

Resources for Gay and Lesbian Students at the High School Level

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ABSTRACT

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Gay and lesbian students often face homophobia, discrimination, and even violence as a part of their routine high school experience. This homophobia has a negative effect on their education. A series of semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions were conducted with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) students enrolled at a Midwestern university. This study sought to determine what challenges LGBT students faced and how these challenges could be over come. Participants in this study described the many challenges they experienced. They also identified support systems within their schools (schools in this paper meaning high schools) as well as suggestions for how their schools could do more to address the unique challenges faced by LGBT students. Most participants felt that school staff members need to be provided with professional development about LGBT students and the challenges they face to help combat homophobia in schools.

Approved: _____

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*This thesis is dedicated to my mentor and friend, the late
Dr. Martha Wilson Alcock (1954-2005), who's life and work continue to inspire
me to help make the world a more beautiful place.*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	3
Dedication.....	4
Acknowledgments.....	5
Chapter One	7
Chapter Two.....	11
Chapter Three.....	28
Chapter Four	35
Chapter Five.....	46
References.....	53
Appendix.....	58

CHAPTER ONE

It is the job of schools and educators to provide a safe learning environment for all students and to meet the everyday educational needs of these students. It is estimated that ten percent of all people have a homosexual orientation. All credible scientific research suggests that sexual orientation is fixed, and the American Psychological Association dropped homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973. As more gay and lesbian people come out of the closet and become more visible in society, the more schools need to address the needs of gay and lesbian students and educators. The National Education Association (NEA) has been supportive of the rights of gay and lesbians since 1974, a result of gay and lesbian teachers losing their jobs over their orientation or their suspected orientation. In 1988, the NEA began addressing the needs of gay and lesbian students and in 1995 encouraged teachers to include gay and lesbian history month into their curriculum. (Jennings, 2005). At the same time, conservative political and religious groups have been successful in limiting the rights of gay and lesbian people. In nine states, the 2004 November election effectively made gay and lesbian people into second class citizens by denying them the right to a legal loving relationship. Many opinion polls suggest that the election of George W. Bush as president of the United States was largely due to the influence of religious conservatives who supported his proposed constitutional ban to deny gays and lesbians the same rights as heterosexual people. More than any other time in history, the civil rights issues of gay and lesbian people have now come to the forefront of American life. According to a 2001 survey conducted by the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLESN),

four out of five gay or lesbian students report harassment of some sort at school, and 30% report missing at least one day of school for fear of their personal safety. A 1989 federal study indicates that gay and lesbian youth are three times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers. Given these distressing details, schools need to begin to address issues of gay and lesbian students. Otherwise, they are neglecting their role of providing a safe environment for all students that promotes a culture of learning and respect.

Statement of the Problem

The primary issue under investigation is to identify needs of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) students and how schools can meet these needs.

Research Questions

1. What are the most significant problems that LGBT students face in high schools today?
2. How can high school officials respond to these needs in order to promote a culture of learning and respect for all students?
3. What are effective ways that high school LGBT students and teachers deal with homophobia?
4. What outside groups have influenced high school curriculum and policy in regards to handling of LGBT issues?
What community resources are available or could be put in place to assist LGBT high school students?

Purpose/Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify specific needs of LGBT students in schools and how schools can meet these needs. The findings could assist teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, and students understand the needs of these students and what they can do to help. School districts could adopt programs used in progressive districts described in the literature or ideas that come from the interviews with LGBT student and teachers, when having to deal with LGBT issues for the first time.

Limitations

One limitation to this study is that the research pertains only to high school level students and can not be generalized to elementary or middle school students.

Delimitations

This research reports the findings from interviews with LGBT students, practicing teachers, pre service teachers, and other staff that work with high school students in schools. Only LGBT people were participants in these interviews.

Definitions

The following terms will be used throughout this study and are defined for the reader.

Bisexual: A person who is physically, emotionally, spiritually, and/or sexually attracted to members of more than one gender.

Gay: A homosexual male.

Heterosexism: The belief that all people are heterosexual, the assumption and/or belief that heterosexual relationships and behavior are superior, and the actions based on this assumption.

Heterosexual: A person who is physically, emotionally, spiritual, and/or sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex.

Homophobia: Fear, anger, discomfort, intolerance, or lack of acceptance toward LGBT people.

Homosexual: A person who is physically, emotionally, spiritually, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex.

Lesbian: A homosexual female.

L.G.B.T.: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.

Religious Conservative: Members of religious groups who feel that the Bible is the inerrant and literal word of God.

School: High schools serving students from grades 9-12.

Straight Ally: A heterosexual person who is supportive of LGBT people.

Transgender: A person whose gender identification is different from their biologically born sex (<http://www.ohio.edu/lgbt/resources/brochures.cfm>, 2008; Robinson, 2008).

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

In order to examine specific needs that gay and lesbian students have and how schools can meet these needs, it is necessary to review literature concerning how the majority of scientists, mental health care professionals and sex educators view homosexuality. It is also necessary to review studies of how gay and lesbian students are at risk, as well as programs that are already in place to help these students cope. As religious conservatives pose what researchers view as the greatest obstacle in providing help to gay and lesbian students (Macgillivray, 2004), this literature review concludes with responses from conservative Christians who oppose rights for gay and lesbian people and resources for gay and lesbian youth in the public schools.

Nature of Homosexuality

It is roughly estimated that ten percent of the population is homosexual. This figure, obtained by the famous Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948), is one of the most widely used figures today. Obtaining an accurate number of gay people is challenging, if not impossible. Some research suggests that the 10% figure may be higher, as a homophobic society may make many people unwilling to truthfully answer questions about their sexual orientation (Caramango, 2002). However, many groups seeking protection for gay and lesbian people still use the 10% figure. Certain conservative groups, many of which actively seek to limit the rights of gay and lesbian people, reject Kinsey's 10% figure claiming bias, sampling problems, and manipulating statistical data. Conservative groups refer to what they call "unbiased" studies, that report only 1-2% of

the population is gay or lesbian (Reinisch & Eichel, 1990). However, as the purpose of these groups appears to be aimed at taking rights and protection from gay and lesbian people, there is a legitimate concern about their credibility, especially at a time when the rights of gay and lesbian people are now at the forefront of American politics.

