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LGBTQQ Students and Safe Schools: A Call for Innovation and Progress

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In a historic decision on June 26, 2015, the United States (U.S.) Supreme Court affirmed the rights of sexual minorities to marry; however, rights and protections for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) youth still lag behind (Singh, 2010). In a large biannual survey exploring the experiences of LGBTQQ students in schools found that over half of the sample reported not feeling safe in their schools based on their sexual orientation and nearly 40% of respondents reported feeling unsafe due to their gender expression. Also concerning was that over 55% of the sample shared they experienced school policies or practices that were LGBTQQ-discriminatory, yet over 60% of respondents shared when they reported LGBTQQ harassment or assault there was no response from school personnel. There are often few schools that enumerate sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression as protected categories in bullying and harassment policies. In addition, LGBTQQ students and their allies frequently experience difficulty in establishing LGBTQQ-affirming clubs in schools such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), despite the research that suggests the presence of GSAs may improve school climate for the entire student body (Davis, Royne Stafford, & Pullig, 2014). Recognizing the many challenges that LGBTQQ students face in schools, the Institute of Medicine (2011) issued a call to researchers and practitioners to further develop the literature base on the experiences of risk and resilience for LGBTQQ students in school settings, as well as generating further research on how to develop safer school settings for these students.

In this current manuscript, the authors describe the research base on LGBTQQ adolescent development, risk, and resiliency across school settings. Recent efforts to develop safer schools



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for LGBTQ students are also described. Throughout this review, attention to LGBTQ from diverse backgrounds is given. Finally, educational policies and practices that support LGBTQ students, their families, and the school personnel who work with them are presented.

Experiences and Needs of LGBTQ Students

In terms of sexual orientation, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth may experience a range of responses from family, peers, and community personnel that either accept or reject their sexual orientation or gender identities (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005). LGBTQ youth who experienced high levels of parental rejection were found 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, and 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs and engage in risky sexual behavior than LGBTQ adolescents who experienced an absence or low levels of parental rejection (Ryan et al., 2009). Similar statistics have been found in research studies that explored the positive significance associated between family acceptance and well-being among LGBTQ youth (Doty & Brian, 2010; Elizur & Ziv, 2001; Shilo & Savanya, 2011).

School personnel seeking to support LGBTQ adolescents should begin by working with their families given the salience and dominance of family acceptance on LGBTQ identity development across academic levels. These efforts can be made through educating families on how to be supportive of their child, particularly those families that are religiously conservative, through family intervention efforts (Ryan & Chen-Hayes, 2013; Ryan & Rees, 2012). Schools are considered to be integral in building support for LGBTQ adolescents through use of LGBT-inclusive curriculum and promoting culturally competent teachers who can model support for LGBT youth (Snapp, Watson, Russell, Diaz, & Ryan, 2015). In addition, LGBTQ students of color may experience conflict between their sexual orientation identity and their racial/ethnic



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identity, particularly as a result of sexual orientation prejudice within racial/ethnic minority communities and racism within LGB communities (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011; Morales, 1989; Ramirez-Valles, 2007). Therefore, school personnel should seek to understand the experiences of LGBQQ students of color from an intersectional perspective (DeBlaere, Brewster, Sarkees, & Moradi, 2010). School personnel should also recognize the significance of disclosing one's sexual orientation to family when seeking allies for this population of students, especially given LGBQQ students of color are less likely to disclose one's sexual orientation when compared to their white peers (Groves, Bimbi, Nanin, & Parsons, 2006; Moradi, DeBlaere, & Huang, 2010; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001).

School personnel who use a multicultural counseling framework recognize cultural variables present with the counseling relationship (Ratts, 2011), and, therefore, acknowledge the social influences that impact the lives of students and clients daily. School personnel can advocate with LGBQQ adolescents by providing peer-based support groups designed specifically for LGBQQ students, and serving as an ally with a safe space to discuss concerns around identity, bullying, and community support for LGBQQ youth. In addition, school personnel can advocate on behalf of LGBQQ youth by conducting intervention models similar to the Family Acceptance Project (Ryan, 2010). Intervention models, like the Family Acceptance Project (Ryan, 2010), focus on educating families of LGBQQ adolescents on how to support their child, even when families may not understand their child's sexual or gender identity (Ryan, 2010).

Experiences and Needs of Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students

While most children demonstrate conventional gender expression at an early age (Brinkman et al, 2014; Halim et al, 2014), some children indicate preferences for variance in their gender self-expression and are described as transgender and gender nonconforming



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(TGNC; Ehrensaft, 2007, 2011, 2012; Menvielle, 2012; Pyne, 2014). In 2009, researchers asserted that between 2.6% and 6% of boys and between 5% and 12% of girls demonstrated gender-variant behavior and/or self-expression (Moller, Schreier, Li & Romer, 2009), but these statistics may not accurately represent childhood gender nonconformity because many children learn to repress their preferences or the families only permit genuine self-expression inside the home (Kennedy & Hellen, 2010). Children who demonstrate behavior, self-expression and mannerisms that contradict the expected normative gender role encounter numerous challenges, as they navigate a culture with a socially-constructed binary view of gender (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Lucal, 1999). These challenges include being teased or bullied at school, being ostracized by their peers and viewed as abnormal by people within their community (Bryant, 2006; Greytak, Kosciw & Diaz, 2009; Meadow, 2011; Roberts et al, 2013; Swearer et al, 2008; Toomey, McGuire & Russell, 2012). These experiences contribute to various negative emotions, which can lead to difficulty in school, family and behavioral problems, as well as higher rates of mental illness (D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks, 2006; Ehrensaft, 2012; Greytak, Kosciw & Diaz, 2009). Research indicates that gender nonconforming youth with supportive families show better mental health functioning and well-being than their peers who do not (Hill et al, 2010; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz & Sanches, 2009) and that when prohibited from expressing their authentic selves, they show an increase in symptoms of anxiety, stress, distress, anger, and depression (Ehrensaft, 2012).

