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Bisexual Students in Secondary Schools: Understanding Unique Experiences and Developing Responsive Practices

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Increased attention is being paid to the experiences of sexual minority students in schools. However, little is known about the unique needs of students who identify as bisexual or effective strategies to support these students. In an effort to begin to examine school practices that are responsive to bisexual students, this article first provides a summary of bisexual identity development. Next, by reviewing the research that is available and extrapolating from the literature that addresses sexual minority students as a whole, suggestions are made for educators in regards to addressing issues of bisexuality in schools, including policy development, staff and student education, classroom climate and school–community collaboration. This article also addresses the significant gaps in research on how school practices affect bisexual students.

KEYWORDS *bisexuality, sexual minority youth, LGBTQ, schools, policy development, staff development, classroom climate, counseling, research needs*

In the past decade, increased attention has been paid to the experiences of sexual minority students in schools, and recommendations have been made for inclusive and responsive school practices (e.g., Crothers, 2007; Fisher et al., 2008; Henning-Stout, James, & Macintosh, 2000; Nichols, 1999); however, few distinctions have been made to address the unique needs of bisexual students, a subgroup of this population. Although there is clearly overlap between the experiences and needs of bisexual students and the

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needs of other sexual minority students, bisexual students are truly a separate population with distinctive needs, challenges and risks (Burrill, 2009; Oswalt, 2009; Sheets & Mohr, 2009). In fact, bisexual students often experience discrimination and marginalization from the heterosexual community and from the larger homosexual community, which likely contributes to an increased level of risk for mental health problems, self-harm and suicide (Eliason, 1997; Gup, 1998; Hansen, 2007; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Oswalt, 2009; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Martin, 2009; Sheets & Mohr, 2009). Educators can glean important information from broad approaches to working with all sexual minority students, yet it is also critical that they understand the unique experiences of bisexual students.

ISSUES OF IDENTITY

Adolescence is a period of development marked by multiple transitions, role changes and challenges (Graber & Bastiani Archibald, 2001; Rice, 1996). It is considered appropriate and healthy for adolescents to experiment and explore different aspects of their developing selves, such as personality characteristics, types of relationships and gender roles as they form an identity and find a place in society (Erikson, 1959). Identity development can be influenced by culture, gender, age and social preferences (Fox, 1996). It is during this period of pubertal, psychosocial and cognitive development that sexual identity, or an "enduring sense of oneself as a sexual being" (Savin-Williams, 1995, p. 166) is explored and established.

There are many models that attempt to describe the process of how sexual minority individuals form sexual identities. However, many have been developed via retrospective research with gay and lesbian adults (Savin-Williams, 1995), have not included bisexuality as a valid, independent category (Fox, 1996) and are thus not applicable to bisexual adolescents (see Chun & Singh, this issue). It is important that educational professionals working with students understand that bisexuality is a stable identity that is valid and independent from other sexual minority groups (Burrill, 2009; Diamond, 2008; Fox, 1996; Hansen, 2007; Matteson, 1996; Oswalt, 2009; Parker, Adams, & Philips, 2007). This is not to say that sexual identity during adolescence must be viewed as fixed; rather, all forms of identity during adolescence should be viewed as fluid as adolescents appropriately define and redefine different aspects of themselves in the process of becoming their adult selves (Erikson, 1959; Graber & Bastiani Archibald, 2001).

As youth move from childhood to adolescence, a heterosexual identity is usually presumed (Matteson, 1996). For youth who later identify as bisexual, many first notice feeling different from their peers regarding sexual interest during early adolescence, and these differences can be accompanied by stress or fear (Savin-Williams, 1995). Retrospective reports from bisexual

men indicate that most experienced their first sexual attractions toward men during early or middle adolescence, and their first sexual encounter with a man was in middle or late adolescence (Fox, 1995). Similar retrospective reports from bisexual women indicate that they had parallel experiences, although the ages were somewhat later (middle or late adolescence for attractions to women and early twenties for sexual experience with women; Fox, 1995). Correspondingly, bisexual individuals tend to self-identify as bisexual in their twenties, which is slightly later than the average ages for gay and lesbian self-identification (Fox, 1996). Thus, very few youth who have same-sex or bisexual attractions or are engaging in same-sex or bisexual behaviors have identified themselves as bisexual while they are attending secondary schools. This is consistent with patterns for other sexual minority youth. Many large-scale surveys of youth behavior have noted that a significantly higher percentage of youth report having same-sex attractions or experiences, compared with the percentage that self identify as gay or lesbian (Savin-Williams, 1995). Thus, professionals in school settings need to expect that the students in their schools who identify as bisexual represent only a fraction of those who are potentially exploring a bisexual identity.