Perspectives of Professionals

Biological origins. The origins of homosexuality have been debated for thousands of years. The first documented biological theory dates back to Aristotle, who felt that gay males had different nerves in their bodies. Scientists, mental health professionals, and sex educators today agree that homosexual desire is natural and unchangeable (Westheimer, 2000). Although a biological cause has not been determined, there has been much research conducted that strongly suggests that biology plays a major role in determining sexual orientation. Some researchers have suggested that various concentration levels of hormones that the fetus is exposed to may have an influence on sexual orientation, as biological sex is determined before the 12th week (Ellis, 1936). Another study conducted by Harner, Hu, Magson and Pattucii in 1993 focusing on chromosomes, revealed that there is a 99.5% chance that genetic material on the X chromosome predisposes males to having a homosexual orientation. The same researchers examined family histories of homosexual males and found there were more gay relatives on the maternal side of the family than on the paternal side. They found 13.5% of the brothers of the homosexual men studied were homosexual, compared to 2% of the brothers of straight men.

Other research is consistent with these findings where men with gay brothers were 14% more likely to be gay versus 2% of men who did not have homosexual brothers (Pillard & Weinrich, 1986). The same researchers examined gay male brothers and found that 52% of identical twins were homosexual compared to 22% of fraternal twins and only 11% of siblings who were adopted (Bailey & Pillard, 1991).

In addition to hormonal and genetic studies, LeVay and colleagues (1991) found that a region in the hypothalamus of the brain called INAH3 is the same size in woman and homosexual men, but twice as large in heterosexual men. This research is supported by Allen, Hines, Shryne, and Gorski (1986) who also found that the anterior commissure of the brain (band of fibers connecting the cerebral hemispheres) is smallest in heterosexual men, larger in women, and the largest in homosexual men.

Current research available at the time of this writing was published in the issue of *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* by Savic, Berglund, and Lindström (2005). In this study, subjects were exposed to various odors and their brain response was noted using PET scans. Subjects were heterosexual males, homosexual males, and heterosexual females. All participants showed activity in the olfactory center of the brain when they inhaled cedar and lavender. However, when subjects inhaled testosterone, a region of the hypothalamus was activated in both homosexual males and in heterosexual females. The hypothalamus is the center of the brain responsible for sexual response. There was no activation in the hypothalamus of heterosexual males when exposed to testosterone. When subjects were exposed to estrogen, heterosexual females showed a response only in the olfactory center of the brain, homosexual males showed a slight

response in the hypothalamus, and heterosexual males showed a strong response in the hypothalamus. Another study conducted by Martins, Preti, Crabtree, Runyan, Vainius, and Wysocki (2005) at the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia found that body odors are perceived differently by homosexuals and heterosexuals. The odors of the bodies of gay men were more preferred by other gay men while least preferred by lesbian women, straight women, and straight men.

There are two schools of thought regarding this research. The direct model of biological causation would suggest this would mean that the brain is hard wired for sexual orientation before birth. The indirect model suggests the brain is not hardwired, but definitely predisposed to sexual orientation while influenced by the individual experiences of the person (Besner & Spungin, 1995). Clearly, there is strong evidence that biology plays a large role in sexual orientation. As science and technology increase, more discoveries will be made.

Psychological origins. Aside from the biological findings, for centuries social scientists have grappled with the origins of homosexuality. The first documented psychological theory is found in the writings of ancient Persian physicians who felt that a male's masturbatory habits would result in either a heterosexual or homosexual orientation. Sigmund Freud felt that a boy might become homosexual if he identified with his mother instead of his father (Westheimer, 2000). He offered no empirical evidence to support his theory, and is the most criticized of all psychological accounts on sexual orientation (Faller, 2000).

Other common theories have been the “weak father, strong mother” theory that boys may become gay if they have weak fathers and strong mothers. Again, there is no credible scientific evidence given for this theory. The majority of scientists, mental health professionals, and sex educators agree that homosexuality is not a mental illness. The American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in 1973, and all national medical and mental health organizations followed suit soon after (APA, 1975). However, there are a minority of scientists who feel that homosexuality is a mental disorder that needs to be cured. Most are thought to be members of conservative religious organizations (Robinson, 2005).

Perspectives of Conservative Religious Groups

Religious conservatives, especially conservative Christians, tend to believe that homosexuality is either a sinful lifestyle choice or the result of poor parenting (Moberly, 1983). They reject scientific findings, as they believe them to be inconsistent with their religious beliefs and focus on the lack of a simplistic scientific cause (Caramango, 2002).

In 1992, the National Association of Research and Therapy for Homosexuality (NARTH) was formed to promote “reparative therapy” to help gay and lesbian people change orientation. Reparative therapy was proposed by Elizabeth Moberly in her book *Homosexuality, A New Christian Ethic* in 1983. NARTH posits that homosexuality is a mental disorder, brought on by poor parenting or child abuse. No peer-reviewed or longitudinal study has ever been conducted to determine reparative therapy’s long-term effectiveness and hazards. Sufficient anecdotal evidence has surfaced to convince the larger mental health professional societies, like the American Psychological Association,

the American Psychiatric Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and others to condemn reparative therapy as ineffective, and warn of potentially dangerous side-effects. It is also believed that most members of NARTH are members of conservative religious organizations (Robinson, 2005).

Exodus International is another organization that attempts to change homosexuals into heterosexuals. Like NARTH, Exodus International rejects scientific research that suggests that homosexuality is biological. According to the organization's official website, "Exodus is a nonprofit, interdenominational Christian organization promoting the message of freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ." Founded in 1976, Exodus "challenges those who uphold homosexuality as a valid orientation" and claims to have 120 ministries in the United States and Canada. The organization works with reparative therapists, but it also refers people to ministries which seek to "cure" gay people through prayer. Their website does not focus on the causes of homosexuality, merely that it can be changed. Those who claim that their orientation changed call themselves "ex-gays" (Exodus, 2007).

The only study that has been published in a peer reviewed journal on the success of ex-gays was conducted by Spitzer (2004). Spitzer concluded that change was possible, although it was extremely rare for this to occur. The 200 participants were largely members of conservative religious organizations who felt that homosexuality was inconsistent with their religious beliefs. Spitzer's study seems to lack validity because the subjects were referred to him by organizations such as Exodus and NARTH who claimed to have changed as a result of various types of therapy or prayer. In an interview with Dr.

Warren Throckmorton (2005), Professor of Psychology at Grove City College, Spitzer indicated that it was very difficult to find subjects for this study.

Discrimination and Harassment in the Public Schools

All gay and lesbian people have the potential to be subjected to homophobia, which is a fear and hatred of gay people. Most gay and lesbian youth know they are different by age seven. Usually, by age ten they become aware of same-sex fantasies. At age fourteen, when many students are in their freshman year of high school, they are aware they are homosexual (Johanson, 2005). There is huge pressure to be accepted in high school, and most gay and lesbian students choose to hide their sexual orientation from friends, family, and even themselves (Ridky, 1996).

