

A School Counselor's Guide to Supporting and Protecting

Students who are Homosexual in High School:

A Literature Review and Analysis

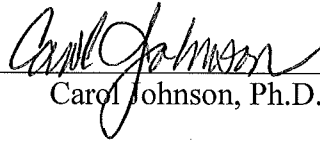
by

Christina McGee

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Carol Johnson, Ph.D.

The Graduate School

University of Wisconsin-Stout

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**The Graduate School  
University of Wisconsin-Stout  
Menomonie, WI**

**Author:** McGee, Christina M.

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ABSTRACT

The number of students who are identifying as homosexual is increasing as are the suicide statistics for this population. Gay and lesbian students have specific needs apart from their heterosexual counterparts including dealing with homophobia, experiencing lack of role models, and living with social isolation. These students are not only at risk for attempting or completing suicide but are also at-risk for school avoidance, not graduating from school, and being on the receiving end of verbal and physical taunting. One of the most significant times and the most difficult time for a Gay Lesbian Bi-sexual Transitioning, or Questioning (GLBTQ) student's life is the identification and coming-out process. Each stage of this process carries its own emotions and risk factors. There is a limited amount of literature addressing this issue and a need to increase school awareness, acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality. The school counselor can help create a safe and welcoming atmosphere within the school environment by

starting a support group or club addressing GLBTQ issues, address homosexuality in the health curriculum, and create and conduct trainings and workshops for all staff members.

Other strategies include creating a GLBTQ-supportive office, establishing and enforcing a nondiscrimination/anti-harassment policy (that includes sexual orientation), offering GLBTQ specific counseling skills, and making the library and classrooms inclusive by adding GLBTQ information and blending the topic into general curriculum. If schools provide a safe environment it is possible that more students may feel safe and the graduation rates might increase as the suicide attempts decrease.

The Graduate School  
University of Wisconsin Stout  
Menomonie, WI  
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## Chapter I: Introduction

According to Campbell and Remafedi, 10% of the American population is identified as gay or lesbian (cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995). This means an estimated 3 million of the 29 million adolescents in the United States in 1989, can be identified as individuals who are homosexual (Gonsiorek; Herdt, cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995). Anderson's research suggests that there are 250 million Americans, and estimates that as high as 10% of the overall population, nearly 25 million individuals, has had a homosexual experience (Anderson, 1994). Using either set of data indicating an increase in either identifying as or experiencing a single homosexual experience, the numbers keep climbing and the homosexual community is slowly becoming a prevalent group in society. This large demographic of individuals deserves attention through research, literature and formal training showing how school counselors can better support gay students through one of the toughest times in their life, adolescence.

The most vital reason that adolescents need attention from parents, caring adults and school counselors is the incidence of suicide. "The National Center for Health Statistics (1993), reported that there are slightly more than 30,000 suicides annually in the United States" (cited in McBee & Rogers, 1997, p. 143). "Suicide was the second leading cause of death of young people, ages 15 to 19, in the United States in the mid-1980s" (Davis & Sandoval, cited in Proctor & Groze, 1994, p. 505). Furthermore, the suicide rate has increased a total of 300% over the past two decades accounting for 5,000 youth deaths in the United States (National Center for Health Statistics, cited in Proctor & Groze, 1994). Though research is limited, it suggests that gay and lesbian adolescents may be two to three times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. A similar study by D'Augelli and Serscherberger, reported that 42% of lesbian and gay youth had attempted suicide (cited in McBee & Rogers, 1997). A study by

Roesler and Deisher also suggested a high rate of suicide among gay and lesbian adolescents (cited in Proctor & Groze, 1994). Of the 61 male homosexual adolescents who participated in this study, 31% had attempted suicide and 37% had made multiple attempts. In research conducted by Gibson, 20% to 35% of gay youths interviewed had attempted suicide while 50% had suicidal ideation; this included serious depression and suicidal feelings (cited in Proctor & Groze, 1994). Gibson found that suicide attempt rates for homosexual adolescents were more than three times higher and their suicidal ideation was twice as high as their heterosexual counterparts (Proctor & Groze, 1994).

“Several studies have identified factors associated with gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth suicide, including low self-esteem, social isolation, depression, negative family interactions, and negative social attitudes” (Proctor & Groze, 1994, p. 508). Hidden and often invisible to school faculty, “these youth may experience greater social discrimination, depression, isolation, low self-esteem, and violence than their heterosexual counterparts (Hunter, 1990; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991; Rofes, 1989; Sondheimer, 1982), all of which exacerbate their desperation and augment the risk for suicide” (cited in Proctor & Groze, 1994, p. 508).

### *Rationale*

The murder of Matthew Shepard and the recent school shooting in California, where 15 year old Lawrence King was shot by a classmate for being openly gay, demonstrates the need for parents, teachers, and school counselors to stop ignoring the issue of homosexuality. There is a need for more information pertaining to the issues that affect the GLBTQ students in schools. It is imperative that educators become trained to aid, advocate and provide safe environments for all children, especially students who are homosexual.

