Advocating for Sexual Minority Students: Implications for Professional School Counselors

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Abstract

Sexual minority students (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or questioning) face unique challenges in the school setting. They face homophobia, discrimination, bullying, and hurdles in identity formation. These struggles can lead to increased risk factors and negative academic and personal outcomes for sexual minority students. A professional school counselor bears responsibility in addressing the challenges these students face, and should be proactive in implementing interventions and school curriculum to build support for this population. This author examines school climates and school experiences for sexual minority students, and the implications for school counselors from both an intervention implementation perspective and from an Adlerian perspective.
Advocating for Sexual Minority Students: Implications for Professional School Counselors

Professional school counselors face many challenges and responsibilities in today’s educational institutions. They are expected to be leaders, advocates, agents of change, and to collaborate with other professionals to increase the rate of success for all students (Bowers & Hatch, 2005; American School Counseling Association, 2012). In the pool of all students in the school system, various subcategories emerge. One of those subcategories is sexual minority youth. According to the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) national standards, professional school counselors are obligated to respect and affirm all students, regardless of lifestyle choices or cultural background (Bowers & Hatch, 2005). This is especially imperative for students struggling with sexual or gender identity issues. Professional school counselors must be “aware of their own beliefs about sexual orientation and gender identity, knowledgeable of the negative effects that result from stereotyping individuals into rigid gender roles, and committed to the affirmation of youth of all sexual orientations and identities” (ASCA, 2007, para. 3).

Sexual minority students are defined as students who do not identify as solely heterosexual. They typically have more negative experiences at school when compared to heterosexual students (Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, & Watson, 2009). The specific challenges this population faces at school can have an adverse effect on academic performance, as well as on the emotional and social development of students (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network GLSEN, 2011). School counselors should use all of their resources to create a safe school climate, and to teach all of the student population to respect other students regardless of the sexual orientation, identity, or gender expression of those other students (GLSEN, 2007). In order to facilitate change, professional school counselors must discover what motivates students,
educators, and the community to become involved with school issues (Valenti & Campbell, 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to identify sexual minority students, and the specific challenges and risk factors they face in schools today. The author will then examine the implications for school counselors in the areas of advocacy, interventions and strategies, school legislation, and from Alfred Adler’s perspective on counseling children and adolescents. This paper will give professional school counselors the knowledge and tools to best represent the sexual minority population. Advocating for sexual minority students is “relevant to multiple levels of the school community, including students, school professionals, and schools as institutions” (DePaul, Walsh, & Dam, 2009, p. 300). Because the sexual minority population is very much an invisible minority and is one of the most vulnerable student populations, professional school counselors have an ethical responsibility to educate themselves on how to best serve these students (Alexander & Miselis, 2007; McCabe & Rubinson, 2008).

**Sexual Minority Students**

**Definition of Sexual Minority Students**

Sexual minority students fall into five different categories: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, and questioning. As youth have begun exploring their sexual identities at younger ages, those sexual identities have become disclosed at school (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). In fact, it is hypothesized that as many as five to six percent of all adolescents identify themselves as sexual minority youth (Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). According to the American Psychological Association (2008a), each category is defined as follows: *gay* being defined as a man being attracted to men; *lesbian* as a woman being attracted to women; *bisexual* as a man or woman attracted to both sexes. The Merriam – Webster Dictionary (2012c) defined
transsexual as an individual who identifies with a sex different than his or her biological sex (the individual may or may not attempt to live as a member of another sex), and defined questioning as subjecting to analysis (Merriam – Webster Dictionary, 2012b). Each of these identifications may be exclusive or fluid, depending on the individual (DePaul, et al., 2009; Saewyc, 2011). Any student who identified him or herself with the aforementioned categories, whether in feeling or in practice, would be identified as a sexual minority student (Hansen 2007; Fisher, Komosa-Hawkins, Saldana, Thomas, Hsian, Rauld, & Miller, 2008; Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2011).

Identity Formation

Since a major task of adolescence is identity formation, assisting sexual minority students in developing a positive identity is an important task. Research has shown sexual minority students may feel they had to redefine themselves when they came out, and the process of forming their new identity required guidance (Fisher, et al., 2008 Saewyc, 2011). Confusion during the process was normal (Hansen, 2007; DePaul, et al., 2009). Because students often had to struggle through the beginning of that process alone, sexual minority students remained largely invisible during identity formation, making it difficult to achieve the task during adolescence (Hansen, 2007; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008).

Because sexual minority students remain invisible to many school personnel and struggling with identity at the same time, they are at a heightened level of risk (Hansen, 2007). Without support from the school, students struggle with accepting themselves and hide their sexual orientation from others (Crothers & Altman, 2007; DePaul, et al., 2009). A major role of a professional school counselor is to assist in the identity formation of students, and to recognize this process may be more difficult for sexual minority students due to the negative connotations
associated with homosexuality (ASCA, 2007; Espelage, et al., 2008). If sexual minority students form a healthy identity, research indicates their risk factors decreased (Wang, Schale, & Broz, 2010).

Huegel (2011) referenced sociologist Richard Troiden (1989) in describing the process of a sexual minority youth coming to terms with his or her new identity. The first stage is sensitization; this is a period of time where the youth feels different and isolated from the rest of the world. The second stage is identity confusion, which occurs when a youth begins to become aware of same-sex attractions, thoughts, or feelings. Youth may feel betrayed by themselves, as their learned negativity of homosexuality can make it difficult for them to accept these thoughts and feelings (p. 17). Stage three is identity assumption. Identity assumption occurs when an individual begins to feel comfortable with him or herself, and beings to identify as the sexual orientation he or she has been considering. Finally, stage four is commitment, which refers to the point when an individual feels he or she is ready to live the lifestyle of a sexual minority individual, and begin to "incorporate sexuality into all aspects of their lives" (p. 17). Not all students will follow a certain pattern; each may vary (American Psychological Association, 2008b).