Students who are openly gay and lesbian may face blatant discrimination and potential harm in the public schools. A 1989 report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that 45% of gay males and 20% of gay females experienced verbal abuse or physical assault in high school. Twenty-eight percent of these students dropped out of high school, and suicide is three times more likely for homosexual youth than for their heterosexual peers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1989). Gay and lesbian people have always been present in schools and all in areas of society, but have been socialized to hide their true identity (Mallon, 1994). High school students may be more reluctant to disclose their sexual identity due to fear of violence or persecution. A 1994 study by the Montgomery County, Maryland Commission on Hate and Violence randomly surveyed 635 junior high and high school students. Fifty-three percent of these students reported that gay and lesbian students were the most

discriminated group in their school. When students were asked to rate how well schools were doing to combat prejudice against gay people, most students responded “Not very good at all” (Ridky, 1996).

Many gay and lesbian students, or students who are perceived to be gay or lesbian, are being discriminated against and subjected to violence resulting in increased absence from school or dropping out of school (Jennings, 1994). Ninety percent of surveyed students who participated in support groups sponsored by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported they frequently heard homophobic remarks in school, mostly from other students. In the same poll, 69% reported they experienced harassment or violence, and nearly 14% experienced physical assault (GLSEN, 1999).

Staff members in high schools have contributed to homophobia by either actively participating in it or ignoring students who use homophobic language as a put down. It would be completely unacceptable for students to use racial slurs, yet the words “faggot” and “dyke” are frequently used by students in schools every day, and the behavior is rarely corrected by teachers (Ridky, 1996). It would be even more unacceptable if a staff member would use racial slurs, yet many students surveyed have reported hearing teachers using homophobic language or telling homophobic jokes (Kissen, 1991).

A two-year survey of the perceptions of school personnel conducted by Sears (1991) indicated that most of the student participants felt teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors avoided the topic of homosexuality. Only a few reported that educators were supportive and made a difference in their lives. Three-fourths of all

students felt teachers have negative perspectives about gay and lesbian people and 80% felt that either few or none of their teachers viewed homosexuality as an acceptable alternative lifestyle to the heterosexual mainstream. In surveying pre-service teachers, Sears (1991) found that eighty percent had negative feelings toward gay and lesbian people. Elementary education teachers were more likely to have negative feelings than secondary school teachers. Less than one-third of these teachers felt comfortable discussing homosexuality in the classroom. He also found that 40% felt that there was nothing wrong in transferring a gay or lesbian student to another class at the request of a homophobic teacher.

Schools play an important role in developing sexual beliefs that are considered 'normal' (Sears, 1991). As a part of society, schools can be highly heterosexist places. Heterosexism is the assumption that everyone is straight and that gay and lesbian people do not exist (Johanson 2005). Many gay and lesbian students have reported that one of the places where heterosexism is the most prevalent in schools is in health and biological science classes. Students have reported that health curricula neglect to mention homosexuality at all except in the context of AIDS. Nothing is mentioned about the scientific facts of the origins of homosexuality or that homosexuality is a normal sexual orientation for a minority of people (Sears, 1991).

Research by Town (1996) indicated that students reported being exposed to positive examples of gay and lesbian people the most in English classes, where English teachers pointed out that Tennessee Williams was gay during a class study of his play, *The Glass Menagerie*. Students felt comfortable coming out to these English teachers,

who they felt were supportive of their sexual orientation. Supportive staff members are clearly in the minority, as negative stereotypical images and limited exposure to the contribution of gay and lesbian people causes increased sense of isolation (Town, 1996).

Meeting the Needs of Gay and Lesbian Students

Qualitative and structured interviews with students indicate that it would be helpful if gay and lesbian teachers were out, though many of these students feel it might jeopardize the teacher's job security (Kissen, 1991). There have been numerous personal accounts of gay and lesbian teachers and administrators who have come out and understand that gay and lesbian students need gay role models to combat the sense of isolation (Jennings, 1994).

Content Area Instruction

To further combat feelings of isolation and heterosexism, teachers can integrate sexual orientation into the context of their own curricula. Health instructors can make contact information for local psychological health agencies available to students, while providing accurate information about all sexual orientations. English and Language Arts teachers can mention the importance of gay and lesbian literary figures. Music teachers can discuss gay and lesbian composers and how their sexual orientation contributed to their compositions. Social studies teachers can present important gay and lesbian figures in history, where many heterosexist textbooks leave out such details. Social studies teachers who teach psychology and sociology can discuss motivation for prejudice and discrimination for all types of minorities, including sexual minorities (Besner & Spungin, 1995).

Library Resources

School librarians can assist by obtaining books that have updated information about homosexuality in general reference books. They can provide books that feature gay and lesbian people as central characters who are heroes. School guidance counselors are often the professions students turn to for emotional support in times of crisis. They can post positive gay information in their offices and provide accurate information about homosexuality (McConnell-Celi, 1993). All school officials who deal with students should be knowledgeable about homosexuality, the needs of homosexual students, and how they are at risk. Such persons include teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, and school nurses (Woog, 1995).

Teacher's Attitudes

Teacher's attitudes can have a significant effect by validating students' feelings of self-acceptance as teachers are viewed as role models and authority figures (Besner & Spungin, 1995). The largest professional teachers' organization, the NEA, has been committed to addressing gay and lesbian issues in education since 1974. In 1987, the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Caucus (GLBTC) was formed to further help protect gay and lesbian students. Its mission statement from their website states, "The NEA-GLBTC, in order to eliminate institutional discrimination and homophobia monitors and participates in the development of NEA policies and activities, provides resources and fosters better communication among educators, students, and communities" (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Caucus of the National Education Association, <http://www.nea-glbtc.org/mission.html>, 2005).

In 1994, the NEA recommended that all school personnel should:

1. Acknowledge the diversity of the student body, including the presence of gay as well as non-gay students.
2. Address gay and lesbian student needs in programs on self-esteem, adolescent development, human relations, pluralism and diversity, conflict reduction, etc.
3. Respect the confidentiality of students who confide the fact or suspicion of their homosexual orientation or who ask for assistance in this matter.
4. Intervene to stop the harassment, including name-calling, of gay and lesbian students.
5. Include in sex education courses information about risks related to HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases.
6. Work to ensure school policy that prevents the harassment of all students.
7. Become involved as volunteers in community programs designed to assist gay and lesbian students.
8. Work to promote the inclusion of in-service programs that help education employees deal effectively with gay and lesbian youth. (National Education Association, 1994, p. 4)

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Gay-Straight Alliances

Another organization, the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) was formed in 1990 by a group of 70 gay and lesbian educators in Texas. The organization is responsible for forming nearly 3,000 Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) throughout the nation

since that time. GSAs are support systems within schools for gay and lesbian students and their supporters. The GLSEN sponsors several national educational events addressing the needs of gay and lesbian students which include National Day of Silence and No Name Calling Week. The National Day of Silence encourages participants to remain silent during the school day to bring attention to the discrimination that gay and lesbian students face. From their website, No Name Calling Week seeks to focus national attention on the problem of name-calling in schools, and to provide students and educators with the tools and inspiration to launch an on-going dialogue about ways to eliminate name-calling (Jennings, 2005).