“Of the 34 million adolescents in the United States, an estimated 10 percent are also struggling with the isolation and rejection of being homosexual” (Smith & McClaugherty, 1993, p. 33). These adolescents are in serious danger and adults need awareness of how to help.

Remafedi (1987) reported that among a nonclinical sample of gay-identified teens, 34% had attempted suicide, 31% had previously been hospitalized for psychiatric problems, 48% had run away from home, 58% had regularly abused substances, and 72% had consulted mental health professionals (cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995, p. 114). Another frightening statistic is that one-third of all successful adolescent suicides are students who identify as being homosexual (Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995).

Research has shown that many adolescents who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual met with a counselor during their teen years. The most common concerns were social, emotional, and cognitive isolation; rejection by family; harassment and violence; suicidal ideation and suicide attempts; anxiety; depression; job-related problems; drug use; sexual abuse; grief issues related to relationships; and desire to clarify or change sexual orientation. (Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995, p. 115)

Research suggests that past counseling strategies have not had a significant positive impact on the students or their parents (Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995). There is a direct correlation between this lack of success with counseling strategies and the limited research that exists on this population. “From 1977 to 1993, only three articles on gay and lesbian adolescents were published in *The School Counselor*, the primary professional journal for a counseling group which has access to the entire population of adolescents” (Fontaine & Hammond, 1996, p. 817). The success of counseling adolescents who are homosexual is dependent on better training and access to more literature on this topic.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Discrimination against homosexuals is thought to be widely spread. As a country much has been done for civil rights during the last half century, but homosexual rights have seen the least amount of progress. Despite the hard work of many, homosexual high school students still experience prejudice that is shameful in light of this progress. Society continues to stigmatize and marginalize homosexuality (Harrison, 2003, p. 107).

“The lesbian or gay adolescent is perhaps the least visible member of a minority population for whom invisibility is a significant problem” (O’Connor, cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995, p. 114). This invisibility is dangerous to adolescents who go unseen and have little or no support during their transition to adulthood combined with identifying their own sexuality (Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995). “To avoid rejection and hostility, adolescents who are homosexual are pressured to hide their sexual identities” (Harrison, 2003, p. 107).

This issue, combined with the normal developmental concerns of being a teenager, can create distinctive problems for adolescents who are homosexual. These students may be at risk for “social stigmatization, isolation, depression, suicide, abuse, and rejection by their families and friends” (Harrison, 2003, p. 107). Throughout this difficult time, both students and their families need support and guidance (Harrison, 2003).

Some agree that a school counselor’s responsibility is to support and protect the students who are homosexual within their school. All students, regardless of their gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation, deserve the right to attend school everyday feeling safe and free to share their opinions and views without fear of harassment.

### *Purpose of the Study*

Because there are limited resources, related literature and formalized training available for school counselors to help students who are homosexual, the purpose of this study is to provide a foundation of information on helping teenagers who are homosexual and offer possible strategies for further research. This review of literature may offer suggestions to help high school students who are homosexual by providing their school counselors with current information on the needs of this population. Risk factors for GLBTQ students, detailed information on the coming-out process and strategies to better accommodate these students should be included in the training. Due to the strong correlation between adolescents who identify as homosexual and suicide attempts, and the increasing rate of students who are identifying as homosexual, this need for training and literature is important. Specific trainings on working with the GLBTQ community need to be recommended for all staff in the high school with the goal being school counselors and educators who are better prepared to support and provide safe environments for homosexual high school students.

### *Objectives*

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify traits of the GLBTQ population that put them at risk of depression and suicide.
2. To review literature to determine specific strategies and training that could benefit school counselors specifically and all school staff members in general when working with GLBTQ students.
3. To support students who are homosexual by offering suggestions for creating a school atmosphere that is not only safe but tolerant and accepting of the GLBTQ community.

### *Definition of Terms*

Listed below are some terms and definitions which may help in the understanding and assisting the homosexual demographic in a school setting.

*Coming-out Process* - The process an individual who is homosexual goes through after identifying as homosexual and then deciding to disclose to family or friends.

*GLBTQ* - This acronym is used to combine these different groups of people: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth.

*Homosexuality* - "Homosexuality is defined as consistent fantasy, interest and arousal toward a person of the same sex" (Smith & McClaugherty, 1993, p. 33).

*Homophobia/Stigma* - "The recognized or unrecognized fear or hatred of homosexuality or homosexuals that is present in both heterosexuals and homosexuals" (Slater, cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995, p. 115).

### *Assumptions of the Study*

It is assumed that the research evaluated and used for this literature review is reliable, valid, and unbiased. Another assumption is that the GLBTQ student has additional struggles when compared to their heterosexual counterpart, especially, during the identification and coming out process, and educators in general wish to provide safe environments for them.

