Experiences of Queer Youth in Today’s Schools:
Creating a Safe and Inclusive School Environment for All Students –
Including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth

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Abstract

All students in today’s schools have the right to feel safe. They should be free of harassment, bullying and physical harm by other students. Yet, research shows that more and more Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth report feeling unsafe in their school environment. Schools across our nation are hostile toward a number of queer youth – almost all of whom commonly hear homophobic remarks, face verbal and physical harassment, and even physical assault because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. This thesis explores how a diligent anti-bullying policy, combined with education and training opportunities for school staff members and families, can encourage personal and interpersonal healing in the lives of queer youth and will help to increase confidence of staff and families around sexual orientation. Of special interest are the Adlerian psychology principles of building on strengths, cultivating social interest, and creating a sense of belonging. These principles will provide healing opportunities for the LGBTQ population in our school systems, and will help to cultivate an inclusive school environment for all students.
Experiences of Queer Youth in Today’s Schools:

Creating a Safe and Inclusive School Environment for All Students –

Including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth

Harvey Milk, who became the first openly gay man elected to public office in California in 1977 once said, “All young people, regardless of sexual orientation or identity, deserve a safe and supportive environment in which to achieve their full potential” (Gold, 2008 p. 73). Thirty years later, many gay youth continue to struggle to find safe and supportive environments. Recent national studies indicate that suicide is the leading cause of death among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth (Toomey, 2010). Furthermore, LGBTQ youth are at-risk for experiencing psychological distress, depression, and substance abuse (Heck, 2011). Research also indicates that others’ reactions to an individual’s sexual orientation may be a key factor in identifying elevated risk (Craig, 2008). Gay youth, who experience parental and/or peer rejection upon disclosure of their sexuality have an increased risk for substance abuse, developing depressive symptoms and for attempting suicide (Heck, 2011). Many supportive parents, family members and peers of LGBTQ youth wonder if schools are doing enough to keep these students safe.

School Climate

Within a school setting, teachers set the tone for classrooms, and all school staff members are responsible for creating a positive culture within a school building. All schools (elementary, junior and senior high) set expectations for positive behavior, model, and maintain those expectations – much of which are often cultivated with being safe, respectful, responsible, and for all to have a sense of belonging. School staff has the power to foster an environment where all members of the school community are treated with dignity and respect, despite all differences.
When school staff members and students are able to accept, respect and embrace the diversity within their building, a community comes together.

“That’s so gay”. These three simple words, according to the 2011 national school climate survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), are frequently heard by roughly 90 percent of the student population at any given public school across the nation. While this expression may not be offensive to all students, negative uses of the word “gay” can be quite distressing for a student who identify as LGBTQ. Also, contrary to the old “sticks and stones” adage, hurtful words that are written or said can and do hurt – especially our LGBTQ youth. Children and adolescents have been known to be good observers but poor interpreters (Dreikurs & Stolz, 1990). Unfortunately, homophobic remarks are not the only issue that LGBTQ students may often deal with while at school. Many LGBTQ youth internalize sexually prejudiced messages, which can lead to issues with negative self-concepts throughout their entire lives (Ryan, 1998).

Across the nation, many LGBTQ students face verbal harassment on a daily basis in their schools. Moreover, some LGBTQ students face physical harassment and/or assault while at school. In a study conducted in 2009, it was concluded that victimization (school bullying, physical harassment/assault, and sexual harassment) based on sexual orientation, gender was a significant predictor – female youth were less likely and transgender youth were more likely to report such victimization than male youth (Kosciw, 2009). While girls are bullied more frequently than boys through rumors, gossip, and sexual comments, boys more often report being hit, slapped, kicked, or pushed (Gruber, 2008). LGBTQ students had higher suicidality, were more apt to skip school because they felt unsafe, and were threatened with or injured by a weapon while at school (Hershberger, 1995). Surveys have also shown that gay males and
lesbians who are teased, bullied, and harassed at school, were five times more likely than their heterosexual peers to skip school out of fear for their safety (Rivers, 2004).

Schools can be a dangerous and hostile environment for students who come out of the closet, or even for students who are perceived to be gay. Bullying may often start during a student’s elementary school years, and continue through high school. “Gay and lesbian students are the most frequent victims of hate crimes, and school is the primary setting for this type of violence. It has also been noted that crimes against gay males and lesbians in schools occur with greater frequency than crimes against the general population in the school setting” (Remley, 2003, p. 342). Oftentimes, LGBTQ students, for fear of retaliation, do not report these crimes.

