

In or Out When Out & About?:
Identifying the Professional Support Needs of
LGBT Preservice Social Work & Education Majors

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John M. Palladino, PhD
Professor of Special Education
Eastern Michigan University
john.palladino@emich.edu

&

Mark A. Giesler, PhD, LMSW
Associate Professor of Social Work
Saginaw Valley State University
magiesle@svsu.edu

Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore how preservice social work and teacher education majors navigate field practicums (e.g., student teaching) as self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) individuals. In-depth interviews with 26 preservice candidates, representative of two public, comprehensive universities with large social work and education colleges ensued. Four themes emerged from the semi-structured participant interviews: (1) a spectrum of outness, (2) heteronormativity of college classroom discourse, (3) lack of intentionality/naivety in field placement assignments, and (4) sexual identity negotiation during field. Questions educators can use to engage students, other faculty, and administrators about the needs and challenges of LGBT students are included in this report as recommendations for practice and future, corroborating research efforts. An appendix of guided questions professional preparation program personnel can use for conversations with LGBT preservice candidates is included.

Authors' Notes

John M. Palladino, Professor of Special Education, specializes in the areas of emotional impairments, secondary methods, and administration. His research agenda includes LGBT bullying in schools, educational services for foster care youth, and professional support for LGBT preservice educators. He serves on the Executive Board for the National Council for Children with Behavior Disorders.

Mark Giesler, Associate Professor of Social Work, conducts research in the areas of gender studies with a focus on men who are marginalized on the basis of sex and sexual orientation. He has served as Vice-President of Standards and Services for the National Association of Social Workers-MI Chapter. He is an Assistant Editor for the *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research* and is in his third term as a member of CSWE's Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. He is currently on the Executive Board of the American Men's Studies Association.

As scholars and practitioners, we approached this topic and subsequent research design on our interactions with preservice students in our respective fields. Given that Eastern Michigan University is one of the largest preservice education programs in Michigan and in the nation and that Saginaw Valley State University is the largest undergraduate social work program in Michigan, we knew that these two specific preservice programs would most likely include several lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)¹ students necessary for a rigorous research project about this topic. The moniker that one in ten people identify as LGBT furthered our assumption.

Grounding our proposed research study into the backdrop of discussions in the literature was not an option. At best, a scant amount of literature about the efforts within preservice education and social programs to acknowledge concerns that LGBT students might have as they begin field placement work exists. We noted that those scholars who did broach the topic utilized broad-based quantitative methodologies and/or retrospective analyses. Missing from this literature were first-hand accounts of LGBT preservice education and social work majors who were either about to begin or were in the process of completing their field placements towards degree completion, a gap that our study purported to fill.

Method

Researching firsthand accounts through one-on-one interviews aligns with qualitative methodology. Therefore, we designed our study according to the standards of phenomenological research. As Creswell (2013) summed, “A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals and their lived experiences of a phenomenon” (p. 76). We

¹ Disclaimer: In accordance with other scholars and labels used throughout the media about sexual identity, we settled for using “LGBT” as a catchall label. Yet, at the same time, we realized that the sexual identity spectrum expands beyond the four identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

identified the preservice field experience (i.e., student teaching and social work practicum), the signature experience that bridges preservice programs and entry into the professions, as a unique phenomenon for LGBT students.

Participants

In fulfillment of this charge, we recruited 20 preservice students, double the number of participants recommended for phenomenological research (see Creswell, 2013). Upon completing the twentieth interview, we confirmed consistent patterns and themes among our participants. To ensure our observations, we recruited an additional six participants, whose stories aligned with the previous twenty and, therefore, confirmed we reached a saturation level justifiable for completing our data collection (see Seidman, 2006).

We used our university's respective listserves and options therein to send email announcements about the study. Additional recruitment methods included flyers distributed throughout targeted courses and our addresses to student groups (e.g., student teaching orientation seminar).

Interviews

Each interview lasted approximately one hour. We designed a semi-structured interview protocol and ensured a certain commonality of discussion topics among all interviews. In seeking integrity for the study, we turned to what little literature does exist and used discussions within it to formulate the following five categories of questions: (1) participant demographics; (2) extent of "outness" during all phases of their programs; (3) LGBT curriculum topics in their major and in general education classes; (4) navigating the field experience, particularly in reference to disclosing their sexual identity; and (5) experiences beyond the field experience.

Data Analysis Process

After completion of the twentieth interview, we each hand coded all of the audio-transcribed interviews. True to phenomenological research design, we did not seek a theoretical interpretation, nor did we bind our analysis to the interview protocol. Rather, we allowed the semi-structured interview protocol to serve as a springboard, one that allowed for consistent questioning and prompting among all participants, but also invited additional dialogue pertinent to individual experiences. The natural flow of conversations that ensued resulted in large texts of responses between questions and prompts, “chunks” of data that we coded.