### *Limitations of the Study*

The lack of literature and research specific to this demographic of GLBT students of school age may limit this literature review and findings. Also, since specific counseling methods for this demographic have either been nonexistent or have not been shown to be effective for this demographic, many of the identified strategies for school counselors are new and untested for

efficacy. As the focus of this study is to provide a general overview of information on this population and provide basic strategies for the school counselor to address school acceptance and tolerance, a limitation is that it does not address extremely specific information on GLBTQ issues and is limited by the number of one-on-one counseling strategies available at this time. The final limitation is that the researcher had limited time and resources and used materials current to this date during the fall of 2009.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### *Introduction*

This chapter will provide important information for the school counselor on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered and Questioning (GLBTQ) issues. Included in this section is literature identifying the specific needs of this population, the risk factors that accompany being a homosexual adolescent in today's society, and information on the identifying and coming-out processes. Addressing the possible reasons for lack of literature and school acceptance of homosexuality will also be discussed in this section. Chapter II will conclude with numerous strategies for school counselors and other educators to increase awareness, tolerance and acceptance of this population in the school setting.

### *Specific Needs of this Population*

Adolescents who are homosexual are often going through the same struggles that their peers are facing, but may have additional problems (inflicted by society's lack of acceptance) that come with being homosexual. These issues are: homophobia (internally and externally), the lack of healthy role models, and the social isolation that exists when one hides one's sexual identity (Herdt; Hunter & Schaecher; Slater, cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995). Since homosexuals do not all share the same experience of being homosexual, certain problems and issues can be unique to each individual, but most students will be affected in one way or another (Herdt; Slater cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995).

Due to the negative stereotypes depicting homosexuals, internalized homophobia, and the stigmatization of homosexuals in society, many students who are homosexual may suffer from feelings of self-hatred, anxiety, confusion, self-degradation, denial, and fear (Maylon, cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995). Due to homophobic feelings internally or from one's family,

some adolescents may turn to therapy designed to convert them to heterosexuality. These types of therapy are based on homophobia and stigma and have largely been rejected. These attempts to cure are, “unscientific, unjustified, unethical, and psychologically scarring” (Coleman & Remafedi, cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995, p. 117).

Homophobia is not just simple hateful/violent attitudes toward homosexuals; it can be at times less severe, but just as hurtful. There is a resistance that exists among some school faculty who refuse to teach on the GLBTQ topic or who those who may avoid it all together. This is also true for some family members and peers who remain silent when someone uses homophobic slurs or tells jokes or mimics gays. By not discussing the issues surrounding being homosexual and being open and candid can create an unsafe and unhealthy environment.

Being uninformed about homosexuality is part of the problem, as some people still believe that being gay or being a lesbian is a choice (Anderson, 1994). Other common negative stereotypes about homosexuals are that they are sexual aggressors, or pedophiles, but the truth is there is no evidence to support the stereotype. Statistically heterosexual married men make up almost 90% of child perpetrators (Anderson, 1994).

Studies have shown that homophobia is worse among people who have never met an openly gay individual. Therefore, one solution would just be for more gay and lesbian people to come-out. Unfortunately, it is not that simple (Anderson, 1994). “Fear and the realities of life cause most gay and lesbian people to keep their sexual identities hidden” (Anderson, 1994, p. 151). A majority of gay and lesbian adolescents have been taught from childhood, through different outlets, that homosexuality is a negative thing. This creates mental turmoil which can foster anguish, fear, and guilt within, before a person comes to terms with being homosexual (Anderson, 1994).

Another issue that makes being homosexual and accepting one's own homosexuality is the lack of healthy role models. Due to homophobia and the stigma of homosexuality in society, there is a reluctance of healthy functioning adults who are homosexual to act as role models for adolescents who are homosexual. Without a role model, it is hard for an adolescent to see the positives of being identified as a homosexual adult. Also, adolescents who are homosexual do not get to know confident and self-assured adults who identify themselves as homosexuals (Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995).

One of the most difficult aspects of being an adolescent who is homosexual is the social isolation endured. This isolation is created through desire to hide sexual identity until ready to disclose. Unlike being born into a minority group, individuals who are homosexual usually recognize their sexual identity during adolescence. Due to the severe fear of stigmatization, they learn to conceal their sexual identity. Specifically, students who are homosexual will decide to hide their sexual feelings from themselves and/or from family members and friends. They will do so to avoid being labeled abnormal or facing rejection by their families or friends. Gay teens may try to replace the same sex attraction with an opposite sex desire, or with an absent sex desire. To keep the secret concealed, adolescents who are homosexual may become overly concerned with their clothing and body image (Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995).

When secretly concealing sexual identity, students who are homosexual may experience social isolation which can create problems throughout adolescent development. The social stigmatization that occurs can also prevent meaningful formation of one's homosexual identity and increase the risk for violence and discrimination (Anderson, 1994). In hiding their identities, teens may deprive themselves of positive role models and make it more difficult for them to assume other affirming social identities such as being an appreciated and respected family

member. Their hidden identity also may delay and distort development of nonsexual friendship skills (Harrison, 2003). “Lastly, many gay and lesbian teens begin to disengage physically, psychologically, and emotionally from friends and school activities” (Hunter & Schaefcher, cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995, p. 117).