Because many LGBTQ students face unsupportive and unsafe schools, these issues can become detrimental to their education, as well as their mental health. In a 2009 study, which focuses on the factors that contribute to a hostile school climate for LGBTQ youth, reports indicate that gay youth experience harassment, discrimination, and other negative events in school, often specifically related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or how they express their gender (Daley, 2007). These experiences include high levels of verbal and physical harassment and assault, sexual harassment, social exclusion and isolation, and other interpersonal problems with their peers (Kosciw, 2009). The study examines how such issues in school negatively impact LGBTQ youth’s access to education as they are linked to increased absenteeism due to feeling uncomfortable or unsafe in school, increased discipline problems, and lower levels of school engagement and academic achievement (Kosciw, 2009).

School districts across the country have implemented harassment and anti-bullying policies, many of which have been recently scrutinized for not including “sexual orientation” as part of the policy’s specifications. As a current teacher for Independent School District 279 –
Osseo Area Schools, I was curious to investigate the district’s anti-bullying policy. According to the website for District 279, the harassment policy reads as follows:

**HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE**

I. In compliance with M.S. 121A.03, subd. 2 – Sexual, Religious, and Racial Harassment and Violence and M.S. 363A – Department of Human Rights, the District prohibits any form of harassment or violence on the basis of race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, familial status, status with regard to public assistance, sexual orientation, or disability (Maple Grove School Board: Adopted 12/1999. 548 Policy Page 1)

Going further, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) explains that, “There is now extensive evidence that LGBTQ students are disproportionately targeted for harassment and discrimination in schools. Left unchecked, this harassment and discrimination may often escalate to the level of physical violence or violent crime” (GLSEN, 2009, p. 1).

For 20 years, GLSEN has worked to ensure safe schools for all students, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. For 10 of those years, GLSEN has been documenting the school experiences of LGBTQ youth. In 1999, GLSEN identified the need for national data on the experiences of LGBTQ students and launched the first National School Climate Survey (NSCS). Up until this time, the school experiences of LGBTQ youth were under-documented and almost completely absent from national studies on adolescents. The NSCS remains one of the few studies to examine the school experiences of LGBTQ students nationally, and is the only national survey to include transgender students.
The Affect on LGBTQ Students

According to GLSEN’s 2009 NSCS, roughly 62 percent of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school, and many report that they have been verbally and physically harassed in the past year because of their sexual orientation. These issues can oftentimes become chronic; and some LGBTQ students may begin to experience frequent absences from school, lowered academic achievement, and an overall poorer psychological well-being (Rosario, 2011). In too many recent cases across our nation, anti-LGBTQ bullying has lead to depression and suicide. Gay youth suicide has become an epidemic that has bombarded headline news and left school officials scrambling to answer to despaired parents, teachers, and students.

Increased Absenteeism

National surveys have shown that gay and lesbian students who are teased, bullied, and harassed at school, were five times more likely than their heterosexual peers to skip school out of fear for their safety (Mansager, 2008). School-based victimization denies these students their right to an education. The GLSEN survey released the latest information on absenteeism issues among LGBTQ youth. Their findings include the following information: twenty nine percent of LGBTQ students skipped a class at least once in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. Even more pressing, thirty percent missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. LGBTQ students were 3+ times likelier to have missed classes (29% vs. 8%) and 4+ times likelier to have missed at least one day of school (30% vs. 6.7%) in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, when compared to the general population of secondary school students (GLSEN, 2009, p. 11).

Absenteeism can often become an issue for many LGBTQ students, who feel forced to miss classes or entire days of school, rather than to endure a hostile environment where they
experience continual harassment. A growing body of research demonstrates that LGBTQ youth often avoid school for lack of a sense of safety. According to a study conducted in 2008, LGBTQ youth were 5 times more likely to report skipping school than were their straight peers, and given that school avoidance is a significant predictor of later school dropout (Mansager, 2008), LGBTQ students’ school avoidance may limit their opportunities for a full education and a stable future (Darwich & Waterhouse, 2012).

**Decreased Academic Achievement**

Another great concern of GLSEN’s findings is the fact that bullied LGBTQ students report lowered educational aspirations and academic achievement, in comparison to other students. GLSEN reports that, “Students cannot succeed in school when they do not feel safe. The incidence of in-school victimization experienced by LGBTQ students hinders their academic success and educational aspirations” (GLSEN, 2009, p. 7). Gay, lesbian, or bisexual students with high levels of victimization are more likely to miss or drop out of school, and do worse in school. A study found that 28% of gay and bisexual male youths never completed high school and attributed their dropout to physical abuse and conflict in school (Darwich & Waterhouse, 2012). Sadly, LGBT students who are harassed are 1.75 times as likely to consider dropping out of school as their heterosexual peers; moreover, a student who is *questioning* is seven times as likely as heterosexual students, and *four* times as likely as a LGBT, to consider dropping out of school (Craig, 2008). Peer victimization of LGBTQ youth directly interfere with their success in school, and underlies their efforts to avoid school altogether (Remley, 2003).