Myths and stereotypes are pervasive concerns for all sexual minority individuals, and bisexual individuals in particular face a number of unique and potentially harmful misrepresentations. It is often presumed that individuals who identify as bisexual are simply gay or lesbian and have not yet fully formed their sexual identities (Burrill, 2009; Fox, 1996; Matteson, 1996; Oswalt, 2009; Parker et al., 2007). Similarly, bisexual individuals may be presumed to be more preoccupied with sex, more promiscuous and more polyamorous than their peers (Eliason, 1997; Esterberg, 1996; Oswalt, 2009; Rust, 1996b; Sheets & Mohr, 2009). A clear understanding of these myths can help educators to better understand the challenges bisexual or bicurious students may face from their own misconceptions of their new or potential identity, as well as through their relations with others.

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Adolescents spend a significant portion of their day at school, and the school environment shapes their social, emotional and behavioral development. Students are exposed to societal values via direct and indirect curriculum and interactions with peers and a variety of adults. This rich setting can greatly affect bisexual students. For some, the school setting can be a source of supportive relationships and networks (e.g., Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Lee, 2002; Sadowski, Chow, & Scanlon, 2009). For others, school may be physically and psychologically unsafe (Murdock & Bolch, 2005). In fact, the majority of extant information on school settings frames schools as environmental risk factors for sexual minority youth, documenting striking rates

of violence, bullying, harassment, isolation, rejection, poor academic performance, high dropout rates and discrimination (e.g., Crothers, 2007; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Fisher et al., 2008; Hansen, 2007). For example, almost 40% of sexual minority students report being physically harassed because of their sexual orientation (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2005). In contrast, decreased victimization and increased feelings of safety at school have been found to serve as a protective factor for sexual minority students (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Szalacha, 2003). Although current school structures often do not adequately meet the needs of bisexual and other sexual minority students, it is important for educators to focus on the positives of school environments, and the ways in which this rich context can be used to protect and enhance the lives of all students. This way, current and future practices can be focused on what to do, rather than simply what not to do.

Research suggests some global best practices in school programming to support sexual minority youth. Henning-Stout et al. (2000) suggest that school programs respond directly to issues of harassment and be preventative in nature, simultaneously focusing on increasing safety for all students and reducing heterosexism in the school community. Fisher et al. (2008) suggested that schools take a threefold approach to programming to support sexual minority students: programming that supports the entire school community, programming to address the needs of sexual minority students at risk for developing problems and programming to support sexual minority students already experiencing academic, social or emotional difficulties.

Similarly, research on best practices in bullying prevention suggest that schools take a multitiered approach, with programming to address school climate, classroom culture and individual students (bullies, victims and bystanders) simultaneously (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). General strategies to reduce bullying include policy development, increased adult monitoring of physical and online spaces, training staff to effectively intervene and improving teachers' classroom management skills (Felix & Furlong, 2008). In the spirit of the primary, secondary and tertiary prevention and intervention recommendations found in literature regarding bullying and sexual minority youth research, this article reviews intervention and prevention strategies for bisexual youth that are on along a continuum from school-wide (i.e., policy development) to individual in nature (i.e., counseling interventions).

Policy Development

One of the first steps toward the establishment of a safe school environment for bisexual students is a foundation of clear and supportive policies. This recommendation echoes those made for all sexual minority students (Fisher et al., 2008; McFarland & Dupuis, 2003; Young & Mendez, 2003). Schools are legally responsible for the protection of all students from bullying,

harassment and discrimination (McFarland & Dupuis, 2003), and districts and school receiving federal funding are required to address sexual harassment and discrimination as part of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Young & Mendez, 2003). In the absence of specific state laws or district policies addressing the rights of sexual minority students, school leaders are encouraged to form a committee to develop antibullying and harassment policies that explicitly address the protection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning students and to determine the appropriate actions that will be taken when the policy is violated (Fisher et al., 2008).

Additionally, schools can take steps toward creating a positive climate for bisexual students by using the term *bisexual* along with other terms related to sexual minority students (e.g., lesbian, gay, transgender) in district and school-site materials (e.g., parent and student handbooks, antibullying or harassment statements and policies, mission statements, etc.), as opposed to reliance on broad terms such as sexual minority. This sends a clear message that this group, along with others, is distinct and valid.

Although many authors, groups and agencies advocate for the importance of policy development, there is a lack of research exploring the impact of these changes (Hansen, 2007). Publicity of policies and policy changes as well as direct and timely support from administrators are critical elements for tangible improvement in school climates (Hansen, 2007). However, it is vital that school administrators and employees recognize that policy alone will not change the day-to-day realities for bisexual students. For this to occur, policy changes must be combined with efforts to educate staff and students, create inclusive classrooms and provide responsive services for bisexual students.

