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# The Effects of Bullying on Sexual Minority Youth: The Importance of Creating an Inclusive School Climate

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THE EFFECTS OF BULLYING ON SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH:  
THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATING AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

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A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Master of Science Degree in  
Counselor Education at  
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Fall 2015

Winona State University  
College of Education  
Counselor Education Department

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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CAPSTONE PROJECT

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The Effects of Bullying on Sexual Minority Youth:  
The Importance of Creating an Inclusive School Climate

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of  
Elizabeth A. M. Strunz  
Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project  
Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Science Degree in  
Counselor Education

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**Abstract**

Sexual minority youth, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) children and adolescents, are an especially high-risk population for bullying victimization. The purpose of this paper is to examine bullying in general, bullying of LGBT youth, negative outcomes associated with bullying victimization of sexual minority youth, and ways that schools can work to reduce bullying and its subsequent effects. Negative effects of bullying on LGBT youth discussed in this paper include absenteeism, lowered academic achievement, lowered self-esteem, and increased risk of depression and suicide. This paper also examines strategies that schools can use to combat many of these negative effects and foster an inclusive school climate. These strategies include the presence of gay-straight alliances, supportive staff members, LGBT-inclusive curriculum, and LGBT-inclusive school policies. Finally, this paper discusses how school counselors and other educators play a key role in developing a positive and safe school environment by promoting inclusivity and advocating for systemic change.

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### **Introduction**

In March of 2015, sixteen-year-old Taylor Alesana, a transgender teenager, committed suicide after facing relentless bullying victimization by her peers. The leader of a support group that Alesana frequently attended states that her school did little to stop the constant harassment she faced, despite the fact that the school administration was aware of her frequent victimization. She often spoke of her bullying victimization and feelings of isolation and loneliness through YouTube videos and other social media sites (Associated Press, 2015). Alesana is one of many sexual minority youth who have committed suicide after experiencing severe bullying victimization in the past year alone. While no figures exist on the number of LGBT students who commit suicide after being bullied, sexual minority youth are more than twice as likely to experience bullying victimization than heterosexual students (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011). Furthermore, sexual minority youth are up to four times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers (LeVasseur et al., 2013), and a large body of research has consistently revealed a clear link between bullying victimization and suicide in LGBT youth (Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2012). Although suicide is perhaps the most serious consequence of bullying victimization, other negative outcomes include a variety of psychological, social, physical, and academic problems (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011), including increased absenteeism, poor academic performance, lowered self-esteem, and increased risk of depression and at-risk behaviors. These negative outcomes can be both significant and enduring, especially because sexual minority youth often lack family, school, and community supports afforded to heterosexual students (O'Malley et al., 2014). Fortunately, schools can play an essential role in helping to assuage these negative outcomes, as research has found that a significant factor in

lessening rates of bullying victimization for LGBT youth is the presence of an inclusive and safe school environment.

Thus, this paper seeks to explore bullying behaviors and prevalence in the United States, bullying of sexual minority youth, negative effects associated with bullying victimization of LGBT youth, and research-based strategies that schools can implement to create a safe and inclusive environment that reduces bullying and its subsequent effects.

## **Review of Literature**

Bullying is a ubiquitous problem that affects children and adolescents of all demographics. However, sexual minority youth experience bullying victimization far more frequently than heterosexual youth. This bullying is associated with a series of negative academic and psychosocial effects. However, schools can help to reduce anti-LGBT bullying and its effects by creating a safe and inclusive environment through the establishment and presence of gay-straight alliances, supportive staff members, and inclusive curriculum and school policies. The following sections of the literature review will further explore these topics.

