

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Students: Perceived Social Support in the High School Environment

Cornne Mufioz-Plaza, MPH
Health Educator
Chapel Hill

Sandra Crouse Quinn, PhD
University of Pittsburgh

Kathleen A. Rounds, PhD
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth (LGBT) continue to face extreme discrimination within the school environment. Existing literature suggests that LGBT youth are at high risk for a number of health problems, including suicide ideation and attempts, harassment, substance abuse, homelessness, and declining school performance. This exploratory study consists of face-to-face interviews with 12 male and female participants, 18–21 years old, who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. The purpose of the study is to determine the types of social support (emotional, appraisal, instrumental and informational) available to these young adults in high school. In addition, the study examines the connection between social support and sexual identity development. Participants found non-family members, which included peers and non-family adults, to be more supportive than family members. More specifically, participants perceived heterosexual and LGBT-identified friends and non-family adults as providing emotional and instrumental support. However, participants perceived limitations to the emotional support they received from heterosexual peers to whom they disclosed their orientation. In addition to providing emotional support, peers and adults who also identified as LGBT provided valuable informational and appraisal, support. Finally, most participants did not disclose to their parents during high school and perceived their parents and family members as offering limited emotional, appraisal and informational support. Confronted with their own sense of alienation and confusion, as well as the overwhelmingly negative messages about homosexuality in their home and school environments, respondents described their sexual identity formation as a process characterized by varying degrees of denial and acceptance. The need for multiple resources emerged as a major theme from participant responses to questions about what types of services and support they would have valued from their high school.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth

Despite increasing visibility, persons who are

lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) continue to face extreme social, legal and institutional discrimination within the United States. LGBT youth are an extremely vulnerable subset of the larger gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender population. Given the degree of homophobia in our society, adolescents who are struggling with issues of sexual orientation face incredible challenges and lack many of the fundamental support systems available to their heterosexual peers (Gonsiorek, 1988). While estimates of the number of gays and lesbians range anywhere from 3% to 10% of the population, the latter figure is more widely accepted (Fontaine, 1998; Robinson, 1994; Marinoble, 1998; Omizo, Omizo, & Okamoto, 1998). Given these estimates, one can safely assume that a significant minority of adolescents in primary and secondary schools either self-identify as LGBT or are questioning their sexuality.

The widespread social stigmatization of homosexuality has been blamed for a myriad of social and health problems that can disproportionately impact LGBT youth (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Robinson, 1994; Remafedi, 1987; Savin-Williams, 1994; Center for Population Options, 1992). Many researchers have particularly focused on the lack of social support systems for lesbian and gay youth within our schools, identifying the classroom as the most homophobic of all social institutions (Elia, 1993; Unks, 1994; Governors' Task Force on Bias-Related Violence, 1988; Remafedi, 1987).

This article seeks to understand lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth and available support systems in the high school environment. Overall, the literature on issues facing LGBT youth is rather limited (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Fontaine, 1998) and much of the past research on this population has come from sources other than the youth themselves (Robinson, 1994). Therefore, additional research in this area is necessary to both raise awareness to the issues LGBT youth face in our schools and help guide and inform future interventions aimed at promoting health within this population. This article presents results from a qualitative study that describes the personal experiences of LGBT youth in high school. The research questions guiding this study are:

(1) What types of school-based social support (*emotional, appraisal, informational and/or instrumental*) are available to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth during their high school years; and (2) How does the available support system influence identity?

Health Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth

Research has consistently shown that LGBT youth are particularly at risk for suicide, as well as verbal and physical harassment, substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, homelessness and prostitution, and declining school performance (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Robinson, 1994; Remafedi, 1987; Savin-Williams, 1994; Center for Population Options, 1992). A 1989 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study cited suicide as the number one cause of death of LGBT youth. Lesbian and gay youth were 2–6 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth and accounted for more than 30% of all teen suicides. Radkowsky and Siegel (1997) assert that the literature not only consistently provides evidence that LGBT youth are at high risk for suicide ideation and attempts, but that the studies in this area have linked such an outcome with stressors resulting from the issue of sexual orientation. Saunders and Valente (1987) point out that general research on the topic suggests people with reduced social support and broken ties with peers, partners and families have a higher risk for suicide than those persons whose social networks are more intact.

