

Running Head: HELPING LGBTQ STUDENTS

A Path to One's Identity:

Helping LGBTQ Students Face the Challenges of Adolescence

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Katharine M. Reinhart

EDU 8678 – Multiculturalism, Gender, and Inclusion in Schools

Villanova University

Villanova, PA 19085

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Abstract

Young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) face unique challenges throughout adolescence. They are faced with a difficult and complex process of identity formation, and are often met with discrimination, maltreatment, and abuse. It is important for educators to be fully informed regarding the special needs of LGBTQ students, and to be acquainted with strategies to help them succeed in school and in life.

## A Path to One's Identity:

### Helping LGBTQ Students Face the Challenges of Adolescence

Adolescence can be a difficult and often confusing time, during which an individual's primary task is to define and solidify his or her own identity as an adult. Part of this process is coming to terms with one's gender identity and sexual orientation, and determining how to incorporate that new and sometimes frightening aspect of oneself into a healthy adult life. For adolescents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or who are questioning their sexual orientation (LGBTQ), this process can be particularly lonely and painful. Educators and other professionals who work with LGBTQ adolescents on a regular basis are in a unique position to help these adolescents work through what is an extremely difficult, yet potentially rewarding and self-affirming process. In order to determine how to help gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, it is first necessary to understand the unique challenges that face them, both inside and outside the school building. What are the special needs of sexual minority students in and out of the classroom environment, and how can they be served most effectively?

### Identity Development and Coming Out

Adolescence for LGBTQ students is a time for identity exploration and development, as it also is for their heterosexual peers. Generally speaking, children begin to explore ideas of sexual attraction and sexual identification between the ages of ten and fourteen, and they continue to wrestle with the formation of a coherent sexual self-identity throughout adolescence into adulthood (Harrison, 2003). The process of developing a sexual identity is an ongoing one, and is not necessarily smooth. In fact, this process, as it continues through adolescence and adulthood, can change many times, and one person's sexual identity can vary from being

strongly defined to highly changeable during different periods of life (Evans, 2000). This process, while directed by the individual, can be strongly influenced by a large number of environmental factors, including the values and opinions of family and friends, the environment in which that individual was raised, media representations of LGBTQ individuals, and the influences of other social groups such as churches and religious organizations (Johnson & Johnson, 2002).

For LGBTQ adolescents, however, the process of developing a coherent identity is more problematic than it is for heterosexual adolescents. While both LGBTQ and heterosexual adolescents are faced with identity struggles and the normal, emotionally-charged developmental challenges of adolescence, LGBTQ students must face the additional difficulties of realizing their identity as being different from that of their peers. There have historically been very few positive societal role models (although more are appearing) who can inspire LGBTQ teens to develop self-confidence in themselves and in their sexual identities (Evans, 2000). These adolescents face the challenge of finding their place in a society that is often hostile to their emergent identity, and must also confront the very real prospect of discrimination and rejection by that society (Johnson & Johnson, 2000).

To deal with the intense fear that the prospect of social and familial rejection causes, some LGBTQ adolescents go through a severe period of denial. They may act out in a subconscious attempt to “prove” a false heterosexual identity for themselves. These actions may be fairly mild, and may be expressed in selections of clothing, hairstyles, and choices of media and entertainment that are meant to project a strong heterosexual image. Alternatively, this acting out could be expressed by engaging in risky and even dangerous behavior. In an attempt to hide their true sexuality, LGBTQ adolescents may engage in promiscuous heterosexual

behavior, leaving them vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies (Harrison, 2003).

Fortunately, not all LGBTQ adolescents resort to denial when coping with their emergent sexuality. Many of these individuals are engaged in a positive process of assimilating this new facet of themselves into their identities. Each LGBTQ youth is faced with a different situation; each individual family member, friend, and social group with whom that person is involved may have a different response to their disclosure of a minority sexual identity. Not all of these individuals are faced with the same level of difficulty; for example, a LGBTQ teenager from a conservative and religious family in a rural location would most likely face more opposition than his or her urban and secular counterpart from a socially liberal family (Evans, 2000). Most likely, though, LGBTQ students will be faced with a range of individuals with widely diverse outlooks, and must find a way to navigate through a complex social world. These adolescents may engage in a process of “visibility management,” that is, the conscious, careful, and deliberate regulation of all information relating to their sexuality, and the control of how, how much, and to whom that information is disseminated (Lasser & Tharinger, 2002).