### **Bullying**

**Bullying behaviors.** According to the U.S. Department of Education, bullying is defined as “intentional, repeated, hurtful acts, words, or other behavior committed by one or more children against another” (Colin, 2005, p. 104). Furthermore, bullying involves an imbalance of power in which the victim feels helpless to stop the bullying behavior (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Bullying is generally classified into four different forms: verbal, which includes threats, insults, or name calling; physical, which includes pushing, hitting, or other forms of assault; relational, which includes spreading rumors or exclusion; and cyber, which relies on technology such as text messaging, instant messaging, or social media to perpetrate acts of bullying (Litwiller & Brausch, 2013). The National Education Association adds, “bullying can be direct – such as teasing, hitting or threatening – or indirect, involving exclusion, the spreading of untrue rumors or psychological manipulation” (Colin, 2005, p. 104).

While all forms of bullying are problematic for adolescents, research indicates that bullying behaviors vary based on gender. Bullying is more common amongst boys than girls (Nansel et al., 2001). Girls are more likely to engage in bullying that involves spreading rumors

or verbal abuse, while boys are more apt to participate in physical bullying (Colin, 2005). In a study that centered on middle school bullying behaviors, the forms of bullying most often reported by boys were “threats, physical harm, rejection, and name-calling.” Girls reported that bullying most often took the form of “name-calling, teasing, rumors, rejection, and taking of personal belongings” (Nansel et al., 2001, p. 2095). Thus, while some bullying behaviors, such as name-calling and rejection were reported by both genders, physical bullying was more prevalent among males, whereas rumor spreading was more typical of bullying among females. In addition, boys most frequently react to bullying with physical aggression, but girls’ most common reaction to bullying is to tell someone. In general, children respond to bullying in a way that mimics the behavior of the bully (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011). Furthermore, physical bullying decreases with age, whereas verbal and indirect forms of bullying increase with age (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

Overall, bullying is intentional, hurtful, repetitive, and involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim. Bullying behavior also varies based on gender, with females engaging largely in relational and verbal bullying and males engaging more in physical bullying. Despite these differences, bullying is a prevalent issue for both males and females of all ages.

**Prevalence.** While it is clear that bullying is a pervasive problem among adolescents, different studies have found varying results regarding the prevalence. Litwiller & Brausch (2013) state that 20 to 35 percent of youth report being involved in bullying as a perpetrator, victim, or both. According to a study of New York youth, an estimated 20 percent of adolescents reported being victims of bullying in the past year (LeVasseur, Kelvin, & Grosskopf, 2013). The National Crime Prevention Council, though, reports that up to three-quarters of American youth

have been bullied (Colin, 2005). While Turner, Exum, Brame, & Holt (2013) state that 20 percent of youth have experienced cyberbullying, a study by i-SAFE places this number at over 40 percent (Colin, 2005). Regardless of the percentage of students involved in bullying, over 7 million bullying incidents occur in schools every year (Colin, 2005). Over 40 percent of teachers and education support staff identify bullying as a major or moderate problem at their school. Only 8 percent of teachers feel that bullying is not a problem at their school. In addition, over 40 percent of teachers and education support staff report witnessing bullying at least once a week (Gulemetova, Drury, & Bradshaw, 2011).

Thus, estimates regarding the percentage of children and adolescents who experience bullying range from 20 percent to 75 percent. While this range of estimates represents a wide variation, it is clear that bullying is a pervasive problem, especially for certain students in populations at high risk for bullying victimization.

**Reasons for victimization.** Perhaps the question most central to the issue of bullying is *why?* In a survey by the National Mental Health Association, adolescents identified the following as the reasons that teens are most often bullied: being overweight, being gay or perceived as being gay, dressing differently, and having a disability (Colin, 2005). Furthermore, students report that those who are different or stand out in some way are more commonly bullied (Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011).

Moreover, one factor contributing to the prevalence of bullying may be the large size of public schools. Many public schools contain “long, unmonitored hallways or stairwells where vulnerable students can be victimized with impunity” (Colin, 2005, p. 104). In addition, as teachers have an increasing number of tasks to complete, they are often too busy to closely monitor hallways, cafeterias, or other common areas where bullying is likely to occur. This lack

of supervision in many areas of the school can create an environment in which students know they can bully others with little fear of getting caught or punished, thus increasing the prevalence of bullying, especially of vulnerable populations such as sexual minority students (Colin, 2005).

