Synthesized Literature about LGBTQ Youth's Educational Experiences:

Disseminating The Real Story Throughout the Preservice Curriculum

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As educators, we strive to provide a safe and accepting environment for our students to learn in. We want our students to feel comfortable so their academic and social success is not hindered. We have made great strides in this pursuit, however, there are students who still long for their guarantee of feeling safe and accepted in the classroom. Students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Questioning (LGBTQ) are still largely left marginalized, and their needs and concerns often are left unnoticed.

Much of the research shows LGBTQ adolescents "live in social environments in which they may be exposed to negative experiences, including social rejection and isolation, diminished social support, discrimination and verbal and physical abuse" (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009 p. 1002). Our LGBTQ students must navigate homophobia in their day-to-day lives and manage the feeling of shame, as well as being positioned as deviant, abnormal, dirty, and disgusting (McDermott, Roen, & Scourfield, 2008).

LGBTQ students are surrounded by unsupportive, negative and even dangerous environments (Almeida et. al., 2009; Elze 2002; GLSEN 2009). By not addressing the situation, the LGBTQ student has essentially been left abandoned in an environment that does feel safe, caring, respectful, understanding, and fair, amongst other things (Hall, 2006). Failure to provide this ideal school environment for our LGBTQ students has great implications, implications that are troubling.

Findings from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey show that anti-LGBTQ language fills classrooms, hallways, school buses, gyms, and cafeterias. The survey showed that an astounding nine out of ten LGBTQ students hear the word "gay" used in a negative way, and three-fourths of students regularly hear homophobic remarks such as "faggot" or "dyke" in school (GLSEN, 2009). Anti-LGBTQ

bullying does not solely target students who identify as a sexual minority status, but also provides a hostile and unsafe space for all students. Homophobia and transphobia can be used to stigmatize, silence and, on occasion, target people who are perceived as LGBTQ, but are not (GLSEN, 2009).

Bullying, coupled with students attending school environments that are unsafe and unaccepting has a tremendous impact on the lives of students. The stigmatization of their identity, as well as the emotional distress developed from bullying and perceived discrimination can manifest into many internal and external behaviors. Behaviors that include: truancy, lower academic performance, anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidality (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Bos, et al., 2008; Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009; GLSEN 2009;Wyss 2004).

School and academic implications are serious for LGBTQ students who are frequently harassed. LGBTQ students often show negative attitudes towards school and have more school related troubles, including lower grade point averages, around a half a grade lower (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; GLSEN, 2009; Duncan 2010). United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan also noted the impact of bullying on students academics in his letter to educators in the fall of 2010. Duncan noted, "Bullying fosters a climate of fear and disrespect that can seriously impair the physical and psychological health of its victims and create conditions that negatively affect learning, thereby undermining the ability of students to achieve their full potential." Furthermore, LGBTQ students who are often bullied and teased are shown to be more likely to skip classes or even full days of school to avoid harassment (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; GLSEN, 2009; Bontempo & D'Augelli 2002).

The well-being of students' physical and mental health is impacted by the physical violence and emotional distress faced by bullying and the stigmatization of their identity.

According to GLSEN's 2009 National School Climate survey, "4 out of 10 students reported being physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) at school because of their sexual orientation, and nearly 1 in 5 students reported being physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2009; Friedman et al., 2006). LGBTQ students who are victimized at school, tend to also show a correlation to at-risk health behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, unsafe sex and self-harm (Bontempo & D'Augelli 2002; Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009; Wyss 2004). Even more alarming, is the higher prevalence of suicide attempts by LGBTQ youth. Some research suggests four times more likely for LGBTQ youth to attempt suicide (Friedman et al, 2006; McDermott, Roen, & Scourfield, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2006; Wyss 2004).

The above-mentioned behaviors are often responses and products of the diminished mental health of LGBTQ students and a lack of social and peer support. Many youth tend to feel bad about their identity, and receive messages that lead them to have lower self-esteem and higher levels of self-loathing, thus resulting in anxiety and depression (Almeida et al., 2009; Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Bos, et al., 2008;Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; McDermott, Roen, & Scourfield, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2006; Wyss 2004).

Anti-LGBTQ bullying is often looked at as solely a sexual orientation based issue. However, this undermines another large component of the research that states the bullying as a response to masculinity/ femininity norms and the departure from gender-role expectations. As Kimmel and Mahler noted, "Terms used such as "faggot" are not necessarily correlated to an individual sexual orientation – looks to emasculate and individual" (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Homophobia is not necessarily directed towards LGBTQ youth, but individuals who were perceived to be gay and/or stray from traditional socially agreed upon ideas masculine and

feminine (Poteat, Espelage, & Green, 2007; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003). Anti-LGBT bullying can be used to emasculate or defeminize individuals who do not conform to social expectations. For many students, this feeling of inadequacy manifests into the health-risk behaviors (substance-abuse, unsafe sex, self-harm) previously mentioned in hopes to compensate for their perceived deficiencies (Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009).