In fact, the “coming out” process, or the decisions and actions taken by a young person to reveal his or her identity as an LGBTQ individual, can be one of the defining events of his or her life. LGBTQ students fear that they will (and often do in fact) face discrimination and attitudes of rejection, not only from society at large, but from parents, siblings, and friends: the very people who, stereotypically, are to be relied on for unconditional love and support. As a result, Most LGBTQ adolescents do not simply decide to come out and proceed to reveal everything to all their family and acquaintances at once – the process of coming out is far more complex than that.

Before coming out, many LGBTQ adolescents engage in a process of assessing the environment around them. They spend a great deal of time and energy analyzing the attitudes of friends and family in order to determine whether information regarding their own identities will be well received or not. This environmental assessment can take many forms. LGBTQ students will pay attention to comments and homophobic remarks, expressions of opinions on issues facing the LGBTQ community, and even opinions on gay-themed movies and television shows. LGBTQ adolescents are not merely passive observers during this process either; they often take the initiative and ask probing questions of family members and friends, in order to further elicit their true attitude towards LGBTQ individuals (Lasser & Tharinger, 2002).

When LGBTQ adolescents choose to come out, family members tend to be one of the most important audiences. Many LGBTQ youths choose a supportive sibling (usually a sister) for their initial coming-out experience within the family (Harrison, 2003). This allows the LGBTQ adolescent to test his or her revelations on an understanding individual within the family. Hopefully, this sibling can also provide the LGBTQ adolescent with an ally within the family, and can help him or her by listening and talking out the possible family implications of his or her sexuality, and can facilitate communication between the LGBTQ child and his or her parents.

Coming out to one's parents can cause extreme emotional difficulty. Parents often form ideas about their children based on societal norms, which include a heterosexual identity. Expectations that parents develop for their children can be very powerful, and can include ideas about when, how, and with whom their children choose to form romantic and sexual relationships (Hillier, 2002). Parental reactions to the news of a child's sexual minority status can vary from complete acceptance to complete rejection, and can even differ between parents of

the same child (Harrison, 2003; Hillier, 2002). The revelation of a child's LGBTQ identity often creates the need to completely redefine the parent-child relationship and reinvent the dynamic to overcome unrealistic expectations and build a new level of understanding (Evans, 2000). Even among accepting parents, it takes a significant amount of time for the parents to come to terms with their child's true sexual identity when that identity diverges from the norm. This process of coming to understand and accept a child's LGBTQ status can, in some cases, strongly resemble the stages that many individuals go through when coming to terms with the death of a loved one (Harrison, 2003). Since parents are often a significant factor in a child's academic success, a LGBTQ student who does not find acceptance from his or her parents can often suffer academically as well as personally. At times such as these, teacher understanding and support can be an extremely positive influence (Evans, 2000).

Friends can be an invaluable source of support for a newly-out LGBTQ adolescent. In fact, many LGBTQ teenagers choose a close, trusted friend as one of the very first people, if not the first person, to whom they disclose their sexual identity (Hillier, 2002). High school is an essentially social place, where interpersonal relationships and community interaction can be as important and as personally meaningful as academic learning. LGBTQ teenagers can find immense social support through a network of friends developed within the school context. For LGBTQ students, as for heterosexual students, supportive and beneficial friendships can exist with individuals of the same gender, or can be cross-gender in nature (Diamond & Dubé, 2002). Social isolation is a risk for LGBTQ students who are unable to find positive relationships either within the family or in the context of friendship; therefore, a feeling of "fitting in" that can be developed within a social environment can be crucial for a young LGBTQ person (Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Schneider & Witherspoon, 2000).