In addition to suicide, LGBT youth are at risk for other social and health problems. One study focusing on 131 young gay and bisexual males found 76% used alcohol and 25% used cocaine (Rotheram-Borus, Rosario, Meyer-Bahlburg, Koopman, Dopkins & Davies, 1994). Rotheram-Borus et al. compared their findings to alcohol use by 49% and cocaine use by 2% of heterosexual male youth found in other studies. While the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services reported in 1991 that 6% of the runaways they surveyed self-identified as LGBT, other investigations have found rates as high as 42% (Victim Services, 1991). Recognizing the connection between runaway youth and

prostitution, Coleman (1989) reviewed research on male prostitution among adolescents and found that empirical evidence across studies suggest approximately two out of three prostitutes self-identify as gay or bisexual. Furthermore, youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender are especially susceptible to high levels of verbal and physical harassment. In a review of research on violence against LGBT junior high and high school students, 33%–49% of youth had reported experiencing harassment, threats or violence (Herek & Berrill, 1992). Of another 2,000 LGBT teenagers interviewed nationwide, approximately 50% of males and 20% of females reported experiencing harassment or physical violence in junior high or high school (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 1985).

Lack of Social Support for LGBT Youth

Research on major life changes, such as the loss of a spouse or loved one, suggests that social support and social networks can act as buffers against stress and aid the coping abilities of individuals faced with a variety of stressors (Hirsch and DuBois, 1992; Rhodes, Contreras and Mangelsdorf, 1994). Furthermore, numerous authors have reviewed the literature linking social support and social networks to morbidity and mortality (Berkman, 1984; House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988; Israel & Rounds, 1987).

House (1981) described social support as consisting of four types of behaviors, which include: 1) **emotional support** in the form of love, caring, trust, listening and other similar affective behaviors; 2) **appraisal support** in the form of positive feedback or affirmation; 3) **instrumental support** in the form of a tangible resource or aid, including money, labor, time, and barter; and 4) **informational support** in the form of advice or suggestions. Mercier and Berger (1989) point to the lack of readily available support systems — at home, in the community, and in the educational system — as the cause of the social isolation that many LGBT youth experience. Elia (1993) argues that the literature consistently associates isolation as one of the major contributors to the high-risk status of many LGBT youth.

Sample

Study participants included lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults, 18–21 years old. A total of 12 young adults, seven female and five male, participated in the study. While transgender youth were recruited for the study, none chose to participate. Nine participants are Caucasian, with two African-American males and one Asian-American male. Of the females, three identified as lesbian, three as bisexual and one as undecided. Of the males, four identified as gay and one identified as bisexual. Eleven participants were undergraduates in public universities in the Triangle and Triad areas of North Carolina.¹

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter and concerns regarding potential risks of LGBT youth obtaining parental consent to participate in the study, adolescents under the age of 18 were excluded. Campus and community organizations targeting LGBT young adults in North Carolina assisted in identifying and recruiting participants. Inclusion criteria for study participants included self-identification as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender and a desire to participate in the interview process. The University of North Carolina School of Public Health Institutional Review Board approved the study activities and informed consent procedures on January 12, 1999.

Participants met with the principal investigator in a confidential setting to take part in a recorded interview, approximately 1½ hours in length. A review of the literature on both LGBT adolescents and social support informed the development of a standardized interview guide that consisted of a series of open-ended questions about the types of social support available to participants during high school. Specific questions within the interview guide asked respondents to both describe the types of social support available in their school environment — instrumental, appraisal, emotional and informational — and the people who provided such support. Once transcription of all the interviews was complete, the data were content

¹ The Triangle area of North Carolina includes the cities of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill and the Triad area includes the cities of Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and High Point.

analyzed for emerging patterns and themes (Patton, 1990). Using cross-case analysis, participants' answers were grouped by topic area and then coded and labeled in order to create an "index" of themes from the transcripts. Once the data were analyzed in this deductive manner, they were processed using NUD*IST, a qualitative data-processing software program.

Results

One area of inquiry was the type of support available to LGBT youth in the high school environment. Participants found non-family members, which included peers and non-family adults, to be more supportive than family members. More specifically, participants perceived heterosexual and LGBT-identified friends and non-family adults as providing *emotional* and *instrumental* support. However, participants perceived limitations to the emotional support they received from heterosexual peers to whom they disclosed their orientation. In addition to providing emotional support, peers and adults who also identified as LGBT provided valuable *informational* and *appraisal* support. Finally, most participants did not disclose to their parents during high school and therefore described their parents as offering minimal support of any type related to their sexual orientation.

