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The World of Sexual Minority Youth:
Implications for Educational Professionals

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Adolescence is recognized as a time when individuals strive to define their unique identities. Sexual orientation is only one of many aspects of identity development (Cohler and Hammack, 2005) and during adolescence, many people explore and experiment with different sexual attitudes and behaviors (American Psychological Association, 2008). Just because a person questions their own sexual feelings or explores sexual behavior with a person of the same gender does not make that person lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transvestite. As with other aspects of a person's identity, sexual identity generally develops gradually over an extended period of time (American Psychological Association, 2008).

Because society can be hostile to people with minority sexual orientations, becoming aware of this facet of oneself and integrating it into a larger self-identity can add an additional layer of difficulty and complication to the often already-challenging phase of adolescence (Cates, 2007). Carrion and Lock (1997) have described eight stages by which individuals with sexual minority orientations come to accept their own sexual identities, which, as noted in a pamphlet on sexuality by the American Psychological Association, usually begin to emerge "between middle childhood and early adolescence" (p. 1).

The first stage is when people internally discover that they have a different sexual orientation. They may, at this point, be bewildered or ashamed. They may attempt to minimize their feelings or deny them. During the second stage, people mull over their own sexual feelings. They may experience more or less inner conflict about these feelings.

When people have navigated their way through the first two stages, they reach the third stage, in which they begin to integrate their sexual orientation into their identity. They begin to

experience what is known as “congruence.” Carrion et al., (1997) call the fourth stage “congruence probing.” At this stage, individuals may seek to engage in sexual behavior with the gender to which they are sexually attracted. This may be their first realization that there are other people who share their sexual orientation.

In stage five, people may begin to “come out.” This can be a time when people with minority sexual preferences find support—or when they are rejected, marginalized, or victimized by family and friends. All too many sexual minority youth leave (or are kicked out of) their homes. The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States cite a disproportionate number of homelessness among youth who self-report as having minority sexual orientation. They note that while only 3-5% of the population self-identifies as having a sexual minority orientation, anywhere from 30-40% of homeless youth self-identify in this way. In addition, some young people who have “come out” are prohibited from maintaining contact with their friends, and others are physically abused (Carrion et al., 1997).

In stage six, individuals consolidate their esteem. During this process of esteem-consolidation, there are often conflicts with others due to “the way they perceive themselves versus the way they are seen by others” (Carrion et al., 1997, p. 375). If others view them in a negative way, it disrupts the process of healthy identity development.

Stage seven consists of integrating sexual orientation into a more global self-identity. People at this stage accept themselves for who they are and take pride in it. No more do the opinions of other people dictate their own acceptance of themselves. Finally, in stage eight, individuals are able to enrich society. They may help other people understand what it is like to have a minority sexual orientation, and they may help younger people who are struggling

through the stages of self-identity. At stage eight, they have totally integrated their sexual identity into their identity as a whole.

“Coming out” is a turning point in the acceptance of sexual identity. When they arrive at this stage, youth who have minority sexual orientations have three different options about whether and how to disclose their sexual orientation to those around them. (American Psychological Association, 2008). Some choose not to disclose it to others at all, fearing prejudice and discrimination. Bisexual individuals may be particularly hesitant to tell people, because they may retain a sense of confusion about their sexual identity for a prolonged period of time (McLean, 2007). They and other youth with sexual minority preferences sometimes eventually choose to disclose their sexual identity, but only to people they believe will accept or support it. Still others choose to disclose their sexual orientation very openly and publically (American Psychological Association, 2008).

There are potential implications to each of these choices. The American Psychological Association (2008) notes that when individuals feel that they cannot discuss their sexual orientation with friends and family members, it may contribute to poorer mental and physical health. However, for some sexual minority youth, there is an inherent risk in disclosing their sexual identity. The younger the individual, the less support and resources they may find (American Psychological Association, 2008). Furthermore, for people of any age, if their families, friends, schools, and communities are not supportive, they may experience bullying and “negative outcomes, such as suicidal thoughts, and high risk activities, such as unprotected sex and alcohol and drug use” (American Psychological Association, 2008, p. 4).