Project 10

Another resource for students that predates the GLSEN is Project 10. This project was founded by a high school earth science teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District who obtained a PhD in psychology with an emphasis on adolescent sexual orientation. Project 10's aim is to help prevent gay and lesbian students from dropping out of high school. The number 10 in Project 10's title stands for the 10% of the population that are believed to have a homosexual orientation. Students meet in a safe location that guarantees privacy and discuss issues relative to being gay or lesbian. Project 10 seeks to educate administrators, and teachers, counsel gay and lesbian students, provide outreach programs for parents, suicide prevention, and risk reduction behavior.

Four years into the founding of Project 10, conservatives tried to halt all funding for the entire Los Angeles Unified School District until the district discontinued it.

Conservative religious groups hired a telemarketing firm to raise money to help disband the program. Their efforts attracted much attention, but were ultimately unsuccessful. Other schools soon adopted programs similar to Project 10 based on its model and principles (Woog, 1995).

Harvey Milk School

In 1985, the nation's largest public school district, the New York City public schools started the Harvey Milk School, an alternative school exclusively for at-risk gay and lesbian students who experience problems in their home schools. The school was founded in response to a 1979 finding that many gay and lesbian youth seeking counseling were not attending school. The New York public schools were reluctant to form such a school, and it took the threat of a class action lawsuit by a social service agency to approve accreditation for the school (Woog, 1995). Today, the school has nearly 100 students. Nearly all of the students have been subject to physical violence in their home school, and many have been kicked out of their homes. At the attending the Harvey Milk School, 95% of all students graduate and 60% are accepted into college (Bronski, 2005).

Opposition to Gay and Lesbian Programs

Reviewed literature indicates that much opposition to these programs comes from conservative Christian religious groups (Exodus, 2007; Robison, 2005) who feel that homosexuality is either a sinful lifestyle choice or caused by inadequate upbringing. Many religious conservatives feel that anti-discrimination laws and gay-positive programs in schools are attacking their beliefs. One member of a conservative action group called Concerned Citizens felt that Christians were being discriminated against

because they view affirming gay and lesbian students as devaluing their beliefs (Macgillivray, 2004). However, it should be mentioned that not all Christians are against the rights of gay and lesbian people. Many Christian groups, such as the United Church of Christ, the Metropolitan Community Church, and certain factions of The Presbyterian Church (USA), the Episcopal Church (USA), and the United Methodist Church support equal rights for gay and lesbian people (Robinson, 2005).

Other arguments come from conservative parents who feel their child may adopt acceptance of gay and lesbian people and reject their own anti-gay teachings. They object to the fact that their tax dollars are used to help gay and lesbian people in the public schools. Since conservative Christian groups feel that they are doing God's will, they will continue to be the biggest challenging to meeting the needs of gay and lesbian students in the public schools (Macgillivray, 2004).

Conclusions

In conclusion, gay and lesbian students face unique challenges including increased risk of suicide, dropping out of school, as well as verbal and physical abuse. Theories that sexual orientation is a mental disorder or caused by poor parenting are no longer accepted by any of the major health or mental health organizations. In the 1980s, programs began to be developed to meet the needs of gay and lesbian students. Currently, conservative religious groups oppose gay-positive efforts in school, and claim

they themselves are victims of discrimination as acceptance and affirmation of gay and lesbian people are against their religious beliefs.

In response to the literature regarding the biological origins of homosexuality, it is curious that there was little mention of lesbian women. The only study that included women ironically was the most recent, and the head researcher on that team was a woman (Martins et al., 2005). It would be interesting if a research team repeated one of the many male-only studies and used women as the subjects to determine if the results were similar or different.

Clearly, evidence suggests that gay and lesbian students are victimized in schools. However, many gay and lesbian students could be so scared and homophobic, that they may not even feel comfortable taking part in a survey, as they may fear they may be tracked and 'found out'-- a leading cause of stress for closeted gay and lesbian people (Westheimer, 2000). Therefore, the percentage of students being harassed or victimized could actually be higher than reported. Although several resources detailing how schools are meeting the needs of gay and lesbian students were mentioned, most of these schools were centered in major metropolitan areas. Students who attend schools in rural areas where a large number of religious conservatives live, most likely will not have a GSA or a program like Project 10 in their high schools. How can high school students living in areas where conservative attitudes predominate be helped? High school students indicated that gay and lesbian teachers should come out if possible, but also mentioned that the teachers' job security might be at risk. Under what circumstances should gay and

lesbian teachers come out? What legal protections are there for gay and lesbian teachers who do come out?

Acceptance of LGBT people in the public schools is opposed by conservative religious groups because of their religious faith. A similar situation occurs in the teaching of evolution, sex education and in other areas of the curriculum in that they have also been influenced by conservative religious groups. As there is much evidence to support that being LGBT is most likely biological, it seems appropriate to address this concept in biological science classes and health classes. When discussing important gay and lesbian figures in history, what context is appropriate? For example, German composer Franz Schubert was likely gay, but British composer Benjamin Britten was openly gay and his art was influenced by his life partner, the tenor, Peter Pears. Are either of the sexualities of these composers relevant or just Britten's? The research portion of this thesis attempts to address these questions and provides some answers and suggestions for those who work with gay and lesbian students in the school setting.

CHAPTER THREE

Method

The overall purpose of this study was to determine what major challenges LGBT high school students face and what high schools can do to promote a culture of learning and respect for all students. This chapter describes the research participants, the instrumentation used to gather information, and how the research was conducted and analyzed.

Research Design

This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the most significant problems that LGBT high school students face in high schools today?
2. How can high school officials respond to these needs in order to promote a culture of learning and respect for all students?
3. What are effective ways that LGBT high school students and teachers deal with significant problems they face in high school related to their sexual orientation?
4. What community resources are available or could be put in place to assist LGBT high school students.

