

Bolstering School Based Support by Comprehensively Addressing the Needs of an  
Invisible Minority: Implications for Professional School Counselors

Jennifer R. Curry

Louisiana State University

B. Grant Hayes

University of Central Florida

### Abstract

The ethical imperative for school counselors to intervene on behalf of marginalized students has been well documented. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth (LGBTQ) have been noted to be at increased risk for school dropout, truancy, lower school achievement, suicidal ideation and attempts, and depression. School counselors are in a unique position to foster the well-being of LGBTQ youth. This manuscript gives concrete strategies for intervening with LGBTQ youth through comprehensive school counseling programming.

## Bolstering School Based Support by Comprehensively Addressing the Needs of an Invisible Minority: Implications for Professional School Counselors

More than ever professional school counselors (PSCs) are called upon to promote cultural awareness and sensitivity while concomitantly demonstrating courage to advocate for marginalized populations (Bemak & Chung, 2005). Historically, schools in the United States (U.S.) designed educational agendas and curricula to meet the needs of the primarily white, Protestant majority culture. However, the manifestation of large scale political and social systems level change has dramatically altered demographics of U.S. schools (Durodoye, 1998) and the diversity of students reflects the increasingly pluralistic composition of society (Hobson & Kanitz, 1996; Johnson, 1995; Ramirez, Lepage, Kratchowill, & Duffy, 1998). It has been estimated that by the year 2050, nearly 60% of children in the U.S. will be of minority ethnic group status (Yeh & Arora, 2003) and school counselors must decide how best to navigate and serve the various diverse needs, abilities, and resources of students—a challenge that at times may seem overwhelming (Holcomb-McCoy, 2001; Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2003). According to the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) position statement on *The Professional School Counselor and Cultural Diversity* (2004) multiple differences exist across the education system including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, abilities and more.

Of the diversities among students, individuals of homosexual orientation are often labeled the invisible minority due to the absence of a clear indication of their minority status. Often, their orientation is not recognized by others, thereby remaining hidden and unacknowledged (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006). It is

commonly estimated that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (those questioning their sexual orientation) (LGBTQ) individuals constitute approximately 10% of the U.S. population (The National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2007). According to Herring and Furgerson (2000), there are about three million LGBTQ youth between the ages of 10 to 20. In a compilation report of multiple studies, the Safe Schools Coalition of Washington (1999) found that in Seattle, 4.5 % of ninth to twelfth graders identified themselves as gay, lesbian, and bisexual. Four percent of students in that same study indicated that they were “Not Sure” of their sexual orientation. Similarly, the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey [MYRBS] (2005) found that 5% of students surveyed reported having same sex sexual contact and 4% described themselves as gay, lesbian, and bisexual. One of the difficulties inherent in ascertaining a consistently, statistically sound percentage of the prevalence of identified LGBTQ youth is that the majority of statistics are based on self-report. Given that many youth may fear repercussions or have not fully developed a sexual concept and/or identity, it is possible that many of the statistics conservatively represent the actual numbers of LGBTQ youth.

While sexual identity development is a milestone for all adolescents, LGBTQ adolescents have been identified in the literature as having higher risk of suicide, truancy, school dropout, depression, suicidal ideation, homelessness and substance abuse (Herring & Furgerson, 2000; McFarland, 1998; Russell & Joyner, 2001; The National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2007). Much of these risks are manifestations of the stress experienced by these youth. Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, and Gwadz (2002), stated that gay-related stress, “refers to the stigmatization of being, or being perceived to be [GLBT] in a society in which homosexuality is negatively sanctioned” (p.

967). In regard to sexual activity, sexual minority youth had higher rates of sexual risk behaviors than other youth their age (MYRBS, 2006). Specifically, the MYBRS survey (2006), conducted in public high schools in Massachusetts with over 3500 participants found,

Sexual minority youth were significantly more likely than other students to report lifetime sexual intercourse (72% vs. 44%), sexual intercourse before age 13 (18% vs. 4%), sexual intercourse with four or more partners in their lifetimes (32% vs. 11%), and recent sexual intercourse (55% vs. 33%). Among students who ever had sexual intercourse in their lifetimes, sexual minority youth were significantly more likely than other students to report having been or gotten someone pregnant (15% vs. 4%) and having been diagnosed with HIV or another STD (10% vs. 5%). (p. 67)

Further, Herring and Furgerson identified eight issues surrounding sexual orientation difficulties that they believe PSCs need to be aware of: (1) misunderstanding and misinformation, (2) invisibility, (3) identity development, (4) lack of support systems, (5) family problems, (6) violence, (7) sexual abuse, and (8) sexually transmitted diseases.