Despite the risks, the American Psychological Association (2008) notes that “coming out” may also be a crucial factor in the positive identity development of individuals with a sexual

minority orientation. This may be because it allows people to live openly, with a sense of more integrity, as cited by McLean (2007). In addition, because when a person lets those around them know about their true feelings and experiences, it can generate social support. Finally, it can provide access to a community of people with the same orientation. In these ways, “coming out” can foster positive mental health for sexual minority youth (American Psychological Association, 2008).

Undoubtedly, “coming out” and dealing with sexual identity struggles in adolescence can lead to emotional and psychological distress in all contexts of a child’s life. Much of the research on sexual minority youth has attempted to study the victimization and bullying of these youth in the schools. Bullying is aggressive behavior that is intentional and involves an imbalance of power or strength. Unfortunately for youth that identify themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBT-Q), they have become daily targets of bullies in schools throughout the United States. Children and youth who identify themselves as LGBT-Q, or perceived to be so, can face unrelenting teasing and bullying by peers. Because this aggression can be sexual in nature, the effects closely resemble those of sexual harassment and in some cases may constitute sexual harassment (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2005).

Investigations focused on life experiences of LGBT-Q youth suggest that up to 66 percent report verbal harassment, 16 percent physically harassed, and 8 percent had been assaulted (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2007). The National School Climate Survey (2005) conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educational Network (GLSEN) concluded that three-quarters of the high school students surveyed heard derogatory and homophobic remarks “frequently” or often at school, and 90 percent heard the term “gay” used generally to imply someone is stupid or something is worthless. The National Mental Health Association (2002)

reported that 78 percent of teens reported that kids who are gay or who are thought to be gay are teased or bullied in their schools and communities. It was also found that 93 percent hear other youth use derogatory words about sexual orientation at least once in a while, and 51 percent hear these words every day.

The hostilities that LGBT-Q students are regularly confronted with often lead to dangerous behaviors and injurious outcomes, abusing alcohol and illicit drugs, engaging in criminal activity, and running away from home (Pilkington and D'Augelli, 2002). An even greater risk to these students is the issue of depression that sometimes leads to suicide. Adolescents who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual are more than twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to be depressed and think about or attempt suicide (Russell and Joyner, 2002).

These disturbing findings on the bullying of sexual minority youth and the consequences of being bullied have led to more research on these students and their educational experience. Recently, increasing numbers of educational professionals, parents and public policy makers have been interested in the experience of sexual minority youth in the schools and how sexual minorities perform in school. In the United States, their safety and welfare has been a topic of interest to those who are responsible for making school a safe environment for children and adolescents. Sexual minority youth are often victimized by peers and rejected by family. Many studies show that victimization and family problems can lead to negative school outcomes, absenteeism, higher dropout rates and lowered academic performance (Mounts and Steinberg, 1995). Sexual minority students are no exception to this research finding. There have been educational policy changes that reflect this new understanding and awareness. These policies attempt to protect students from harassment or discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation, which will hopefully work to prevent negative school outcomes and school

troubles for these youth (Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). Currently there is not a great deal of empirical data and research available to help concerned parents and educators in evaluating the degree of school-related problems for these sexual minority adolescents. In particular, research that focuses on the complex factors in a variety of contexts of their lives that may contribute to their marginalization or resilience within the school setting is not abundant. Although the research related to this population of youth has increased over the past 10 years, many of these studies have made use of non-generalizable samples of self-reported lesbian and gay youth. Rarely has the research focuses on bi-sexual youth and school troubles. Some researchers may identify these bi-sexual youth as gay or lesbian because of the bias that they believe bi-sexuality is a precursor to gay or lesbian identity (Russell et al., 2001).