### *Risk Factors for this Population*

Due to homophobia, lack of role models, and the social isolation that students who are homosexual often feel, they are at risk for not only suicidal thoughts, but also mental illness, substance abuse, domestic abuse, school avoidance due to verbal or physical abuse by peers, low self-esteem, prone to be runaways or dropouts, and added stress related to their sexual orientation. In a study conducted by Sears, two-thirds of the 36 participants who repeatedly contemplated suicide in high school, listed several factors accompanying these desires, such as social isolation, anger, depression, repeated stress, feelings of inadequacy, and sexual-identity difficulties (cited in Proctor & Groze, 1994). Schneider, Farberow, and Kruk’s study of gay men between the ages of 16-24 who had attempted suicide were significantly associated with parental alcoholism, familial physical abuse, and familial suicide attempts (cited in Proctor & Groze, 1994).

Another study examining the strong correlation between homosexuality and being at-risk for suicide is by Saghir and Robins who found, “ five out of six homosexual men who had attempted suicide had done so by age 20” (cited in Proctor & Groze, 1994, p. 508). Remafedi, Farrow and Deisher found “one third of the gay and bisexual young men aged 14-21 had made a suicide attempt, with half of them reporting multiple attempts” (cited in McBee & Rogers, 1997, p. 143). It is important to recognize that students might have an inner struggle and suffer in silence. Educators need to know what to look for in these students.

School-related problems such as school avoidance and dropping out are frequent among students who are homosexual due to the verbal and physical violence they may endure. Verbal abuse is the most common example of homophobia in the schools. According to Bailey and Phariss, "children learn those words that are sure to deliver an insult or to keep someone in line--queer, lezzy, faggot, or sissy" (cited in Bernal & Coolhart, 2005, p. 132). Unfortunately it is not only students who use these homophobic slurs; this insulting language has also been demonstrated by teachers. Even though there are teachers who overtly harass students who are homosexual, the more common form of homophobia among teachers is by not intervening and silently witnessing homophobic acts (Bailey & Phariss, cited in Bernal & Coolhart, 2005). "It is not surprising that most queer youths report negative school experiences" (Ryan & Futterman, cited in Bernal & Coolhart, 2005, p. 132).

Due to the ongoing hostile climate surrounding homosexuality, violence against homosexuals is still prevalent. Research conducted by DeCecco, Hunter and Schaecher, and Martin, document the number of violent acts against homosexual youths has increased (cited in Proctor & Groze, 1994). Research conducted by Hunter further reported:

Of the 500 youths surveyed from the Hetrick-Martin Institute, forty-percent reported violent attacks. Forty-six percent of these reported that the attacks were related to their sexual orientation, and sixty-one percent of the attacks were within the youths' families. Further, forty-four percent of the youths who had experienced violence also experienced suicidal ideation (cited in Proctor & Groze, 1994, p. 507)

Homosexual couples are sometimes met with violent acts when displaying their sexual orientation, as are individuals who pronounce being homosexual. Both individuals and same

gender couples have been targets of similar negative and cruel responses. “In a study of lesbian and bisexual female youths, D’Augelli found that 75 percent had been verbally abused, 30 percent had been threatened with physical violence, 17 percent had had things thrown at them, 13 percent had been assaulted physically, 4percent had been assaulted with a weapon, and 12 percent had been assaulted sexually” (cited in Bernal & Coolhart, 2005, p. 131).

A large majority of students who are homosexual will meet some sort of verbal or physical abuse. There are the milder (but still very hurtful) cases of homosexual slurs being used in schools and communities. Students may find negative, hurtful graffiti on their lockers. An extreme example of abuse was the horrendous and highly publicized murder of Mathew Shepard, for being openly gay. “Queer youths are socialized with knowledge of this violence and thus are not provided with the appropriate information about themselves to develop a healthy group identity; instead, they are inundated with slanderous, stigmatized messages about themselves” (Martin & Hetrick, cited in Bernal & Coolhart, 2005, p. 131).

Gay and lesbian individuals and their willingness to come out is largely influenced by society’s view of homosexuality. “Cramer and Roach (1988) indicated that society’s negative attitudes toward homosexuality influence, the decision to come out; suicidal ideation may be not so much an indication of pathology as a response to negative pressures from society” (Rofes, cited in Proctor & Groze, 1994, p. 507). It is understandable why homosexuals may not want to come out, when they fear how they will be viewed by the world around them.

In an article by Anderson (1994), the writer shared his own experience of being gay at a time when he attended a Sunday service at a church with a priest who was accepting of homosexuality and preached love and tolerance. He talked with the priest after the service, the priest said something that was very prolific, “we gays and lesbians would have to gain

acceptance on an individual basis” (Anderson, 1994, p. 151). That statement is truthful and descriptive of how society view’s homosexuality. In the current society, anyone can freely express their heterosexuality, but for homosexuals, they must first announce their sexuality to anyone they meet, which heterosexuals almost entirely never have to do. They also have to earn the acceptance of each new person they meet. Even if the next person they meet is completely accepting of their homosexuality, the stereotypes are still present and the individual who is homosexual may still feel the need to prove themselves and earn the trust and respect of others.