Qualitative Inquiry

The qualitative methods of phenomenology and grounded theory were used in this study. Phenomenology attempts to describe how the world appears to others as they look through their own individual way through which they view the world (Trochim, 2008). Participants answered open-ended questions based on their own experiences using their

perspectives as LGBT in high school. This study also used grounded theory methodology to guide the research. Grounded theory uses generative questions to help guide the direction of the research. The goal of generative questions is to create an opportunity for the participants to share their own personal and varied observations, experiences, and perceptions. A theory can then be generated and based or 'grounded' on the experiences of the participants to explain a phenomenon (Trochim, 2008). In this study, the focus is on the descriptive experiences and stories of the participants to generate a theory of the challenges of LGBT students and how school officials can meet these challenges. The best way to obtain this information is through qualitative research where the participants can provide as much of their own experiences and perceptions as possible.

Participants

The idea for the study began to develop in the winter of 2004 when the researcher was attending a Midwestern university and was actively involved with the LGBT community at the university. The project began to materialize when the researcher completed an internship at the office of LGBT affairs at the university and worked directly with university students who described challenges when they were high school students. Informal recruitment began that winter in the form of social conversations at various functions of various LGBT groups at the university. Participants in these groups were very enthusiastic about such a study, as many of them were focused on service to the LGBT community.

There were three groups of LGBT students on this particular campus from which participants were recruited. The first group, the largest, served to promote awareness,

acceptance, and education about LGBT people to the university and community. It was composed LGBT students and their straight allies who were undergraduate, graduate, professional, and non-traditional students. The meetings and functions the researcher attended had anywhere from twenty to thirty members at its weekly meetings, and many non-members would participate in various events hosted by this group.

The second LGBT group consisted of graduate, professional, and non-traditional students. Occasionally, members of the faculty attended meetings of this group as well. This purpose of this group was to provide a social outlet for LGBT graduate students and their allies. There were about fifteen to twenty regular participants in this group that met for dinner and other activities several times each academic quarter.

The final LGBT group was composed primarily of lesbian students and met once a week. All these groups often collaborated, and many members belonged to two or more of these groups.

The researcher regularly attended events sponsored by all three of these groups, and much of the recruiting was done through informal conversation with its members. A formal announcement was made in the spring of 2005 to a group of about forty students regarding the purpose of the study and need for participants. Many of those present already knew about the study through the many informal conversations with the researcher over the previous months. Nineteen students volunteered to be interviewed.

Of the nineteen recruited, twelve participated in the study. Six students were female, five were male, and one student was transgender. Eight participants identified as

gay or lesbian, one as trans-gendered, and the remaining three were straight allies of LGBT community. The participants ranged in age from eighteen to early thirties.

Trustworthiness and Bias Control

As the researcher was an active member of the LGBT community, there was a degree of trust between the participants and the researcher. The participants were eager to share their stories and experiences, as all participants felt the need to improve conditions in high schools for LGBT people. The researcher could relate to their experiences and that added to the trust factor. Since the researcher was an active member of the LGBT community, and knew many of the participants, it was important to take specific steps to control bias. This bias was controlled by providing factual information in the literature review about those who oppose equal rights for LGBT people and explain why those individuals feel the way they do. The researcher consulted regularly with his thesis committee members who challenged him to maintain a neutral stance when interpreting data in light of the available literature, leading to increased trustworthiness of the data and findings.

Instrumentation

The research utilized a five-question semi-structured interview designed to answer the research questions in conjunction with the literature in order to produce a valid and reliable instrument. The theoretical foundation for the questions can be found in the appendix. The following questions were included in the semi-structured interviews:

1. Overall, was your high school a safe and supportive place for LGBT people?
2. If it was not safe and supportive, what could be done to make it so?

3. Did your school have any resources for LGBT students? Please describe them.

Were staff and students generally supportive of these resources?

4. How did staff members usually respond when homophobic language was used?

5. Were you aware of any resources that are supportive of LGBT people outside of your high school? Please describe them.

During the interview, hand-written notes were taken and later transferred to a computer for analysis.

Procedures

Five interviews were scheduled in the spring and one in the summer of 2005 at a local coffee house chosen for its proximity to the LGBT office of the university. The researcher took hand-written notes during the interview and later typed the notes, transferring them to a computer for analysis.

As a result of only being able to schedule six interviews from the nineteen volunteers (many had problems scheduling interviews as late spring quarter is a very busy time), a mass e-mail was sent out to all students who participate in LGBT organizations at the university, reiterating the purpose of the study and the need for volunteers.

The second recruitment resulted in an additional six interviews that took place in the fall of 2007. Four consisted of students who had graduated from the university and participated in the organizations when the research began, and two responded to the interview by e-mail. The four interviews that were conducted in person were held in the

city where the researcher and the participants were living. A popular coffee house was chosen for location of the interviews as it was centrally located and a familiar place to all of the participants.

The face-to-face interviews varied in length. The shortest lasted about ten minutes, and the longest lasted over thirty minutes. Both e-mail interviews consisted of short, often one-word answers.

Data Analysis

After all interviews were complete, data was transferred from handwritten notes to a computer to be reviewed for analysis. Each interview was marked with the date of the interview, the sexual orientation and/or gender identify of the participant, and the location of the interview. Each participant was also assigned a capital letter for organizational purposes so that their comments could be distinguished from one another, yet maintain strict confidentiality. After the data was organized, each transcript was read and reread for content.

Analyzing qualitative data is known as coding. The purpose of coding is to identify patterns and key concepts from qualitative data. The first step in coding is open-coding, where the researcher first examines the data carefully and develops initial categories (Trochim, 2008). The researcher manually coded a printed copy of each transcript by writing words or phrases in the margins of the data. At that point, initial categories of data were organized.

The second step in coding is axial coding. It occurs when the researcher examines the codes in the initial categories and makes connections to link codes together (Borgatti,

2008). The researcher organized the codes obtained from the open-coding process in data tables to make it easier to visualize the codes and organize the data analysis.

During the coding process, the researcher records his or her own thoughts and ideas as they relate to the data. Qualitative researchers refer to the recording thoughts and patterns of the researcher as memoing (Trochim, 2008). This researcher recalled the tone of voice and noted the strength of non-verbal communication of the participants during memoing. Several participants made the statement “this needs to be in there,” and all of those moments were recorded as memos above the codes.