Families face the challenge of having to balance two conflicting directives - nurture their child's authentic personhood while promoting their adjustment to negative social realities (Drescher & Byne, 2012; Ehrensaft, 2007; Menvielle, 2012). Another dilemma some families face involves the struggle regarding crucial decisions about their child's gender identity while



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dealing with uncertainty about which identity he or she will affirm as they mature – balancing the task of remaining flexible while affirming their child’s current self-expression (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2012; Menvielle, 2012; Wyss, 2013). Parents carry the responsibility of negotiating these tasks in both supportive and judgmental social contexts within the culture, where gender nonconformity often becomes a source of isolation and oppression (Malpas, 2011).

While recent years have shown a shift in how professionals view gender nonconformity (Pyne, 2014), parents still struggle with finding helpful resources and social support in an effort to understand and empower their gender nonconforming child (Drescher & Byne, 2012; Hill & Menvielle, 2009). These families continue to need support and advocacy as parents learn to provide an environment for their children that allow them to thrive and reach their fullest potential (Ehrensaft, 2007; Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Minter, 2012). Brill and Pepper (2008) suggest interactions that extend beyond the idea of “tolerance,” shifting towards true acceptance regarding the complexity of gender identity across society. TGNC student advocacy should include efforts that reflect a deep understanding of the injustices that occur as a result of homophobia and transphobia (Brill & Pepper, 2008) and aims for a more positive environment with teachers, staff, as well as other students and parents.

Building Safe School Climates for LGBTQQ Students

Despite the alarming overall picture of school climate for LGBTQQ students, the GLSEN survey and related report also offer encouraging statistics which point to future action, highlighting that some LGBTQQ students are thriving despite the odds stacked against them (Burdge et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2014). A closer look at the data provided in the GLSEN report shows that LGBTQQ students who are thriving – or at least surviving – are individuals with access to LGBTQQ-related resources and supports (Kosciw et al., 2014). This cohort of



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students demonstrated increased academic success in addition to better school experiences, overall (Kosciw et al., 2014). Generally speaking, LGBTQQ students who attend schools with safe school initiatives in place experience a reduction in feelings of endangerment at school (Kosciw et al., 2014). School staff may operationalize safe school initiatives in a variety of different ways based on the each school's unique needs. The GLSEN report highlights a top-down approach to creating safe schools for LGBTQQ youth, such as enacting school policies which explicitly address bullying, harassment and assault in addition to integrating LGBTQQ-inclusive curriculum and instruction, where positive representations about LGBTQQ people, history or events are taught both help to mitigate academic and health concerns and increase a sense of resiliency for LGBTQQ students (Kosciw et al., 2014).

However, not all responsibility for creating safe schools for LGBTQQ youth rests on the shoulders of school administration. Specifically, supportive school personnel who take a stand against colleagues and pupils who make anti-LGBTQQ comments or acts and provide inclusive support of student organizations help to build a community of acceptance and support around LGBTQQ students (Kosciw et al., 2014). When school personnel support organizations that directly address LGBTQQ student concerns, such as GSAs, this support fosters a sense of community, belonging, and safety for LGBTQQ students (Kosciw et al., 2014). Creating an environment where LGBTQQ students are able to access a quality education and receive appropriate support when setting academic and personal goals for their future, they are more likely to stay in high school, graduate, and successfully transition to fulfilling academic and professional pursuits, rather than facing negative personal and academic outcomes (Katayoon, Marksamer, & Reyes, 2009). The implementation of safe schools initiatives serve to empower LGBTQQ students and their families to become more resilient, increase their self-advocacy, and



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overcome personal and systemic barriers to achieve personal and academic success.

About the Authors



Anneliese A. Singh, PhD, LPC is an associate professor in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at The University of Georgia. Dr. Singh is a past President of the Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC), where her Presidential Initiatives including the development of counseling competencies for working with transgender clients in counseling, supporting queer people of color, and ensuring safe schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning youth. She is a co-founder of the Georgia Safe Schools Coalition, an organization that works at the intersection of heterosexism, racism, sexism, and other oppressions to create safe school environments in Georgia, and has been honored with numerous national awards for her work in community-building. She also founded the Trans Resilience Project to translate findings from her 15 years of research on the resilience that transgender people develop to navigate societal oppression.



Lauren Moss, PhD is an assistant professor at Kutztown University in the Counseling and Student Affairs Department. She has extensive experience in the public school setting at the middle school level, both as a professional school counselor and special educator. Her professional experiences working with diverse populations have led her to research interests, which include: group work, bullying prevention, social justice,



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Rebecca Eaker, PhD teaches in the Psychology department at Georgia Gwinnett College. Dr. Eaker's background includes working as a social worker in the psychiatric and mental health setting as well as many years as a counselor in the alternative school setting, working with a diverse population of 6-12th grade at-risk students. Her research interests include gender identity development with a focus on gender nonconformity in childhood and adolescence, as well as social justice in academic settings. Dr. Eaker currently works primarily with college students as a teacher and advocate – supporting the needs of marginalized populations as they navigate their academic experience.



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