### Problems Faced by LGBTQ Adolescents

Unfortunately, social isolation is far from the only problem that threatens LGBTQ adolescents. These young people are disproportionately at risk for a wide range of personal, health-related, and social problems that can also be reflected in their academic achievements. These problems can stem from the anxiety and stress that is related to being a member of a socially marginalized group (Schneider & Witherspoon, 2000).

Suicide and suicide attempts are among the most serious risks for a LGBTQ adolescent. Social hostility, homophobia, and attitudes of rejection from the family and among peers can create an environment that cause LGBTQ individuals to feel worthless, and can cause such distress that suicide is seen as a method to end the mistreatment (Lock, 2002). Suicidal behavior is far more prevalent among LGBTQ adolescents than among the general population. One study reported that 42% of LGBTQ participants had contemplated suicide, and 33% of participants had made suicide attempts (D'Augelli, Herschberger, & Pilkington, 2001).

Depression and other mental illnesses are problems that often face LGBTQ adolescents. Depression is a particular risk for LGBTQ youths who have been met with a less than accepting attitude from their family, and have been unable to develop and maintain a sufficiently supportive social network (Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). Family heritage, environmental difficulties, and a perception of community hostility can also be contributing factors to mental illness among LGBTQ adolescents (Else, 2002). Other common mental illnesses that face these adolescents include eating disorders. Predictably, eating disorders are commonly found among lesbians who are struggling with issues of femininity and body image (Crocco, 2001). However, they are also not infrequently found in LGBTQ males, contrary to the usual female-centered perception of these disorders (Harrison, 2003).

LGBTQ adolescents are also at higher risk of becoming involved with substance abuse, and this trend is unfortunately only increasing (Jordan, 2000). This is perhaps another reflection of the culture of loneliness and isolation that is often experienced by LGBTQ teenagers, who may turn to drugs and alcohol for solace. Drugs and alcohol could also serve as a coping mechanism for those LGBTQ youth who are having difficulty coping with the mental stresses involved with their identity construction.

One of the most dangerous external threats faced by LGBTQ adolescents is the threat of verbal abuse and overt physical violence. LGBTQ students are often the recipients of homophobic bullying and aggressive behavior from their peers who are unwilling to accept them as part of the wider community (Lock, 2002). In fact, over fifty percent of all LGBTQ students have been verbally abused within their high school communities, and almost one in eight have faced physical abuse (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002). Unfortunately, teachers and other professionals within the school building often do not involve themselves with the situation, and can even demonstrate homophobic behavior themselves (Schneider & Witherspoon, 2000). This can create an intense climate of fear. One sixteen-year old lesbian student expressed her fears very clearly:

“Schools can be rough. They can be really bad for people. And so in some cases it’s better to look at a wall than it is to look at somebody’s fist... I could feel like I’m lying to everybody or I could get beat up” (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003).

This level of fear, besides having clear negative effects on the lives of the LGBTQ students who experience this kind of threatening environment, can have seriously detrimental effects on their academic performance as well. Many LGBTQ students simply stop attending school, or attend sporadically for fear of being subjected to verbal or physical abuse during the school day

(Crocco, 2001). Unfortunately, their fears are not unfounded. Many school cultures perpetuate a climate hostile to sexual minorities, and LGBTQ students are often subjected repeatedly to both verbal and physical abuse (Harrison, 2003). LGBTQ students who are particularly open about their sexuality are among those most likely to suffer abuse, although students who are even suspected (with or without evidence) of being a part of a sexual minority can be victimized (Schneider & Witherspoon, 2000).

### Helping LGBTQ Students Succeed, Inside and Outside the Classroom

Clearly, then, something must be done to protect these students. If the goal of a professional educator is to teach all children, it is essential that an environment be created in which that can occur. Creating a safe environment where students are not continuously afraid is crucial to providing a successful education for LGBTQ students. The classroom teacher can be an invaluable ally for LGBTQ students, and can help them navigate the often turbulent social atmosphere faced by sexual minority high school students. In fact, LGBTQ students who have had positive, affirming experiences with supportive teachers tend to have fewer difficulties within school (Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). In order for this to occur, however, teachers need to be able to convey a clear willingness to support their LGBTQ students, and must be willing to be patient and persistent in helping those who have been frightened from asking for help from others due to experiences of homophobia (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003).