One recent study reported that LGBTQ youth felt less connected to their school community than their heterosexual peers, and that sexual minority boys in particular performed worse academically and were less prepared for postsecondary education (Varjas, 2007). The GLSEN
survey reports the following statistics regarding education aspirations and academic achievement: LGBTQ students who were more frequently harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression had grade point averages almost half a grade lower than students who were less often harassed. The ramifications of having low grade point averages could cause students to lose many college opportunities.

LGBTQ students who faced harassment were more likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any type of post-secondary education (obtaining a high school diploma only or not finishing high school altogether) than a national sample of students (Gruber, 2008). In addition, LGBTQ students who experienced high levels of in-school victimization because of their sexual orientation or gender expression were more likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education (college, vocational-technical or trade school) (Gruber, 2008). About 14% of students who experienced high levels of victimization because of their gender expression or their sexual orientation did not plan to continue their education, compared to about 9% of those who had experienced low levels of victimization (Darwich & Waterhouse, 2012). This research clearly indicates that many LGBTQ students who are victims of harassment cannot succeed in schools because they do not feel safe. In-school victimization hinders these students’ academic success and educational aspirations.

**Decreased Psychological Well-Being**

Today’s LGBTQ adolescents are known to be disproportionately at risk for experiencing negative psychosocial well-being and health problems (McCabe, 2008). Often, youth who are struggling with their sexual identity have few allies with whom they can openly talk with. Many gay youth report feeling shameful of their sexuality, misunderstood by peers and/or family members, and may fear being judged by others (Maguen, 2002). Not surprisingly, evidence has
increasingly shown a disproportionate risk among transgender youth (Russell, 2009). While transgender youth often struggle with their sexual identity, these young people also struggle with their gender identity. Research which focuses on the struggles of transgendered youth is limited, but some recent studies have become available.

Specifically, all previous research indicates that LGBTQ youth are at greater risk for suicide ideation and attempts (Russell, 2001), depression, substance use (see Marshal et al., 2008), and lower self-esteem than their heterosexual peers (Russell, 2006). Furthermore, recent studies of adolescent health document that the risks reported by this population for suicidality and depression are particularly heightened in the developmental period of adolescence in young adulthood for same-sex attracted males (Toomey & Russell, 2010).

Not surprisingly, poor psychological health is yet another major issue in the problem of anti-LGBTQ bullying. “In-school experiences of harassment and assault were related to poorer psychological well-being for students who identify as LGBTQ” (GLSEN, 2009, p. 14).

Adolescence is considered a time of exploration and self-discovery. Some LGBTQ youth turn to substance abuse for coping with the stigmatization and harassment issues they face from their close-minded peers. Recent studies have indicated that substance abuse is a growing problem among youth and that the problem is even greater among LGBTQ youth (McCabe, 2008). The origins of substance abuse in sexual minority teens may be linked with feeling marginalized by society, seeking relief for feelings of depression and isolation, or desiring alleviation of the chronic stress associated with being stigmatized both interpersonally and intra-personally (Jordan, 2000). Prevention and intervention efforts can be successful in working with sexual minority adolescents in jeopardy of developing substance abuse issues.
As mentioned before, for some LGBTQ youth, particularly for those who are not out of the closet to their families and/or friends, there are few people to confide in and turn to when problems arise. More recent research shows that LGBTQ youth engage in greater substance use (alcohol and drugs) than do their heterosexual peers (DeAngelis, 2009). Adolescence who use drugs are susceptible to numerous issues such as: impaired judgment, health concerns, legal issues, and addiction.

Finally, GLSEN’s 2009 survey explains the relationship between victimization and three correlations: depression, anxiety, and lowered self-esteem. “LGBTQ students who reported higher levels of victimization regarding their sexual orientation or gender expression had higher levels of depression and anxiety than those who reported lower levels of those types of victimization” (GLSEN, 2009, p. 16). Many LGBTQ youth feel as if they need to hide who they are to avoid rejection. Some gay youth conceal their thoughts and feelings so that they will not hurt their parents and other family members who may believe that being gay is wrong or sinful. However, hiding has a cost. Keeping these feelings inside undermines an LGBTQ adolescent’s self-esteem and sense of self-worth (Ryan, 2009). Lowered levels of self-esteem for LGBTQ youth who face bullying (who may already be dealing with self esteem issues due to the struggles they experience with coming to terms with their sexuality) can lead to major psychological issues - suicide being the extreme.

