Preservice Teachers' Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions of LGBTQ Bullying Intervention

~ William Milburn & John Palladino

Abstract

Literature about the school experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth report unsafe and unaccepting school environments detrimental to their social, emotional, and academic success. LGBTQ bullying is recognized as a complex issue that teachers are expected to face in their schools. The present study examined the unique aspect of addressing LGBTQ bullying, an investigation of preservice teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions relative to the issue. Preservice teachers responded to Likert scale questions designed from findings in the literature and provided insights about their understanding of and willingness and ability to address the issue. Initial findings from our research study found disparities between the responders' willingness (dispositions) to confront the issue, and their lack of knowledge and skills to do so effectively. Understanding this insight can help teacher preparation programs respond with training and curriculum enhancements that best prepare teachers to address LGBTQ bullying in K-12 settings.

Key Words: bullying, victimization, sexuality, education.

Current School Climate

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth's social and

academic needs are marginalized, ignored, and often go unnoticed in schools throughout the

country. A lack of acknowledgement about students who either identify as LGBTQ youth, who

are bullied for their perceived sexual orientation or gender role expression, alienates many

students. Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, Azrael (2009) summarized the literature's portrayal

of LGBTQ youth: "They often 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" (p. 1002).

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) 2009 School Climate Survey combined discussion in the literature with statistics about the environmental experiences of students in schools:

> Four out of ten 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. (p.25)

The survey reported that 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). LGBTQ bullying does not solely target students who identify as a sexual minority, 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 who are not (GLSEN).

When schools have unsafe and negative climates that harbor bullying and harassment, implications often manifest within victimized students that negatively   impact their lives. The stigmatization associated with their identity, as well as the emotional distress they endure from bullying victimization and perceived discrimination can develop and be expressed as internal and external behaviors that include: (a) truancy, (b) lower academic performance, (c) anxiety, (d) depression, (e) substance abuse, (f) self-harm, and (g) suicidal ideation. For example, Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002) investigated the correlation between at-school victimization and higher levels of health risk behaviors, such as substance abuse, suicidality, and sexual risk behaviors, as

compared to their heterosexual peers. Bos, Standfort, Bruyn, and Hakvoort (2008) also compared LGBTQ youth to their heterosexual peers, and reported "higher levels of mental health concerns, such as, depression and lower self-esteem" (p.59). Wyss (2004) added acknowledgment of the reported lower academic performance, and higher levels of truancy among LGBTQ youth. These findings reflect the statistical information from GLSEN's (2009) School Climate Survey, and expose the implications surrounding bullying victimization.

In addition to developing internalized and externalized behaviors, students who are consistently victimized based on their perceived or actual sexual orientation also manifest negative academic implications. Attitudes toward school diminish and academic performance drops among students who do not recognize school as a safe and accepting environment for them. The literature acknowledges half a grade lower performance for bullying victims (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; GLSEN, 2009). United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan (2010) addressed bullying in a letter to teachers: "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" (p.1). Students may not achieve excellence when they are in consistent fear of verbal and physical abuse. This reality correlates with higher reported levels of truancy among victims, and the greater likeliness of students to skip classes or even full days of school to avoid harassment (Birkett, et al., 2009; Bontempo & D'Augelli 2002; GLSEN, 2009).

Students who are victimized at school tend to manifest concurrent at-risk health behaviors, such as drug and alcohol abuse, unsafe sexual activities, and self-harm (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009; Wyss, 2004). Even more alarming is the higher occurrence of their suicide attempts, especially among LGBTQ youth for whom the research

suggests is four times more likely than for their non-LGBTQ peers (Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr, & Sites 2006; McDermott, Roen, & Scourfield, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2006; Wyss 2004).

Such behaviors are often responses to and products of the diminished mental health of LGBTQ students and the stigmatization of their identity coexisting with the lack of social and peer support. These youth often negatively view their own identity, and receive messages that further diminish their self-esteem and increase their 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, et al., 2008; Savin-Williams, 2006; Wyss 2004).