As part of the creation of a safe and accepting atmosphere, the teacher needs to be very careful about not allowing homophobic language to be used in the classroom. Terms such as “gay,” “fag,” “lesbo,” “poof,” and other similar words are commonly used as all-purpose negative epithets, often without a consideration of the homophobic meanings behind the words (Buston & Hart, 2001; Parker, 2001). It is important that teachers emphasize that this kind of

offhanded verbal abuse is deeply offensive and is hurtful to LGBTQ students. Similarly, homophobic jokes should also be treated as unacceptable forms of humor in the classroom (Renn, 2000).

Teachers should also attempt to debunk common myths that are both untrue and insulting to the LGBTQ community. These beliefs include a perception that LGBTQ individuals intend to convince heterosexuals to adopt a bisexual or homosexual lifestyle; that is, that LGBTQ people attempt to evangelize others into their way of life. Some individuals fear and hate LGBTQ people due to fears related to a false idea of almost universal HIV/AIDS infection within the community. Others believe that LGBTQ individuals are inherently promiscuous and are uninterested or incapable of being involved in stable, long-term relationships (Johnson & Johnson, 2000). Other myths, such as the idea that LGBTQ people are somehow threats to children, are equally offensive to sexual minority individuals, and should be confronted whenever the opportunity presents itself (Harrison, 2003).

Johnson and Johnson (2000) published a helpful list of methods to promote a positive safe environment for LGBTQ individuals. Although this list is geared for counselors and other mental health professionals, many of the suggestions are clearly applicable to teachers and others in the educational field. These suggestions include: educating oneself about homosexual lifestyles; avoiding the automatic assumption that everyone is heterosexual; using words related to LGBTQ lifestyles in positive ways; and demonstrating an open and accepting attitude towards sexual minority individuals (Johnson & Johnson, 2000).

While it is essential for teachers to create safe, effective learning environments for their LGBTQ students, more is needed. Teachers, administrators, and local and state school district officials all need to work together to protect LGBTQ students and help them succeed

academically. For example, at the university level, stickers have been used on the doors of faculty members who have agreed to support LGBTQ students. This has had a positive effect and has helped LGBTQ students feel safe enough to ask for help when needed (Evans, 2000). Although this program was pioneered at the collegiate level, similar programs could undoubtedly be adapted for a high school setting. At the state level, the Massachusetts Safe Schools program, where implemented, has had a significant positive effect on the school environment (Szalacha, 2003). Programs such as this could be expanded to other states.

In general, more education and training is needed for educators. The information and training provided to teachers to deal with homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender issues in the classroom is often fragmentary, either overgeneralized or specific to a small population, and is often additionally difficult to access (Renn, 2000). Many teachers are uncomfortable with approaching issues of homosexuality and bisexuality in the classroom, and appropriate training and education could help give them more confidence and allow them to handle these difficult issues more sensitively (Buston & Hart, 2001). Teachers need training in order to be able to approach LGBTQ issues from an informed, supportive, and caring perspective (Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001).

As LGBTQ students are not an inconsiderable proportion of the population, it is highly likely that any educator will have a number of LGBTQ students in his or her classroom over the years. A teacher cannot just teach the subject matter of a particular class; he or she must be conscious of a teacher's potential status as a trusted adult who students can approach for both academic and personal help when it is needed. Therefore, it is critically important that professional educators who work with adolescents make the effort necessary to understand the issues facing LGBTQ students. These students, like any others, need and deserve a solid

education, but they also have a strong need for a supportive and safe environment in which they can develop into healthy, well-adjusted adults who are comfortable with their LGBTQ identities. Educators need to be able to work through the controversies and strong emotions that are often associated with LGBTQ issues, counter myths and fears with facts and common sense, and act with kindness and compassion towards these often vulnerable students.

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