ranging from what it means to be gender queer, from passing and homophobia, to love and activism.

*The Full Spectrum: A New Generation of Writing about Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Other Identities* – by David Levithan & Billy Merrell (2006). 40 essays, mini-autobiographies, poems, and photographs that chronicle the lives of 21st-century LGBT young people, ages 13 to 23.

*The Gay and Lesbian Guide to College Life (College Admissions Guides)* - by Princeton Review (2007). A resource for GLBTQ teens and their parents and counselors, this guide covers GLBTQ friendly-schools as well as tips on making the most out of college as a queer individual.

*The World in Us: Lesbian and Gay Poetry of the Next Wave (Stonewall Inn Editions)* – by Michael Lassell and Elena Georgiou (2001). A collection of poetry by openly LGBTQ authors of all ages, this volume spans topics from traditional poetry to newer slam and spoken word poetry.

*Trans Forming Families: Real Stories about Transgendered Loved Ones, (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)* - by Mary Boenke (2003). A book oriented to families, it provides vignettes of parents with transgendered children, the lives of transgendered adults, as well as the stories of others affected by the transitioning person.

*Transparent: Love, Family, and Living with the T in Transgendered Teenagers* - by Cris Beam (2007). The author details the lives of transgender teens she encountered while working in a trans support center in Los Angeles, as well as including writing and advice from the youth themselves.

*When You Don't See Me* - by Timothy James Beck (2007). A gay Midwestern boy tries to make a new life in New York as he navigates self-acceptance, economic troubles, and love.

*Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History* - by Robert Adrich (2003). Over 500 entries of some of the most famous (and not so famous) LGBT persons throughout history, spanning from pre-Roman era to more recent times.



## Appendix B

*Recommended Books for School Counselors*

*Gay-Straight Alliances: A Handbook for Students, Educators, and Parents* – by Ian K.

MacGillivray (2007). This guide explains exactly how to begin a gay-straight alliance. There are chapters for students, counselors and teachers, principals and superintendents, and parents.

*Lesbian and Gay Voices: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide to Literature for*

*Children and Young Adults* - by Frances Ann Day (2000). A resource for counselors, librarians, and others who will be providing services to GLB youth, this book provides information on positive books for LGBTQ and their families.

*The Heart Has its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content,*

*1996-2004* – by Michael Cart & Christina A. Jenkins (2006). A comprehensive overview and detailed discussion of 35 years of young adult books with gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (GLBTQ) content.

*Understanding Gay and Lesbian Youth: Lessons for Straight School Teachers,*

*Counselors, and Administrators* - by David Campos (2005). Discusses the current state of affairs for LGB students in schools, lessons for working with LGB students and strategies for creating a safe and accepting school atmosphere.