Risk Factors

Risk factors are higher for sexual minority youth than for heterosexual youth (Alexander & Miselis, 2007; Crothers & Altman, 2007; Espelage, et al., 2008; DePaul, et al., 2009; Valenti & Campbell, 2009; Goodrich & Luke, 2010; Huegel, 2011; Trueland, 2012). Vital to research, however, is understanding that these risks were not inherent in sexual orientation, but in the negative reactions of society and in the victimization of sexual minority students (Hansen, 2007). In order for professional school counselors to serve the sexual minority population, it is
important that school counselors understand the risk factors this population is more likely to experience.

Sexual minority student experiences showed “negative effects of self-concept, affect, and mental health” (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008, p. 471). Risk factors include but are not limited to homelessness, bullying, family rejection, an inability to form supportive relationships due to a lack of feeling safe, increased suicidal behavior, isolation, harassment, under-performing in academics, increased levels of anxiety and depression, self-harm, self-destructive behaviors, increased drop-out rate, decreased levels of self-esteem, lower emotional health, increased aggression, and increased risk engaging in high risk sexual behaviors (Hansen, 2007; American Psychological Association, 2008b; Espelage, et al., 2008; Fisher, et al., 2008; McDermott, Roen, & Scourfield, 2008; Swearer, et al., 2008; DePaul, et al., 2009; Valenti & Campbell, 2009; Travers, Guta, Flicker, Larkin, Lo, McCardell, van der Meulen, & Toronto Teen Survey Team, 2010; Wang, et al., 2010; Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore, & Giambrone, 2011; Russel, Ryan, Toomey, Rafael, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011; Saewyc, 2011; Fenwick & Sanders, 2012; Fritz, 2012; GLSEN, 2011). Many of these risk factors related to one another; for example, isolation was linked to higher rates of depression and suicide attempts (Huegel, 2011). Once a professional school counselor understands the incredible discrepancy between the number of heterosexual students at high risk and sexual minority students at risk, the importance of focusing on how to encourage and support sexual minority students becomes clear.

**Homophobia**

**Definition.** Homophobia is defined as an “irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2012a). It can range from discomfort with the topic to outright violence in response to one's sexuality (Huegel, 2011). Despite the
negativity of the concept, homophobia is very common in schools and society (Espelage, et al., 2008; Valenti & Campbell, 2009; Hanlon, 2009). Homophobia is a result of two phenomena: misinformation and invisibility (Huegel, 2011, p. 27).

**Sources.** Homophobia originates from various sources in schools. Lack of inclusive curriculum and self-censorship by teachers creates a climate of exclusion and expectation of silence with regards to sexual minority issues (Hanlon, 2009). In addition to silence, outright homophobic bullying occurs between students (Swearer, et al., 2008; GLSEN, 2011; GLSEN, 2012). In such instances, bullies often receive no punishment or chastisement for their words. Often school staff does not even discuss the incident with the students (Hansen, 2007; Swearer, et al., 2008; GLSEN, 2012). According to Alexander and Miselis (2007), homophobia pervades society as a whole, making it difficult for schools to combat it. One reason homophobia is so common is a result of the *mob mentality* (Huegel, 2011, p. 31). The mob mentality makes individuals feel that either homophobia is acceptable, or that if they are not homophobic they will experience negative consequences (Huegel, 2011). As a result, many institutions like schools do not properly address the issue.

**Systemic in schools.** Homophobia is systemic in schools and creates challenges for sexual minority students due to the prejudices they face in school (Fisher, et al., 2008). Homophobia cannot exist in a healthy school climate (GLSEN, 2007). The way professional school counselors view homosexuality in general creates barriers between them and their students, and affects the quality of interventions put into place by the professional school counselor (Satcher & Legget, 2007). McDermott et al. (2008) aptly summed up the purpose and consequences of homophobia in schools:
Homophobia is discursively constructed by our research participations as punishment for the transgression of heterosexual norms. The punishment was through physical and verbal abuse, rejection or isolation but this went beyond the immediate hostility of, for example, a physical attack in the street. Homophobia works to punish at a deep individual level to create psychological distress; it shames the self and requires a young person to deal with being positioned, because of the sexual desire, as abnormal, dirty, and disgusting. (p. 821)

Homophobic rhetoric is prevalent within schools, and researchers often refer to it as the “new racism” (Zack, Mannheim, & Alfano, 2010, p. 106). Homophobic rhetoric permeates school language far more than racist language, from both students and staff (Zack, et al., 2010). In rare cases, some schools have policies in place forcing any discussion of homosexual activity to be done in a negative manner, denoting it as deviant or abnormal, and not represented in curriculum. This only further reinforces the use of homophobic rhetoric (Hanlon, 2009).

According to Hanlon (2009) educators felt uncomfortable with the topic, some found it difficult to manage a discussion with students, and others felt they did not have the time for such discussion in the classroom. Because of the silence surrounding sexual minority issues and the lack of inclusive curriculum in schools, heterosexual norms become reinforced (Swearer, et al., 2008; Hanlon, 2009; Valenti & Campbell, 2009). This creates an environment in which sexual minority students and staff become silenced, and where sexual minority lifestyles come to be reinforced as strange or deviant. Homophobia underscores school functioning, creating a homophobic culture in which students grow up (Valenti & Campbell, 2009).
School Climate

In recent years, sexual minority youth have become more visible in societal structures, including in schools. As a result, schools struggle in attempting to find a balance between the traditional ideals of society and acceptance of all individuals (DePaul, et al., 2009). Research has shown life at school for sexual minority youth can range from uncomfortable and awkward to actually dangerous (DePaul, et al., 2009; Huegel, 2011). In addition, this population of students may not always be visible (Hansen, 2007). Having a safe school policy that is inclusive of sexual minority students makes a difference in the perception of the school climate of sexual minority students (Espelage, et al., 2008; Huegel, 2011; Russell, et al., 2011). A negative school climate can “contribute to and intensify negative health and mental health outcomes,” as well as affect school achievement (Hansen, 2007; DePaul, et al., 2009, p. 302). Because of this, educational institutions have become faced with the question of whether to and how to address the issues of sexual minority students. Research has reinforced the need for interventions to improve the quality of the school climate for this population (Hansen, 2007; DePaul, et al., 2009).