Educating the School Community

Staff training. Staff training to raise awareness about the unique challenges faced by sexual minority students and to provide teachers and other school staff with accurate information about these populations is widely recommended in the literature (e.g., Fisher et al., 2008; Hansen, 2007; Young & Mendez, 2003). Suggested topics to be included in such trainings are facts about sexual minority groups, risks faced by sexual minority students, legal responsibilities of schools and teachers in protecting students rights and safety and a self-exploration of beliefs and biases that may affect student-teacher relationships, classroom climate and so on. An example of an extant curriculum designed for staff training is *Homophobia 101: Teaching Respect for All* (GLSEN, 1999).

In spite of the broad support for staff training, there is little to no research support to directly connect staff training with improved perceptions of school climate or reported student experiences (Hansen, 2007). Additionally, scant information is available about the importance of these trainings for bisexual students in particular; however, some extrapolations can be made

from broad research and recommendations. For example, in his studies of the perceptions of heterosexual young adults of homosexual and bisexual individuals, Eliason (1997) established that bisexual people were viewed less favorably than other sexual minority groups. Additionally, results indicated that there was a very high correlation between having little knowledge of bisexuality and no personal relationships or acquaintances that identified as bisexual. Based on this information, staff training about bisexual youth in particular may be hypothesized to have a beneficial impact by reducing biphobia or negative attitudes about this group.

Student training. As with staff training, providing students with accurate information about sexual minority students is widely recommended (Fisher et al., 2008; Young & Mendez, 2003). However, there is a similar lack of information regarding bisexuality or the impact on bisexual students in particular. Although there is not yet direct empirical evidence that supportive peer networks are a result of peer education about bisexuality, some evidence for the importance of peer training can be extrapolated from research about peer support of sexual minority students. For example, many authors have explored the protective impact of social relationships on the well-being of sexual minority youth in school settings (e.g., Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Sadowski et al., 2009). Other authors have found the positive influence of healthy peer relationships, including heterosexual peers on bisexual students specifically (e.g., Sheets & Mohr, 2009). As knowledge and familiarity with bisexual individuals has been established to be predictive of more positive attitudes toward this population (Eliason, 1997), peer training may assist bisexual students in having more positive social interactions with their classmates.

Gay-Straight Alliances

The foundation of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) on school campuses are a well-documented method for school support of sexual minority students, including bisexual students (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Griffin et al., 2004; Hansen, 2007; Lee, 2002; Sadowski et al., 2009). Support for the efficacy of these programs reveals several pathways in which GSAs play a role in improving the school experiences for sexual minority students. First, the existence of a GSA helps to establish a school's climate as safe and supportive (Griffin et al., 2004; Lee, 2002; Sadowski et al., 2009). Additionally, it is often through the GSA networks that many sexual minority students are able to find secure, supportive peer relationships (Hansen, 2007). Although there is considerable evidence regarding the positive impact of these groups, educators and administrators should also recognize a few cautions. As Griffin et al. (2004) described, the exact makeup of the participants in a given GSA can affect how 'safe' it is perceived to be by sexual minority students. In some cases, GSAs may be made up primarily of heterosexual

allies and therefore not considered to be a true network or community for some sexual minority students. Schools must also be careful to not utilize a GSA as the only effort for affecting school climate (Griffin et al., 2004).

No current studies were located for this review that specifically focused on the impact that GSAs may have upon bisexual students in particular. For example, Griffin et al. (2004), Goodenow et al. (2006), and Lee (2002) each examined the impact of GSAs via reports from several stakeholders (e.g., staff, parents, students) but identified youth only as either sexual minority or nonsexual minority. When reviewing what is available from this population's perspective, a few points are critical. Because GSAs are by nature groups that include the broad community of sexual minority youth, students and supportive campus staff need to be aware of the possibility that bisexual students could become lost within the large community or feel pressured to conform to a gay or lesbian identity. With this in mind, GSAs and their leaders must be careful to validate the existence of bisexual youth as a unique population with distinct needs.

Responsive Classrooms

Curriculum. Several authors have written about the importance of representing sexual minority individuals in school curriculum (e.g., Fisher et al., 2008; Murdock & Bolch, 2005). It is widely recommended that inclusive materials be age and developmentally appropriate, and the information about sexual minorities and sexual minority individuals be integrated across the curriculum. For example, historical treatment of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender population in the United States can be explored in history classes, and the identities of famous authors, playwrights and poets can be explored in literature and English courses (e.g., McFarland & Dupuis, 2003). Additionally, it is recommended that sexual minority themes be consistently a part of a school's curriculum (i.e., not only during an awareness week or month), and that they be a part of a fully inclusive total curriculum, representing diverse cultures, beliefs and so on (GLSEN, 2001).

