5-7-2020

# LGBTQ+ survey for school psychologists and school counselors

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LGBTQ+ Survey for School Psychologists and School Counselors

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Educational Specialist


Department of Graduate Psychology


August 2020

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# Abstract

School counselors and school psychologists were surveyed regarding their perceptions and experiences working with school aged students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ+) their sexual orientation or gender. Findings indicated that many of those surveyed believe that professional development and experience with the LGBTQ+ population will benefit them the most in ensuring that they can provide for the student's needs. Perceptions of school support for the LGBTQ+ community were reported as relatively positive. A list of resources are included in the recommendations section.

# Introduction

In August of 2018, James Myles, a 9-year old student, committed suicide a week after school began, as a result of anti-gay harassment he experienced at school. James had recently "come out" to the public as gay, and faced harsh discrimination by his peers. James' death is just one of many suicides that occurred in 2018 that drew media attention, prompting questions of need and hope for change. Students who identify or are identified by others as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) often face challenges in school due to a history of social prejudices and discrimination. This issue has been brought to higher focus over the recent years due to changes in the political climate, as well as more attention being focused on this marginalized group. However, there is still much that can be done in schools to alleviate the stressors that students are experiencing daily.

## Definitions

LGBTQ+ is an acronym used to identify people included in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender population, with the "q" typically standing for "questioning," but sometimes meaning for "queer." The "plus" is added to include all the communities like pansexual, agender, gender queer, bigender, asexual, etc. The questioning population includes people who are uncertain about their sexual orientation or who are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation. Queer is a term that has been adopted and reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community to represent people who claim a sexual identity other than heterosexual. It is frequently used as an "umbrella term" for those who are having difficulties figuring out how they identify. Variations of the *LGBTQ* acronym are *LGBT*,

*LGB* or *GLB* (which does not include transgender), *LGBTIQ* (which includes intersexed),
*and LGBTQA* (which includes allies into the population).

People who identify as LGBTQ+ do not adhere to the heteronormative sexual
identity of society. Typically, *gay* refers to males who are attracted physically and
emotionally to other males (Merriam-Webster, 2020); however, some females have also
used this term as well. Those who have a *lesbian* identity are typically females who are
attracted physically and emotionally to other females. A *bisexual* individual is a person
who is attracted physically and emotionally to both men and women; they are not
attracted exclusively to people of one particular gender. A *transgender* individual is a
male or female whose gender identity, outward appearance, expression and/or anatomy
do not fit into conventional expectations of male or female, respectively. The term
*transgender* is often used to represent a wide range of non-conforming gender identities
and behaviors. Lastly, a term that can be a defining moment for these students is when
they *come out* to society. Coming out is the process by which one shares their sexuality
or gender identity with others. Although these are the current definitions of these terms,
this language is constantly evolving.

**Safe Schools**

Schools have a legal and moral obligation to provide a positive and safe school
environment for LGBTQ+ students. Guidelines developed by the Office of Civil Rights
of the United States Department of Education prohibit sexual harassment and the creation
of a sexually hostile environment, including for those students who identify as LGBTQ+
(McFarland & Dupuis, 2003). In the past 20 years, courts have held that schools must
provide equal access for all students and must protect them from harm and harassment

(including, Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education, 1999; Nabozny v. Podlesny, 1996; Wagner v. Fayetteville Public School, 1998, as cited in McFarland & Dupuis, 2003). Even with policies and prior court cases with legal precedence, LGBTQ+ students still do not feel protected. The National School Climate Survey (NSCS), conducted periodically by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) since 1999, has consistently documented unsafe educational environments for many of these students. The survey results reported that approximately 60% of students felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and almost 40% reported feeling unsafe because of gender expression. (Kosciew et al., 2010).

School psychologists and counselors may be the first people to come into contact with LGBTQ+ students regarding issues with safety in the schools. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) calls for nondiscriminatory school policies and interventions to prevent homophobic harassment (NASP, 2004). School psychologists are "ethically obligated to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity for the development and expression of their personal identity in a school climate that is safe, accepting, respectful of all persons and free from discrimination, harassment, violence, and abuse" (NASP, 2011). Similarly, according to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, public schools that receive federal funding have a responsibility to provide students with supportive educational environments free from discrimination. This is particularly relevant for school counselors, who "promote equal opportunity and respect for all individuals regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression" (ASCA Position Statement, 2016, p. 50).