### *Identifying and Coming Out Process*

A crucial part of establishing a positive gay or lesbian identity is based on the decision to come out of the closet or not. This period of gay-identification and then eventually coming-out is essential to the student’s well being. If the student struggles through this transition period without support, they are more likely to succumb to one of the many risk factors mentioned previously. The coming-process occurs in different stages of development. Depending on the student’s support system they can progress through each stage or they may get stuck in a certain stage. There are many different versions of the stages of identifying and coming-out but they all follow the same general progression of initial confusion, discovery/exploration, and finally to integration/resolution.

“Troiden (1989) has combined components from several theories and formulated a four-stage model of coming-out that explores what seem to be the basic elements of lesbian/gay identity development. The stages in this model are Sensitization, Identity Confusion, Identity Assumption, and Commitment” (cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995, p.118).

Understanding the identification and coming out process in detail is helpful for school counselors so they can better understand what the student may be going through and therefore enhance

empathy and sensitivity. With that said, it is important to understand each student is different and they may experience his or her own path of self-awareness and self-acceptance.

The first stage, sensitization, generally occurs before puberty and is the first time he/she realizes that they are different from their same sex peers. This difference is not related to sexuality but is more of a general sense of being different from same sex peers. For example, a lack of typical gender identification or being interested in gender-inappropriate interests is common. Some young males find a greater comfort level associating with girls and share common interests in fashion and socializing. "Based on this sense of being different, children may begin to develop difficulties in self-esteem, socialization, cognitions, psychological integrity, and interpersonal skill development" (Gonsiorek, 1988; Maylon, 1981; O'Connor, 1992, cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995, p.119).

The next stage, identity confusion, occurs in adolescences. This is the time when the student begins to recognize thoughts, feelings, and behaviors they may deem as homosexual. This is the most difficult stage for the student to go through. It is when they deal with confusion and may resort to any one of the previously mentioned negative coping mechanisms. This is the time when they may deny their homosexual impulses, avoid situations that may provoke these impulses, or in extreme cases they may even become extremely homophobic which can lead to substance abuse to deal with the self-hate and confusion. They may try to rationalize their impulses or wish them away. However, the healthiest way to deal with the identity confusion is to accept the impulses as a natural part of identity. This is an area where a school counselor could explain this to a student who is struggling or questioning gender roles and preferences. Getting through the identity-confusion stage can be a painful process filled with self-doubt, anxiety, and other negative emotions.

“To survive the Identity Confusion stage, adolescents must master several developmental tasks” (Coleman, (1982) cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, (1995) p.122). A school counselor can help the student master these tasks. First, the counselor can aid the student in developing social skills to better identify and recognize other students who are homosexual. Just knowing they are not alone is an important step. A school counselor can help the student create a positive self-perception.

The third stage in the identification and coming-out process is identity assumption. This occurs in the late adolescence. “During this stage, individuals consolidate their self-identification as homosexual, move from identity tolerance, to identity acceptance (Cass, 1979), and begin regular association with other homosexuals and exploration of the gay and lesbian subculture” (Troiden, (1989) (cited in Kottman, Lingg, & Tisdell, 1995, p.124). The main focus of this stage is acceptance of the self-definition of homosexual. At this time the student is coming-out to themselves and gradually to others. An important step in this transition is to have positive contacts with other homosexuals. This helps change the negative connotation surrounding being homosexual in the student’s mind to a more positive one. The next big and important step in this transition is to learn how to function in a same-sex relationship. This process can be difficult due to the previously discussed lack of role models. The final step is commitment which refers to the person’s complete acceptance and commitment to identifying as homosexual.

During the identification and coming-out process it is important for school counselors to respect each student’s level of “outness” and not push him/her to disclose beyond their own level of safety and comfort. It is important to examine with the student the costs and benefits of disclosing to family and friends. Most importantly, student self-determination should be encouraged and respected when it comes to disclosure decisions and timing (Morrow, 2006).

### *Lack of Literature*

One difficulty when researching the adolescent gay population and finding ways that school counselors can offer support in a school setting, is that the literature is still somewhat limited. This is especially frustrating to educators when researching the strong correlation between identifying homosexual youth and suicide rates. An extreme example of this limited research is in Australia where there has been only one study done as of 2003 examining attitudes towards homosexual adolescent suicide (Molloy, McLaren, & Mchlachlan, 2003). Lack of helpful studies and limited research may contribute to lack of understanding of the GLBTQ community for the professionals who seek to gain knowledge on the topic of homosexuality. A hope is that as awareness and acceptance of homosexuality grows, so will the research and literature.

### *School Setting*

“School is a central component in virtually every adolescent’s life. It is the primary social setting where friends are made, social skills are learned and self-efficacy is developed” (Morrow, 2006, p. 180). Healthy psychosocial development in adolescence is largely connected to the quality of the social interactions that occur within the school setting. However, this school environment can be among the most dangerous for students who are homosexual (Black & Underwood, (1998) cited in Morrow, 2006).