Thus, while bullying is a pervasive problem, certain students such as those who have a disability, are overweight, dress differently, are (or are perceived to be) sexual minority youth, or are labeled as different or “other” in some way have an increased risk of bullying victimization. No matter why or how bullying is occurring, it has become clear that the perception that *bullying is a part of growing up* is an untrue and dangerous mindset that condones bullying, and that bullying can have significant effects, especially on members of frequently targeted populations, such as sexual minority youth.

### **Bullying of Sexual Minority Youth**

**Prevalence.** Although bullying is a widespread problem affecting youth of various demographics, a large body of evidence suggests that sexual minority youth are at increased risk for bullying victimization in comparison to heterosexual youth (O’Malley Olsen, Kann, Vivolo-Kantor, Kinchen, & McManus, 2014). In fact, an analysis that examined data from eighteen studies found that LGBT youth are 2.24 times more likely to experience bullying than their heterosexual peers (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011).

Within a social context that enforces behavior standards through threats, taunts, and physical attacks, young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT), or who look like they may be LGBT, or may be questioning their sexual orientation, are at some special risk for bullying with the accompanying threats to their physical, academic, and psychological well-being. (Conoley, 2008, p. 217)

In what is regarded as the most comprehensive study of LGBT youth bullying and victimization experiences to date, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), found that more than eight in ten sexual minority students reported being victims of verbal harassment due to their sexual orientation, whereas four in ten stated that they had been physically harassed (e.g. pushed or shoved). Furthermore, two in ten students surveyed noted that they had been victims of more serious physical assault at school (e.g. being injured with a weapon, kicked, or punched) because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The most common form of bullying victimization amongst LGBT youth surveyed, though, was relational aggression, with 90 percent of respondents reporting that they had been deliberately excluded by others and 84 percent of students noting that they had rumors or lies spread about them because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Kosciw et al., 2012).

It is an unfortunate reality that the vast majority of LGBT youth experience relational bullying in the form of exclusion and rumor spreading as a direct result of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In addition, nearly half of sexual minority students experience physical bullying. Overall, LGBT students are more than twice as likely to experience bullying victimization when compared with their heterosexual counterparts.

**Considerations regarding victimization.** A complex milieu of social, environmental, and other factors surround the phenomenon of LGBT bullying, and the question of *why* sexual minority youth are frequent victims is still being explored. One explanation is that youth who differ from what their classmates consider to be “normal” are frequent targets of bullying, and many LGBT youth are perceived as different by peers (Guerra et al., 2011). Misconceptions regarding sexual minority individuals, societal expectations regarding gender roles, and the fact that homophobic slurs and language are often regarded as socially acceptable may also be

contributing factors in the prevalence of LGBT bullying (Varjas et al., 2008). Furthermore, “the reluctance of school personnel to protect sexual minority students and to punish the perpetrators of harassment demonstrates their implicit acceptance of homophobia” (Varjas et al., 2008, p. 62).

When considering the prevalence and effects of sexual minority bullying, it is also important to note that most bullying goes unreported to school personnel, with over 60 percent of students surveyed by GLSEN stating that they have never informed school staff of bullying incidents, and a mere 14 percent of respondents noting that they usually or always reported bullying incidents. Students gave several reasons for failing to report bullying incidents including doubt that the problem would be resolved if reported, concern about the school personnel’s reaction to the problem, and belief that reporting the incident would worsen it. These concerns that lead to lack of reporting underscore the importance of schools having supportive and inclusive personnel, a factor which both decreases the likelihood of bullying and increases the likelihood of bullying that does occur being reported (Kosciw et al., 2012).