Despite the legal protections and precedents and the support of building level mental health professionals, bullying of sexual minority students in schools is widespread; yet educators are generally unaware of the degree of victimization and often fail to intervene when bullying occurs (Espelage et al., 2008).

**Suicide/Self Harm/Homelessness Risks**

LGBTQ+ youth are at greater risk for harassment, victimization, and potential development of a number of emotional and behavioral problems. As a result of cumulative stresses, LGBTQ+ students are at a particularly high risk for suicide, which is the leading cause of death among LGBTQ+ adolescents (Rhoades et al., 2018). In fact, researchers have found that up to 40% of sexual minority youth have attempted suicide in their lifetime. Unfortunately, a relationship also exists between LGBTQ+ youth homelessness and suicidality. Rates of suicidal ideation among homeless LGBTQ+ youth are 9-20% points higher than those who identify as heteronormative (Rhoades et al., 2018). Students who identify as LGBTQ+ are also 2.5 times more likely to report non-suicidal self- injury (NNSI) than those who identify as straight or heterosexual (Monto, McRee, & Deryck, 2018). The relationship between experiences of homelessness and negative mental health outcomes among LGBTQ+ students is complicated by the fact that these people often experience homelessness because of parental rejection or other home-based issues related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Parental rejection and poor home environments have been associated with negative mental health outcomes for the students experiencing it. A supportive school climate has the power to improve academic and psychological outcomes and has profound emotional benefit for LGBTQ+ students (McCabe, 2014). School psychologists, along with teachers, administrators, and

counselors, can play a key role in promoting positive emotional development and academic success for LGBTQ+ students.

**Victimization/Academic & Learning Challenges**

Educators are responsible for academic success, in addition to the well-being of their students. The victimization of youth at school is a factor associated with negative mental health outcomes, as well as academic difficulties, for LGBTQ+ individuals. Prior research indicates that LGBTQ+ youth report experiencing significantly more at-school victimization than their heterosexual peers. (Heck, Flentje, Cochran, 2013). According to Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National Climate Study, which consisted of about 6,000 sexual minority high school students, 86% reported being verbally harassed at school within the past year, 44% reported being physically harassed, and 22% reported being physically assaulted (Kosciw & Diaz, 2010). Close to 30% of the youth who felt unsafe had skipped at least 1 day of school in the past month because of safety concerns, and another 30% skipped one class for the same reason.  Overall, at school victimization disproportionately impacts LGBTQ+ youth and has been shown to be related to lower levels of school belongs, feeling unsafe, poorer academic performance, more substance abuse, and more depressive symptomatology. Additionally, because LGBTQ+ students often experience fear, anxiety, and isolation at school, they may be unable to concentrate on academic tasks and learn effectively. They are five times as likely as the general population of students to report skipping school because of safety concerns, and they are twice as likely to report no plans for post-secondary education (Fisher et al, 2008). When students find strong social support within the school building, the victimization they experience is less likely to cause lasting negative psychological

effects. Since these students are considered to be so much more at-risk than their heterosexual peers, it is even more vital that school psychologists and counselors are attune to their needs.

**Initiatives to Support Youth**

Although there are many negative stories about the LGBTQ+ community frequently on mainstream media, there are projects and organizations that have formed to help combat the problems this population is experiencing. Crisis services for persons within the LGBTQ+ populations have become more commonly available over the last 20 years. The Trevor Project is a national organization that specializes in providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ members who are younger than 25 years of age (The Trevor Project, 2019). One of their purposes is to provide resources for students who are experiencing suicidal thoughts and require immediate help. Students have the capabilities to call, instant message, or text a counselor for prompt assistance during times of crisis. Trevor Project continues research and expansion on their website to further communicate what can be done to help prevent suicide for young students within this community.