Participants cited "close" friends as the members of their network that they relied on most for emotional support. These were people in their network that they felt they could talk to most easily about personal issues in general, depend on in a crisis and spend quality time with on a day-to-day basis. When asked who at school he would talk to about something personal, a gay participant said, "It would never have been a teacher...it would have been a friend." However, participants perceived limitations to the emotional support they received from heterosexual peers to whom they disclosed their sexual orientation. Specifically, while respondents said they could share feelings, resources, affection and time with their friends, many could not admit to their true sexual feelings. A bisexual women said she could talk to one of her closest friends about, "Pretty much anything..." but added in the next breath, "not my sexual orientation at that point at all." A

gay male said that he would go to close friends about a lot of personal issues, but that with regards to his sexuality, "there were lines that weren't crossed with them...Like we talked to each other a lot, you know, we were good friends and buddies, but...I had a lot on my mind that I just didn't speak of."

Some respondents described the emotional price they paid in high school for the perceived limitations many of their close friends placed on their support. One gay male described this impact:

Very few friends could I talk very candidly with about the details of my sexual relationships...generally, you tell them and you get this reaction like that was uncomfortable or awkward...if those barriers weren't there...that sort of unconscious trust and just total comfort that you can feel with people might be there. I like to be open. Especially with people that are very open with me and people that I consider my best of friends...

LGBT-identified peers and adults provided valuable *informational* and *appraisal* support. One lesbian talked about how an LGBT-identified friend at her school was a role model:

Julie was a big role model and [not just] because she was a lesbian...[she's] just an amazing person...she was like someone who I went to a lot...I mean, [her sexuality] probably had something to do with it. I remember before I came to the school, [my friend] saying there'll be this girl, Julie...she's a lesbian. I remember like going ooh! Wow!

A bisexual woman talked about how an LGBT-identified peer provided her with information and advice:

...she was the one I could turn to my age that was at the same school with me that, you know, would have advice or, you know, knew what I...what I felt...So, she was definitely an inspiration and also like a really good person to talk to with my own questions and stuff like that. Like Sonya and I could talk about girls, but I couldn't talk about them with anybody

else really.

Participants perceived their parents and family members as offering limited emotional, appraisal and informational support. A gay interviewee explained his primary fear of telling his parents about his sexuality in high school was being disowned, "...having the doors changed, having the locks changed literally." Only three of the respondents' parents knew anything about their children's sexuality. These participants overwhelmingly felt a lack of support from their families. The only participant to share her sexuality with a parent directly described her mother's reaction:

...She was one of those people that like was very — like as long as it wasn't anybody connected to her, she was very pro LGBT...till I came out to her and then she flipped, you know, like she was a Baptist minister or something, you know...the first time I told her that I thought I was a lesbian she told me to un-think it.

Emerging Identity and Support

Another major theme throughout participants' responses was their emerging identity during high school and the interplay between sexual identity development and social support. Troiden (1989, pA.6) defines the concept of identity as "perceptions of self that are thought to represent the self in specific social settings" (such as, a "doctor" identity at work, a "spouse" identity at home or a heterosexual/homosexual identity within amorous settings).

Uribe and Harbeck (1992) argued that a central role of our high schools is to assist adolescents in developing a sense of personal identity via the adoption of social norms. The teachers, counselors, coaches and administrators described by participants in this study generally strove to uphold the heterosexual model as normative, a perspective that was in direct conflict with the participants' emerging sense of sexual identity. Subsequently, participants explained how an increasing awareness of their sexual identity represented both an internal and external struggle for them throughout high school. Confronted with their own sense of alienation and confusion, as well as the overwhelmingly negative messages about homosexu-

ality in their home and school environments, respondents described their sexual identity formation as a process characterized by varying degrees of denial and acceptance.

Growing up, many felt a sense that they were different in some way from their peers. One gay-identified male said, "...I always knew that the way I felt about guys or opposite sex or whatever, was always different from my friends." This difference was often associated with a reported inability to "fit in" with their peer groups and feelings of alienation. For example, one lesbian said, "...I never really...since I guess freshman year of high school, I didn't feel like I fit in, exactly...I felt alienated most of the time."