In regard to school achievement and performance, LGBTQ youth are more likely than their heterosexual peers to report higher rates of violence against them. Further, there were significant associations found between increased acts of violence and lower school achievement (MYRBS, 2005). Moreover, students who identified as sexual minorities were more likely to carry a weapon, be the victim of bullying and dating violence, have been threatened or injured with a weapon, and to have experienced sexual contact against their will. They were also more likely to report drinking and/ or

binge drinking within the last thirty day; in addition, they were more than twice as likely to attempt suicide and to report drug use behaviors (MYRBS, 2006).

It is important that teachers and counselors be trained and prepared to embrace student diversities as positive and essential to the learning landscape, including the uniqueness of LGBTQ youth (Mathison, 1998). As part of a comprehensive school counseling program, PSCs are ethically obligated to advocate for, provide services to, and establish safety networks for special concerns that affect students within the school system (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005; Davis, Williamson, & Lambie, 2005). Specifically, according to the Preamble of the *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2004),

Each person has the right to be respected, be treated with dignity and have access to a comprehensive school counseling program that advocates for and affirms all students from diverse populations regardless of ethnic/racial status, age economic status, special needs, English as a second language or other language group, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity/ expression, family type, religious/ spiritual identity and appearance.

Further, the *ASCA Position Statement: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth* (2004), asserts that the professional school counselors' role necessitates that they educate teachers, administrators, and staff about issues of concern for LGBTQ students, promote diversity through intentional large group guidance programming, and construct services specific to the LGBTQ population. Due to the high risk status of LGBTQ students, it is imperative that PSCs explore the efficacy of interventions designed to improve the mental health and school achievement for

these youth. This article is designed to provide the foundation for professional school counselors to include and implement direct service components of an overall comprehensive, developmental program designed to assist LGBTQ students.

### Professional School Counselor's Role

The data suggest that LGBTQ adolescents are at an increased risk for dropout, truancy, lower academic achievement, increased depression, and suicide attempts (ASCA, 2005). To work effectively with this population, PSCs must have an understanding regarding homophobia and heterosexism and the behaviors displayed in the school system that are associated with these beliefs. Homophobia is the "irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality of homosexuals" (Merriam-Webster, 2002). Homophobic behaviors displayed by students toward those perceived as or identified as LGBTQ may include bullying, verbal or physical aggression, gossiping, ostracizing, or ignoring LGBTQ students. Homophobic comments may also be made by teachers and staff, including unequal treatment in the classroom or making fun of students' mannerisms. In the National School Climate Survey (1999), 86.7 percent of LGBTQ youth reported that they sometimes or frequently heard homophobic remarks in their schools from, over one third of which reportedly came from faculty or school staff.

Heterosexism is different from homophobia and may be described as a belief that heterosexual orientation is preferable to or better than a homosexual orientation. Heterosexism often involves ignoring or excluding the possibility of homosexuality. For instance, assuming that all students have a mom and dad (versus a mom and mom) or assuming that boys want to date girls and girls want to date boys. Heterosexist

assumptions and comments tend to further alienate LGBTQ students. It is critical that PSCs explore and become aware of their own homophobia, heterosexism, and biases about sexual orientation (ASCA Position Statement, 2004). Further, according to the *ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2004), section E.2. Diversity, professional school counselors have an obligation to be self aware--to honestly assess their own biases and judgments regarding other groups, including their own cultural encapsulation (Harris, 2002). PSCs should continually seek correct information about others and use this information to inform their practice in ways that benefit all students. It is also important that when school counselors encounter a diversity issue that they are not trained to address, they seek consultation and supervision to ensure appropriate client services (ASCA, 2004). Some basic issues in counseling that reflect a biased or limited competence for working with diverse populations include: an emphasis on individualism, dependence on abstract words, working with the individual and neglecting client support systems, linear thinking, focus on changing individual actions instead of systemic problems, and the neglect of historical events and individual culture (Hobson & Kanitz, 1996).