Bullying

Sexual minority students experience more verbal and physical bullying than heterosexual students (Berlan, et al., 2011; Sherriff, et al., 2011). Bullying often begins as teasing in elementary schools and escalates to violence as students age (Hanlon, 2009; Russell, et al., 2011). Bullying is linked to negative mental health outcomes for the victims, and to criminal behavior later in life for the bullies (Crothers & Altman, 2007; Espelage, et al., 2008; Saewyc, 2011). Students being bullied perceive their school to have a more negative school climate than students who are not bullied (Espelage, et al., 2008). Because bullying has become more verbal and relational than in the past, it has become more difficult for bullying to be tracked and
managed in schools (Crothers & Altman, 2007). The use of intimidation has also become more common (Crothers & Altman, 2007). Many sexual minority students choose to hide that part of their identity at school as a result of being afraid of bullying or judgment (Human Rights Campaign, 2012).

According to Crothers and Altman (2007), bullying “is a frequently-occurring, painful phenomenon of childhood” (p. 1). Bullying and harassment is a “pervasive problem faced by U.S. youth” (Swearer, et al., 2008, p. 160). Sexual minority students specifically deal with bullying (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008; DePaul, et al., 2009; Huegel, 2011; Russell, et al., 2011). Sexual minority students experience more bullying than heterosexual students because they are perceived as different; in addition their challenges in being victims of bullying often vary from heterosexual students (Alexander & Miselis, 2007; Swearer, et al., 2008; Graybill, et al., 2009; Valenti & Campbell, 2009; Zack, et al., 2010; Russell, et al., 2011; GLSEN, 2012; Trueland, 2012). According to the GLSEN National School Climate Survey (2012), eighty percent of sexual minority students experienced “harassment at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation” (p. 2). Three fifths of sexual minority students felt as though school was not a safe place (GLSEN, 2012). Even heterosexual students find bullying related to their perceived sexual minority status is more distressing than being bullied for other reasons (Swearer, et al., 2008; DePaul, et al., 2009). Despite this research, little has been done to integrate the issue of bullying with the attitudes of homophobia in the schools (Espelage, et al., 2008).

The GLSEN recorded the following statistics regarding bullying of sexual minority youth in their National School Climate Survey (2012):

- 81.9% of [sexual minority] students reported being verbally harassed,
- 38.3% reported being physically harassed and 18.3% reported being physically assaulted at school in the
past year because of their sexual orientation. 63.9% of [sexual minority] students reported being verbally harassed, 27.1% reported being physically harassed and 12.4% being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their gender expression. 6 in 10 [sexual minority] students (63.5%) reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation; and 4 in 10 (43.9%) felt unsafe because of their gender expression. [Sexual minority] students reported feeling unsafe in specific school spaces, most commonly locker rooms (39.0%), bathrooms (38.8%), and physical education/gym class (32.5%). (p. 2)

While the number of sexual minority students experiencing bullying at school has decreased from past years, it is still a significant problem in schools (GLSEN, 2012). Bullying has negative effects on mental health, and the effects can last well into adulthood (American Psychological Association, 2008b; Berlan, et al., 2011; Russell, et al., 2011).

School Achievement

When sexual minority students perceive their school climate as positive, they have a tendency to “flourish academically and socially” (DePaul, et al., 2009, p. 305). Sexual minority students often do not achieve at the same academic level as heterosexual students because of the victimization they experience (Hansen, 2007; Nastasi, 2008; Russell, et al., 2011; Fritz, 2012; GLSEN, 2011). For many sexual minority students, the victimization “has resulted in school failure, poorer grades, and restricted life chances that limit vocational and career development and undermine their human potential” (Russell, et al., 2011, p. 229). Sexual minority students also reported themselves as less likely to pursue post-secondary education (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008).
A perceived negative school climate can result in lower grade point averages (Hansen, 2007). Specifically, when students experience harassment due to their sexual orientation, the GLSEN (2012) found the sexual minority students’ grade point averages were on average three tenths lower than students that were not harassed because of their sexual orientation. The GLSEN National School Climate Survey (2012) found that “nearly one third of [sexual minority] students (29.8%) reported skipping a class at least once and 31.8% missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because of safety concerns” (p. 2). With sexual minority students being more likely to feel unsafe and to feel victimized, their perception of the negative school climate greatly impacts their academic and vocational future.

**School Involvement**

As referenced above, DePaul, et al. (2009) found that students who perceive their school climate to be positive flourish not only academically, but socially as well. The increased levels of bullying and harassment experienced by sexual minority students predisposes them to be absent from school and isolated from school-related activities (Swearer, et al., 2008; Sherriff, et al., 2011). In addition, for students experiencing high levels of victimization such as sexual minority students, they often withdraw from the social aspects of school altogether (Crothers & Altman, 2007). Sexual minority students are more likely to have skipped school because they do not feel safe (GLSEN, 2012). Without interventions such as a Gay Straight Alliance or other supports in place which can make sexual minority students feel like they belong at school, many experience isolation at school (Valenti & Campbell, 2009).

**Role of School Staff**

Students want support from their educators, and that support can create a positive school climate for sexual minority students (Hansen, 2007; Fisher, et al., 2008). Sexual minority
students find discrimination or even silence from school officials to be the most frustrating lack of support in schools (Espelage, et al., 2008; Huegel, 2011). Homophobic attitudes rarely get addressed in schools, even though schools have an ethical and legal obligation to provide a safe educational environment for all students (Fisher, et al., 2008; Hanlon, 2009). Many school staff members believe general anti-bullying laws provide sufficient support, but they do not (Hanlon, 2009). A lack of support from staff in attempting to combat homophobic language in schools presents one explanation for why the issue of homophobic language persists (Swearer, et al., 2008). In fact, homophobic language comes from staff as well as students (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). Due to a lack of support, the GLSEN survey (2012) found that over sixty percent of sexual minority students never reported an incident of harassment to assault to school personnel. Too often, school staff either avoid the situation or hesitate to speak up. A smaller number of staff members who feel comfortable confronting the issue and include sexual minority history and concerns in the curriculum are beginning to make themselves known in schools; this number must grow in order for school staff to be effective (Zack, et al., 2010). As in any issue of discrimination, the silence of staff members is telling of their position (Zack, et al., 2010).