The final step in grounded theory is known as selective coding, where one central theme emerges which all relate back to (Borgatti, 2008). The researcher identified the central theme by locating the most frequently occurring code, while using memoing, remembering the most passionate parts of the interviews, to determine a central or core theme.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

The purpose of the research was to determine the most significant problems that LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered) students face in high school today, how high school officials can meet the needs of these students, and what resources are in place to assist them. To answer these questions, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted. Responses were recorded and saved on disk and hard drive for later analysis using grounded theory. After coding the responses to the key questions, several themes began to emerge. These themes include:

1. Positive and negative aspects of the school environment
2. Formal and informal support systems in the school
3. Perceived reasons for lack of support
4. Ideas for improvement

School Environment

All participants described high school environments that posed challenges to LGBT people and those perceived to be LGBT. Homophobic comments were heard on a daily basis. Hallways, school buses, locker rooms, and cafeterias were the most common places these remarks were heard. With somewhat less frequency, homophobic remarks were heard in classrooms, study halls, administrative offices, and during extra-curricular activities either in front of staff members or even by staff members.

The participants reported that the majority of the time, staff members pretended not to hear remarks made by students. When staff did address these remarks, formal

disciplinary action was not taken. One particular school had a zero tolerance policy against racial slurs, but did not have a similar policy in place regarding homophobic remarks.

Discipline was often seen as unfair in the participants' high schools. A student who was perceived to be lesbian reported being taunted and harassed by three female students about her sexuality. When she physically fought back, she was expelled for the rest of the semester for fighting, yet the students who taunted her were not disciplined. After her expulsion for the semester, the student requested to transfer schools where she would not be harassed.

More frequently, participants reported bullying to occur and the LGBT students did not fight back. In three different cases, participants transferred schools due to verbal harassment. One incident related by Participant D occurred during the week of homecoming. Each day during homecoming week, there was a different dress-up theme. On one particular day, the theme was 'boy-girl' day where students were to dress up as members of the opposite sex. All of the students who were LGBT were subject to ridicule and many feared for their own safety. There were constant comments toward students who were perceived to be LGBT, such as other students calling the day 'fag' and 'dyke' dress up day. Other students mocked transgendered people by dressing up as members of the opposite sex and calling each other gay and pretending to simulate sex acts with each other. LGBT students felt it drew attention to them in a highly negative way. School officials did not view this as problematic as 'boy-girl' day continued for

another four years. As a result, many LGBT students choose not to go to school on that day.

Participant B reported that a transgendered student who was described as ‘flamboyant’ was attacked and beaten so badly the student was transported to the hospital by ambulance and required a stay in the intensive care unit.

Most participants reported that staff members, particularly teachers, played a large part in setting the tone in the school environment. Teachers were heard using homophobic remarks not only in conversations with each other, but some made them while speaking to their classes or to groups of students.

Participant B told of a special education teacher who announced to the class that the drama teacher was responsible for changing the sexual orientation of male students in her drama program from heterosexual to homosexual. The same teacher informed a student (perceived to be gay) that he needed to admit that he was gay and the entire school knew of his orientation.

Participant A reported that a music teacher, after overhearing a student use a homophobic remark, stopped rehearsal and stated that many of his friends from music school who were gay had died of AIDS, and that there was really nothing worse than being gay.

A high school English teacher who served as the advisor for the National Honor Society, while reading the guidelines for giving blood to her students in preparation for an upcoming blood drive, read that men who had sexual contact with other men could not give blood. She was reported to then ask her entire class why anybody would want to

sleep with a member of the same sex. Participant C stated, “She got up in front of the class and pretended she was throwing up.”

Some teachers, in the context of their course content, taught that homosexuality was wrong. Participant A reported that a biology teacher taught homosexuality could not be biologically natural because the purpose of organisms was to reproduce to make viable offspring. The same teacher also refused to teach evolution because of her personal religious beliefs. Similarly, a health and physical education teacher explained that heterosexual people were ‘normal’ inferring that homosexual people were somehow abnormal.

Many of the participants’ comments related to school environment reporting how staff members who are LGBT are treated in schools. All participants acknowledged that LGBT staff members worked at their schools, and many reported challenges these staff members experienced at work.

Participant J told about a mathematics teacher who experienced harassment from her students and was not supported by her administration. Although she never came out to her students publicly, her truck had gay rights stickers on it, and she had been seen around the city with the same woman who was known to be her partner. She was known for helping students pass the mathematics portion of standardized state tests required for graduation and she had good rapport with her students. [Participant J] “I learned more math from Ms. [teacher’s name] in one class period than I did four years of math from other teachers.”

One academic year, she had a geometry class containing a group of homophobic students. [Participant A] “Kids called her ‘sir’ just to be mean, and they would ask her if any female who would knock on the door was her ‘girlfriend.” The teacher was not supported when attempting to discipline these students, and was told by the administration to transfer to a school where her ‘lifestyle would be more acceptable.’

Participant F reported an incident where an openly gay science teacher was not supported while a closeted gay science teacher was supported. The openly gay teacher was extremely popular with students, very knowledgeable about his content, and open about his sexual orientation with both students and staff. He gained the respect of the students and was ‘a role model’ for students who were gay or questioning their sexual orientation. The closeted gay man was not as popular with the students, nor was he as competent in his content area.

“He was a mess. He didn’t know physics, but took the time to tell that teachers should not share their personal ‘choices’ with their class. Yeah, we ALL knew he was a closet case after that.” [Participant F]

In response, the closeted teacher filed sexual harassment charges against the openly gay teacher citing that he had ‘outed’ him at work. Even after an investigation and the charges were dropped, the openly gay teacher was targeted for a staff reduction and sent to work in one of the worst schools in the district while the closeted gay man kept his job.

Another instance reported by a Participant H involved an openly gay teacher who kept a picture of his significant other on his desk and spoke freely about his partner. He was told by the principal to keep his private life to himself and that the rest of the staff

did not want to hear it. In addition to these specific incidents, many participants reported trying to keep their orientation a secret, as they felt that their jobs may be in danger and that they would have been dismissed.

For many of the participants, even though the high school environment was reported to be hostile to LGBT people, the data revealed several consistently positive events. A minority of teachers was reported to address homophobic remarks and would not tolerate hate language in their classrooms. For example, a drama and speech teacher set the tone in her classroom in the beginning of the year by giving a demonstration persuasive speech that homosexuality was not a choice, and that homophobic language was hurtful. At the end of the speech, she revealed that her sister was a lesbian.

“Ms. [teacher’s name] was the kind of teacher who you had no choice but to pay attention to, she commanded respect. Nobody ever made a [homophobic] remark after that.” [Participant L]

Participant K reported that a chemistry and physics teacher reported to respond to students who said, ‘that’s so gay’ by stating, “I’m not sure what you mean, that has nothing to do with being either happy or homosexual.” The same teacher, who was a lesbian, stated “that’s very flattering, but I don’t date students” when a student ask her in front of her class if she was lesbian.