In essence, there are a variety of potential factors that place LGBT youth at a greater risk for bullying victimization. These include the fact that sexual minority youth are often perceived as different by their peers, youth and adults often have misconceptions about LGBT individuals, and homophobic language and actions are often seen as acceptable by both students and staff. Thus, the heterosexual norm among both students and staff not only fails to protect, but outright oppresses, LGBT individuals through bullying victimization. Regardless of the reason for this victimization, it is clear the negative outcomes associated with bullying victimization are detrimental to sexual minority youth in numerous ways.

### **Negative Outcomes of Bullying of Sexual Minority Youth**

The effects of bullying victimization on sexual minority youth can be both devastating

and long lasting. LGBT youth who are victims of bullying are at a greater risk of a variety of psychological, social, physical, and academic problems (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011). Specifically, victimization can “increase the risk for suicide and other mental health problems including depression and lowered self-esteem, multiple other health-risk behaviors, and poor academic performance among all adolescents, but particularly among sexual minority adolescents” (O’Malley et al., 2014, p. 436). Specific health-risk behaviors in which LGBT bullying victims are more likely to engage include unhealthy coping strategies such as self-injury and substance abuse. Despite experiencing these negative outcomes, these victims do not demonstrate higher rates of risky sexual behavior, violence, or aggression in response to victimization, indicating that these victims tend to internalize bullying rather than externalizing it through outward aggression or violence (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011). Furthermore, LGBT bullying victims who have experienced physical bullying are twelve times more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder than non-victims (Beckerman & Auerbach, 2014).

Meyer’s minority stress model provides a lens through which to examine and better understand LGBT bullying victimization. This model posits that persons from non-majority groups experience stressors related to the oppressive structures they encounter as a result of their disadvantaged position. Essentially, discrimination, victimization, and violence experienced by oppressed populations can contribute to negative health and psychosocial outcomes (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2012).

Victimization perceived as homophobic may have added effects beyond general victimization for LGBTQ youth because it further denigrates their identity and emphasizes their marginalized position. In line with these arguments, homophobic victimization is associated with mental health and academic concerns and risk behaviors

for LGBTQ youth. (Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011, p. 597)

Thus, Meyer's minority stress model can be used as a framework to examine the oppression and subsequent negative outcomes experienced by sexual minority individuals. These negative outcomes include academic effects such as increased absenteeism and decreased academic performance and psychosocial effects such as lowered self-esteem and increased risk of depression, unhealthy coping behaviors such as self-harm, post-traumatic stress, and suicide.

**Absenteeism and academic effects.** Bullying victimization negatively affects absenteeism and academic performance for both heterosexual and LGBT youth. "Youth who experience homophobic victimization feel a lower sense of school belonging, which is associated with more frequently skipping school, poorer academic performance, and feeling it is less important to graduate" (Poteat et al., 2011, p. 606). According to the Human Rights Watch, sexual minority youth who experience bullying victimization are four times more likely to miss school, specifically because of fear of victimization (Varjas et. al, 2008). Similarly, GLSEN found that LGBT students who reported severe levels of harassment were three times more likely than those who experienced lower levels of harassment to have missed school in the past month (Kosciw et al., 2012). A study by the Massachusetts Department of Education found that when compared to their heterosexual peers, sexual minority youth were five times more likely to be absent from school due to feeling unsafe (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009).

In addition to absenteeism, students who are victims of bullying experience decreased academic performance and educational aspirations. Adolescents who experience severe victimization report a lower GPA than those who experience less severe victimization (2.9 and 3.2 respectively). Those who experience severe victimization are also less likely to report that they plan to pursue a post-secondary education (Kosciw et al., 2012). One may assume that the

negative effects of bullying on academic performance are due primarily to the increased absenteeism of bullying victims. However, even when absenteeism is accounted for, a strong correlation exists between bullying and poor school performance, suggesting that factors other than absenteeism are at play (Hamming & Jazkowski, 2013). One possible explanation for the connection between bullying victimization and lowered academic achievement, even when accounting for absenteeism, is that victims of bullying often have trouble concentrating and remaining engaged in class (Colin, 2005) and experience decreased self-esteem about their academic abilities (Hamming & Jazkowski, 2013). Ultimately, students who face frequent bullying victimization are at greater risk of dropping out of school (Duong & Bradshaw, 2014).