School staff who speak out against homophobic language, bullying, and curriculum often experience “possible lack of credibility, their fear about possibly losing their job, and their fear about being accused of recruitment to the ‘gay lifestyle’” (Hanlon, 2009; Valenti & Campbell, 2009, p. 238; Zack, et al., 2010). Oftentimes gay men are incorrectly viewed a pedophiles, and staff members risk being accused of such crimes when supporting sexual minority students (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). In order for supportive groups or clubs to take place at school, a staff member must step forward and take the responsibility (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). When school personnel support the needs of sexual minority students, positive effects can be seen –
grade point averages increase, students become more likely to pursue post-secondary education, school attendance increases, and sexual minority students feel safer at school (GLSEN, 2011; GLSEN, 2012).

School staff members who get involved with support systems want to protect and assist the isolated sexual minority students (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). Some staff members don’t realize there are issues regarding sexual minority students. In order to be effective in supporting this population of students, staff must first recognize a problem exists (Crothers & Altman, 2007; Zack, et al., 2010). When sexual minority students remain invisible in schools, some staff cannot see the issues. School personnel who know of the issues have an obligation to educate other staff members so they too can advocate for sexual minority students (DePaul, et al., 2009; Valenti & Campbell, 2009). Staff can support sexual minority students simply by giving them access to resources (Valenti & Campbell, 2009).

**Teachers.** Teachers hold a powerful role and can advocate for the ending of homophobia in schools (Fisher, et al., 2008; DePaul, et al., 2009; Welcoming Schools, 2012b). Research has shown many teachers ignore homophobic language, while some even encourage homophobic talk in their classrooms (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). Some teachers and staff perceive a lack of support from administrators in addressing homophobia. If accused of recruiting students to the gay lifestyle or of being a pedophile as a result of advocating for sexual minority students, teachers fear their principals will not support them (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008).

In order to be effective advocates, teachers can address homophobic language with the students by agreeing on respecting others (Welcoming Schools, 2012b). Sexual minority students feel more supported when talking with teachers who address these issues in discussions and in curriculum than with those teachers who do not (GLSEN, 2012). Collaborating with others to
create teachable moments, along with planning lessons that explore and encourage respect for all people, can create support for teachers to address homophobia (Welcoming Schools, 2012b). Teachers being out of the closet can also provide safety for sexual minority students, and can be more effective in reaching this largely invisible population (Fenwick & Sanders, 2012).

Administrators. Administrators as a whole have failed to establish an accepting environment in schools, and haven’t given the support to the necessary policies to create a safe place for sexual minority students (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008). Anti-harassment policies that include sexual minority students are unlikely to produce change without administrator support (Hansen, 2007). Ultimately, the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the administration to support inclusive curriculums and to address homophobia in the schools (Fisher, et al., 2008; Hanlon, 2009). Without the support of the administrators, there can be no hope for change (Hanlon, 2009). According to the Welcoming Schools (2012a), administrators must clearly communicate the importance of safety to their staff members. Administrators provide encouragement to teachers to use teachable moments to eliminate homophobic language (Welcoming Schools, 2012a). Administrators can engage parents and the rest of the community to raise awareness of the issues, and policies can be implemented in schools to represent the support of the community (Hanlon, 2009; GLSEN, 2007; GLSEN, 2012; Welcoming Schools, 2012a).

Implications for Professional School Counselors

According to DePaul et al. (2009), “schools are one of society’s most stable institutions and, thus, are slow to change” (p. 304). Research has shown there is a need to address the issues of sexual minority students in a broad way, such as in a school setting (Sherriff, et al., 2011). The American School Counseling Association seeks to expand the role of school counselors to
include being advocates, leaders, collaborators and agents of change (2012). In order for professional school counselors to be successful in these roles, they must have a plan of how to address specific issues and populations in the schools, such as sexual minority students.

According to ASCA (2007), professional school counselors have an obligation to work with students to “promote self-acceptance, deal with social acceptance, understand issues related to ‘coming out,’ including issues that families may face when a student goes through this process, and identify appropriate community resources” (para. 9). Discussion of the specific needs of this population in schools is a fairly recent change, and professional school counselors have a responsibility to know how to effectively handle the discussions (Hansen, 2007; McCabe & Rubinson, 2008). Bullies and negative school climates cannot simply be punished or reacted to; instead, proactive solutions need to be pursued in order to most effectively address the needs of sexual minority students (Espelage, et al., 2008; Fenwick & Sanders, 2012).

According to McCabe and Rubinson (2008), “schools can play a significant role in preventing the negative effects of harassment and bias and enhancing resiliency of [sexual minority] youth” (p. 483). The experience students have at school can impact their entire adult experience, because their youth is when primary development of identity takes place. As a result, the role of the professional school counselor includes working to affect the school climate through creating an environment of safety by implementing violence-prevention interventions and cultivating an environment free of bullying, antagonism, aggression, and fear (Fisher, et al., 2008; ASCA, 2007). Professional school counselors hold the ideal position to assist students with their emotional, social, and academic needs. As previously stated, sexual minority students face challenges in all of these areas and have a higher risk of experiencing negative outcomes (Espelage, et al., 2008). Because they feel ostracized, many sexual minority students never seek
help for fear of being mocked or rejected (American Psychological Association, 2008b; Sherriff, et al., 2011).

Professional school counselors have the opportunity to be agents of change (ASCA, 2012). They can use their relationships with other staff, as well as the nature of their relationships with students, to usher in appropriate strategies to manage the needs of sexual minority students (Fisher, et al., 2008). When professional school counselors implement strategies specific to the sexual minority population, they can increase the positive experiences and opportunities for healthy social and emotional development of sexual minority students (DePaul, et al., 2009). Due to the multi-faceted role held by professional school counselors, they have the perfect position to develop a healthy school climate for sexual minority students. They do this by advocating for sexual minority students, implementing strategies for creating a healthy environment, and enforcing safe school policies and antidiscrimination policies (Russell, et al., 2011).