Unfortunately, very little attention has been paid to the inclusion of bisexuality in particular. One article was located that advocated for bisexual pedagogy at the college level. Nathanson (2009) highlighted the advantages to broader learning that can be attained via the inclusion of bisexuality into curriculum. Specifically, she noted that the discussion of bisexuality can help students to better understand the true diversity of human sexuality, as well as promoting a richer understanding of other surface-level dichotomous groups (e.g., Black/White, North/South, etc.). Additionally, Nathanson mentioned that the inclusion of bisexuality can encourage critical questioning on the part of students, as well as demonstrate to all sexual minority youth that the classroom is a safe place for discussion of their lives and concerns.

Classroom behavior. As with suggestions about curriculum inclusion, there has been much literature support for the need for teachers to ensure that their classrooms are safe places for sexual minority students. Teacher supportiveness has been related to more positive outcomes for sexual minority youth at school (Murdock & Bolch, 2005). Teachers are urged to clearly establish their classroom expectations regarding the respect of all students and to take immediate action any time these policies are violated (Crothers, 2007; Fisher et al., 2008; Murdock & Bolch, 2005). Additionally, it is vital teachers understand that if or when this is not done (i.e., homophobic or derogatory comments are ignored), they are allowing their classrooms to become unsafe, as well as condoning harassment of their students. Because the experience of direct harassment and/or exposure to homophobic or biphobic speech or comments has been established as contrary to the healthy development of bisexual students (Hansen, 2007), the elimination of these factors in secondary classrooms is of the utmost importance.

School-Based Counseling

There are many suggestions for providing appropriate and beneficial individual counseling services for bisexual youth. Many of these suggestions parallel broader recommendations for all sexual minority students (e.g., Fisher et al., 2008). However, one of the most salient suggestions in the extant literature is that counseling services, including individual and group counseling, must be tailored to this population (Oswalt, 2009; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Martin, 2009). By appropriately labeling groups, openly discussing bisexuality as an identity, and providing specific materials, books, and other resources, school professionals are demonstrating to students that they accept bisexuality as a distinct identity with its own specific needs (Oswalt, 2009). In addition to these rather broad suggestions, the literature highlights several specific topics that may be important to address in individual counseling with bisexual students.

Due to the high risk for suicidal ideation and behavior in bisexual youth (Gup, 1998; Oswalt, 2009; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Martin, 2009; Sheets & Mohr, 2009), it is very important that counselors in schools address this issue. First, it is imperative that counselors understand the nature of this risk—that it stems from interactions and experiences with society, culture, family, peers and so on, and not from anything inherent about identification as a sexual minority individual (Hansen, 2007). Counselors and others working with bisexual students must be alert to a variety of risk factors, including victimization, social and familial isolation or rejection, substance abuse, school problems (academic and behavioral), gender nonconformity, religiosity and suicide attempts or completions in home or school networks (Gup, 1998). Additionally, counselors also need to be cognizant of the fact that risk factors for suicide exist in various combinations for each student, and that it is often

the interplay or coexistence of individual factors that determines ultimate risk (Gup, 1998).

Marginality and isolation of bisexual students are important concerns to be addressed in counseling. All sexual minority students are at risk for experiencing some degree of explicit or perceived separation from the heterosexual community (including peers, family and the broader community). However, bisexual students are in the unique position of potentially feeling isolated from the hetero- and homosexual communities (Pallotta-Chiarolli & Martin, 2009; Paul, 1996). Additionally, counselors must recognize the possibility of the impact of marginalization from cultural or ethnic groups as well (Rust, 1996a). As students may feel pressure to conform to one group or another (i.e., heterosexual or homosexual) to combat or alleviate feelings of isolation, it is important for counselors to confirm the validity of bisexuality as a healthy, natural and distinct identity (Oswalt, 2009) and recognize the possibility of increased stress due to multiple minority identity status (Rust, 1996a).

It is extremely important for counselors to keep in mind that although the majority of bisexual individuals experience same-sex attractions and encounters during their high school years, most do not come out to others until their late twenties (Fox, 1996). Therefore, a large number of students are coping with experimenting and exploring their sexuality on their own, without the support of others (Hansen, 2007). This may be a reflection of tremendous resilience but also mean that many students do not seek counseling services despite high levels of stress or confusion. For all sexual minority students, the coming-out process carries simultaneous risks and benefits (e.g., social support, social rejection). Counselors can support students as they explore their identity and the possibility of coming out to others but must not push or pressure students to do so. As rejection, isolation, and harassment are a reality for many bisexual youth (e.g., Sadowski et al., 2009), the potential implications of coming out should be carefully and realistically explored in the counseling setting.