A Complex Issue

LGBTQ bullying is most commonly understood as an issue related to sexual orientation. However, this perception undermines and ignores a significant portion of the research that more accurately depicts bullying as a byproduct of something else. Bullying based on sexual orientation is present; however, the component of gender and gender role expression seems to also have a context within this issue (Kimmel, 2004). Feminine and masculine norms find their way into schools, and the messages surrounding gender can be difficult for students to process. Many students are victims of LGBTQ- type bullying simply based on their departure from traditional gender role expressions. The nonconformity to either being masculine of feminine, based on biological sex, can place students in position to be victims of bullying and harassment. An example of this outplay is demonstrated in the homophobic language heard in schools. Homophobic language is commonly used towards students who do not align with gender and biological sex (e.g. "Tomboys," "Sissies").

Terms such as "faggot" are commonly used to emasculate, and to display power and control over an individual (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). In such cases the catalyst of bullying is not

to discriminate against sexual orientation, but to position an individual to feel deviant and ostracized for departing from social norms of masculine or feminine behavior (Kimmel, 2004; Poteat, Espelage, & Green, 2007; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). For many students, the societal messages of gender expectations coupled with being bullied for not being masculine or feminine enough can be difficult to process and navigate. Feelings of inadequacy often lead students to partake in health-risk behaviors (e.g. substance abuse, self-harm, unsafe sexual activities) to compensate for perceived deficiencies, often aligning themselves with hyper- masculine / hyper -feminine extremes portrayed in media (Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009).

Teacher and School Responses

Whether overtly or unintentionally, school personnel have perpetuated unsafe school environments by not adequately addressing LGBTQ bullying (GLSEN, 2009). Teachers are specifically looked at as being potential allies and advocates by LGBTQ youth, but continue to fall short in being able to help students navigate the emotional distress they might face (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). When they do, their potential to be an ally for LGBTQ youth becomes, at best, questionable.

Students reported in the GLSEN (2009) School Climate Survey that teachers used anti-LGBTQ language, did not frequently address the anti-LGBTQ language of their co-workers, and were perceived to perpetuate heteronormative beliefs and biases. The reason why teachers come up short in effectively addressing the bullying is also a multiple perspective one. There is more than one reason for why teachers reported their hesitations, and often multiple reasons played into their dispositions. For example, Hall (2006) explored the precursors that would cause a teacher to not address LGBTQ youth issues in schools. Hall's research reported that teachers feel

that addressing the issue will make it larger than necessary, feel discomfort discussing sexuality with their students, have their own personal beliefs on homosexuality, and identify their lack of understanding about the topics and language associated with LGBTQ individuals as the most cited reasons.

Teachers may consider that addressing the issue will put a "spotlight" on the individual and bring more attention to the student, as being "different" and that ignoring the issues will help it to go away. Teachers may be uncomfortable discussing sexuality with adolescents and young adults, and determine such conversations are inappropriate for school dialogue. Another component brings forth the teacher's own personal beliefs about LGBTQ related issues, and the struggle of keeping personal and professional beliefs separate. Finally, teachers also reported a lack of knowledge and skills associated with LGBTQ and other forms of bullying, and are not prepared to address the issue in their respective schools and classrooms (Hall, 2006).

Teachers' self-reports of being unprepared to address LGBTQ bullying during their teacher education programs is another finding reported in the literature (e.g., Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Jennings & Sherwin, 2008; Mathison, 1998). Gay and Kirkland (2003) discussed the importance of developing "culturally critical consciousness and self-reflective teachers" (p. 181), who are aware of the diverse lives their students live, and could reflect on the impact of power and privilege within the curriculum, in the hopes to strive for improvement. This calls for teachers to be better prepared in addressing bullying, even towards marginalized groups, notably, LGBTQ youth.

New teachers graduate from their teacher education programs without the appropriate knowledge and skills to be the effective allies their students were looking for. Many teachers across the research have also noted a general lack of resources and understanding of the topic to

address LGBTQ bullying in their respective schools (Birkett, et al., 2009; Ginsberg, 1998; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Mathison, 1998).The deficit in knowledge, perhaps ignored in their teacher education programs, has left teachers feeling unable to be successful in navigating LGBTQ bullying and harassment situations.

At the administrative and school district level, failure to address the needs and concerns of victimized LGBTQ students has also been cited throughout the literature. Many school districts do not have antidiscrimination policies that address sexual orientation, gender identity, or perceived gender expression, and those districts that do have such policies, often do not enforce them (Wyss, 2004). GLSEN (2009) has commented about the lack of implementation and enforcement of anti-bullying or harassment policies, also known as safe school policies, as being a source for the perpetuated reports of negative school climates and students reported feelings of being unsafe in their schools. United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan (2010) also commented about this issue: "Because the school failed to realize 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" (p. 6).

