

ADVOCATING FOR SEXUALLY DIVERSE YOUTH: A CALL TO SCHOOL COUNSELORS

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Abstract

The purpose of this discourse is to examine how school counselors can successfully advocate for sexually diverse youth using a school-wide approach. Sexually diverse youth are considered to be at extreme risk for school failure, social isolation, abuse by peers, identity confusion and self-harm. Considered an invisible minority group, schools often fail to identify sexually diverse students who are in need of advocacy. This paper identifies the need for schools to recognize these students and to create a school-wide environment that is safe and accepting for all students. Suggestions for counselors are explored, including utilizing a whole-school approach and community resources, and one school's solution of implementing a student-run diversity workshop designed by trained student leaders is offered as an example of a successful program.

As the United States as a people continues to grow, the nation's schools continue to diversify, offering a smaller scaled sample of the various groups in our society. Just as many U.S. citizens are having difficulty adjusting to the growing assortment of groups which are represented here, so are our children experiencing the same process of becoming aware and accepting. Literature agrees that the person positioned strategically to help the upcoming generations become more accepting of differences and more open to equality is the school counselor. Many researchers seem to agree that among the various levels of diversity- race, religion, orientation, gender, physical ability – those who represent diverse sexual orientations are still at higher risk than many other groups. In advocating for these at-risk sexually diverse youth, counselors' best strategy, beyond working one on one with the diverse students, is to educate and empower the entire school environment, including the student body, to assist in the advocacy process.

There is wide agreement across studies that gay, lesbian and other sexually diverse youth are at risk for school failure. Stone (2003) notes that this is likely because of failure to ensure a safe school environment, which Underwood and Black (1998) and Bauman and Sachs-Kapp (1998) agree is necessary for academic success. In fact, Stone (2003) recalls a Massachusetts Department of Education survey of 4,000 secondary school students, in which 22 percent of the respondents who identified themselves as gay reported skipping school at least once during the last month specifically because they felt that they were not safe in their school. Stone (2003) puts this failure to ensure both physical safety and emotional protection squarely on the shoulders of the schools, citing them as blinding themselves to the struggles that these students face daily. Underwood and Black (1998) also note the high likelihood that sexual minority students have for school failure and dropout. Stone (2003) further quantifies the dropout rate as around three times the overall dropout rate nationwide, for a minority group that is estimated to account for between 10 and 18 percent of any given high school population.

Added to the difficulties that sexually diverse students face regarding academic success, Bauman and Sachs-Kapp (1998) discuss the obstacles to socialization as compared with their peers. At a time

when being socially accepted by schoolmates seems vital, sexually diverse students face additional obstacles to forming meaningful relationships (Baumann and Sachs-Kapp, 1998). Stone (2003) agrees that personal identity development for these youth is particularly difficult given that they are more likely to become ostracized by peers and family members, all of whom are vital in creating a safe environment for self-exploration. Furthermore, Stone (2003) believes that sexually diverse students “may well be the most stigmatized members of school environs,” (p. 145), considering that her research found that students typically hear around 25 anti-gay comments each day. Bauman and Sachs-Kapp (1998) add to that the fact that in some schools, simply questioning a student’s sexuality may be enough to be outcast by his or her peers, citing one case in which an artistically inclined boy had to transfer schools because of being falsely labeled as homosexual and consequently becoming a target for discrimination.

Underwood and Black (1998) warn that the consequences for this fear of discrimination by their peers may lead many sexually diverse students to try to pass as straight during this time in their development. This often leads to unhappy relationships later on in life, identity crisis, and an increased risk for students to seek an out any way they can. Stone (2003) notes an increased risk for depression and suicide, citing statistics that have shown that 20 to 40 percent of sexually diverse students will attempt suicide. Underwood and Black (1998) agree that attempted suicides are two to three times more likely in sexually diverse youth than in their peers, and that of 5,000 annual successful suicides committed by youth from age 15 to 24, at least 30 percent were fueled by some sort of sexual identity problems. Although Stone (2003) cites this increased suicide rate as reason enough for schools and counselors to take action, Underwood and Black (1998) still add an increased risk for sexually diverse youth to develop problems with substance abuse, to have low self-esteem, to have poorer academic performance, to be abused by family or peers, and to engage in higher risk activities, often involving self-harm or unsafe sex practices, which puts them at an increased risk for developing sexually transmitted diseases. While some cope by dropping out of school to avoid persecution, Stone (2003) and Underwood and Black (1998) note a tendency for sexually diverse students to fly under the radar or to try to pass as straight by avoiding sexuality issues, leading to their classification as an invisible minority.

