Voices of Rural School Counselors: A Study of Creating Safe Zones for LGBTQ Students

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Outline

• LGBTQ Students
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Introduction

This study aims to:

- Understand from the perspective of school counselors what is their role in supporting LGBTQ students.

- Understand the strategies and challenges of creating a safe zone for LGBTQ students, especially in rural areas.

- Explore how to train school counselors to increase their competency in advocating and supporting LGBTQ students.
Why is this Important?

Studies show:

- LGBTQ student bullying contributes to lower academic outcomes and lower self-esteem. (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013)

- Higher rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts, substance abuse, and sexual risk behaviors. (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010)

- Social exclusion and isolation. (Ueno, 2005)
Why is this Important?

**ASCA Ethical Standards:**

Every student should have access to a school counseling program that affirms all students regardless of sexual orientation, gender, and/or gender identity/expression (ASCA, 2007).

It is the responsibility of the school counselor to gain training which improves knowledge and skills in working with diverse populations (including gender, gender identity/expression, sexual orientation) (ASCA, 2007).

Schools have a legal obligation to provide support and protection for all students (Weiler, 2004).
End Goal!
Overall Purpose of Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the experiences of school counselors who have created safe zones in their schools to better support the LGBTQ student population.

Demographic Information collected:
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Grade Level of Students
- Location of School (Suburban, Urban, Rural)
Research Questions

1. What initially motivated you to create a safe zone in your school?

2. Who were the other school leaders who assisted in the process of creating a safe zone, (i.e. administration-principals, assistant principals, teachers, support staff, students) and how did they support the creation?

3. Please describe any hardships you encountered while you were creating a safe zone in your school.
Research Questions

4. What educational resources do you keep in your safe zone for students, parents, and colleagues?

5. How do you address current events that may affect LGBTQ students and/or their parents?

6. What professional development resources do you use to keep current on your knowledge of LGBTQ student issues?
Research Questions

7. What changes (if any) have occurred in your school since the creation of a safe zone?

8. How have you measured the effect of a safe zone on the students in your school and on the school climate?

9. What advice would you offer to school counselors who want to create a safe zone in their schools?
Participants

Criteria for Participants

- Licensed School Counselor
- At least one year experience as a school counselor
- Experience in middle, junior high, or high school

The Sample

- Nine school counselors
- Gender: 8 Females, 1 Male
- Ethnicity/Race: All reported being White/Caucasian
- School Location: Rural and Suburban
- Age: From 26 to 55
Research Methods- Procedures

❖ Researcher used school counseling list-serves, Arkansas School Counselor Association and American School Counselor Association to recruit participants.

❖ Researchers emailed School Counselors a letter of invitation that describes the criteria for being a participant, asking them to contact the principal investigator if they are interested in study participation.

❖ Participants were fully informed of the purpose of this study, methods to be used in the research, and their rights as participants.

❖ Individual interviews lasted approximately 30 to 50 minutes.

❖ The interview data were recorded via a digital voice recorder and transcribed.
Research Methods- Framework

- Interview data was analyzed using a Phenomenological framework.

- Phenomenological research is the best qualitative research tool to describe an individual's experience of a phenomena.

- Phenomenology is the method which seeks to describe meaning of the lived experiences surrounding those who are involved in the phenomena (Miller and Salkind, 2002).
Findings: Key Themes

1. Need for an Organized Support System
2. Collaborations with School Leadership
3. Challenges in Safe Zone Creation
4. Professional Development Resources
5. Advising Future School Counselors
Subthemes
Theme 1: Need for an Organized Support System

A. More LGBTQ students (especially transgender)
   “We had our first, outwardly expressive transgender student. We took real effort to make sure we did everything by the book for his sake.”

B. Purposeful Effort to Reach Out
   “We purposely wanted to make sure all our LGBTQ students could have a spot because we are in a rural community and there’s not really a lot of support in our community.”
Subthemes

Theme 1: Need for an Organized Support System

C. Purposeful Effort to Reach Out

“Some families come from blue collar workers and talking about any LGBTQ issues gets pushed under the rug. I wanted to put the word out there and let students know that if this is something they are struggling with or trying to identify, I wanted this is to be a safe space for them to not only talk about it but eventually get to a place where they are accepted and able to express that to other people in their lives.”
Subthemes

Theme 2: Collaborations with School Leadership

A. Other School Counselors
   “The most support has come from other school counselors. We have our meetings and talk about student contact and how we can be more accessible to all students.”