We wrote a summary statement about each chunk, compiled our two lists together, and reorganized the statements into themes we identified as encapsulating all of the codes. We then used this condensed coding list when analyzing the subsequent six final interviews. Upon verifying that our coding rubric accounted for all chunks of data in the final six interviews, we expressed confidence that the rubric, our thematic labels, and dissemination plan was valid.

Results

We sorted the interview data into four specific themes: (1) a spectrum of outness, (2) heteronormativity of college classroom discourse, (3) lack of intentionality/naivety in field placement assignments, and (4) sexual identity negotiation during field. The following discussion highlights details about each of the themes².

Spectrum of Outness

We asked each participant to share his/her “out” status at the start of the interview, and inquired about the degree to which they are with peers, family, friends, colleagues, and others.

² Manuscripts that further detail the thematic findings are in press. Please contact the authors for further information.

Participants described the overall climate at their universities as fully inclusive and respectful of LGBT students. Their narratives suggested low to no anxiety in being out. For many of them, the university campus served as a testing ground for ascertaining others' responses to their self-disclosures. Those who experimented with coming out on campus, either for the first time or as an additional occurrence of doing so, received affirmation from peers, roommates, coworkers, members of student clubs and organizations, and others with whom they interact. We labeled their experiences as a two-way process of coming out and receiving immediate validation.

Compared to the overall inclusive environments of the campus setting, the classroom represented yet another level of "coming out" for our study participants. They described coming out in the classroom as a conscious and intentional act, a phenomenon we dubbed as one-way. Students who made the decision to come out did so in a private, reserved manner, such as disclosing in a paper they wrote for a professor or sharing the information with a small group of peers. Prevalent among their stated fears in coming out to the entire class was a perception of being a token gay or lesbian. The underlying message that participants gave about coming out in the classroom was, "I'm not going to flaunt it, but I'm not going to hide it either."

The field placement setting signified a third level of outness on the spectrum of sexual identity self-disclosure. Here we noted a clear difference between social work and education majors. The social work student participants were limited in their outness in field; most indicated that they self-disclosed to one other co-worker or supervisor. A few asserted complete closetedness. The hesitation to come out fully by some may have been fueled by experiences they recounted for being fired from a previous job.

The education majors, by contrast, were universal in their sentiment that it was not safe for them to be out in their field settings. Participants cited the following factors that informed

their decision to remain closeted in the classroom: (1) icons their supervising teachers or other personnel displayed that were heteronormative in nature (e.g., jewelry, photos of family); (2) talk they overheard about church and/or religion; (3) the perception that their K-12 students' parents might object to having a gay or lesbian teacher; and (4) a "business first" mentality, marked by the view that their sexual orientation was irrelevant to their task of being a student teacher. The implicit message for these participants was, "I need to focus on getting through this—on graduating—so I cannot let any negative backlash jeopardize this goal."

Heteronormativity of College Classroom Discourse

The second theme was the perceived heteronormativity of college classroom discourse. We asked participants to share the extent to which LGBT issues were covered in their preservice classes. Both social work and education students noted its coverage in the required diversity courses for their respective disciplines, but had difficulty citing instances in other parts of the curriculum. When LGBT issues were discussed in social work classes, participants recalled the dialogue as being framed in the context of a debate about controversial issues, such as same-sex marriage or parenting. In some cases, students were asked to argue against the phenomenon. One student taking an online course noted his discomfort at being the recipient of his peers' anti-gay comments. Education majors, as well, identified some students who "spewed hatred," in the words of one participant, about LGBT issues with little to no "on-the-spot" intervention by the professor.

A phenomenon that both social work and education majors identified that further indicated a heteronormative classroom dynamic involved the level of "outness" displayed by the instructors. Despite the fact that nearly all of the social work professors were either gay-friendly (as indicated by "safe space" stickers or other messages on their office doors), or identified as

gay or lesbian outside the classroom, students noted how rarely a professor's LGBT self-identity was revealed in the classroom. Their perception of closeted faculty provided a strong message for them: "To be a professional, you must stay closeted." Silence, in this case, sustained the heteronormative environment that was reflected in the curriculum.

Lack of Intentionality and Naivety in Finding a Placement

The third theme was a lack of intentionality and naivety around finding a field placement. Students in both disciplines lacked awareness about how their sexual identity status might impact the placement process. They rarely sought out each other as resources to locate "gay-friendly" placements. Nor did they engage in conversations with faculty about such arrangements. Many admitted their anxiety about finding a placement, but few seemed to consider researching practice or policy implications of being LGBT. For example, they assumed that their universities would back them up if discrimination based on their sexual identity were to happen, but were not aware of the processes their universities had in place to do so.

Some education majors' lack of intentionality in negotiating their sexual identity was further expressed in two choices they made regarding their placements. First, some participants made the decision to move back home with their parents during their student teaching, despite the stress such an arrangement might cause. They identified, for example, how doing so removed them from gay/lesbian-accepting peer groups and re-closeted them with certain family members. Second, education majors on the whole did not factor into their placement decisions the possibility that certain schools were more politically conservative, and therefore, potentially anti-gay. Students relied on other criteria, such as finances or school reputation, in making the ultimate decision of where to student teach.