**Advocating**

Because of the nature of the relationship between professional school counselors and their students, professional school counselors have the ability to advocate for sexual minority students because students often confide their troubles in their counselor (Fisher, et al., 2008; ASCA, 2007). Unfortunately, there is some disagreement in addressing the needs of sexual minority students. Some feel advocating for and providing information about sexual minority students will create a more accepting environment; opposers of this thinking believe discussing homosexuality will promote it (Huegel, 2011). Professional school counselors can use their position in the schools to “promote equal opportunity and respect for all individuals” (ASCA, 2007, para. 1). Professional school counselors should utilize their role in the school system to
create a dialogue and raise awareness about the specific needs of this population (Satcher & Leggett, 2007; Nastasi, 2008; DePaul, et al., 2009; Wang, et al., 2010; Fritz, 2012). All aspects of the position, from their training to their role in the school, set them apart as individuals who have the ability to address these issues.

Because students often confide in their counselors, professional school counselors may be the only staff aware of the issues surrounding sexual minority students in the school. This puts school counselors in the unique position to help “alleviate them while fostering personal strengths” of the sexual minority students (De Paul, et al., 2008, p. 303). Professional school counselors also have the responsibility to be a voice for sexual minority students and raise awareness in the school, in the community, and with legislators (Hansen 2007; Satcher & Leggett, 2007; McCabe & Rubinson, 2008; DePaul, et al., 2009; Sherriff, et al., 2011; ASCA, 2007). They have the opportunity to shape the worldview of not only sexual minority students, but others as well (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008). Professional school counselors can, if vocal about the issues, “eliminate barriers that impede student development and achievement” (ASCA, 2007, para. 1).

Because professional school counselors possess the skills and training to advocate for sexual minority students as a result of their role in the schools, they can begin actively working toward advocating for these students. Making decisions and using problem-solving strategies about how to begin the advocating process is a major aspect of beginning this journey (Graybill, et al., 2009). Although the context of the school (the community, society as a whole, homophobic culture) may make broaching the subject difficult, simple signs of advocacy (such as designating the counselor offices as “Safe Space” zones) can be small ways to begin reaching out to this isolated population of students. Failing to advocate properly for sexual minority
students may have negative consequences on the “academic and emotional functioning of [sexual minority] youth” (Graybill et al., 2009, p. 580).

Interventions and Strategies

As schools become more diverse, professional school counselors should continue to be educated on various student minority groups. Interventions for dealing with the needs of sexual minority students should improve these students’ educational experiences by “creating a school climate that is safe, affirming, and conducive to learning and healthy development” (DePaul, et al., 2009, p. 304). Professional school counselors should use interventions to reach not only minority students, but should educate all students and staff on how to best understand and address the issues of sexual minority students. There are many different areas that need to be addressed in order for the needs of this population to be met in schools.

Gay/straight alliances. Gay/straight alliances (GSAs) are one of the most common and most powerful forces in producing change in school climate for sexual minority students and in combating homophobic attitudes in schools (Hansen, 2007; Fisher, et al., 2008; DePaul, et al., 2009; Valenti & Campbell, 2009; GLSEN, 2012). Research has shown GSAs provide the support and inclusion necessary to greatly impact the school climate (Hansen, 2007; Valenti & Campbell, 2009). According to Huegel (2011) “gay-straight alliances are student-led groups that work to create a safe, welcoming, accepting school environment for all students” (p. 279).

In schools where a GSA is present, sexual minority students are more likely to feel safe and face less victimization than in a school where a GSA is not present (Hansen, 2007). According to the GLSEN (2012), students in a school with a GSA were more likely to be “hearing fewer homophobic remarks, experiencing less victimization because of their sexual orientation and gender expression, being less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual
orientation, and having a greater sense of belonging to their school community.” GSAs show sexual minority students that they are not alone, and provide peer support and belonging to students who feel isolated by providing a safe space for sexual minority students to receive support, raising awareness about sexual minority issues, educating others about the issues, and by advocating in the school system (Hansen, 2007; DePaul, et al., 2009; Valenti & Campbell, 2009).

In order for a GSA to run in a school, a staff member must step forward to be an advisor for the group (Valenti & Campbell, 2009; GLSEN, 2012). Many staff members do this because they want to protect the sexual minority students in their schools; they understand that a GSA will provide safety for these students (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). The group is meant to bridge relationships between sexual minority students, heterosexual students, and staff to unite against discrimination in schools (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). Staff members who act as advisors are passionate about helping sexual minority students and often face discrimination themselves as a result of their involvement with GSAs (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). The number of GSAs in schools has increased over the past year due to the willingness of staff members to advise groups, despite the discrimination advisors often face (GLSEN, 2012).

Professional school counselors provide the support for both the advisors and the students for GSAs so that sexual minority students can gain support from this resource. The GLSEN provides information on how to start a GSA in a school. Support such as a GSA “can help buffer [sexual minority] students from risks and increase opportunities for healthy personal and academic development” (DePaul, et al., 2009, p. 306). The role of professional school counselors provides the opportunity for them to be actively involved in advocating for supporting these groups.
Inclusive curriculum. Professional school counselors can advocate for the use of inclusive curriculum in schools; policies and programs can be put into place to represent the sexual minority student population (Hansen, 2007; Russell, et al., 2011; GLSEN, 2012). Professional school counselors can incorporate information and history about sexual minority individuals into the existing school curriculum (Crothers & Altman, 2007). Having diversity included in the school curriculum provides representation for sexual minority students and diversity education for heterosexual students (Hanlon, 2009; Huegel, 2011; Fenwick & Sanders, 2012). Creating classroom curriculum and providing resources in the school library provides visible information regarding sexual minority individuals, which can create a sense of belonging for sexual minority students (Alexander & Miselis, 2007; Huegel, 2011; GLSEN, 2012). Inclusive curriculum would help disprove stereotypes and biases created in society, and encourage students to examine these issues without the homophobic attitudes of society (Hanlon, 2009).