**Psychosocial effects.** In addition to negative academic effects, sexual minority bullying victims are at greater risk for a variety of negative psychological outcomes including lowered self-esteem and higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation and behavior (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011).

**Self-esteem.** Lowered self-esteem in LGBT bullying victims may be worsened by the fact that these youth are often not afforded the privilege of the support systems in schools, communities, and homes. “In contrast to racial minorities, sexual minority individuals are not born into a visible minority group. This situation creates unique challenges and choices for sexual minority youth including stigma management, coming out, and identifying safe places and potential ‘straight allies’” (Varjas et al., 2008, p. 67). This systemic lack of support and fear of stigmatization can serve to increase feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and isolation, thereby leading to decreased self-esteem (Varjas et al., 2008). In addition, more severe levels of victimization are correlated with lower levels of self-esteem in sexual minority youth (Kosciw et al., 2012).

**Depression.** Similarly, more severe levels of victimization are also associated with higher levels of depression in LGBT youth (Kosciw et al., 2012). In a study comparing victimization of sexual minority and heterosexual youth, researchers found that not only were depressive symptoms higher in sexual minority youth, but that harassment and victimization “significantly mediated the effect of sexual minority status on depressive symptoms and suicidality” (Burton et al., 2012, p. 394). A similar study also found harassment mediated the relationship between lower levels of self-concept and higher rates of depression in sexual minority youth (Martin-Storey & Crosnoe, 2012).

The relationship between “coming out,” victimization, and depression is complex. Adolescents who attempt to hide their identities as sexual minorities are often unsuccessful, which can lead to higher rates of victimization and, as a result, higher rates of depression. Although “being out” can result in victimization, “being out” during middle school or high school is positively correlated with healthy adjustment in young adulthood, indicating that “coming out” in adolescence may serve to lower one’s risk for depression in the long term (Russell, Toomey, Ryan, & Diaz, 2014). Similarly, GLSEN found that although “out” students experienced higher levels of victimization, “being out” also correlated with better psychological well being (e.g. higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of depression) (Kosciw et al., 2012).

**Suicide.** Risk factors such as lowered levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression are closely tied to increased rates of suicidal ideation and behavior amongst sexual minority youth, one of the most serious consequences of bullying. In a study of New York City adolescents, 1 in 12 heterosexual adolescents reported attempting suicide; this figure skyrocketed to 1 in 3 for LGBT adolescents (LeVasseur et al., 2013, p. e1). A 2009 study by the Child

Welfare League of America found that while 8 percent of heterosexual youth attempted suicide in 2005, 45 percent of sexual minority youth attempted suicide in the same year (Hong, Espelage, & Kral, 2011). A study by Rivers (2001) cited in Varjas et al. (2008) found that 53 percent of sexual minority youth had considered suicide because of bullying.

A review of 37 studies revealed a consistent correlation between bullying victimization and suicidal ideation in adolescents (Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2012). The correlation between bullying and suicide can be explored through the framework of the interpersonal theory of suicide. “Low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression also have all been identified as correlates of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness” which, according to the interpersonal theory of suicide, are causes of suicidal desire (Litwiller & Brausch, 2013, p. 675). For LGBT youth, these feelings of thwarted belongingness (and resulting lack of self-esteem, anxiety, and depression) can be due to a lack of support networks and feelings of alienation and rejection from family, peers, or community. This notion is consistent with findings that depression mediates the link between bullying victimization and suicide (Bauman et al., 2012). An additional lens through which to consider this correlation is Durkheim’s sociological theory of suicide, which states that lack of integration into the dominant culture can be an underlying motivation for suicide (Hong et al., 2011).