“A Harris Poll released in June 1993 reported that 86% of high school students said that they would be very upset if classmates called them gay or lesbian” (Anderson, 1994, p. 152). Within the school many offensive words are challenged and corrected but the word faggot is commonly used within the student culture with little punishment. There is much avoidance and denial on the behalf of many administrators and school staff members on the topic of homosexuality.

A study conducted at Fairfield University in Connecticut sent questionnaires out all over the state asking administrators and teachers about their schools' responses to the needs of gay and lesbian students and staff members. The majority of teachers believed that their schools were not promoting a climate of tolerance and acceptance and the majority of administrators thought the opposite (Anderson, 1994). This is why school counselors need to bridge the gap between administrators and staff by creating a comprehensive school counseling model that will address the needs of the GLBTQ students.

### *Clubs, Organizations and Centers*

As previously discussed there is a lack of homosexual role models for GLBTQ students and that is also apparent within the school where there are little to no openly GLBTQ teacher role models. The number of teachers who are openly homosexual is often low due to a fear of losing one's job in some communities (Morrow, 1993, cited in Morrow, 2006). This fear of being fired also plays a crucial role in teachers and administrators unwillingness to start a GLBTQ club or organization or to even start up anti-harassment policy specifically for students who are homosexual. Therefore, the services offered to the GLBTQ youth are often either very limited or nonexistent. It is important for school counselors to advocate for services specifically for this population. For example, starting a GLBTQ-orientated support group that can deal with the issues of coming-out and forming healthy relationships is important to being accepted in the school community. Another way to aid the homosexual student in schools would be to have afterschool educational programs for GLBTQ students and their families (Morrow, 2006).

The first step in starting a club, organization, or center for the school GLBTQ population is by informing other staff members about the emerging minority, to prevent any negative lash-back on the part of educators and other school personnel. Informing staff with statistical research

on the risk-factors among the GLBTQ youth including suicide may raise awareness and increase a safe environment for seeking help. Training can also extend to families, coaches and caring community members for the same results mentioned above. Partnering with community organizations such as campus GLBTQ clubs and PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) are often helpful solutions too.

Once school leaders and counselors have informed and gained understanding from the staff and community members, it is a good time to start a support organization. Advertising the club as a safe place for all students, not just homosexual students, will likely increase acceptance and sensitivity from the heterosexual students who also attend. The club may start out as strictly informational until trust is established within the group to share and eventually openly discuss issues of being a homosexual adolescent. It is also crucial to establish a confidentiality policy for the group. These clubs are established in most colleges and universities and are slowly appearing in some high schools in larger cities. A future goal for all schools should include consideration for a GLBTQ club or organization providing a safe space for all students.

### *Training*

Currently some schools offer optional sensitivity training that is very broad and does not specifically address the needs of the GLBTQ population. As a school counselor creating and implementing specific GLBTQ trainings and workshops that address the risk factors and needs of these students is one of the most helpful ways to increase acceptance and tolerance among school staff members. Educators who may have certain beliefs or attitudes about homosexuality are more apt to say or do things that may offend or alienate the GLBTQ student. If a staff member still believes myths about homosexuality, such as, pedophilia, being homosexual is a choice, or that GLBTQ individuals actively recruit other students to be homosexual; they won't

be able to help an adolescent succeed as he/she struggles with the issues during identifying and coming out stages. Therefore, the first goal for training in a school setting is to provide staff members with accurate information about homosexuality and debunk all myths and stereotypes with as much of the current accurate information possible on the GLBTQ community.

Another important area to include in training are the local resources that exist for this population (if there are any) as in GLBTQ youth groups, community centers, telephone hot-lines, and organizations for parents whose children have come out (Anderson, 1994). Resources to help create factual training sessions for staff members may include Planned Parenthood, SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States), and PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and are three of the most used sources of current information on homosexuality (Anderson, 1994).

### *Curriculum*

The current curriculum in most schools does not educate students or teachers regarding the skills necessary to prevent the use of anti-GLBTQ slurs. Even more common in schools is the absence of gay awareness education and finding most diversity or health curriculum does not include any GLBTQ content. This lack of coverage is due to the controversy it creates among some students, parents and community members. "Silence and ignorance thus perpetuate misinformation, lack of understanding, intolerance, and hatred" (Morrow, 2006, p. 181).

The bottom line is that homosexuality should be included in any conversations surrounding sexuality, dating, relationships, and parenting. "The social, psychological, and emotional development of gay and lesbian adolescents can be addressed right along with that of their heterosexual classmates" (Anderson, 1994, p.153). The addition of this topic does not require lengthy curriculum committee meetings or a completely new curriculum as the

information can be added to the original curriculum, just expanding the perspective frame of study from only heterosexual to both homosexual and heterosexual view points.