Much of the research on sexual minority youth within school environments has been written by and for school counselors with the ultimate objective of developing school environments that are safe and supportive. A recent study found that gay and lesbian students go to school counselors for assistance with depression, poor self-esteem, social isolation and elevated suicide risk. In interviews with 50 self-identified homosexual students, school-based homophobia was found to be associated with lower self-esteem, increased tendency for self-destructive behaviors and overall effects on school performance and outcomes (Russell et al., 2001).

Remafedi (1987) stated that a previous review of literature identified a number of potential problems that sexual minority youths face in school including social isolation, substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, school dropout and absenteeism. Interviews conducted in his research on adolescent homosexuality found that 69 percent of sexual minority students interviewed reported a history of school problems related to sexual identity consisting of

verbal and physical abuse. It was found that 28 percent of the subjects interviewed had left high school before completing requirements for a diploma. Verbal and physical abuse were most often the reasons cited for school dropout.

Remafedi's (1987) research also found that 80 percent of the students interviewed reported recent changes in their academic performance, consisting of deterioration and fluctuation. It was also found that 39 percent of the students had been truant on at least, if not more, than 10 occasions during the academic year. In most cases, the decline in attendance or performance was related to their personal difficulties and harassment from peers in the school setting.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model which states that the quality of the adolescents' social world such as relationships with parents, peers, teachers and other adults in the school setting will affect their psychosocial functioning, it is hypothesized that the mental health and school performance of sexual minority youth is impaired. This is because their social network is often strained due to victimization, stigmatization and lack of acceptance (Bos, Sandfort, Bruyn, & Hakvoort, 2008). Studies have found that the quality of the relationship between the parent and the child is negatively related to problem behavior, depression, academic achievement and grade point average. Disclosure and open communication with parents for sexual minority youth is linked to higher levels of academic achievement and lower rates of delinquency and externalizing behavior (Mounts & Steinberg, 1995).

Much of the research reviewed by Russell et al., (2001) also finds that sexual minority adolescents report more negative attitudes toward school, more school troubles and lower grades in comparison to their heterosexual peers. Relationships with family, teachers, and peers are strained and compromised so often times this leads to negative school attitudes, school troubles,

and reduced GPA. Chodorow's theory of gender and human development suggests that through adolescence girls often define themselves in terms of associated with main figures in their lives such as mothers and family. Boys often define themselves in relation to their social world. It is anticipated then in much research that family factors would play a stronger role in mediating the effects of sexual preference on school troubles for girls and that social and peer influences would have stronger mediating effects for girls (Russell et al., 2001).

Russell et al., (2001) study found that sexual minority girls report less positive attitudes about school and more school troubles such as lack of homework completion and peer conflict. The girls also reported lower GPAs than their heterosexual peers. These girls often scored the lowest on the maternal relationship scale and their mothers reported high negativity toward their daughters. Surprisingly, only bi-sexual boys reported compromised school outcomes (school trouble and lower GPA) and boys that reported exclusively same-sex attractions did not differ greatly from their peers on school outcomes. The bi-sexual boys also felt more dislike from their peers and felt that others are unfriendly to them. The results also found that feelings about teachers play the largest role in predicting the school trouble of both boys and girls with bi-sexual attractions in school (paying attention, getting homework done, and getting along with peers).

The school context plays a large role in a student's emotional, social, and academic development. A healthy school climate for sexual minority students is important and contributes to positive learning experiences (Weiler, 2003). In the 2001 GLSEN school climate survey, they questioned the largest school districts throughout the country. GLSEN found that about one half of the 42 school districts surveyed, received a failing school climate score for sexual minority students (Weiler, 2003).

Reportedly, 68% of sexual minority students felt that his or her school was not a safe place because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw and Cullen, 2001; Weiler, 2003). Many schools do not provide factual information, safeguards, or utilize anti-bullying intervention programs that incorporate harassment about sexual orientation (Weiler, 2003).