Although bullying victimization has been linked to increased substance abuse and risky sexual behavior, which are both risk factors for suicide (Litwiller & Brausch, 2013), “bullying is a significant risk factor for suicide ideation independent of other suicide risk factors” (LeVasseur et al., 2013, p. e1). While youth who have been bullied in any form are at a higher risk of suicidal ideation and behavior, youth who are victims of both cyberbullying and traditional bullying are at the greatest risk (Duong & Bradshaw, 2014). Furthermore, LeVasseur et al.

(2013) cite a study by Abelson, which suggests “suicidality among LGBT youths is not the result of individual pathologies but rather a direct result of peer victimization” (p. e1). The correlation between bullying victimization and suicide serves to highlight the necessity of schools taking action to combat all forms bullying, including those that target sexual minority youth.

### **Inclusive School Climates**

Fortunately, a large body of research suggests that the prevalence of bullying and the effects of victimization are influenced strongly by school climate. Positive school climate can be defined as students’ “perceptions that school was a good place to be – where students and teachers could be trusted, students were treated with respect, and rules were fair” (Guerra et al., 2011). While negative school climates are associated with higher rates of bullying victimization and increased negative psychosocial and academic effects, positive school climates are correlated with lowered rates of bullying perpetration and victimization (O’Malley Olsen et al., 2014). In turn, positive school climates and the absence of homophobic teasing are also associated with lowered risk of depression, decreased rates of at-risk behaviors such as alcohol and marijuana use, and decreased levels of absenteeism (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011), suggesting that “schools with low homophobic teasing and a positive school climate will drastically reduce the prevalence of negative outcomes in GLB youth” (Birkett et al., 2009). Perhaps most importantly, a positive school climate is associated with lower rates of suicide (Birkett et al., 2009; Black, Fedewa, & Gonzalez, 2012).

Several components help to create a positive school climate. LGBT students report a more positive school climate when their school has a gay-straight alliance (GSA) or comparable organization, they can identify supportive school personnel, the curriculum includes and positively portrayed LGBT individuals and events, and the school’s anti-bullying policy is

comprehensive with specific mention of sexual orientation and gender identity (Kosciw et al., 2012). While these factors may not completely eliminate bullying that targets LGBT individuals, they can greatly reduce both the frequency of bullying and subsequent negative effects.

**Gay-straight alliances.** One of the most important components of a positive school environment for sexual minority youth is the presence of a gay-straight alliance (GSA) or similar organization. A GSA is usually a student-led organization that strives to address LGBT student issues, provide support for sexual minority students, unite LGBT individuals with allies who support inclusion and diversity, and promote a positive and safe school climate. Because many sexual minority youth lack support networks at school and outside of school, GSAs can provide a much-needed safe space that can help to buffer feelings of isolation or hopelessness associated with a lack of support (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011). When compared with LGBT students whose school does not have a GSA, students whose school does have a GSA hear negative homophobic remarks less frequently, experience less severe victimization, are less likely to feel unsafe at school, are less likely to miss school due to feeling unsafe, and feel a higher level of school belongingness. Furthermore, sexual minority students who are members of a GSA reported higher academic achievement and better engagement in school (Kosciw et al., 2012). Moreover, GSAs have been shown to reduce the number of violent incidents and risky behaviors (e.g. alcohol consumption, risky sexual behavior, and suicide attempts) most notably in sexual minority students, but also in the general student population (Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2012). GSAs can also empower students by helping them to influence social justice in their schools and improve the overall psychological well being of sexual minority

youth (Black et al., 2012). Thus, GSAs can positively impact both heterosexual and sexual minority youth through improved school climate.

**Supportive staff members.** Another important factor that can help to reduce bullying targeting sexual minority youth, and subsequent negative effects, is the presence of supportive staff members, including school counselors, teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. Sexual minority students surveyed by GLSEN who could identify at least six supportive school staff members were much less likely to report feeling unsafe because of their sexual orientation than students who could not identify any supportive staff members (53 percent and 77 percent, respectively). In addition, the presence of supportive school personnel can decrease absenteeism by decreasing the rates at which students skip school due to feeling unsafe and increasing feelings of school belongingness. Supportive staff members are also correlated with an increase in educational achievement (e.g. higher GPAs) and aspirations (e.g. higher education plans) among LGBT students who are bullying victims (Kosciw et al., 2012). In addition, when sexual minority students report that they have at least one supportive adult at school, their odds of engaging in physical fights and attempting suicide are reduced significantly (Duong & Bradshaw, 2014).