### *Other Strategies*

The most crucial strategies have already been mentioned in great detail and in summary these included conducting trainings and workshops on GLBTQ issues for all staff members, starting school based support groups for GLBTQ students and heterosexual students, and including GLBTQ based curriculum to the sexuality curriculum generally covered in health class. These three strategies may be the most important and may provide the biggest impact in creating safe environments at school. After implementing these three strategies, counselors may find these additional strategies helpful for working with and addressing the issues and needs of the GLBTQ students in schools:

1. Establish a GLBTQ- supportive school office environment: “GLBTQ youth learn quickly to be vigilant of their surroundings for signs of acceptance or rejection” (Morrow, 2006, p. 190). Therefore, as school counselors it is important to visibly communicate openness and acceptance. One way to do this is by displaying GLBTQ supportive literature and symbols in the office and waiting area. School counselors should keep accurate basic materials about the range of sexual orientation and gender identity expression in their offices and in the main office for homosexual and heterosexual students (Morrow, 2006). Another way to demonstrate counselor, educator and administrative openness is by having inclusive, nonbiased and gender neutral language on all forms.

2. Establish and enforce a nondiscrimination policy: If the school doesn’t already have a nondiscrimination or anti-harassment policy, one should be established. The policy should include sexual orientation and gender. The school policy should aim to protect GLBTQ students

from harassment, violence, and discrimination (Anderson, 1994). To enforce it effectively the school counselor and other staff members should challenge antigay slurs and enforce tough punitive consequences for students who harass or discriminate against GLBTQ students. Use of inclusive language should be encouraged on all school documents and policy.

3. Effective counseling skills: As previously discussed, students who identify as homosexual are at risk for depression, substance abuse, suicide, and victimization; therefore, it is important that school counselors are constantly assessing for student safety when working with this population. It is not unusual for GLBTQ youth to be dealing with issues such as rejection by family, expressing fears of becoming homeless, or suffering from physical/verbal abuse for sexual orientation. Therefore, the initial service may be in the form of crisis intervention to help stabilize the situation for the student (Morrow, 2006). Lastly, it is beneficial to refer students and parents of students to appropriate services within the community, such as, support groups, counseling agencies, and hot lines. Raising awareness of support services is an important counseling skill for school counselors and referring out as needed.

4. All-inclusive library and classrooms: GLBTQ inclusion doesn't need to exist only in the counseling office, as it can be a more welcoming environment in the library, labs and classrooms. Teachers and librarians will need to on board to make the GLBTQ student feel less isolated. Providing or displaying books, pamphlets, and GLBTQ safe symbols are just some of the ways to show support and provide knowledge about this population. "The American Library Association maintains a very active Gay and Lesbian Caucus. This group can be a source of information, booklists, and support for building a library collection on inclusion" (Anderson, 1994, p. 154). Another way to promote the GLBTQ community would be through having display cases with GLBTQ issues, information, and awareness. Lastly, within the classrooms, each

teacher can make an effort to address the GLBTQ population within their specified subject area. For example, the social studies teacher could include covering the gay rights movement when discussing the various civil rights movements of this century (Anderson, 1994). Researching contributions of famous gay leaders may shed light on leadership and provide role models for others who wish to continue to lobby for their rights.

In conclusion, there are many suggestions that school counselors and educators can do to create safe environments for all students. It is important to remove barriers to learning and challenges to the importance of all students and the potential contributions that they can make. School counselors are perceived as leaders in many schools and students need adults to take on leadership roles to help them feel safe, valued and appreciated. Working in partnership with the students, families and communities, educators may bridge the gap in research and literature supporting students in environments where learning can take place for all.

### Chapter III: Summary, Discussion and Recommendations

#### *Introduction*

This chapter provides a summary of the key points from the findings in the literature. Also included is a discussion about the research information offering suggestions for school counselors working with GLBTQ students and lastly, are recommendations for future research on the topic of GLBTQ youth and creating safe environments in the schools.

#### *Summary*

From all of the different statistics found in the recent literature pertaining to the homosexual population, two truths were confirmed: the homosexual population is increasing, and suicide rates and suicide attempt rates are very high for the adolescent homosexual population. Adolescents who are homosexual are at severe risk of committing or attempting suicide. The literature was consistent through most of the findings that adolescents who are homosexual have specific needs apart from their heterosexual counterparts.

The three main issues that may limit opportunities for students to feel safe and supported as indicated in many of the journal articles were: homophobia, lack of role models, and social isolation. Homophobia experienced either internally or externally, seemed to be extremely dangerous to the student's well being. Teens do not always know what is happening within, and may need a trusted adult with whom to discuss the issues. Much of the research acknowledged the lack of homosexual adult role models for adolescents who are homosexual and how it may create low self-esteem in the adolescent and an unwillingness to disclose with family or friends. Raising awareness on recognizing warning signs of questioning youth is important to the coming-out process.