**Increased Risk of Suicide**

To date, there have been several studies conducted on the difficulties of dealing with the stigma of homosexuality, and its correlation to depression and even suicide among LGBTQ youth. While LGBTQ youth think about and attempt suicide more often than their straight counterparts, most LGBTQ youth do not attempt suicide (Russell, 2001). LGBTQ youth have
many of the same risk factors as straight youth, but many LGBTQ have more or more severe risk factors (Ryan, 1998). Russell explains that it is important to note that being LGBTQ is not a risk factor in and of itself; however, the minority stressors that LGBT individuals encounter — such as discrimination and harassment — are directly associated with suicidal behavior as well as indirectly with risk factors for suicide.

During adolescence, when sexuality emerges to become a central issue in the lives of young people, it can become particularly heightened for those who struggle with their sexual identity and/or gender identity. During a study of adolescent sexual orientation and suicide risk conducted in 2001, results indicated that there is a strong link between adolescent sexual orientation and suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Russell, 2001). More recently, two key suicide risk factors for LGBTQ youth are individual-based factors such as depression and experiences of stigma and discrimination, including anti-LGBTQ hostility, harassment, bullying, and family rejection (Cox, 2009). There is growing evidence that the two factors are definitely linked. The strong effect of sexual orientation on suicidal thoughts is mediated by critical youth suicide risk factors, including anxiety, hopelessness, victimization, and suicide attempts (Russell, 2001).

In reference to LGBTQ students and suicide, the latest statistics are staggering. The following statistics were recently reported by the national organization Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG):

- Suicide is the leading cause of death among gay and lesbian youth.
- Gay and lesbian youth are 2 to 6 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth.
- Over 30% of all reported teen suicides each year are committed by gay and lesbian youth (Fenaughty, 2003).
Close to Home

One of the more recent suicides (and one of the most public in Minnesota) was committed by fifteen year-old Justin Aaberg. Justin, a student at Anoka High School, hung himself in his bedroom on July 9\textsuperscript{th}, 2010. Justin was a gay teenager, who came out to his family and close friends at the young age of thirteen. According to an article found in the Minneapolis Star Tribune, Justin’s mother, Tammy Aaberg, who found her son on that fateful day, “thought that he had the perfect life”. Over the past year, seven current or recently graduated middle school and high school students from the Anoka-Hennepin School District have taken their lives, including three students who were identified as gay or lesbian. Studies consistently show that, “LGBTQ youth are up to four times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers, in large part because of the issues that face many LGBTQ youth in our schools today such as: bullying, harassment, fear of persecution, and alienation from family members and friends” (Toomey, 2010, p. 87).

In the months following the death of Justin Aaberg, LGBTQ advocates charged that school officials were not doing enough to support LGBT students. They targeted the Anoka-Hennepin school district policy, which states that sexual orientation is not part of the district curriculum and therefore teachers should remain "neutral" in dealing with such issues. The Anoka-Hennepin school board held several meetings and listened to many parents who were on opposite sides of the issue. Some parents were angry and protested during school board meetings, demanding that the curriculum stay the same, and that teaching gay and lesbian issues in school is morally and ethically wrong. Other parents, and former gay and lesbian students from the district, spoke to the school board and pleaded with them to listen to their stories. Stories were told about being bullied, harassed, and teased to the point of skipping school.
Stories of being pushed into lockers were recalled and of being punched in the stomach, and tripped in the hallways. Stories of a young teenager, unable to cope with it all, and who took his own life were shared from a mother who could not fight back her tears.

Tammy Aaberg has become an outspoken ally for LGBTQ youth and has recently created a non-profit organization to support LGBTQ youth called “Justin’s Gift”, in honor of her son. She has been quoted as saying, “For those of you who have never had a gay child, you need to know it is one of the scariest things to learn because you know that they will need to deal with a lot of criticism and harassment in their lives, and it makes me worry” (Minneapolis Star Tribune, 2010).

In recent months, the Anoka-Hennepin School Board, amid much public debate and criticism, voted to replace their neutrality policy. On February 14, 2012, the school board voted 5-1 to replace the Sexual Orientation Curriculum Policy with one that emphasizes "respectful exchanges of views" during classroom discussions of sexual orientation and other contentious issues. This was a gigantic step toward the healing of LGBTQ youth in our schools, and many people in our state (and across the nation) applauded this decision.