These trends underscore the importance of staff professional development regarding bullying and other issues facing sexual minority youth.

It is critical that school professionals be provided with both pre- and in-service professional development about addressing these issues in schools. Staff training (and all prevention measures) about bullying should specifically address bullying of LGBT youth and provide concrete strategies for educators to address bias-based bullying (Kosciw, Bartkiewicz, & Greytak, 2012).

Moreover, school psychologists, counselors, and other pupil services personnel are in a unique position to help create a supportive school environment. In addition to providing counseling and other responsive services to bullying victims, these individuals must strive to collaboratively create prevention programs and policies that address bullying, prejudice, and homophobia and promote inclusive and positive school environments (Poteat et al., 2011).

**Inclusive curriculum.** An additional factor that can help to foster an inclusive school environment is an LGBT-inclusive curriculum. Such a curriculum may include the study of significant LGBT historical figures, historical and current events related to the LGBT community, and literature by LGBT authors or featuring LGBT characters. Another important component of an inclusive curriculum is the accessibility of LGBT-related texts and resources in the school library, counseling office, or other location in the school (Kosciw et al., 2012).

Inclusion of such topics can help sexual minority students to feel a greater sense of belongingness and engagement in school, and can also help to educate heterosexual students about topics related to sexual minorities. Students whose schools incorporate such topics into the curriculum report hearing homophobic remarks less frequently, feeling safer in school, experiencing bullying victimization less frequently (Kosciw et al., 2012), and feeling a greater sense of connectedness at school (Black et al., 2012). In fact, the presence of an LGBT-inclusive curriculum can reduce the rate of victimization for sexual minority youth by half. Unfortunately, over 80 percent of students surveyed by GLSEN stated that their school curriculum does not include positive representations of LGBT individuals (Kosciw et al., 2012).

**Inclusive school policies.** Finally, an essential component of creating an inclusive school environment is the presence of inclusive or comprehensive bullying and harassment policies.

A “comprehensive” policy is one that explicitly enumerates protections based on personal characteristics, including both sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. When a school has and enforces a comprehensive policy, especially one which also includes procedures for reporting incidents to school authorities, it can send a message that bullying, harassment, and assault are unacceptable and will not be tolerated. (Kosciw et al., 2012)

In schools that have and enforce such policies, LGBT students are less likely to experience bullying, more likely to demonstrate positive psychological outcomes, and less likely to attempt suicide. In schools that lack such policies, LGBT students are more likely to experience bullying and more likely to attempt suicide (and state that difficulty at school was the primary reason for the attempt). Thus, like other key factors in developing an inclusive school environment, the presence and enforcement of a comprehensive anti-bullying policy can reduce not only bullying victimization, but also the negative effects associated with victimization (Black et al., 2012).

In addition to comprehensive anti-bullying policies, it is imperative for schools to develop and enforce other policies that promote equality and inclusion. For example, schools must ensure that dress code regulations and policies regarding school events such as prom do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Best practices also call for the designation of gender-neutral bathrooms or allowing transgender students to use the bathroom in which they feel most comfortable. Like comprehensive anti-bullying policies, policies such as these promote a sense of connectedness, belongingness, and inclusivity for sexual minority youth (Teaching Tolerance, 2013).