Additionally, benefits of attending a high school with a gay-straight alliance (GSA) have been studied over the recent years. Gay-straight alliances are usually student led, school-based clubs that exist in middle and high schools whose goals involve improving the school climate for LGBTQ+ youth and educating the school on issues and inclusivity (Kosciw et al, 2018). Results indicated that youth who attended a high school with a GSA report significantly more favorable outcomes related to lower levels of suicidality, negative school experiences, alcohol use, and psychological distress (Heck,

Flentje, & Cochran, 2013). These findings extend from previous research examining

GSAs and may hold implications for considering a high school GSA as a protective

factor. Gay-straight alliances may offset these risks by reducing experiences of at-school

victimization or bullying, while increasing feelings of connectedness and acceptance to

the school environment. Interestingly, students do not even need to attend the GSA

meetings to experience the benefits of having one within their school building. Even

supports on the collegiate level are becoming much more accessible for students to join.

Colleges and universities across the nation are creating clubs and spaces that are

considered safe if you are a member of this community. For example, Columbia

University has over 10 clubs that undergraduates can join, ranging from general groups

like Columbia Queer Alliance to specific interests or populations like Queer and Asian or

Columbia Queer Business Society (LGBTQ Student Groups-Columbia University, 2019).

**Preparation for Working with LGBTQ+ Students**

One of the main barriers that professionals within the schools face when it comes

to working with the LGBTQ+ population is the lack of substantial training. A

comprehensive overview of all the surveys conducted on this topic that target school

psychologists, school counselors, or educators have been included for this study.

A survey conducted by McCabe and Rubinson in 2008 explored how graduate

students in education, school psychology, and counseling roles are being prepared to help

ensure an equal and safe learning environment for youth identifying as LGBTQ+. The

researchers were interested in professionals' preparedness to support this community

before they even enter the field. Focus groups were conducted with the graduate students

where they were asked specific questions directed to reflect their knowledge and

behaviors in addressing social justice issues in the school. Responses were transcribed and organized using a framework of the theory of planned behavior (TPB). TPB hypothesizes that our attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control predict behavioral intention and subsequent behaviors. Results indicated that although the graduate students had strong positive attitudes to overall themes of social justice, such as race, class, or language, they revealed inadequate knowledge of issues faced by the LGBTQ+ students. Many of them even reported unsympathetic subjective attitudes norms in reference to their colleagues within the school, and barriers to engaging in LGBTQ+ advocacy, including lack of administrative support.

Additionally, McCabe, Rubinson, Dragowski, and Utnick (2013) furthered their prior research when they surveyed a national sample of teachers, school psychologists, and counselors on their attitudes, beliefs, school culture, and perceived barriers while working with youth who identify as LGBTQ+ that would predict whether educators would intervene to stop bias and harassment of these students. Theory of planned behavior (TPB) was used again to analyze responses. Educators' responses to the survey showed a significant amount of variance in their intentions to advocate for LGBTQ+ students.

McCabe, Dragowski, and Rubinson (2013) conducted a survey to assess school psychologists' observations of bias and harassment of LGBTQ+ students in their schools. Quantitative analysis showed that only 16% of school psychologists reported observed bias and harassment once a month or more frequently. However, 43% of participants reported hearing more epithets such as "that's so gay" among students once a month or more frequently. Shockingly, at least 8% of respondents said that these epithets were

spoken by other staff members at least once a month. Results also indicated that school psychologists would directly respond to verbal insults but often ignored homophobic language not specifically directed at people. Findings also correlated to the culture of heteronormativity and micro-aggressions within the schools.