One step schools have taken to change school climate is the fostering and support of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA). These student led organizations (mentored by a school staff member) aim to help educate both students and school staff about the issues and concerns surrounding the LGBTQ population, while providing skills necessary for the development of better advocates in schools (Fetner & Kush, 2008). GSAs, 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 (2009), 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 entire country. Many schools fail to support or even attempt to sponsor GSAs for the lack of district and staff support. 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 (Fetner & Kush, 2008; Jennings & Sherwin, 2008).

Moving Forward: Survey and Working toward Change

Our reviewed and synthesized literature gives an understanding to the complex and multifaceted issue that surrounds LGBTQ bullying. It is clear that school can be an unsafe and unaccepting place for LGBTQ youth, as well as students who do not conform to traditional gender role expressions. Teachers and schools are unprepared, lack the appropriate knowledge, and are unable to meet the needs and concerns of the victimized students and often perpetuate unsafe school climates.

While in their teacher education program, preservice teachers are commonly asked to "describe the ideal classroom." For example, Hall (2006) found responses to such a prompt to be consistent in the push to create, "clean, colorful, bright, safe, spacious, welcoming, intellectual, nurturing, respectful, humorous, understanding, encouraging, fun and fair" (p. 149) classrooms and schools. Yet, the reality for many of our LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students is a school environment that they attend on a day-to-day basis that is the opposite of the above desired traits.

Teacher education programs address various forms of 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 portion of students, a change needs to be made in the pursuit of providing all students with a safe and successful place to learn. Throughout much of the reviewed literature, a dearth of discussion about the need to better prepare teachers and help expand their awareness of the issues surrounding LGBTQ students exists.

Teachers, willing or not, are expected to be an effective ally for their students. However, as noted, teachers do not report being comfortable or able to do so based on a lack of knowledge and skills surrounding the needs of victimized students. Teachers cite their preparation programs as not training them to address such topics in school. It is this finding that we explored in the present study. Our specific aim was to determine the degree to which preservice teachers agree with the aforementioned findings in the literature as means to determine their dispositions, skills, and knowledge about addressing LGBTQ bullying. We wanted to determine if preservice teachers in Eastern Michigan University's (EMU) teacher education program were willing and able to address potential LGBTQ bullying incidents in their future classrooms, and to understand their perception of the impact their program's curriculum played into this capability.

Method

With the university's IRB approval, Milburn, the principal investigator, surveyed preservice teachers, within EMU's college of education to understand their overall knowledge, perceived skill set, and personal disposition toward addressing LGBTQ bullying in schools. The PI created a Likert scale survey with questions based on findings from the literature reviewed.

Responders had the option to strongly agree, agree, remain neutral, disagree, strongly disagree, or claim an inability to answer based on the statement provided to them. Furthermore, the survey accounted for the responders' demographics, allowing for potential notation of correlations between responses based on the following variables: age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, program of study (e.g., elementary education, secondary education), and class standing (e.g., sophomore, graduate student). We further included demographic questions relative to our institution. For example, since EMU has a post-bachelorette teacher certification program, we considered it necessary for responders to report their degree status/intent: undergraduate, post-bachelorette, graduate, or specialist. We hypothesized that responders' knowledge, skills, and dispositions would vary among the distinct status groups. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the IRB approval involved obtaining responders' passive consent whereby submitting a completed survey to a faculty proctor served as their consent to participate.

The response from the survey provided the perspective of 457 preservice teachers in EMU's teacher education program. While entering the data, it became apparent that the responders considered the survey important and often made personal comments in the margins of the survey. While the PI and co-PI continue with the analysis of the statistical quantitative survey data, this article includes initial findings that provide some initial insights into the perspective of the soon to be teachers who completed the survey. It is important to note that while our analysis is ongoing, confirmation exists that the survey is valid.