Social isolation seemed to be the most prevalent issue with homosexual adolescents and stems from their desire to hide their sexual identity. Fear of ridicule, exclusion by others and taunting by peers may result in teens keeping the feeling inside. Feeling isolated may lead to loneliness, lack of friends and missed opportunities to socialize with others. While some youth may choose to isolate themselves out of fear of the unknown, others are isolated socially by their peers.

Also confirmed by numerous literature sources was the prevalence of verbal and physical abuse which students who are homosexual often experience, especially in the school setting. The literature reviewed in this study included statistical data which suggests that these students are not only deserving of safe environments, but it is necessary to eliminate the verbal and physical abuse many experience. Special training for school counselors and other educators as they develop school rules that eliminate bias are critical to the success and acceptance of gay students.

Almost all of the articles researched addressed the identification and coming out process as a challenge for most gay adolescents. Research showed that the coming-out process is a crucial part of establishing a positive gay or lesbian mind set. This period of self-identification, acceptance, and then eventually coming-out is essential to the student's well being. If the student struggles through this transition with little or no support, they are likely to succumb to one of the many risk factors mentioned previously. The coming-out process occurs in stages of development. Each stage presents differently, carries varied emotions, and requires different counseling skills on the part of the school counselor. Therefore, understanding the coming-out process in detail is critical for school counselors to be effective when working with GLBTQ students.

Research proved to be somewhat limited on the topic of recommended counseling strategies and this limitation may be a problem for not only the GLBTQ community but also the professionals who want to be informed and knowledgeable on how they can better support GLBTQ youth. Due to the risk factors, such as suicide and attempted suicide, there is an ever apparent need for more research on ways to identify students who are struggling with the stages of the coming-out process. University level counselor preparation programs may wish to include this in the curriculum so that new professionals coming into the field could be current regarding strategies to make the school feel welcoming and safe for all students. Currently employed counselor practitioners may wish to update their skills as needed to support students in the GLBTQ population and universities could consider offering those updates too.

The welcoming and safe school setting also proved to be an area that needs some improvement. Prejudice still exists in many school communities and the bias and discrimination is an extreme disservice to GLBTQ students and their heterosexual counterparts. There is a fear of scrutiny from administration, other staff members, and community members that often paralyzes people who want to see and create change. It is important for educators, parents and community members to not succumb to that fear and to focus on protecting and supporting all students.

Numerous strategies that aim to create awareness and support GLBTQ students within the school setting were also identified. The most widely used and most helpful strategies school counselors can use are providing training and workshops, starting a support group or club, and implementing a GLBTQ curriculum. Trainings and workshops for all staff members are used to debunk stereotypes and provide accurate information on how to better support these students. Starting a support group or club that is GLBTQ focused but open to any student is a way to

create awareness, decrease isolation, and address GLBTQ issues. Adding GLBTQ information into the health curriculum often validates homosexuality to all students and provides accurate information about homosexuality.

Other valid strategies mentioned are creating a GLBTQ-supportive office, establishing and enforcing a nondiscrimination/anti-harassment in schools (that includes sexual orientation), offering GLBTQ specific counseling skills, and making the library and classrooms inclusive by adding GLBTQ information and blending the topic into general curriculum.

### *Discussion*

The literature studied provided proof that this population of GLBTQ teens not only deserves more research and training but needs it in order to serve all students equally. GLBTQ students often have specific needs which require action on the part of the school counselor to prevent GLBTQ students from succumbing to one of the many at-risk behaviors or for becoming the target of harassment.

The identification/coming out process is one of emotional turmoil that school counselors should not only be knowledgeable about but also be trained in the appropriate skills to facilitate these students at this time. The schools have not always provided an environment that is welcoming of homosexuality, in some cases has not always had anti-harassment policies in place and has not always protected the rights of this population. More research and literature reviews need to be conducted to better support these students and their families. The strategies listed above are just some of the ways the school counselor can create awareness, increase school acceptance, and support the GLBTQ students in his/her school.

### *Recommendations for Further Research*

One recommendation would be to include more current and effective training program for school counselors and other educators on the topic of adolescents who are homosexual. Offering a guide of community resources for school counselors may prove helpful also. Further research on the stages of the coming-out process during adolescence would be extremely helpful for school counselors so they know what is developmentally and age appropriate. Exploring diversity and ethnic background and acceptance in the GLBTQ experience might provide insight to know if different cultures experience similar themes as the dominant culture. Further research to discover the feelings and emotional turmoil that adolescents experience might provide a closer look at the barriers to learning that might be involved.

While researching the literature on this topic, numerous mapped out identification for coming-out models with specific stages or steps for youth who are homosexual were discussed; however, as mentioned in the article by Morrow (2006) there are similar models for bisexual or transgender identity development. This would be an important area for more research to be conducted which then could in return produce a model for each specific population.

In conclusion, education is the priority for all students. Those who have special issues or needs should be given consideration to help them overcome barriers to success in the classroom and school community. GLBTQ students may fall into that category if they are not in a safe and welcoming environment. It is in partnership with the families, the schools and communities that school counselors and other educators can influence policy and establish procedures to remove the barriers to success in the school environment.

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