**How to Support LGBTQ Youth in our Schools**

While there is still a great deal of bias against gay and lesbian people, social acceptance has increased significantly (Remley, 2003). The gay and lesbian students in schools are coming out of the closet and shedding their status as an invisible minority. As they make their presence known, these students frequently encounter a wall of hate. Hate is based on homophobic attitudes and often results in harassment and violence (Arm, 2009). When will the harassment and violence stop in our schools? When will professional educators say enough is enough?
And finally, how many more LBGTQ students will have to suffer (and possibly die) before things take a turn for the better?

**Programming for LGBTQ Students**

About fifteen years ago, Minneapolis Public Schools created an LGBTQ coordinator position that worked under their district’s diversity committee. This position was designed to work within the Minneapolis school system to help staff members, students, and families create safe and supportive schools for LGBTQ students, staff, and their allies. Currently, this position is only one of the mere six district level LGBTQ coordinators in the nation who help deal with the unique issues of LGBTQ youth in our schools. The Minneapolis-based program, which is named Out4Good, helps many districts in Minnesota and across the country to create inclusive and welcoming school environments for LGBTQ youth, and helps their allies to promote social justice for all students within a school building.

Out4Good offers tips for integrating LGBTQ issues into classrooms to help create a safe and supportive school climate. Out4Good explains that, ‘If teachers and school staff were to take steps to make their classrooms and school environment safer for LGBTQ students, families and fellow staff, then students and the school as a whole will follow, and all students will benefit.’ Many of the tips would be easy to implement into a classroom setting, and will help to show students that support for all is what will help to create a strong school climate where all students are valued. A list of tips and resources can be found in the supplemental toolkit that I created alongside this thesis.
Programming for Staff

During a recent interview that I conducted with Jason Bucklin, who is the project coordinator for Out4Good, he offered the following tips to help support LGBTQ students in our schools. School staff should:

1. Always intervene whenever they hear or see anti-gay language or actions.
2. Visually show support – through signs, posters, stickers, rainbow flags, and books.
3. Use language that is inclusive and gender neutral.
4. Integrate inclusive lessons and activities into classrooms, teams, student organizations, clubs and school-wide events.
5. Provide support for LGBTQ students.
6. Be a role model and an ally to LGBTQ students, families and staff.
7. Educate themselves about LGBTQ issues and people.
8. Learn about local and community resources (Bucklin Interview, March 22, 2012).

While some of these ideas are often easier to implement than others, Bucklin says that the number one way school staff members can show support is to consistently intervene when homophobic language is overheard (number 1 from above). This action alone will send a message to all students (especially LGBTQ students) that homophobic language is not tolerated within the school building, and that they are a safe person to talk with about LGBTQ issues.

Programming for Families of LGBTQ Students

During our interview, Bucklin further explained how important it is to not only work with students who are LGBTQ, but also to be able to make connections with their families as well. Bucklin offered the following advice regarding providers who work with LGBTQ children, youth, and families:
1. Identify community and online resources for LGBT youth and families to teach parents and caregivers how to help their LGBT children.

2. Parents and caregivers need access to positive family role models to help learn new ways to support and care for their LGBTQ and gender-variant children.

3. Ask LGBT adolescents and those who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity about how their family reacts to their identity.

4. Provide supportive counseling, as needed, and connect youth with LGBTQ community resources and programs.

5. Identify the level of family rejection and related health risks in LGBTQ youth.

6. Refer and follow up with families, as needed, to provide education and counseling.

7. Tell parents that negative reactions to their adolescent’s LGBTQ identity can have a serious impact on their child’s health and mental health.

8. Encourage parents and caregivers to decrease rejecting behaviors that increase their LGBTQ children’s risk for health and mental health problems.

9. Help families identify supportive behaviors that help protect against risk and help promote their LGBT child’s well-being (Bucklin Interview, March 22, 2012).