During their burgeoning awareness of their sexuality, respondents often relayed a sense of confusion about what they were feeling. A lesbian woman said, "It was like we were both sort of in this process of like not really knowing what was going on, but knowing that we weren't straight." When asked when they first became aware that their sexual orientation was different from the heterosexual norm, respondents pinpointed fairly specific time frames in their adolescence and young adulthood. On the whole, males reported having some awareness of their sexual status in their elementary or middle school years. On the other hand, the women came to grips with their sexuality issues during their high school years.

During the interview, all respondents were given an opportunity to define, in their own words, how they identified with regards to their sexual orientation. While some of the respondents stated that they only partner with members of the same sex, others (both bisexual and gay/lesbian) suggested a more fluid approach to sexuality. Slightly under half of the participants identified themselves as partnering exclusively with members of the same sex. However, while still identifying as lesbian or gay (as opposed to bisexual), several respondents felt that attraction to members of the opposite sex is possible. A lesbian respondent put it this way:

I identify more as a lesbian...I am very much more into women, like I am very much more, like I think my life partner

is going to be a woman, but it might be a man...but I don't know if I would want to be in a relationship with one — on a continuum? I would be way over to women.

Of those persons that identified as bisexual in the sample, only one expressed an equal likelihood that they would partner with a woman or a man. Overall, there was a theme of fluid sexuality, but identifying more with one sex than the other. One bisexual identified female said, "...it's simple in the sense that I guess I would call myself bisexual. But if I — my roommate asked me about percentages once and I told her ninety-ten. Ninety percent gay, ten-percent straight."

The following two female respondents felt a strong identification with the word "dyke" as opposed to being labeled lesbian. Among these women, there seemed to be a conscious "taking back" of a term that has historically been used pejoratively against lesbians. While one woman said, "I am a dyke," another explained:

Well, I guess that I'm lesbian...like before I'd say I was a lesbian, I'd say I was a dyke, like in terms of word choices. Just because it seems like...a more politicized choice, and like I'm more like visible and out there. I just think you should have to be at least 35 to be a lesbian.

Respondents explained the degree to which they told other peers, family and school personnel about their sexuality in high school. In addition, they spoke to those factors that impeded and facilitated their "coming out" process in the school environment. Respondents rarely described disclosure as occurring in a linear fashion, but rather working through a repeating pattern of disclosure and reinforcement.

By far, the major barrier to disclosing their sexual orientation to friends, family and teachers was fear. Interviewees said they were afraid of losing support, as exemplified by the following comment:

...I guess being rejected by someone you care about and seeing the change. Even if you are not totally rejected, just knowing that there is a change would be enough

to really like, keep you [from disclosing] ...a change in support. A change in how they interact with you and all of a sudden they are still your friend, but they don't talk to you as much or they stop calling you or that sort of thing.

A number of respondents stated that they were particularly concerned about teachers at school finding out about their sexuality for fear of unfair treatment. One respondent stated, "I think part of me would think that teachers may talk and I wouldn't want to have to deal with being singled out because I was gay...I would be afraid of being harassed or being given bad grades or something."

Finally, other respondents reported they were afraid of being thought of as a sexual predator by friends. Interestingly, while four of the seven women mentioned this concern, none of the men cited it as a concern. One bisexual woman stated:

...I was pretty much scared to tell her [a friend] because she just seemed like one of those types that would — she doesn't have a problem with it, but if it was me she might think that there was something ulterior going on in our friendship. She would be the one that would freak out and think that I was, you know, like, thinking back to all the slumber parties and stuff.

Participants expressed that their fear was fueled by the negative messages they received about homosexuality in the school environment. This gay male spoke about how witnessing the treatment of openly gay peers influenced him:

The people who were out, I kind of envied them because I was thinking it would be so much easier if I was just out, but then hearing what the other people would say about them behind their back made me not want to come out.

Other interviewees shared observations on the experience of other LGBT people, namely faculty and school personnel: A lesbian respondent said:

I was more scared. I mean, I thought — [my teacher] was — he still is the coolest

person. But at the time it scared me more than anything. People didn't react to him that well.