Sexual minority individuals have played a role in the development of the world, and including their contributions to society in school curriculum creates a more complete educational experience for students. If the roles of sexual minority individuals are not recognized and taught, then the invisibility continues to reinforce homophobia (Fenwick & Sanders, 2012). Schools with an inclusive curriculum provide a safer environment for sexual minority students because their lifestyle is no longer considered abnormal to the other students (Hanlon, 2009; GLSEN, 2011). Schools OUT (2012) has developed strategies for implementing inclusive curriculum in classrooms and provides resources for teachers who desire to create an inclusive educational experience. The ultimate goal of all-inclusive curriculum is to “provide a safe and inclusive environment that acknowledges the existence of [sexual minority] people” (Hanlon, 2009, p. 32).
When discussion of sexual minority individuals issues occurs in the classrooms, it can be much easier for educators to respond to homophobic language and behaviors by creating meaningful discussions among the students (Hanlon, 2009; Huegel, 2011; GLSEN, 2012).

Inclusive curriculum has met resistance. For example, there are individuals who believe including sexual minority figures in curriculum will encourage students to engage in sexual behavior (DePaul, et al., 2009; Hanlon, 2009). As a result, inclusive curriculum has not been implemented in most schools. In fact, almost eighty-seven percent of students never heard of sexual minority individuals mentioned in their curriculum (GLSEN, 2012). Without it, a hidden curriculum exists; this hidden curriculum enforces traditional gender roles and the heterosexual lifestyle (Hanlon, 2009). The non-inclusive undertone of curriculum is exclusive, because “most educators assert sexuality norms and teach in a heteronormative manner; heteronormativity implies that heterosexuality is normal and everything else is different or abnormal” (Hanlon, 2009, p. 36). Simple concepts can have a great impact on students. Students who experience an inclusive curriculum report that their classrooms are more accepting of sexual minority individuals, hear less homophobic language, and are more likely to intervene when homophobic language is heard (GLSEN, 2012).

Professional school counselors have a responsibility to advocate for inclusive curriculum in schools and to be aware of their own unconscious biases (DePaul, 2009). For example, simple word choices such as saying “mom and dad” rather than using the word “parents” create the idea that all children have heterosexual parents. Using inclusive language as a professional school counselor allows sexual minority students to feel visible (DePaul, 2009). The role of professional school counselors is always to be inclusive and representative of all students (ASCA, 2007).
Professional development. According to Hanlon (2009), educators are often guilty of “perpetuating and allowing homophobia in schools” (p. 37), both intentionally and accidently. Research has shown that while many educators desire to combat the homophobic culture in schools, they often lack the skills and knowledge of how to do so (DePaul, et al., 2009; Graybill, et al., 2009; Zack, et al., 2010). Because professional school counselors have mental health and diversity training “they hold a critical role in educating teachers, administrators, and parents about research exploring sexual orientation in children and the effect of unsupportive educational and family climates” (Espelage, et al., 2008, p. 214). Teachers and administrators, as well as professional school counselors, hold positions that provide the opportunity to reach all students through the school system (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008).

Educating school staff members about multicultural competence can create an understanding of social justice (Nastasi, 2008). Welcoming Schools (2012a & b) discusses the roles of teachers and administrators in addressing the needs of sexual minority students, and the roles are extensive. In order to step into these roles, educators need to be trained in understanding and intervening on the behalf of sexual minority students (Alexander & Miselis, 2007; McCabe & Rubinson, 2008; DePaul, et al., 2009; Sherriff, et al., 2011). Professional school counselors possess the skills to provide training regarding the specific challenges sexual minority students may face, and how to most effectively address concerns brought to the attention of the staff by sexual minority students (ASCA, 2012).

Educators cannot advocate for students without proper training. Attending formal professional development meetings can provide the instruction, as well as collaborating with others to fulfill their personal responsibilities to all students (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008; Nastasi, 2008; Goodrich & Luke, 2010). Some staff members are unsure of how to respond to
homophobic language, so they fail to respond. Students infer this to mean those staff members agree with the homophobic language when in reality, they just don’t know how to respond (DePaul, et al., 2009; Zack, et al., 2010). When educators hold the tools to examine their own beliefs about sexual minority students and to effectively address homophobic language and behaviors in schools, they can more effectively serve this population (Crothers & Altman, 2007; DePaul, et al., 2009; Hanlon, 2009). Professional school counselors can empower colleagues to work on behalf of sexual minority students (Nastasi, 2008). Preparations for educators can be adapted to include sexual minority competence training in order to most effectively address the needs of the increasing number of sexual minority students in schools (Zack, et al., 2010). Without the collaboration of teachers and administrators, professional school counselors will not be able to implement the policies and create the change in schools for which they are responsible (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008).

Providing staff development regarding sexual minority issues has been found to be one of the most effective ways to cultivate a positive school climate (Hansen, 2007). The GLSEN provides resources for addressing the issues of sexual minority students in school at no cost such as the Educator Training Program, which provides information for educators on how to understand and address the needs of sexual minority students. Professional school counselors can take a leadership role in their schools to create a safer school climate for sexual minority students, and can use modeling to illustrate the techniques and language appropriate for educators (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008; ASCA, 2012). Counselors can partner with other staff members or with community agencies passionate about creating a safe school environment for all students (DePaul, et al., 2009). Without discussion among educators, the homophobic culture in schools is unlikely to be reversed (Graybill, et al., 2009; Hanlon, 2009).
Guidance curriculum. Because of the training in child development and counseling, professional school counselors have the tools to understand and address the issues faced by sexual minority students (Crothers & Altman, 2007; Fisher, et al., 2008). One way to effectively cultivate a culture of acceptance in schools is to educate all students about sexual minority issues and teach respect, acceptance, and kindness (Fisher, et al., 2008). Professional school counselors can utilize the guidance curriculum as a catalyst for this information. According to ASCA (2007), guidance curriculum can be used to address inclusive language, to promote cultural sensitivity and acceptance, and to provide age-appropriate information about different types of families, different types of dating relationships, and the different facets of physical health.

Professional school counselors can also use guidance curriculum to simply raise awareness of the issues faced by sexual minority students and individuals (DePaul, et al., 2009). Awareness education benefits sexual minority students by helping them feel less isolated and by counteracting the heteronormative culture of education (DePaul, et al., 2009). Appropriate discussions at each age level can be facilitated by a professional school counselor, such as discussing different types of families with elementary school students (homosexual parents, heterosexual parents, single parents) (Fisher, et al., 2008; ASCA, 2007). Guidance curriculum could include books by sexual minority authors, or include sexual minority individuals in the lesson discussing diversity (Fisher, et al., 2008). Guidance curriculum could also be used to educate students on the issues of discrimination and bullying experienced by sexual minority students (Crothers & Altman, 2007; Fisher, et al., 2008). These issues could all be addressed as a part of normal guidance curriculum in the classroom.