**Develop Policies that Prohibit Harassment of LGBTQ Students**

In the book, *Ethical and Legal Issues in School Counseling*, Remley says that, “Several states have suggested specific ways to address the homophobia that causes anti-gay violence in schools” (Remley, 2003, p. 348). Remley explains that gay and lesbian students are at risk because of societal views of homosexuality, which create unsupportive and even hostile environments at school and often at home. In schools, when harassment or violence instigated by homophobic attitudes persists, students learn that it is acceptable to be intolerant of diversity.
Remley goes on further to explain that, “The Connecticut State Board of Education 1991 publication Equity Newsletter (as cited in Anderson, 1994) identified nine suggestions for bettering the school environment for gay and lesbian students and staff” (Remley, 2003, p. 348). Those suggestions are:

- Challenge anti-gay epithets
- Use inclusive language
- Designate resource people in the schools for gay and lesbian students
- Make resources and materials on homosexuality visible and accessible
- Educate staff members on homophobia
- Support gay and lesbian colleagues
- Use gay and lesbian colleagues as role models
- Refer self-identified gay and lesbian students to appropriate services
- Refer parents of gay children to organizations such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)

Establish Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)

For students who identify as LGBTQ, student clubs that address LGBTQ issues (commonly known as “GSAs” – Gay-Straight Alliances) in schools can offer critical support. Youth empowerment, activism, leadership, and self-efficacy opportunities are ways in which LGBTQ youth (both individually and collectively) are able to create social changes in schools. GSAs emerged from community-based programs that were formed in the 1980s and 1990s to provide for the unique needs of LGBTQ youth in schools (Garofalo, 1998).

Today, hundreds of GSAs exist in our schools nationwide, and each year these numbers are growing. Of greatest importance, GSAs provide a safe and supportive environment within a
school setting where LGBTQ youth can be themselves. Also, many GSAs have evolved over the years to not only provide support for LGBTQ youth, but have become clubs engaged in educational and activist duties aimed at challenging homophobia in schools (Doty, 2010).

GLSEN examined schools with student-led GSAs in their schools in the 2009 NSCS survey. The survey explains that, “Student clubs that address LGBTQ student issues can create safer and more inclusive schools by addressing anti-LGBTQ harassment and promoting respect for all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Attending a school that has a GSA was related to a more positive school climate for LGBT students in our survey” (GLSEN, 2009, p 7). Students in schools with a GSA or similar student club:

- Reported hearing fewer homophobic remarks
- Experienced less harassment and assault because of their sexual orientation and gender expression
- Were more likely to report incidents of harassment and assault
- Were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation or gender expression
- Were less likely to miss school because of safety concerns
- Reported a greater sense of belonging to their school community (GLSEN, 2009)

**Adlerian Psychology and LGBTQ Youth**

Alfred Adler “was the first, in 1917, to establish a connection between homosexuality and an inferiority complex toward one’s own gender” (Bruti, 1995, sect. 2). However, Adler’s discussions on sexuality, puberty, and child development reveal much about individual psychoanalysis, with the exclusion of his opinions on homosexuality (Leibnau & Stein, 2003). Adler’s view of homosexuality in his article, “On Homosexuality”, reflects the rather common
bias of his time and culture. Although he transcended the widespread misconceptions about women and children at the turn of the century, his view of homosexuality represents a historical limitation and apparent contradiction of his general perspective (Leibenau & Stein, 2003).

While Adler’s comments on homosexuality appear out of sync with his belief in individual psychoanalysis, his thoughts on alternatives to self-esteem, maturation, socially determined goal establishment and the role of religion are remarkable. The current classical Adlerian view of sexuality promotes cooperation between partners and attempts to correct domination or depreciation within all sexual orientations. This contemporary stance is more congruent with Adler’s central posture of equality, respect, and acceptance (Leibenau & Stein, 2003).

Adler believed that human beings are social animals (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). Human beings need positive social interaction in order to thrive. Adler believed strongly that each one of us has a sense of belonging. We are embedded socially and, as such, we are able to affect others in a positive or negative way, across communities and cultures. This social mindset observed in human beings led Adler to speak of what he referred to as “Gemeinschaftsgefühl”, which is a German term that can be translated into “community feeling”, “social feeling”, or, in English, “social interest” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 134). To Adler, in order to have social interest, one must have an empathetic moral compass. As Adler himself wrote:

[Social interest] is an evaluative attitude toward life. It is an attitude quite different from what we find in a person whom we call anti-social. The evaluative attitude must not be understood as an external form only, as if it were the expression only of an acquired way of life. It is much more than that. We are not in a position to define it quite unequivocally, but we have found…a phrase that clearly expresses what we could
contribute to an explanation: “To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another.” For the time being, this seems to be an admissible definition of what we call social feeling (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 135).