These biases present explicitly in language, affect, and by intentional exclusion of LGBTQ perspectives and experience. Furthermore, implicit, covert and unintentional demonstrations of homophobia and heterosexism by PSCs may surface through presumptions of student heterosexuality, or by not confronting the blatant homophobic remarks of administrators, teachers, and students. This alienates students from the school counseling program and fosters the underutilization of school counseling services by the students who desperately need them.

In addition to becoming aware of homophobic and heterosexist acts, PSCs should also be knowledgeable of the coming out process, systems level oppression of the LGBTQ population, and risks specific to LGBTQ students. Further, PSCs should familiarize themselves with resources within their community for LGBTQ youth and their families, such as Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). Referring students and their families to these additional support networks is part of the PSCs indirect service role provision as delineated in the *ASCA National Model (2005)*.

### *Advocacy*

The Advocacy Competencies for counselors (Lewis, Arnold, House & Toporek, 2003) were endorsed by the American Counseling Association at a Governing Council March 20-22, 2003. These competencies encompass six major domains including (a) client/student empowerment, (b) client/ student advocacy, (c) community collaboration, (d) systems advocacy, (e) public information, and (f) social/ political advocacy. All six of these areas are forums in which the professional school counselors work. The role of PSCs as advocates, leaders of systemic change, and proponents of social justice is well supported in school counseling literature and through the *ASCA National Model (2005)* (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Goodman, Liang, Helms, Latta, Sparks, & Weintraub, 2004; House & Martin, 1999; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Brown & Trusty, 2005). Specifically, the *ASCA National Model* delineates advocacy as one of the four major themes of school counseling programs along with leadership, collaboration, and systemic change. In school settings, PSCs often have to advocate for their clients, their profession, and for their own school counseling programs

in order to deliver the best possible services to all stakeholders (ASCA, 2005). PSCs may serve as advocates for LGBTQ students who experience bullying, fear of coming to school, and discrimination from school administration, faculty, and/ or staff by comprehensively addressing this population's needs. We will look at each of the *National Model's* direct service components and provide suggestions for integrating prevention and intervention activities within the context of each.

### *Large Group Guidance*

Large group guidance curriculum and presentations are one direct service component of a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2005). According to the *National Model* (ASCA), all students should have access to a school counseling program including a guidance curriculum aimed at prevention and attainment of academic, career, and personal/ social competencies. During middle school and high school, adolescents become more cognitively prepared to conduct abstract thinking and perspective taking; this subsequently leads to the development of empathy which promotes pro-social behavior and unselfish caring while concomitantly demoting self interest behavior—such as bullying (Robinson & Curry, 2006). Counselors can conduct classroom presentations aimed at fostering empathy development and understanding diversity based on the personal/ social standards of the *National Model* (ASCA).

### *Small Group and Individual Counseling*

Specifically, the ASCA (2007) *Position Statement: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth* states that school counselors promote awareness of issues related to sexual orientation/gender identity among students. Activities that

may be particularly salient in regards to assisting LGBTQ youth include those targeting bullying, sexual harassment, diversity, self awareness, and empathy.

Another direct service is support group counseling. PSCs are clearly encouraged to incorporate group as a direct service component for remediation in the overall counseling program according to the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) *National Model* (2005). Before introducing the idea of a LGBTQ Group, PSCs should write a comprehensive, thorough counseling group proposal that outlines the group process for all stakeholders. Sociopolitical issues for PSCs conducting LGBTQ groups may initially reside in the process of "selling the group" to administrators, teachers, and parents. For example, the first author attempted to run a support group for LGBTQ students in a high school and was told by the assistant principal, "We can't do that. Parents will think we are turning their kids gay." Therefore, PSCs need to develop a thoroughly written group proposal that outlines the necessity for the group in an educational format that stakeholders can understand. The group proposal should encompass the following: (1) a rationale for the group including risk factors for LGBTQ youth and how this may be linked to school achievement; (2) the referral and screening process for potential members (including number of participants); (3) group meeting logistics including times, location, length and duration of the group; (4) informed consent outlining parameters of confidentiality, risks of participation, and techniques to be used; and (5) baseline and outcome measures such as school attendance records, school safety surveys, depression inventories, and academic grades.