## **Summary**

Sexual minority students are an especially high-risk population for bullying victimization, which is associated with a variety of negative outcomes that can be both serious and long-term. Increased risk of suicidal ideation and attempts is perhaps the most serious negative outcome associated with bullying victimization, and the risk of suicide is far higher in sexual minority youth when compared with their heterosexual counterparts. Fortunately, bullying victimization and related negative effects can be reduced when students attend a school with an inclusive climate. Key research-based factors in creating an inclusive climate include GSAs and similar organizations, inclusive curriculum and school policies, and the presence of supportive staff members. Through systemic and individual student advocacy, school counselors play an important role in helping schools to develop safe and inclusive environments.

## **Discussion**

### **The Role of School Counselors**

Because a large body of research resoundingly emphasizes the negative effects of bullying victimization on sexual minority youth, it is essential that schools work to engage in research-based, best practices to reduce bullying and its negative outcomes. School counselors can play a key role in helping to reduce bullying victimization in schools. While providing responsive services to sexual minority bullying victims is essential, it is perhaps even more pertinent for school counselors to advocate for students by helping to establish an inclusive school climate and effecting systemic change. Because school counselors interact with administrators, teachers, students, and other key stakeholders, they can work collaboratively with others to promote an environment of inclusivity. School counselors can advocate for the establishment and enforcement of inclusive policies, programs, and curriculums; provide

relevant professional development opportunities for staff; and communicate to LGBT students that school counselors are allies who can provide a safe space.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) code of ethics calls on school counselors to promote social justice by advocating for equitable school programs, policies, and practices (American School Counselor Association, 2010). An especially important area in which school counselors can advocate for sexual minority youth is in regards to the establishment and enforcement of comprehensive anti-bullying policies. Although the majority of schools have bullying policies, less than 8 percent of students surveyed by GLSEN indicated that this policy includes specific protections based on both sexuality and gender identity, indicating that this is an issue that requires advocacy in many schools (Kosciw et al., 2012). In addition, because school counselors work closely with both administrators and teachers, they can help provide professional development to other staff members. School counselors can educate other staff members about how to recognize, respond to, and report bullying targeting sexual minority youth in order to ensure that, once established, anti-bullying policies are enforced. Thus, it is essential for school counselors to advocate not only for the establishment, but also enforcement, of anti-bullying policies that specifically protect sexual minority youth.

Furthermore, school counselors play an essential role in advocating for sexual minority students, including bullying victims. When asked which staff member they would feel most comfortable discussing LGBT-related issues with, students most commonly responded that they would talk to a school-based mental health professional such as a school counselor (Kosciw et al., 2012). School counselors can provide students with a safe space to discuss their sexual orientation or gender identity, provide responsive services to bullying victims, and help to connect students with appropriate community resources. Because LGBT individuals sometimes

lack support from family, peers, and others in the community, it is especially essential for school counselors and other educators to communicate a message of support, acceptance, and inclusivity.

### **Considerations for Future Research**

While research about both problems and solutions regarding LGBT bullying victimization is becoming more widespread, further exploration of the topic is still needed. The current body of literature would benefit from increased longitudinal studies that examine the impact of bullying on sexual minority youth, not only as they experience it, but also after they have reached adulthood.

In addition, further research into bullying victimization of transgender students specifically is needed, as most current research examines transgender youth only in conjunction with gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. Transgender youth, whose minority status lies in their gender identity rather than their sexual orientation, have many experiences and struggles that are distinct from their gay, lesbian, and bisexual counterparts. For example, transgender youth often encounter discriminatory practices within schools such as being required to use a bathroom designated to an individual's biological rather than identified gender. However, little is known about if or how bullying victimization among transgender youth differs from the victimization experienced by other sexual minority youth, as studies that focus on this population specifically are far less common. Greater exploration of bullying victimization of transgender youth and potential solutions to this victimization may provide greater insight into meeting the needs of this population.

With further research, we can better understand the effects of bullying on sexual minority youth (specifically the long-term effects of bullying and the effects of bullying on transgender

youth) as well as strategies for schools to prevent and combat these negative effects. Through the application of this research, school counselors and other educators can help to lessen bullying and its negative consequences and work to create schools that are safe spaces which promote inclusivity, diversity, and acceptance.

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