Along with “social interest”, there are two other Adlerian beliefs that LGBTQ youth might find useful as they navigate through their middle and high school years. Adler’s “felt minus to a perceived plus” and “both picture and artist” provide encouragement, and offers a positive viewpoint of one’s life circumstances. While many LGBTQ youth who struggle may often feel discouragement, Adler felt that movement from below to above is quite possible in what he referred to as “a felt minus to a perceived plus”. LGBTQ students and their supporters can continue being active, and doing things in their school community to move to a more accepting place. Going further with a similar Adlerian concept, “both picture and artist”, all students have the ability to decide for themselves which type of a school community they want to create. Adler believed that “we can paint ourselves into a certain way of life” and that the life that each of us is live is of our own creation. LGBTQ youth, through guidance and acceptance from school staff and peer support, can help create a respectful school community, which embraces all students.

Finally, Adler’s “Style of Life” (Lifestyle), which he describes as “every action, thought, and feeling” that we encompass while moving toward our life goal, is another belief that may resonate with LGBTQ youth. While our Lifestyle is much more than just our personality, Adler believed that it is everything that we are about – it is our every action and movement in the world which can encourage us to stay on the “useful side of life”. LGBTQ students who struggle in school, who face discouragement and harassment, may often find it difficult to see their Lifestyle
in a positive way. With supportive adults in their lives, such as school counselors and parents, LGBTQ youth will find encouragement to continue moving toward their life goal. This particular group of youth will be able to pave the way for other gay youth who struggle, and through this will find true power in healing.

**Implications for School Counseling and LGBTQ Youth**

Students and staff look to school counselors for guidance and support. Many school counselors across the United States work with LGBTQ youth every day, and some of them have no idea that the student sitting before them is gay. As an advocate for all students, counselors need to foster a welcoming environment for every student who walks through their door. When working with gay youth who often need empathy and belonging, this is particularly important. There are numerous ways for school counselors to foster empathy and to help create social interest and belonging for LGBTQ youth in schools. Social interest opportunities include: Helping to create and organize student-led GSAs, recognizing and celebrating LGBTQ events such as Gay Pride and Day of Silence (which recognizes LGBTQ bullying), and engaging school staff members and families to openly and honestly discuss LGBTQ youth issues to help create a safe and inclusive school environment for all.

Remley’s book explains that, “Research has concluded that one in five school counselors report that working with gay and lesbian students would not be gratifying”, (Remley, 2003, p. 342). Some school counselors may grapple with their own personal issues regarding homosexuality. This is an awareness that a counselor will need to have in order to work with LGBTQ youth effectively. Remley refers to gay and lesbian students as the “invisible minority” in our schools, and says that since homosexuality has historically been viewed as only an adult issue, many people in the public schools remain uninformed about the number of gay students in
schools, and often show little interest in the concerns of these students (Remley, 2003). On the other hand, Remley further explains that 41% of the counselors in this study also reported that schools were not doing enough to help gay and lesbian students adjust to their environment (Remley, 2003).

Remley explains further that there are implications for myself and other school counselors when it comes to the issues of gay and lesbian students. First of all, infusing educational information surrounding homosexuality within guidance programs is important. Part of the curriculum would be to challenge the myths about LGBTQ issues, discuss the contributions of LGBTQ persons throughout history (including present day persons), discuss the legal struggles for many gay and lesbian people, and address the personal challenges that LGBTQ youth face in our schools, and in society as a whole. Addressing with students the struggle that many LGBTQ people face during their coming out process, while continuing to manage family relationships, stress, and potential school issues related to their homosexuality would also be an important element to consider.

Second, Remley stresses that school counselors must attend professional development programs that deal specifically with LGBTQ issues. Training is vital, so that school counselors are able to gain the skills needed in working with gay and lesbian students. “Through counseling interventions, school counselors can assist students to challenge internalized homophobia before it results in self-destructive behaviors” (Remley, 2003, p. 173).

Finally, through system and school support, school counselors must help develop all staff in-service training programs to incorporate gay and lesbian issues into the school curriculum. This curriculum must address how staff members can effectively support a student when he or she indicates that they are having sexual orientation issues. By addressing the needs of LGBTQ
youth through all developmental guidance program components (curriculum, responsive services, individual planning, system support), school counselors may become leaders in the effort to reduce violence against LGBTQ youth in the schools (Remley, 2003).

**Conclusion**

School counselors may experience a backlash from parents, community members, school administrators, and teachers for supporting and advocating LGBTQ youth in school settings. The education and discussions of homosexuality continue to be unwelcomed in our schools by many parents and community members who feel that talking about gay and lesbian issues condone the lifestyle. There are several arguments that school counselors can make when defending gay and lesbian youth. School counselors can emphasize that the educational environment for all people is enhanced when ideas are discussed openly and honestly. While some people may have religious or personal objections to homosexuality, it is important to explain that living in a democratic society involves valuing tolerance of others (Remley, 2003). School counselors have a responsibility to advocate for a supportive and safe learning environment for all students and to help encourage other staff members to do the same.