PSCs should apply theoretical knowledge to group facilitation including therapeutic factors, Rogerian techniques, and group leadership theory (Rogers, 1987;

Yalom, 1995). Counselors will also need to be cognizant of differences in the group counseling process for this population; specifically, group development and termination. According to Yalom, “therapeutic change is an enormously complex process and occurs through an intricate interplay of various guided human experiences” (p. 3). These experiences are referred to as therapeutic factors in group counseling and, as stated by Yalom, eleven different experiences constitute the primary factors. Of those eleven factors, the following may be especially beneficial to LGBTQ youth: (a) instillation of hope, (b) universality, (c) imparting of information, (d) interpersonal learning, (e) group cohesiveness, and (f) catharsis.

In both group and individual counseling with LGBTQ youth, Rogerian techniques are helpful and include providing unconditional positive regard, empathy, active listening, and joining with the client. Other techniques that may be particularly helpful are narrative, psychodrama, bibliotherapy, expressive arts, music therapy, and cinema therapy. To be effective at delivering individual counseling for LGBTQ youth, PSCs should focus on listening to the client’s story in a supportive, non-judgmental manner. It is also appropriate for PSCs to link LGBTQ youth with resources in the community to address further needs manifesting outside of the school setting.

### *Faculty Inservice Training*

PSCs are in a key position to be active advocates for LGBTQ students by ensuring that they are provided with equal access to services and opportunities to participate in school activities. Part of being an advocate is providing education to multi system stakeholders about the issues faced by LGBTQ youth. One critically important point to convey is that LGBTQ students tend to find school to be a hostile or dangerous

environment and appear to be targeted recipients of bullying behavior and other safety issues. It also appears that many students have heard disparaging comments about LGBT individuals, including statements by teachers and staff. Further, they must educate other professionals to recognize bias treatment and negative attitudes toward students of differing cultures and groups (Durodoye, 1998). Faculty should receive diversity training to assist them in recognizing their own biases including prejudice through language and actions, they should be trained to recognize bullying behavior, identify effective ways to intervene, and have knowledge of--and skills for--supporting LGBTQ youth. PSCs can facilitate this type of faculty in-service training as part of a comprehensive school counseling program.

### Conclusion

Creating balance and equity in service delivery and promoting the positive attributes of diverse populations including LGBTQ youth is a responsibility of school counselors (ASCA, 2008). Infusing diversity in the school culture requires methodical, deliberate preparation and consistency. PSCs should use language that reflects acceptance, demonstrate a desire to learn about students and their cultures, and engage students in dialogue that promotes awareness and encourages cultural understanding (ASCA, 2007). In addition, PSCs should not treat students as though they are uni-dimensional (such as looking at students as though they are only Black, Asian, Jewish, etc.), ask students to speak as a representative of their whole culture, or avoid uncomfortable dialogue about diversity issues. One of the most important things the PSC can do is to help students and teachers become aware of the biases and judgments they have about other groups (Harris, 2002). They should also encourage

others to examine how preconceived notions and faulty beliefs impact cross-cultural relationships.

This article was meant to address the role of PSCs in addressing the needs of LGBTQ youth based on the *ASCA National Model (2005)*. PSCs are in a position to promote understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ youth through comprehensively addressing their needs within the context of a fully implemented, school counseling model. In addition, PSCs can continue to serve as advocates for policies and practices that support LGBTQ youth and allow them equal access to a safe education in a welcoming school climate.

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### Author Note

Jennifer Curry, Ph. D. is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Practice at Louisiana State University. B. Grant Hayes is the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies in the College of Education at University of Central Florida. All correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Jennifer Curry at [jcurry@lsu.edu](mailto:jcurry@lsu.edu).