Participant A told of another chemistry teacher who reported being irritated when students used homophobic language in his class, and would correct the behavior on the spot. After these remarks did not stop he stated, “No, that’s NOT gay, I’m gay, and I

won't tolerate that language in my classroom." The remarks abruptly stopped, but the teacher was transferred to another school at the end of the year after the principal told him to keep his private life to himself.

Homophobia is clearly a problem in schools and in turn, the learning environment of the school is compromised. Staff members play a large role in the climate of the school and set the tone for appropriate behavior for students. Staff members who refused to tolerate homophobic remarks had fewer problems than staff members who ignored these remarks. It often seemed as if staff did not know how to handle these remarks due to discomfort or were unaware of any policy in place to deal with such remarks. Staff members provide a variety of support for students on both academic and personal levels. Staff members were often responsible for making supports available in the schools for students who are LGBT.

Available Support

Although the atmosphere in all of the participants' schools was mostly negative, some participants reported their schools as having formal resources to help LGBT students, and others as having more informal resources. Of the formal resources, Participant B's school had a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) formed in response to the beating of a transgendered student. The organization was established by a group of concerned students with the help of the school nurse whose daughter had recently come out as a lesbian. An openly gay science teacher and a straight gifted and talented teacher assisted the nurse with meetings and activities. None of the staff members were paid for their time or countless hours of service.

Participant B reported meetings consisting of coming-out support, discussions of gay and lesbian issues, discussions about forming relationships and dating, safe sex and STD prevention, and an opportunity to socialize with other LGBT youth. Occasionally, speakers from the local LGBT community attended meetings and various activities outside of the school campus. One of the favorite activities included meeting with state representatives and urging them to support legislation that supported LGBT youth.

Administrative staff at the building level did not actively support the organization, but did not oppose it either. Some teachers were reported to have made offensive remarks about the organization. One biology teacher said to her class, “We already have a gay club, it’s called the choir.” Other teachers took it as an opportunity to discuss gay and lesbians in their field. For instance, one popular art teacher was reported as saying, “there would be no art without gay people.”

The GSA lasted three years, with as many as twenty five members attending its meetings. After the school district reconstituted the staff of the school, all staff members were assigned to other buildings within the district. Without the needed leadership, the GSA disbanded.

In addition to this one example of a formal support system, participants reported most other schools having informal support from several staff members who were LGBT or LBGT friendly. Participant C reported coming out to an openly gay teacher, who served as a mentor and role model for him. The teacher referred this participant to a youth center in a Midwestern city that specialized in LGBT youth. This center provides a safe place for LGBT youth ages 12-20. There is a lending library, a computer lab, a small

snack bar, planned activities and tutoring for LGBT youth five days a week. It is governed by a board and has one full-time staff member and numerous volunteers. Participant C stated, “ I couldn’t believe that all of those people were actually GAY, for the first time, I fit in, they were a great help.”

Participant F described a guidance counselor who posted a rainbow flag in her office and was knowledgeable about how to assist LGBT youth. “I never told her I was gay, but I should have. I don’t know why I was so closeted, even to people who I knew were safe.”

Organizations like the GSA and the youth center provided formal support for students, while staff who are informed about LGBT people and LGBT-friendly, provide informal support for students. Both are needed to insure that schools are supportive places of learning for all people. The majority of staff members were found to ignore LGBT concerns, while some staff members even contribute to the problem. Participants shared a variety of reasons why they felt staff members were not supportive of LGBT students.

Perceived Reasons for Lack of Support

Participants reported that most homophobic remarks made by students were ignored by staff members. Many participants felt the main reason for this was they either did not care, or they did not know how to appropriately handle these remarks.

“Ms (teacher’s name) had no idea what to say. She probably didn’t want to draw attention to herself, so she always pretended not to hear.” [Participant I]

Staff members who identified as gay or lesbian might have chosen to ignore the remarks because they did not want to bring attention to themselves or to cause controversy in their classrooms. All participants felt that if there was a specific policy in place to address these remarks, more teachers would actively address them appropriately. Most participants felt that homophobic remarks from students and staff stemmed from ignorance about LGBT people.

Ideas for Improvement

All participants felt strongly that mandatory staff development in understanding LGBT people and issues is needed as well as a policy in place for staff to address homophobic remarks or bullying of LGBT students. Many participants noticed that 'sexual orientation' was not part of their school's non-discrimination policy, and felt it needed to be added to protect both LGBT staff and students. All participants felt it would be very helpful to LGBT staff members who were out, to serve as role models for their students. Most felt it would not be practical at the time of this research, as many would be in danger of losing their jobs. It may be helpful for more non-discrimination policies to be put into place to protect LGBT staff from losing their positions.

LGBT students in this study indicated they experience many challenges unique to LGBT individuals and these challenges clearly have a negative effect on their learning environment. Homophobic remarks by students and other staff members, insensitive and

cruel comments about LGBT people in general, and a situation where a student's physical safety was compromised were specific examples provided.

There were also many positive aspects that emerged as well, such as understanding staff members, the formation of a GSA, and a community center for LGBT youth. Participants felt that in order to overcome these challenges, mandatory professional development for staff members is needed in order to overcome much of the apparent ignorance about dealing with LGBT youth and about LGBT people in general. One participant indicated, "It is very hard to hate people or want them to go to hell when you get to know and understand them."

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to determine what challenges lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered students face in high schools today and how high schools can provide assistance in meeting students' needs.

Discussion

Participants in this study identified needs for safety and equality at school. All reported hearing homophobic remarks on a regular basis. There were also times when students were provoked and even physically attacked. Some students ended up transferring to other schools as a result of discrimination and/or violence. Some staff members, those who were LGBT or familiar with LGBT people, did intervene to provide both formal and informal support to these students. Most ignored homophobia and some contributed to it.

Most participants indicated that the lack of support was due to ignorance about LGBT people, not necessarily because of conservative religious beliefs prevalent in the community.

The study investigated whether organizations such as the GLESN or NEA would have been utilized for assistance when students and teachers faced discrimination. The Gay Straight Alliance formed at one school due to the beating of a transgendered student was formed with the assistance of the GLESN. Otherwise, all available support in the schools was provided by staff members who were employed by the high schools. Outside the high schools, there was a youth center for LGBT youth that provided support,

educational opportunities, and social activities for youth supported by the Stonewall organization that was established to educate the community about LGBT issues and promote social activism among LGBT people.