Finally, as bisexual and bicurious students explore their identities, counselors in schools are in a position to assist students with the understanding of their internalized homophobia and biphobia (Matteson, 1996). Biphobia is a distinct phenomenon from homophobia and has been established to be associated with having little knowledge about bisexuality or no friends or acquaintances that are bisexual (Eliason, 1997). As the bisexual population is relatively small, it is likely that many students seeking counseling do not have prior exposure to or a large amount of knowledge about the bisexual community. Additionally, as discussed previously, students are likely to have been exposed to the many myths and misconceptions about bisexuality and bisexual individuals. In light of these facts, it has been recommended that having a sexual minority counselor may be beneficial, as this provides students with at least one positive identity model (Matteson, 1996). However,

when this is not possible, it is important that counselors learn about factors affecting bisexual students and provide students with accurate information about bisexuality and the bisexual community, such as referring to Websites, community agencies or support groups (Fisher et al., 2008; Matteson, 1996).

School–Community Collaboration

Given that bisexual students often experience isolation from the hetero- and homosexual communities, it is especially important to provide bisexual students with access to community resources that are tailored for their population. Many communities, especially if one broadens this term to include the online world, have agencies, groups and other resources that can be extremely supportive to sexual minority students. In fact, some authors argued that the sexuality-specific support that is found in community resources may be more important for some students than broad social support from heterosexual friends and family (Sheets & Mohr, 2009).

Although bispecific groups and community resources are becoming more numerous in many communities, they are still elusive enough to remain a unique challenge and area of need faced by the bisexual population (Esterberg, 1996; Fox, 1996). In their interviews with Australian bisexual youth, Pallotta-Chiarolli and Martin (2009) found that a large portion mentioned that they did not feel accepted within or connected to their local gay and lesbian communities, and that bispecific community support was not available.

RESEARCH NEEDS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although the aforementioned efforts are recommended for creating school environments that are supportive of bisexual students, there is a great deal of work to be done to document the outcomes of such practices. Many practices, including staff-training, policy development and inclusive classroom curriculums, have been widely recommended by researchers as steps to be taken to eliminate the risks posed by school system for all sexual minority youth, yet extant research regarding the impact of these efforts on the outcomes and well-being of sexual minority youth is scant (e.g., Fisher et al., 2008; Hansen, 2007). Furthermore, research on impacts of recommended practices for bisexual youth in particular is virtually nonexistent. Studies should be designed to examine the efficacy of all such practices on bisexual students.

Similarly, some recommendations have current research support behind them regarding efficacy for all sexual minority youth, but not for students who identify as bisexual *per se*. For example, there are several studies documenting the benefits of GSAs on school campuses, but this research does

not address bisexual youth specifically (e.g., Goodenow et al., 2006; Griffin et al., 2004; Lee, 2002). New studies need to include bisexual students as a unique population with its own needs. One potential challenge to research on only bisexual students may be sample size. Although the population of self-identified bisexual students at the secondary level may be very small, this should not prevent authors from presenting descriptive data, or utilizing single or small-sample case research methodology (e.g., Kennedy, 2005).

Finally, more retrospective research is needed to better understand the impacts of educational practices and interventions on bisexual students. As many bisexual individuals, especially women, do not self-identify as bisexual until later adolescence or early adulthood (e.g., Fox, 1995), it follows that studies of current secondary school students may miss a large portion of bisexual individuals. Thus, retrospective research is needed to ensure that the voices of all bisexual youth are heard.

CONCLUSION

As educators become more aware of the experiences of sexual minority students in schools and work to develop responsive school practices, it is critical that they understand and address the unique needs of bisexual students. Similarly, it is important that bisexuality be addressed when educators work to develop policies to ensure equal protections for all sexual minority students and develop programming to educate staff and students about the unique challenges faced by sexual minority students. By working to be responsive to bisexual or bicurious students in GSAs and in the classroom, teachers and other staff can better ensure more positive experiences and outcomes. Additionally, counselors in schools can support bisexual students and help smooth their transition into adulthood by being aware of the challenges they face, by addressing biphobia and by connecting bisexual students with community resources. As educators work to develop responsive practices for bisexual students, it is critical that they document their efforts so that we can begin to develop a body of research to better guide school practices to serve this unique population.

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