Individual counseling. Due to the unique challenges faced by sexual minority students, they may benefit from individual counseling with a professional school counselor (DePaul, et al.,
Before entering into a counseling relationship with a student, a professional school counselor should educate him or herself about the specific challenges presented to sexual minority students (Crothers & Altman, 2007; Fisher et al., 2008). Because individual counseling is so relational it “allows for a restoration of the capacity for interpersonal authenticity in adolescents who may have presented false selves to the world for some period of time” (DePaul, et al., 2009, p. 5). Developing an authentic relationship with a counselor may help sexual minority students overcome a fear of rejection (DePaul, et al., 2009). Professional school counselors should become aware of any personal biases before entering into an individual counseling relationship with a sexual minority student. Harboring prejudices while working with a student will only further damage the student (Crothers & Altman, 2007). Attachment can be an issue for sexual minority students. Therefore counselors have a responsibility to educate themselves on attachment and ensure the relationship does not become detrimental to the student (Wang, et al., 2010).

Family involvement. For students struggling with their sexual identity or facing issues at school, involving the family is very important (DePaul, et al., 2009). While students adjust to coming out with a new identity, parents and other family members may struggle as well (DePaul, et al., 2009). Providing information, resources, and support for parents and family members may help sexual minority students feel more accepted. Students who are out to their families and feel supported by them report being happier than those who are not (DePaul, et al., 2009; Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Having the support of parents can be one of the most effective counterbalances to victimization faced by the student (Espelage, et al., 2008; Fritz, 2012). It is important for parents and other family members to understand the important role they play in their child’s coming out. Parents and family members still play a major role in the development
of their child and should be supported in their journey of learning how to support their child (Espelage, et al., 2008; Human Rights Campaign, 2012).

Students may struggle with coming out to their parents. One third of sexual minority students feel their families are homophobic, and almost one fifth of sexual minority students are afraid of the reactions they will received from their families (Sherriff, et al., 2011; Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Professional school counselors should support students in the process of coming out to their families, as students may struggle with how to broach the subject (Espelage, et al., 2008). Healthy communication with their parents highly impacts the psychological outcomes for sexual minority students (Espelage, et al., 2008). Professional school counselors can assist in this process, but also have the opportunity to refer the family to an outside agency for support.

**Legislation for Schools**

Schools have both a moral and a legal obligation to make school a safe place for all students Fisher, et al., 2008). Two amendments in the United States Constitution can be used to protect sexual minority students. The First Amendment protects freedom of speech and the separation of church and state; the Fourteenth Amendment states that all individuals should be treated equally under the law (American Psychological Association, 2008b; Huegel, 2011). The freedom of speech protects the right of sexual minority students to discuss their sexuality without fear of being discriminated against. The separation from church and state protects school curriculum from adhering to a specific worldview, including those that view homosexuality as sinful or as deviant. According to the American Psychological Association (2008b):

The legal mandate of equality for gay and non-gay students alike is not limited to circumstance of harassment – it applies to all decisions a public school official might
make that would treat lesbian, gay, and bisexual students different based on their sexual orientation. (p. 13)

Due to the broad nature of these laws, many states and even schools within states choose different methods to implement policies.

States have varying laws protecting the rights of their citizens. For example, the state of Minnesota has hate crime laws, non-discrimination laws, and school laws that all protect sexual minority individuals (Human Rights Campaign, 2007). Unfortunately, not all schools have the protection necessary. According to the GLSEN (2012), some schools still lack comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies (Russell, et al., 2011). According to research by Hanlon (2009), forty-two states failed to demonstrate adequate protection for sexual minority students. Legislation exists that will work to change the lack of adequate protection – part of the Equality Act has statements protecting sexual minority students from bullying and strives to promote equal opportunity for all students (Fenwick & Sanders, 2012). In addition, the Equal Access to Act assists sexual minority students by “providing for equal treatment of all non-instructional, student-initiated clubs” (Huegel, 2011, p. 79). This protects the rights of sexual minority students to form GSAs or other support groups as needed across the United States.

Professional school counselors can use mandated federally funded policies and the specific school policies to cultivate support in schools (Fisher, et al., 2008). Schools are hugely influenced by legislators and by advocates who fight for the protection of sexual minority students (DePaul, et al., 2009). Because of the high risk of sexual minority students, professional school counselors hold the responsibility to actively work to ensure protection for these students at school (Fisher, et al., 2008). Professional school counselors are in a highly influential role to
create change in policies in favor of sexual minority students (Espelage, et al., 2008; DePaul, et al., 2009).

**Adlerian Perspective**

Alfred Adler began practicing psychology in the early 1900s. He began his psychological career believing that “the child’s greatest good fortune was the personal courage to cope with life” (Sweeney, 2009, p. 3). Adler felt that great impact could be made on children, so he most commonly focused his theories on children. Adlerian psychology is based upon three life tasks that Adler believed all individuals must face and deal with in their life. The three tasks include work, friendship, and love (Sweeney, 2009). All Adlerian psychological strategies and therapeutic techniques are designed to ultimately help the client understand what life task isn’t being fulfilled. In working with sexual minority students, professional school counselors can use these tasks to gain an understanding of what may be missing in the students’ lives, and use other key Adlerian concepts – such as encouragement, belonging, and social interest – to work to meet the needs of the students.

**Adler’s Analysis**

In late 1800s to the early 1900s homosexuality was viewed as deviant and abnormal. Thankfully, society’s perception and psychology’s perception of homosexuality has changed greatly over the past few decades. Because of the period of time in which Adler lived, he once stated that homosexuality was the result of an individual being discouraged (Adler, 1978). At that time, he viewed homosexuality as a negative result of the unhealthy development of one’s sexuality (Adler, 1978). This view seems greatly influenced by the limited knowledge society had about homosexuality at that time. Historically Adler was open-minded and accepting, and if
he had been working in today’s society it seems easy to assume his perspective would be very different.