The complete survey is currently in-press and not included in this present article. However, we provide a general overview for the reader's awareness about its general construction and reliability/validity. We grouped findings from the literature into three categories: (1) knowledge, (2) skills, and (3) dispositions. We then invited students to report the

extent to which they agreed with the findings, which we turned into survey questions. For example, we asked, "I would be willing to confront anti-LGBTQ bullying in my school," a survey question that related to information and findings from Birkett, et al.'s (2009) article, *LGB and questioning students in school: The moderating effect of homophobic bullying and school climate on negative outcomes*. We did not inform the students that the literature reported each of the survey statements as true ones, so as to not influence their insights.

We randomly ordered the questions and did not inform students about our survey's alignment with the knowledge, skills, and disposition categories within it. Our intent was to determine if our responders were consistent with responses within each of the categories, despite the ordering of questions. Our decision maximized the options we had for determining the surveys' validity and reliability.

Administering the survey at one institution of higher of education limits the overall validity and reliability we could report for the present article; additional administration of it are needed. However, additional administration of the survey might not provide a validity and reliability rating because of demographic variations that may exist at other institutions. For example, as mentioned above, our host institution has both undergraduate and graduate teacher certification programs in addition to a post-bachelorette certification program. The demographics would be a different for institutions with only graduate-level preservice programs.

While overall survey validity and reliability has yet to occur due to the one-time administration of it, we can confirm that the survey administration we report in this present article yielded valid and reliable results for each of the three subcategories: knowledge, skills, and dispositions. We ran an exploratory CFS with varimax rotation that revealed strong factors. For example, we grouped 8 disposition questions and obtained an alpha of 0.845. The group

differences within this factor exposed that female responders had a significantly higher average ($M = 3.84$) compared to their male counterparts ($M = 3.63$) ($p < .01$); no significant differences between the age groups; no significant differences between preservice teachers' majors (e.g., elementary education, secondary education, special education); and significant difference among White ($M = 3.82$) students than non-White students ($M = 3.59$) ($p < 0.01$). We proceeded with this format to obtain the significant findings we report and discuss in the present article. Overall, our preservice teacher respondents reported positive dispositions toward LGBTQ youth and students who are victims of bullying. They appeared "willing" to address bullying in their schools and would like access to information and best practice methods to be an effective ally in their schools. They did express a commitment to addressing the issue and reported that doing so would be a part of their future job responsibilities.

Despite their positive dispositions, responders were unable to connect LGBTQ bullying to the mental health concerns reported in the literature. They also failed to recognize bullying as an antecedent for emotional distress and potential health risk behaviors. Furthermore, the responders did not generally acknowledge LGBTQ bullying as an issue beyond sexual orientation, and did not make the connection to gender and gender role expression nonconformity. These findings support the information from the literature, that teachers lack an adequate and appropriate amount of knowledge to be effectual allies.

Responders seemed unsure and indecisive regarding the role their teacher education program played in providing them with the tools and skills to address LGBTQ bullying in schools. This finding would then agree with findings from the literature that teachers do not believe their respective preparation programs equipped them with necessary skills to address bullying in their classroom and schools.

Next Steps

The initial findings from the survey helped navigate potential further research to explore additional understanding of the teacher's role in addressing LGBTQ bullying in schools. As noted, the mental health component of the topic is not clearly understood by preservice teachers and there is a lack of confidence in their ability to recognize early signs of distress in their students. Addressing this deficit directs the research to find a practice already in place within schools, and to frame the issue into the overall understanding of such a practice. Specifically, further exploration of the topic should consider amelioration at a tier two level within a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework, the level at which specific interventions are targeted for a subpopulation of students in need of more intense interventions than ones typical of a day-to-day classroom setting. Mental health interventions could address LGBTQ bullying victims and their perpetrators. It could allow teachers to explore the power and control struggle of LGBTQ bullying and the implications and precursors of victimizing and victimization, while simultaneously providing support skills for students to address the behavior.

This approach would then prompt research to find an understanding about teachers' perceptions of tier two interventions, and whether or not they perceive LGBTQ bullying and victimization as a component of them. As the initial findings from our survey exposed, teachers may not have the knowledge and skills to adequately address this issue in their schools despite their positive dispositions towards this subpopulation of students, especially at a tier two level. Mental health and tier two interventions should then be addressed in the teacher educator programs so at to best prepare future teachers' abilities to address inevitable and multifaceted LGBTQ bullying in schools.

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