People would say, you know, he is a brilliant musician, but he is gay. Like gay equals bad. One gay male illustrated a theme present in the majority of the interviews — that they learned that being gay is “bad” or “wrong”:

...because it seems like that is what society makes you think...it is bad to be gay, it is bad to be LGBT and so you assume, well, they [people at school] are part of society, so they are going to take society's opinion even though they really didn't, but you just assumed that because you are trying to cover yourself.

Several respondents spoke of their own internalized homophobia, suggesting that their own experience with anti-homosexual feelings in the past added to their apprehension about coming out. When asked why she wasn't out at school, one bisexual woman said:

...definitely also because of the hometown. I mean, like with these people, they would sit around and be like, you know — it was — I mean, everyone was homophobic there, you know. I mean, in fact, I was at one point in my life just because that was the only attitude I had ever heard...

Many participants suggested that they were simply not far enough along in their identity development during high school to be able to share their homosexual or bisexual feelings with anyone else. Feelings of uncertainty and living up to their old self-image ripple through the following quotes:

(1) I wasn't ready for it yet. There was still sort of a self-denial thing. And part of it is, it's just — I really fought my feelings because, I mean, it's not easy being a lesbian.

(2) I really wasn't sure...how I wanted to go about verbalizing it to everyone. So, I just figured, you know, why create this whole new image of myself...last semester of high school...just to myself I thought I'd be more comfortable being in the environment were I didn't have to re-invent

myself at all, and just come in there [college] as this type of individual and that'd be it...

(3) I thought I had to be super girl. Super girl — oh my God — she's gay?

Other respondents either shied away from other people who were identified or perceived as LGBT or went along with anti-homosexual remarks to avoid disclosure.

The degree to which participants confided in other people about their sexual orientation ranged from those who never came out to anyone in high school to those who reported their sexual preferences were common knowledge at school. When asked about the degree to which she was out, one lesbian woman said, “Ah...I don't really think that people knew. Only because I was so uncomfortable with myself. I was very, very depressed all through high school.” While some did not disclose at all in high school, other respondents stated that a larger number of people were aware of their sexuality:

...I told, yeah, like the first beginnings of it all, I told Maria because she was around. And eventually just started — but once I started telling people I just couldn't stop. So, by the time I graduated, everybody knew.

Most interviewees came out to at least a few select peers, with a smaller number disclosing to teachers and school personnel. One gay man describes his experience coming out to a female friend:

So we ended up just spending a lot of time. And then when we weren't together we'd be on the phone talking. So trust was developed after a certain point. It became clear that I could share anything with her. I kept having crushes on guys and I just had to unload. And then she was just like, have you told your — maybe she asked first and made it easier for me even.

Another gay male talked about why he only disclosed to peers when he said, “Yeah, well there was support from my friends, ya know, and that was good. That is all I really needed. But like in the larger way, I didn't want to make

it too big of a deal, that would have just caused conflict.” On the other hand, one lesbian woman talked about why she tended to confide in teachers, “Or like a lot of times it was teachers, especially those that I knew were feminists, so I assumed they would be comfortable. I would say — like especially at the beginning, I told more teachers than other people.”

Participants outlined methods they employed to disclose their sexual orientation to other people at school. In some situations, respondents described just telling people in a very direct way. One gay man described his matter-of-fact approach:

...I would say, probably, most of them [peers] I just told outright, and then there was one guy, who suspected and he was gay himself and so he actually approached me, but most people I just told. They were just told.

Another gay male described a different, yet just as direct, approach — by disclosing his sexuality to a teacher in a term paper:

Actually, because during the class we had the opportunity to read all the different authors — Sappho, Whitman — people like that...And during the semester we had to write maybe two or three papers analyzing the material it had in it and also trying to incorporate it with our own opinions and things like that. And so one of the papers...I just figured a better way of getting my point across was just saying how it related to me. So that was basically how I came out and told him...I wrote it [my sexual orientation] in the paper.

A common theme was the strategy of putting out “feelers” with other people to both determine the safety of disclosing, as well as to actually assist the participant in disclosing in a slightly more indirect way. One bisexual female said that if she weren’t positive about how receptive someone would be, she wouldn’t tell them. She explained her method for making this assessment: “...I definitely, you know, ask a couple of questions and stuff like that just to kind of get an idea of what they would say...like testing the waters with people.” This quote from a lesbian respondent provided insight into her

strategies for assessment and disclosure:

Well, if I didn’t know them, I’d probably use like gender-less pronouns, which I started —that’s how I usually started talking to people, and then once I know them a little bit, I’ll like tell them like...I’ll say like, “she” and see how they react — if it was fairly positive, I would just keep on going.