Oops, They Found Out! (Or Will!): Negotiating the Placement

We labeled the fourth theme as, “Oops, They Found Out (or Will).” Once students began their field placement experiences, they became more aware of how their sexual identity might implicate them in the workplace and were forced to negotiate it. Here there were marked differences between the education and social work majors.

Education students identified that remaining closeted, while desired, was not always possible, which induced a state of anxiety. They did not consider their concurrent enrollment in a student teaching seminar course as a venue for discussing how to navigate the disclosure of their sexual identity in K-12 settings. Nor did they view their university supervisors as allies in the negotiation process. Some expressed hesitance to speak up when they heard homophobic language in the K-12 classroom or hallway, sensing that they would be “outed” for doing so.

Social work majors negotiated their time in the field in three distinct ways. First, some avoided the issue altogether and remained closeted. A bisexual female participant, for example, indicated that it would be too awkward for her not to pass as straight. The students who opted to out themselves to a co-worker or supervisor did so with little recognition of the consequences of such a decision. These students assumed that their “secret would be safe” and would not be shared with other staff members and/or clients. Finally, a third group of social work students took the bold step of advocating for change around LGBT issues. For example, a gay male student filed a formal complaint about the faculty member who failed to debrief anti-gay-oriented debates about same-sex marriage in her online course. These students interpreted coming out as a way for them to advocate not only for themselves, but for other LGBT students.

Implications for Educators

Appendix A presents a list of questions educators may consider in their efforts to engage students, other faculty, and administrators about the needs and challenges of LGBT students. The

questions for students are designed to assist them in negotiating their sexual identity status from pre-placement through field. Asking students to consider if and when to “come out,” and the consequences of doing so, as well as helping them realize the benefits and disadvantages of accessing university resources, is essential to this endeavor.

The questions designated for faculty and university administrators allow these stakeholders to consider the best means of supporting GLBT students in their programs while still honoring where they are in the “coming out” process. Evaluating present field applications, discussing how to best prepare students for the typical “re-closeting” that ensues when a student enters field, and empowering non-GLBT students to become allies for their GLBT peers should all be considered part of the conversation.

Conclusion

We recognize the limitations of this qualitative study. The lack of racial and ethnic diversity among participants, the limited geographical location of the study, and the small sample size all contribute to a lack of generalizability of the findings. However, hearing the voices of LGBT students while they are experiencing field is a gap in the research that can be replicated.

The present study corroborates the literature that identifies stressors of LGBT students in preservice programs such as education and social work. It furthermore suggests that dialogue among faculty and administrators about how best to support these students happens rarely. LGBT students in these disciplines would benefit from conversations about the benefits and disadvantages of coming out while in field, as well as how best to be supported in that decision-making process. This dialogue would transform our aforementioned “Oops, they found out!” theme into a “I have a choice in their finding out” mentality. Empowering LGBT students who

negotiate field placements is an important step toward helping them navigate the real-world stressors of the profession.

Appendix A

Questions for Dialogue with LGBT Students

- What impact might a “putting the client/student first” mentality have on negotiating any anxiety you have about being out/closeted during your field experience? Would such a focus prevent or delay any awkwardness about potential disclosure of your sexual identity?
- Is it better for you to be forthcoming about your sexual identity status to field personnel or to wait and see if it is something you would eventually disclose? What are the implications for each?
- How can university faculty/administrators best help you negotiate your sexual identity status in the classroom and/or out in the field?
- How could campus LGBT resources best support you during your time in field?
- What changes should be made in the field application process to better accommodate your sexual identity needs?

Questions for Dialogue with Faculty/University Administrators

- What processes/policies need to be in place at the time of application for field placements so that LGBT students are better prepared for and supported throughout the field experience? What policies/procedures need to be in place for LGBT students dismissed from field placements due to their sexual identity/expression?
- How should you respond to students who “out” themselves in papers/assignments?
- How might the findings that LGBT students do not want gay issues “debated” influence your classroom discourse about such topics?
- How can you best prepare students for the natural “going back in the closet” phenomenon that typically accompanies field/student teaching?
- How can you best help our students negotiate their biases and assumptions about religious-oriented placements/schools?
- How can you empower all students to be peer allies for their LGBT colleagues during field placements (e.g., conversations in field seminar classes)?
- How can you broker with established campus support groups to help LGBT field students negotiate the “coming out” process?
- How can you best prepare adjunct faculty who supervise field placements to support LGBT students?
- How can you best prepare field instructors/supervising teachers to support LGBT students?
- How can you best support LGBT faculty who want to be present for LGBT students in field, while at the same time honoring their desired level of “outness” with students and the campus community?

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