The research questions were based on issues raised following a critical review of the literature. The researcher expected that students would identify challenges in schools including homophobic language, violence, and non-supportive attitudes of staff. This expectation was supported by Ridky (1996) who found that 96% of LGBT students reported that schools were doing a poor job to combat prejudice against LGBT people. It was expected that there would be some formal and informal support in schools to accommodate the needs of these students. Jennings (1994) found that many staff members who are LGBT have come out to their students and have been able to support them. Jennings describes LGBT teachers who have had challenges within the school systems, which was found by this researcher. The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (2005) has been involved in making sure that formal support systems, such as Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) could be put into place to assist LGBT students.

The literature described how religious conservative groups provided obstacles to those who either were LGBT or LGBT friendly. Macgillervy (2004) reported how conservative Christians felt discriminated against when schools supported LGBT students as it sent a message that it was okay to be LGBT, which went against their conservative Christian teachings. Participants in this study made little mention of religion. They did not report other students or staff members using religion as an excuse to discriminate.

Instead, they mentioned ignorance about homosexuality as the most likely cause of homophobia.

As high school staff members are responsible for setting the tone of the school, participants in the study felt strongly that staff members should be given mandatory professional development for effectively dealing with and combating homophobia as well as understanding LGBT students. Recommendations for further study include research on attitudes of high school staff members and antidiscrimination policies in school districts.

Recommendations

Participants in this study all faced discrimination in schools that was ignored by most staff members. These participants felt that homophobia was due mainly to ignorance, and felt there should be training for staff members. It would be useful to research staff attitudes about LGBT students and to research school policies on nondiscrimination. Teacher should be interviewed to determine how they feel about homophobic comments in their classrooms and how they handle them, and school administrators should be interviewed to determine if they are aware of LGBT concerns in their building and how their particular building deals with these concerns.

As school nurses and school psychologists are the medical and mental health professionals responsible for the physical health and well being of their students, they should also be included in training, as may be able to assist in professional development for the rest of the school staff.

Research conducted by Sears (1991) found that 80% of pre-service teachers had negative feelings towards LGBT people. It might be helpful to conduct a similar study, as

this data is nearly twenty years old and there has been an increased awareness of LGBT issues since the early 1990s. If staff members can be trained on how homophobia affects their students' ability to learn and nondiscrimination policies can be put in place to combat homophobia in schools, then certainly schools will become closer to their goal of providing a safe and supportive learning environment for all students regardless of race, religion, gender, class, and sexual orientation.

Recommendations for Further Research

The policies of school districts should be examined to determine if LGBT people are included in existing non-discrimination policies. Further research needs to focus on high school staff members such as teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and upper administration who supervise building principals. Future research should seek to determine if high school staff members are aware of the challenges that their LGBT students face and how they are currently meeting these challenges.

Educational Recommendations

After conducting and completing this research, the researcher feels it is imperative to incorporate LGBT people and issues into the high school curriculum in the same manner that all other minorities are included. For example, social studies teachers who celebrate famous African American politicians should also include famous LGBT politicians, such as Barbara Jordan and Barney Frank. This should be done across the curriculum, as LGBT people make contributions in all content areas. This would also provide LGBT people with tangible role models, combating the isolation that is felt by

many LGBT people. In biological science, health and psychology classes, teachers should address the topic of homosexuality from a scientific point of view. Most participants in this study felt that ignorance about LGBT people was a main cause of homophobia. By integrating LGBT people and issues into the curriculum, high schools can both combat this ignorance and provide a culture where all students are treated with respect.

To combat ignorance about LGBT students, the researcher recommends that issues of LGBT students should be included in part of the training of pre-service teachers. All pre-service teachers should complete courses in cultural pluralism and take diversity classes that cover the facts about LGBT people as part of their teacher education programs.

The goal of a cultural pluralism class is to make individuals more aware of other cultures and to dispel stereotypes and ignorance (Maples, 1992). While enrolled in teacher education classes, pre-service teachers should learn about the challenges that LGBT students face and how they can assist these students. This could be accomplished in classes such as educational psychology, where pre-service teachers are taught about individual differences and how the brain works.

In my own undergraduate educational psychology class, it was taught that at one time in the recent past, left-handed students were forced to write with their right hand so that they would be more like the majority of the population. Teachers were ignorant about how the brain worked. Now, education students are taught that people are left-handed because of the way their brains work and that it is harmful to try to make a left-handed person right-handed (Alcock, 1995). The same thing should apply to LGBT

people. They are born into the world ‘wanting’ to be who they are because of the way their brain works and seeking to change that is harmful. Preparing pre-service teachers with this training will help to eliminate misconceptions about LGBT people and assist professionals in their effort to create a classroom environment where all students are respected for who they are.

Conclusions

It is the responsibility of the public schools to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for all students. The existing literature and this study provide very specific instances describing how students who are LGBT are subjected to homophobia on a daily basis from other students and staff members alike. It is this researcher’s hope that this thesis can and will be used as part of a growing body of empirical evidence that provides school officials with an awareness that the needs of LGBT students are not being met.

This thesis focuses attention on awareness, acceptance, and action. School officials need to be aware that LGBT students are not able to feel safe and supported in their schools. They need to accept that LGBT students have a right to the same protections and recognition that are offered to other any other minority group. Finally, school officials need to take action to ensure the needs of these students are being met. Each school needs to have policies in place requiring staff members to address homophobic remarks in the same way that racial slurs are addressed. Schools should have staff members who are knowledgeable about LGBT people and who can be role models for their students. Schools should have resources in the school to address LGBT

concerns such as a GSA, or have access to resources outside the school where they can refer students in need.

If public schools will use some of these findings and recommendations, they can do a much better job of serving all of their students. A participant in this study remarked after his interview was over, “One of the most important lessons I learned in school was taught to me by my 3rd grade teacher who had a rule called ‘no put downs.’” As simplistic as this is, it may be a good rule for all public schools to adopt to ensure that each student can achieve his or her maximum potential.

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APPENDIX

Research Questions

Research Question	Supporting Literature
Overall, is your school a safe and supportive place for gay and lesbian student? If not, what could be done to make it safe? If so, how could it improve?	Besner and Spungin (1995) Jennings (1994) Sears (1991) Town (1996)
Does your school have any resources for gay and lesbian students. If so, please describe them. Are staff and students generally supportive of these resources?	Kissen (1991) Jennings (1994) Macgillivray (2004) Woog (1995)
When students use homophobic language (any derogatory term referring to gay and lesbians or the expression “that’s so gay”), how do staff members normally respond?	Kissen (1991) Jennings (1994) Sears (1991) Macgillivray (2004) Town (1996)
Are you aware of any organization outside of school that are supportive of the needs of gay and lesbian people? Please list and describe them.	Ridky (1996) Woog (1995)