Although not all respondents knew people who were LGBT, those that did spoke of how their relationships with these people helped them feel more comfortable with their sexuality and moved them along in the disclosure process. Speaking about a teacher, one gay male said:

But I was just happy that he seemed so happy, even though he was clearly so different...I looked at him and thought...if I get to a place where I can come out and face up to the — you know, and be in a place where being gay is okay, then maybe I’ll be happier.

One lesbian participant agreed, “...it was the first time that I had actually met other like young lesbians and it — I was like, ahhh, oh my god, they’re talking about girls! I like girls too!” A bisexual woman described her experience relating to other LGBT people:

...like I had a lot — or not a lot but a couple of friends...who were openly gay and that I knew about...So, I definitely started seeing it a lot and, you know, it was a period of a lot of just discovering there was a community surrounding it, you know? And they weren’t isolated, you know, there was something there that, you know, there was a community.

Given that the majority of respondents who did disclose suggested they were very selective about whom they told, reactions to their “coming out” were often described as fairly positive. One gay youth described the reaction of the only other person to whom he disclosed at school, an instructor who was teaching a class on sexual orientation: “Well, actually, he was — he was, I guess you’d say, grateful for me telling him, I guess you would say.” A bisexual female participant talked about how her best friend re-

acted:

Well, Joanna was...my best friend and she was — she's very straight. And I don't know, I don't remember particularly like an event of telling her. But I remember just kind of hinting at an interest...I think I remember I just said something like, you know, I think I could be bi. And she was like, really? And I was like, yeah, I think it could happen. And she was just like, okay.

While positive reactions did occur among peers and school personnel, some respondents experienced more negative outcomes from disclosing their sexuality. One lesbian described being crushed by the response from a teacher she had greatly admired:

And there was this incredible history teacher...and he had been so important to me...But his response was just horrible. And I expected him to be completely supportive...I had to deal with this man who was like pretty hostile to the whole idea, who had been — like who I revered ...He just completely...rejected me, like rejected the fact that I was a lesbian...He said that he like, one, didn't believe that I was a lesbian, that I really need to think carefully — like I love this whole thing, like you really need to think carefully. Like you haven't, you know!

Discussion

Findings from this study highlight significant gaps in the social support available to participants from peers, school personnel and family. Overall, the participants' accounts about the types of social support available to them in high school concur with the three main categories Martin and Hetrick (1988) use to describe the social isolation of LGBT youth—cognitive, social and emotional. Following this framework, respondents experienced *cognitive isolation* because they had extremely limited access to accurate information on issues related to sexual orientation; *emotional isolation* as a result of constant negative messages about homosexuality from peers, school personnel and family, which made their feelings seem “bad” or “wrong”; and *social isolation*,

not only from peers and family that they could not tell about their sexuality to begin with, but also with many of the friends they did tell. Participants shared some critical experiences related to their sexual identity development during high school. While they described the process of coming to grips with their homosexual or bisexual identity as taking significant time and reflection, very few respondents described moving through this period in a linear fashion. Instead, they described cycling back and forth between feelings of denial, fear, alienation, confusion and acceptance during their high school years. Participants' descriptions of this process mirror Trolden's (1988; 1989) characterization of homosexual identity formation as a process characterized by fits and starts, with individuals moving back and forth between various stages — *sensitization*, *identity confusion*, *identity assumption* and *commitment*. Participants' descriptions of feeling different and not “fitting in” with peers early on in adolescence parallel Trolden's *sensitization* stage.

In addition, interviewees reported periods of confusion and denial as they came to acknowledge their sexual orientation. These experiences mirror the stage of *identity confusion*, because they began to acknowledge that their feelings were possibly attributable to homosexuality. Often in direct conflict with their previous self-image, participants suggested that admitting this to themselves was difficult and characterized by periods of inner turmoil and confusion. In order to cope with this turmoil, many participants talked about trying to deny or avoid their feelings as much as possible. Negative messages and a lack of information in the school climate about homosexuality contributed to the internal conflict many participants experienced as a result of their homosexual or bisexual feelings.