As an accompaniment to this thesis, I have created a toolkit for working with LGBTQ youth in our school systems. The toolkit, which I have titled, “We ARE” (Accept, Respect, and Embrace our differences) is broken into three sections: Staff, Students, and Families. This toolkit is meant to be a working kit, which can be added to and shared with groups of individuals who are interested in working with students and staff members who identify as LGBTQ. When implementing changes for an inclusive school environment, it is important to first address staff members. Supportive staff is vital in the success of making positive changes within a school building.
In the toolkit section labeled “Staff”, a table of contents listing specific information will help with navigation. Many questions and wonderings can be answered in several of these areas, specifically in “Glossary of Terms”, “The Facts”, “The Laws”, and “Creating a Safe School”, which will help to address issues of anti-gay bullying. In these subsections, persons will find the latest research results when creating safe school climates. There are also state and national law sections that specifically address the protection of LGBTQ youth in our school systems, which will be fundamental when having conversations with administration and other school staff officials. In the subsections, “The Facts” and “Glossary of Terms”, specific information is provided about the terms: sexual orientation, homophobia, gay rights, and heterosexism. There are also many definitions given in this area of the toolkit, which will help to educate all key players in a school building about other specific terminology.

Also included in the “Staff” section of the toolkit are the subsections, “The Impact of Bullying on LGBTQ Youth”, “LGBTQ-Friendly Lesson Plans”, “LGBTQ Inclusion in Schools”, and “Resources”. This thesis specifically addresses the impact of bullying on LGBTQ youth, so this area of the toolkit mirrors the latest research findings regarding mental health issues of LGBTQ students who are bullied, including suicide statistics. I wanted to add several “gay-friendly” lesson plans for the toolkit, so this subsection includes a few lessons throughout the grade levels. Many more lesson plans will be included in this section, which will help to create a more accepting and respectful school climate, where all students are embraced for who they are. Finally, the last two subsections, “LGBTQ Inclusion in Schools” and “Resources”, offer suggestions to help create teachable moments in our schools where all students are represented and valued for who they are. There are also several tips listed for including LGBTQ issues in the classroom, from opening conversations about gay and lesbian people in history, to the
importance of providing accurate and truthful information about gay issues to students. There are many additional resources provided toward the end of “The Staff” section of the toolkit, so LGBTQ information can be at the tips of fingers within a moment.

There are many informational artifacts included in all sections of the toolkit that can be used to help create an inclusive environment for LGBTQ youth in our schools. There are also many suggestions and examples of ways in which all of us can work together (students, staff, and families) to help bridge communication gaps and foster a more positive experience for all students across our school systems.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

There is still much to be studied when it comes to best practices and empowerment for the LGBTQ student population in our school systems. In the much broader sense of the societal issues of homosexuality, gay youth often face the ramifications of growing up in a society that is dominated by a culture that is by and large, heterosexual (Levitt, 2009). Many factors contribute to the discrimination and negative feelings toward homosexuality such as religious beliefs, personal biases, and family/societal influences. Many of these beliefs and ideas conflict with a school system in which expectations are maintained for all students to feel safe, respected, and to have a sense of belonging. Future research could examine the school experiences within various subgroups of the LGBTQ youth (transgender, black youth, Latino/a youth, rural youth, etc.) to determine potentially differing experiences and perspectives. Currently, there is very little research on transgender students within the school system.

While most research conducted on the school experiences of LGBTQ youth is focused on the victimization and other negative aspects, there is an insufficient amount of research that paints LGBTQ youth in a positively influencing picture. Research should be expanded to
include the success stories, social activism, GSA contributions, and continuous ways to encourage positive school climates for all students.

Every student who walks into any given school across the country has the right to feel safe, to be treated with respect, and to be a welcomed part of the community. Many schools are failing to provide these opportunities for LGBTQ students. While many schools have begun to slowly change the experiences for gay youth, many others continue to struggle. Staff members, families, and students need to come together to engage in honest dialogue about the issues LGBTQ youth face in school. These students need to feel supported and accepted by schools, and to be given opportunities in social interest to begin changing perspectives and negative stereotypes of being gay. While many feel that LGBTQ youth have come a long way in their struggle for acceptance, there is still quite a long way to go before they will have to struggle no more.
References