Teacher and School Response

Unfortunately, teachers, schools and their respective districts have come up short in responding effectively to anti-LGBTQ bullying occurring in schools. From top to bottom; administration to teachers themselves; schools have underperformed in addressing the needs and concerns of their LGBTQ students, and often perpetuate unsafe school environments. (GLSEN, 2009).

Teachers are often looked at as people of support by LGBTQ students, and are in place to be allies and advocates for their students (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). However, many teachers are hesitant to address anti-LGBTQ bullying in schools for multiple reasons: their feelings that it will make the issue larger than necessary, their lack of comfort discussing sexuality with their students, their own personal beliefs on homosexuality, and their lack of understanding on the topics and language associated with LGBTQ individuals (Hall, 2006). Often, teachers site their lack of preparation in their teacher education program as their reason for hesitating to address anti-LGBTQ bullying in schools (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Jennings & Sherwin, 2008; Mathison, 1998). Many teachers across the research have also noted a general lack of resources or understanding of the topic to address anti-LGBTQ bullying in their respective schools (Birkett, Espelage, Koenig, 2009; Ginsberg, 1998; Goodenow, Szalacha, &

Westheimer, 2006; Grossman, D'Augelli, 2006; Mathison, 1998). Furthermore, many students even cited their teachers as using anti-LGBTQ language and failing to address their co-workers anti-LGBTQ language in school, perpetuating heteronormative beliefs and bias, thus eliminating them as safe and credible ally by the students (GLSEN, 2009).

Administration, and school districts also can be cited as failing to meet the needs and concerns of LGBTQ students. Many school districts do not have anti-discrimination and harassment policies that specifically address gender identity, or perceived gender expression, and those districts that do, are not effectively enforcing them (Wyss, 2004). GLSEN also commented on a lack of "implementation and enforcement of anti-bullying or harassment policies, also known as safe school policies" (GLSEN, 2009). US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, cited school and district failures in his letter to educators in 2010. Duncan stated, "Because the school failed to that the incidents created a hostile environment, it addressed each only in isolation, and therefore failed to take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the harassment and prevent it's recurrence."

Many schools across the country foster and support Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA). These student led organizations (mentored by a school staff member) can be seen as a positive for schools and their overall climate. GSAs aim to help educate both students and school staff on the issues and concerns surrounding the LGBTQ population, while providing skills necessary for better advocates in schools (Fetner & Kush, 2008). GSAs, especially when implemented early in school (elementary and middle school), have shown safer and more supportive schools for LGBTQ youth by helping to reduce and even eliminate bullying, harassment and perceived discrimination (Fetner & Kush, 2008; GLSEN 2009). Furthermore, GSAs have been also noted

for their challenges and disruptions of heteronormativity, masculinity and femininity (Szalacha, 2003).

However, according to GLSEN, only about 4,000 schools across the nation have a registered GSA. This number is a step in a positive and somewhat promising direction but still can only address a portion of the student population across the country (GLSEN, 2009). Many schools fail to foster or even attempt to sponsor GSAs for the lack of district and staff support. Furthermore, many staff members are hesitant to mentor such organizations, for they feel inadequate and lack an overall knowledge to address the needs and concerns of their LGBTQ students effectively (Jennings & Sherwin, 2008; Fetner & Kush, 2008).

Next Steps

Preservice teachers in their preparation programs are often asked to describe their ideal classroom. Commonality amongst answers shows a consistent push to create, "clean, colorful, bright, safe, spacious, welcoming, intellectual, nurturing, respectful, humorous, understanding, encouraging, fun and fair" (Hall, 2006). However, the reality for many of our LGBTQ students is a school environment that they attend on a daily basis that is the opposite of the above desired traits.

Teacher education programs address various forms diversity, yet the attention to sexual orientation and gender identity topics are often absent or de-emphasized (Jennings & Sherwin, 2008). Many teachers rely on the knowledge and skills obtained through their teacher preparation programs to address issues and concerns in their classrooms and schools. When teacher preparation programs fail to address a population of students, a change needs to be made in the pursuit of providing all students with a safe, and effective to learn. Throughout much of the reviewed research, little discussion is mentioned on the need to improve preparation

programs for preservice teachers, as well as, help expand their awareness of the issues surrounding LGBTQ students.

      Eastern Michigan University (EMU) has one of the largest teacher preparation programs in Michigan. EMU is a school that takes pride in their College of Education and pursues to prepare highly qualified educators. Therefore, the research will look to understand the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of preservice teachers at EMU. Doing so will demonstrate the overall preparation of students graduating from EMU's teacher education program in their willingness and ability to be effective allies for LGBTQ students, as well as their readiness to promote safe classrooms and schools.

      A survey will be presented to students in various levels of the teacher education program at EMU. The survey will look to understand the dispositions and knowledge of preservice teachers relating to LGBTQ students' related issues. Furthermore, the research will add to current studies critiquing teacher preparation programs, the need for safe schools, and the overall perception of LGBTQ students in K-12 education.

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