B. Mixture of Experiences with Administration
   1. “I wouldn’t say they’ve not been supportive, but they’ve wanted the counselors to handle it you know anything of this sort. It’s just they don’t know what to do. There wasn’t a barrier with the admin, it’s just like, ‘y’all do what you need to do.’”
Subthemes
Theme 2: Collaborations with School Leadership

B. Mixture of Experiences with Administration
   2. “The Gay-Straight Alliance Club had to be approved by the administration and they approved it.”
   3. “Administrators have to okay students leaving a classroom when they are in a stressful situation to come see us and so far they are supportive of this.”

C. Supportive Teachers
   “Even if a student doesn’t ask to see us, if a teacher overhears a conversation and they feel a student may need someone to talk with they shoot us an email or catch us and say ‘you may need to talk to so and so, I got an uneasy feeling or they were crying in class’.”
Subthemes
Theme 3: Challenges in Safe Zone Creation

A. Resistance due to Religious Affiliation
   “There has been some resistance of faculty due to religious affiliation. I have seen some adult bullying with regard to and that was another motivator to tell you the truth I have seen teachers who have said to me, ‘these kids would not suffer the hardships they are suffering if they would not act the way they are acting.’ So that was a motivator. I have a gay son.”

B. Lack of Awareness
   “We have a ‘why do we need this’ attitude among some of our faculty. Our teachers over the years have not seen a need on our campus. It is not necessarily against a safe zone, just a lack of awareness.”
Subthemes

Theme 4: Using Professional Development Resources

A. National and State Conferences/Professional Organizations

“I have resources from the American Counseling Association available to LGBTQ students. I went through a 5 part training series on how to best work with LGBTQ students.”

B. Internet Resources

“One of the big things I have a list of resources that I turn students towards, It Gets Better, GLSEN, Teaching Tolerance, those sites have a lot of information.”
Subthemes

Theme 5: Advising Future School Counselors

A. Be Open to all Students

1. “You have to be very diligent in being non-judgmental towards anybody. In your school don’t have a climate of judgment. You have to be accessible which you do through your personality and your communication with them.”

2. “I don’t care what your personal beliefs are you have to set them aside, that’s an ethical issue you have to be there for every one of your students.”
Subthemes
Theme 5: Advising Future School Counselors

A. Be Open to all Students

3. “Whether it is a religious or parenting issue, school counselors need to lay that at the door when they enter the school building.”

B. Just Do It

“Counselors need to just do it. It is imperative that LGBTQ students have a space which is safe for them. You look at the suicide rate. You look at the hardship these children are suffering. If no one else is going to reach out to them we have to be the one.”
Implications

Aims of Study:
Understand from the perspective of school counselors what is their role in supporting LGBTQ students.

- Role is to be open to all, while keeping personal judgments outside of the school.
- Role is to purposively reach out to LGBTQ students and promote awareness among school staff that these students exist.
Implications

Aims of Study:
Understand the strategies and challenges of creating a safe zone for LGBTQ students, especially in a rural areas.

- **Strategies include:**
  - Collaborating with school administration and other school staff.
  - Accessing professional resources (ACA, ASCA), attending conferences, and internet sites.

- **Challenges include:**
  - Resistance due to religious affiliation.
  - Lack of awareness from staff/parents that there is a need on their campus.
Implications

Aims of Study:

Explore how to train school counselors to increase their competency in advocating and supporting LGBTQ students.

- Counselors-in-training must be aware of their personal/political/religious viewpoints regarding LGBTQ individuals. These viewpoints affect body language, communication, and overall receptiveness.
- Counselors-in-training need access to professional development resources to assist them in keeping up-to-date on issues affecting LGBTQ students (i.e. higher suicide rate, increased homelessness, etc.).
Limitations

➢ The responses were self-reported and based on school counselor perception only. Students at the schools were not asked about the impact of the safe zones.

➢ Participants were all white.

➢ Participants were all female, except one male.
Future Research

- More research on perceptions of students who access safe zones...why do they access it, what do they find helpful, what improvements could be made?

- More research on successful collaborative relationships with school counselors, school administration, teachers/support staff, and community agencies.

- More research on ways to increase acceptance of LGBTQ individuals among individuals who have strong religious viewpoints.
Selected References


Selected References


Thank You!

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