



Middle

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Matters

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Addressing the Needs of LGBTQ Youths

Middle school leaders must work to ensure that there is a safe and supportive environment for youths of every sexual orientation and gender identity.

Norma J. Bailey

It is well known that the middle school years are typically the time when young adolescents begin their search for identity. While it is generally not an easy time for any young adolescent, it is a particularly stressful time for those who are coming to an awareness of their lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) identity, or who are in a stage of questioning their sexual or gender identity (Q). At the same time that these students are experiencing same-sex attractions or gender identity struggles, they also are clearly being given multiple messages from society that they are expected to be heterosexual and/or behave in gender-appropriate ways.

Many of these young adolescents know that they are somehow “different” than their peers, yet most have not yet self-identified as LGBT. However, a number of studies clearly indicate that homosexuality and gender identity are young adolescent issues in terms of awareness, questioning, and “coming out” (GLSEN, 2001; Savin-Williams, 1997; Bailey & Phariss, 1996).

Thus, in addition to the normal stresses of early adolescence, LGBTQ young adolescents must try to figure out who they are and where they fit in, most often without the benefit of accurate information (e.g., library resources and curriculum), role models, counselors who are comfortable with their issues, support groups, and teachers with whom they can talk about their thoughts and feelings. However, the most important and immediate issue for these youngsters is safety.

Experiences of LGBTQ Youths

As reported by Human Rights Watch (2001), the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007), and the California Safe Schools Coalition and the 4-H Center for Youth Development (2004), harassment, threats,

and/or violence against gay and lesbian youths—and those perceived to be gay or lesbian—continue to be significant issues in middle and high schools. In the most recent GLSEN National School Climate Survey (2007) of 6,209 LGBT youths, 86.2 percent reported being verbally harassed (e.g., name-calling and threats), 44.1 percent reported being physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved), and 22.1 percent reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation. Overall, 60.8 percent of LGBT students reported feeling unsafe at their school because of their sexual orientation, and 38.4 percent felt unsafe because of their gender expression.

The shame of ridicule and the fear of a verbal or physical attack make school a frightening place for these youths, which results in frequent absences. They spend a great deal of energy determining when and where to be in certain school locations—hallways, locker rooms, bathrooms—so they can avoid verbal and physical harassment. As a result, there is often little energy left to learn. This unsafe climate often leads to despair and a sense of worthlessness that has a negative impact on these youngsters’ motivation and desire to achieve.

What Can Be Done?

Certainly, making schools safe for all students is the No. 1 goal. However, there also are specific strategies that show promise in helping to create a safe climate for LGBTQ youths, one in which they can feel supported and valued.

No Name-Calling Week (NNCW), developed by GLSEN, involves educational activities aimed at stopping verbal harassment in schools. The activities target the safety of all students, including LGBTQ youths, by attempting to create awareness of harassment and eliminate name-calling.

Inspired by the book *The Misfits*, by James Howe, the first NNCW took place in 2004. This year, more than 100,000 students participated, the majority at the elementary and middle school levels. Activities included poster-making contests and daily announcements to create awareness about the problem, and classroom activities, such as video screenings, class discussions, writing assignments, and role-playing. There also were schoolwide activities such as the reading of essays over the intercom and promoting the NNCW ideal through the wearing of stickers, T-shirts, or ribbons.

GLSEN conducted a year-end study evaluating the effectiveness of NNCW. Survey data were collected from 111 seventh-grade students from two middle schools and 68 fifth graders from an elementary school (Kosciw, Diaz, Colic, & Goldin, 2005). Prior to the event, name-calling was pervasive in these schools. However, more than a third of the students surveyed said there was less name-calling and bullying after NNCW.

Another strategy that schools have undertaken to establish a safer environment for their LGBTQ students is to allow the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). GSAs are student-led clubs that work to address the anti-LGBTQ climate in schools and promote safety and respect for all students. Such clubs also provide an avenue for LGBTQ youths to talk about their feelings and experiences, and provide a way for straight friends and allies to demonstrate their support. While such groups are more common in high schools (about 6,000 groups nationwide), their numbers are growing at the middle school level (approximately 200 at present). In Madison, Wisconsin, for example, 10 of the city's 11 middle schools have active GSAs, and they are beginning to have an impact (Kilman, 2007).

Students in schools with a GSA report hearing fewer homophobic remarks, and experience fewer incidents of harassment and assault because of their sexual orientation and gender expression. They are more likely to report incidents of harassment and assault to school staff, are less likely to feel unsafe, and are less likely to miss school because of safety concerns. They also report a greater sense of belonging to their school community (GLSEN, 2007).

Other Support Measures

GLSEN recommends four approaches that schools can implement to help provide a safer and more supportive environment for LGBTQ students:

- Adopt a comprehensive anti-bullying policy that enumerates categories such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and gender expression/identity. Enumeration is crucial to ensure that anti-bullying policies are effective for LGBTQ students.

- Provide training for staff in identifying and addressing anti-LGBTQ name-calling, bullying, and harassment.
- Support student efforts to address anti-LGBTQ bullying and harassment, such as the formation of a GSA or participation in the National Day of Silence, a GLSEN-sponsored national event in which students from middle school to college take a vow of silence in an effort to encourage schools and classmates to address anti-LGBTQ behavior.
- Institute age-appropriate, inclusive curricula to help students understand and respect differences within the school community and society as a whole.

In a middle school that is truly student-centered, school leaders will work to ensure that the needs of *all* young adolescents are addressed and that there is a safe and supportive environment for youths of every sexual orientation and gender identity. There are many resources available to help school leaders. The key is to get started today.

References

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- California Safe Schools Coalition and 4-H Center for Youth Development, University of California, Davis. (2004, January). *Consequences of harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender non-conformity and steps for making schools safer*. Davis, CA: Author.
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- Human Rights Watch. (2001). *Hatred in the hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in U.S. schools*. New York: Author.
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- Savin-Williams, R. C. (1997). *'...And then I became gay': Young men's stories*. New York: Routledge.

Resources

Organizations

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN),
www.glsen.org

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG),
www.pflag.org

Publications

Casper, V., & Schultz, S. B. (1999). *Gay parents/straight schools: Building communication and trust*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Lipkin, A. (2004). *Beyond diversity day: A Q&A on gay and lesbian issues in schools*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Macgillivray, I. K. (2003). *Sexual orientation and school policy: A practical guide for teachers, administrators, and community activists*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Videos

I Just Want to Say: Parents, Students & Teachers Talk About Anti-Gay Bias in Our Schools. Available from GLSEN,
www.glsen.org.

It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School—A Guide to Community Organizing, Professional Development and K-8 Curriculum. Available from Groundspark,
www.groundspark.org, or New Day Films,
www.newday.com.

Let's Get Real (name-calling and bullying at the middle level). Available from Groundspark, www.groundspark.org, or New Day Films, www.newday.com.

Norma J. Bailey is a professor of middle-level education at Central Michigan University. Her e-mail address is baile1nj@cmich.edu.