**Belonging**

Individuals are best understood when their relationships with others are examined (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). When students feel they belong somewhere, they are more likely to feel safe and significant. There are various ways schools as institutions can assist sexual minority students in feeling that they are a part of the school community. For example, students in a school with an inclusive curriculum have a greater sense of belonging and safety at school (GLSEN, 2012). GSAs are also important, as they bring peer support and the message that sexual minority students are not alone. Using groups as a means of supporting sexual minority students can remove the feeling of isolation and increase feelings of belonging. Eliminating the feeling of isolation can serve to lower the risk factors and improve academic achievement for sexual minority students (Hansen, 2007; Espelage, et al., 2008; McDermott, et al., 2008; ASCA, 2007).

Sexual minority students often feel isolated at school (Hansen, 2007; Valenti & Campbell, 2009). Professional school counselors can utilize resources to minimize isolation for sexual minority students. Many sexual minority students will benefit from “social and psychological support” in order to be successful individuals (Hansen, 2007). Professional school counselors can provide and/or facilitate both of those support structures. The environment at schools should be one of acceptance for all, including sexual minority students (Fisher, et al., 2008). When professional school counselors take a personal interest in the challenges faced by this population, sexual minority students can be more effectively reached in schools.
Encouragement

Encouragement allows individuals the freedom to be themselves, without fear of failure or not living up to other’s expectations (Sweeney, 2009). Sexual minority students often lack the freedom to be themselves, and are not accepted or appreciated. Effective professional school counselors will use encouragement in working with sexual minority students to help the students build self-esteem and to help them “establish goals, attitudes, and competencies they need to cope with life as they experience it” (Sweeney, 2009, p. 75).

Sexual minority students face discouragement and discrimination each day. Professional school counselors use encouragement to nurture self-esteem and self-acceptance with sexual minority students. According to Sweeney (2009), who authored *Adlerian counseling and psychotherapy: A practitioner’s approach*, there are five steps to assisting an individual in developing positive self-esteem. The first is pre-awareness. Students may not realize their self-esteem or self-acceptance is low. Professional school counselors work with students to explain and help them understand their level of comfort with themselves. The second step is awareness. In this step, an effective professional school counselor will actually assess how the students feel about themselves. Thirdly, the professional school counselor can utilize interesting resources and information to assist the students. Using pop culture figures, popular books or movies, or sharing personal experiences can make students feel more comfortable and help them understand the concepts. The fourth step is action, where professional school counselors lead the students in choosing specific changes the students can make in their daily lives to increase self-esteem and self-worth. Once the students have a stronger sense of self-worth, the professional school counselor continues to meet with the students occasionally to help them maintain their level of self-esteem.
Professional school counselors can use encouragement to effectively reach their students. Students struggling at school are most likely discouraged and are not getting their needs of belonging, significance, and/or safety met. When educational professionals (teachers, administrators, counselors) provide encouragement for sexual minority students to be themselves, the students will be more successful, and feel safer and happier at school. Children cannot be without encouragement. It is the responsibility of professional school counselors to reach out to the discouraged population of sexual minority students and work with them to improve their educational experience.

**Social Interest**

In the theory of Alfred Adler, “the term social interest denotes the innate aptitude through which the individual becomes responsible to reality, which is primarily the social situation” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 133). According to Adler’s theories, social interest is built into the structure of individual minds and can be an automatic response to injustice (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Without caring for others in the world, humans cannot truly reach their full potential. The ability to empathize is one of the greatest gifts humans possess, and one of the major catalysts for social interest (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). One major facet of social interest is justice and equality for all people. Effective professional school counselors have a passion for advocating for those who do not have a voice (ASCA, 2012).

According to Fritz (2012), research points to the need for professional school counselors to be passionate about social justice and to be advocating for sexual minority students in schools. In order for this to occur, educational professionals will need training. According to Nastasi (2008), “multicultural competence is an important precursor to social justice” (p. 488). Professional school counselors have the opportunity to attend and facilitate professional
development meetings with staff to raise awareness of the injustices sexual minority students experience in school (Goodrich & Luke, 2010). Many professional are not aware of the issues, so it is imperative that professional school counselors be a voice for this often silent minority (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008).

The focus of the sexual minority community overall has shifted from changing religious attitudes to fighting for social equality and social justice (Satcher & Leggett, 2007). It is not only the responsibility of legislators to be working for social justice but also of those in positions to be agents of change in systems, such as school counselors. In order for change to occur, the people must become involved (Nastasi, 2008; Valenti & Campbell, 2009). Working with community agencies that are passionate about social justice can provide great resources for professional school counselors. When support can be enhanced through outside resources, sexual minority students’ needs are far more likely be met at school (Satcher & Leggett, 2007; DePaul, et al., 2009).

Conclusion

Sexual minority students face exceptional challenges in today’s school systems. Their lack of representation and the discrimination they face gravely affects their academic and professional futures. Professional school counselors have the ability to create a most positive school climate, and support sexual minority students at school. Using Adlerian concepts and strategies, counselors can implement interventions and encourage sexual minority students, heterosexual students, and school staff to be inclusive and tolerant of all individuals.

Further research on this topic would be beneficial. A deeper look into discrimination faced by sexual minority individuals in society as a whole may provide deeper insight to why schools struggle to address the issues of these students. Examining different school types
(parochial, private, public), school sizes, and school locations (urban, suburban, rural) in relation to the educational experience of sexual minority students may also provide answers of how best to represent them in various school settings. Finally, once sexual minority students have the support of a community, further research can help demonstrate how to best teach them to advocate for themselves. Once they have the freedom to be themselves, sexual minority students can be taught how to effectively and respectfully advocate for their needs at school. Professional school counselors can provide this training for their students once research discovers how to most effectively administer the information.

Sexual minority students face challenges in schools heterosexual students do not face or understand. Professional school counselors have the training and skills to raise awareness of the issues for others in the school and community, and to use various strategies to address them. Without advocates in the school, sexual minority students will continue to be silenced and discriminated against. The role of the professional school counselor is clear – advocate for this invisible minority.
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