Despite the fact that Stone (2003) cites a survey of school counselor in which 41 percent of respondents indicated their schools were not doing enough for their sexually diverse students, she also found that training programs on how to advocate for these students were hard to come by, leading many feeling unprepared to work with these youth. Stone (2003) notes that interpretations of Title IX from late in the last decade have been expanded to protect sexually diverse students, securing their right to a safe and inclusive school environment, which is not only vital to their being able to access an equal education, but also gives advocates more ground to stand on in protecting these students.

Noting the need for more literature on strategies for working with sexually diverse youth, Stone (2003) and Underwood and Black (1998) offer some suggestions. First, it is necessary to have a clear picture of the ethical and legal responsibilities surrounding working with these youth, including the ethical dilemma of confidentiality with underage clients. While Stone (2003) suggests that the developmental age of the child should be evaluated in deciphering confidentiality, Underwood and Black (1998) believe that if a youth reveals issues as personal as sexual identity, this should be kept in confidence until the counselor is able to work with the youth and prepare them for coming out at an appropriate time in the self-discovery process, warning that forcing the student to come out before they are secure enough with their identity may lead to more confusion. Stone (2003) recommends a collaborative effort among counselors and school faculty in producing strategies and school policies to reduce harassment and protect minority students of all types. Sexuality should be included in diversity

curriculum and health education to give students a chance to discuss issues with faculty leadership, and included in general curriculum as much as possible (Stone, 2003; Underwood and Black, 1998).

Support groups for sexually diverse youth and their friends and family should be utilized as resources for referrals, and family and friends should be involved as much as possible (Stone, 2003; Underwood and Black, 1998). Having appropriate community referrals for youth organizations is vital, as Underwood and Black (1998) note a tendency for sexually diverse youth to get involved with like adults, who tend to be more at ease with their sexuality, which often leads youths to exposure to adult practices which they may not be ready for. Counselors should be supportive and nonjudgmental, validating the students' concerns and anticipating the areas in which they are likely to have some confusion (Stone, 2003; Underwood and Black, 1998). It is often helpful to use the student's terms to build rapport and allow the student to define himself or herself without the counselor's assumptions. Counselors should offer to help in appropriate ways, including providing information, but making sure to allow the student to move at their own pace and work through their issues in their own ways. Beyond working with the student directly, the counselor should challenge any language or actions, from staff or students, which make assumptions or judgments about diverse sexual orientations. When necessary, remind school staff that they have a public duty to provide all children with an equal education, regardless of personal beliefs (Underwood and Black, 1998).

Because there was a clear need to have the student body's support in effectively creating school environments that are open and accepting of all diverse students, Baumann and Sachs-Kapp (1998) describe a student-run program in one school that seemed to successfully educate the student body about sexual diversity. Student leaders were trained through workshops and classes, using a variety of techniques, including self-awareness exercises, team-building, role-modeling by counselors and role-playing, to explore equity issues. Students then selected sexual diversity as a topic for a diversity workshop, and organized three panel discussions for students, one led by an area youth, one led by family members of sexually diverse individuals, and one led by a psychologist. Students had time at each panel and then broke off into smaller groups for discussions. Students were allowed to address their classmates at the end, and to help transfer the skills back to daily life, fliers with student responses were posted around school. Questionnaires indicated more positive responses than negative at the end of the day, and overall students rated the educational value of the experience as 3.8 out of 5 on a Likert scale. Students and faculty alike were encouraged by the overall response from the student body, and by remarks from several individual students who indicated significant changes in their previous assumptions (Baumann and Sachs-Kapp, 1998).

There is a clear need for intervention on behalf of sexually diverse students as cited in the literature reviewed above (Stone, 2003; Underwood and Black, 1998; Baumann and Sachs-Kapp, 1998). While intervention needs to start with the school counselor's own training on how to advocate for these students, and offering training programs for other school staff, Baumann and Sachs-Kapp (1998) show not only the importance that students have a part in the intervention process, but also the impact that student-run programs can have. By not only including students in this process, but allowing them to take on ownership and responsibility for the process, Baumann and Sachs-Kapp (1998) were able to empower a small group of students with the ability to spread their new understanding and new skills to their classmates with encouraging results. While it is still vital to have adult leadership within the school to oversee that all students are given the chance to access an equal education in a supportive environment, it is clear that students both have the power and the ability to take the need further and see it through from their level and infuse skills in their peers that they will carry out into a diverse world.

Works Cited

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