Schools have legal requirements to follow in order to provide equal access to education and equal protection under the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution (Weiler, 2003). In 1996, the pioneering *Nabozny vs. Podlesny* case found that schools must protect all of their students equally after Jamie Nabozny sued his school district for being subjected to anti-gay harassment and physical violence (Henning-Stout, James, & Macintosh, 2000). Because school faculty and staff are constitutionally required to prevent and discontinue harassment based on sexual orientation, school-based programs and interventions need to be implemented to ensure all students receive their right to the most appropriate education (Weiler, 2003; Henning-Stout et al., 2000).

There are many school related factors that are associated with protection and supportiveness for sexual minority students. Research has found that larger schools are more likely to have higher rates of behavioral incidents related to sexual orientation than smaller schools (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006). Other studies have found that sexual minority students who attended schools in urban areas were more likely to feel unsafe and victimized than those attending school in a suburban setting (Goodenow et al., 2006).

When schools make an effort to improve the social climate inside of the school they also focus on promoting healthy relationships that will foster responsibility in other contexts. Weiler (2003) states the school faculty can have a vital influence on the lives of sexual minority youth

through support systems and effective interventions. Various different interventions are identified to help all students receive appropriate educational services (Weiler, 2003).

First, and foremost, it is necessary for the goal of all interventions to create a school environment in which all students know they are appreciated and accepted for who they are. In order to promote appropriate conduct between all students and school faculty, it will be essential to implement an age-appropriate inclusionary curriculum to offer accurate information about sexual minority issues. A school policy should also be put into practice that supports diversity and does not tolerate any victimization against sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, and/or gender. It will also be essential to educate faculty members about their legal obligation to respect all students equally, regardless of his or her sexual orientation. Professional development trainings should raise awareness, include procedures adults can follow when supporting sexual minority students who seek help, and prepare everyone to address sexual controversy (Weiler, 2003).

The most recognized approach to making schools safer are support networks or groups. One of the initial support groups, Project 10, began in 1985 and served as an adult facilitated, small group counseling sessions for sexual minority youth (Henning-Stout et al., 2000). Recently, gay/straight alliances are student run groups that focus on support and partnerships between students of all sexual orientations (Goodenow et al., 2006). A gay/straight alliance helps develop positive self-esteem and strengthens the school climate for all students (Weiler, 2003).

Studies by Goodenow et al., (2006) and Kosciw and Cullen (2001) report the presence of a gay/straight alliance or other support group in the school system was associated with an overall enhanced feeling of safety. Sexual minority students from schools with support groups reported

less dating violence, a reduced amount of being threatened or physically assaulted at school, were less likely to skip school, and were less likely to attempt suicide. This study also measured the perceived availability and support of staff members (Goodenow et al., 2006). Researchers found that students who felt there were available faculty members to talk to in school reported an improved quality of school life and were also less likely to have multiple suicide attempts (Kosciw and Cullen, 2001; Goodenow et al., 2006).

GLSEN is a primary educational organization that focuses on teaching students to respect and accept people of all sexual orientations (Day of Silence, 2010). This educational organization designs trainings to provide information about sexual minority youth to educators and students. GLSEN's main objective is to generate a school climate where diversity is accepted and respected (Day of Silence, 2010).

One of GLSEN's main projects is the Day of Silence (Day of Silence, 2010). This project was started by students at the University of Virginia in 1996 as a class assignment to create a non-violent protest. Currently, the Day of Silence is one of the largest nationally run actions led by students. For the duration of this protest, students take a vow of silence during non-instructional times of the school day to represent the suppressed voices of sexual minority students (Day of Silence, 2010). This movement is a chance for all students to work together to enhance the climate of their school and communities (Day of Silence, 2010).

The research and literature reviewed in this paper collectively shows that there can be serious negative outcomes for sexual minority youth in the educational setting. Their personal struggles in many aspects of their lives as well as the verbal and physical abuse and victimization of these youth can lead to emotional and psychological distress, lowered academic achievement and an overall unsafe environment for them in the schools. These findings lead to important

implications for school professionals, counselors, teachers, policy makers and parents and should encourage improved attempts and efforts to make the school environment a safer place for sexual minority youth.

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