Trolden characterized the stage of *identity assumption* as generally occurring during late adolescence, with the individual self-identifying as gay or lesbian. Again, discussions about when respondents self-identified appear to follow similar stages or patterns identified within the existing literature. Male respondents generally labeled their feelings as gay or bisexual slightly

earlier than women in the sample. While males said they labeled these feelings in elementary or middle school, females said they self-identified as lesbian or bisexual during high school. At that time, interviewees said they often wanted to share their secret with loved ones. In fact, some respondents began telling select peers or other LGBT students about their sexual orientation.

Based on the interviews, it appears that most participants, at the time of the interviews, were cycling between identity assumption and the final stage, *commitment*. While they reported increasing comfort and acceptance of their sexuality, many were still working toward complete acceptance. This suggests that resources for LGBT students are necessary beyond high school into our post-secondary institutions as well. Increased institutional support in schools will ensure that LGBT students continue to develop positive self-images into adulthood. Furthermore, both male and female respondents expressed their discomfort with current categorizations of homosexuality and bisexuality. Whether they ultimately chose to identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, many respondents expressed a sense that their own sexuality was

not adequately conveyed using commonly accepted terms. On the whole, participants described a more fluid sexuality than that which is implied by contemporary definitions of sexual orientation.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is the fact that the young adults interviewed are fairly homogeneous across several important demographics, including the fact that all but one of the participants was enrolled in a public university in North Carolina. Therefore, this investigation failed to recruit young adults outside the university setting who may have had very different life experiences. In addition, the study did not include any transgender youth. For these reasons, data obtained in this study is in no way intended for generalization to the larger population of LGBT youth.

A second limitation of this study is that it is retrospective. Because they were asked questions about their experiences several years prior to the study, participants may have had difficulty recounting these experiences with absolute accuracy. Additional studies in this area should ideally survey LGBT youth who are currently enrolled in high school.

Increase Awareness and Sensitivity

- Display LGBT info throughout the school campus (stickers, posters, books, etc.)
- Show “no tolerance” for anti-LGBT harassment
- Include sexual orientation in school non-discrimination policy
- Celebrate “diversity” via assemblies, speakers, etc.
- Support LGBT teachers so they can be visible role models and mentors

Professional Training for Educators and School Personnel

- Include training on LGBT issues in education and counseling college curriculum
- Require sensitivity training for all school personnel, including administrators, teachers and aides, guidance counselors, nurses and health educators, coaches, librarians, etc.

Services

- Sponsor a gay/straight club or alliance at school
- Offer confidential, sensitive counseling
- Make sure health services and information address concerns of LGBT youth

Curriculum Development

- Expand sex-ed curriculum to include LGBT issues (*beyond* discussion of *HIV/AIDS*)
- Include LGBT topics in class (i.e., history of LGBT civil rights movement in history class or LGBT authors in English class, etc.)

Table 1: Recommendations for Supporting LGBT High School Students

Implications

The need for multiple resources emerged as a major theme from participant responses to questions about what types of services and support they would have valued from their high school. **Table 1** (previous page) provides several recommendations for specific ways in which education professionals can address the social support needs of LGBT youth within the high school setting.

While it is certainly important to highlight the problems LGBT youth face in our society, this approach can tend to overlook the strengths, talents and skills available to this population. While the literature strongly suggests LGBT youth are at increased risk for many health problems due to intense stigmatization and discrimination, the majority of these young adults manage to develop positive and productive coping strategies to assist them through adolescence and into adulthood. Finding ways to tap into already existing supports, while fostering new ones, is critical for the health and welfare of LGBT students in our schools.

Conclusion

Schools can no longer ignore the presence of adolescents and young adults who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender or who are questioning their sexuality. Teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, nurses and other education professionals are in a unique position to assist young adults who are questioning their sexuality because they come into contact with adolescents in a number of settings and under varying circumstances. Simply by taking the time to recognize the presence of LGBT and questioning youth, educators and health professionals can refuse to participate in the promotion of “compulsory heterosexuality” and help ensure that these youth are afforded the same advantages and opportunities provided to their heterosexual peers. Maintaining sensitivity to the words we use and messages we convey, as well as testing our own assumptions as professionals, can ensure that future LGBT youth can be open about their sexuality. In doing so, we will go far in improving the health of LGBT and questioning youth in our schools.

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