Staton, DeNoble, and Gilligan (2015) conducted a survey to gather school psychologists' and counselors' perceptions and experiences while working with middle and high school students who identify as LGBTQ+. Ninety-two school counselors and 35 school psychologists participated in the study. Findings indicated that the majority of school professionals believe that working with this population is important, but most have not had professional development opportunities regarding LGBTQ+ students' potential and current needs. The most common answer provided was "none" or "PFLAG" when asked about specific guides, websites, texts, or other resources used.  All other responses included were the professional organizations that the school psychologists or counselors were members, such as ASCA and NASP (Staton, DeNoble & Gilligan, 2015). Few respondents could provide examples of appropriate resources (referring to local organizations supporting LGBTQ+, websites with accurate information for support, etc.) to provide for the students or to use for their own professional training. The researchers could not surmise whether obstacles to professional competence with the LGBTQ+ population are related to the practitioners or the environment. Researchers provided best practices associated with interventions at both the individual level and systemic level as a result of their findings.

Dragowski, McCabe, and Rubinson conducted a continuation of their previous surveys in 2016 and asked 968 educators to report the incidence of LGBTQ+ harassment

in schools, and their advocacy on behalf of this population. Questions also included their current knowledge and training relating to topics in the LGBTQ+ community. Ninety percent of educators reported observing LGBTQ+ harassment, while only 30% reported to intervene. Additionally, overall, educators reported positive attitudes towards this population, felt professionally supported, and ready to take on LGBTQ+ advocacy. However, educators reported adequate knowledge of LGBTQ+ related issues, yet they felt inadequately trained in this area. Many of them expressed a desire to learn more specifically about this problem. School counselors were found to be more informed about LGBTQ+ issues and more aware of LGBTQ+ harassment than school psychologists or teachers.

The lack of training opportunities, combined with educators' desire to learn more about this student population is an ongoing issue. This group of youth warrants support in school communities, and they are not receiving it to the extent that is needed because educators, school psychologists, and counselors have expressed that they do not feel adequately "ready" to take on these challenges because of lack of training. Continuing education opportunities, including in-service trainings, targeted sessions at professional conferences, and workshops could easily be beneficial to school counselors and school psychologists. With more formal training provided to school staff, it is evident that they would feel more prepared to work with students who identify as LGBTQ+.

This current study is a replication of Staton, DeNoble, and Gilligan's past research to ensure that the information regarding LGBTQ+ students is current. The objective of this study will be to (a) gather information regarding school counselors' and school psychologists' experiences and preparedness while working with LGBTQ+

students (b) continue research on how to aid these students during times of needs (c) compile a list of resources that combines suggestions from practicing school counselors and school psychologists with recommendations from current research regarding best practices for promoting and supporting the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth in the schools (d) gage the level of support received from administration for LGBTQ+ students. Current hypotheses include that participants will have a positive attitude or experiences while working with LGBTQ+ students, but lack in resources to refer them to. Additionally, we also expect various levels of support from the school systems.

## Method

### Participants

Participants identified as school psychologists or school counselors who are working in the public school systems with students between the grades of kindergarten and twelfth. This range was selected to ensure a comprehensive overview of all ages, as students are coming forward with needs at earlier and earlier stages. Participants were gathered through a convenience sample with the use of the Department of Education (DOE) database and through school websites. The school psychologists and counselors were contacted via email to complete the survey.

Overall, one hundred fifty one participants responded to the survey. The breakdown of respondents included 58 school counselors, 88 school psychologist, 2 school psychologist supervisors, 1 director of counseling, 1 associate professor, and 1 clinical psychologist (n= 151). Fifteen percent (n=21) identified as male, 83% identified as female (n= 113), 1% (n=1) identified as non-binary/third gender, and 1% (n=1)

preferred to self-describe. The majority of the participants (49%; n=66) held a MA/MS/ M.Ed degree, while 41% (n=56) held an Ed.S., and 10% (n=14) held a PhD degree. Seventy-six percent (n= 104) of the participants had been in their field of work for eight years of more, and 4% (n=6) were new professionals (i.e. two years or less in the field). Participants identified a variety of school localities: 51% (n=68) urban, 23% (n=31) suburban, 13% (n=17) small town, 9% (n=12) small city, 4% (n=6) rural.

**Procedures**

School counselors from six counties in the Commonwealth of Virginia were contacted via email and invited to complete an online Qualtrics survey. The school districts were purposively chosen to represent geographic regions of the state to include urban and rural areas. Two hundred twenty-three school counselors were contacted and 58 (26%) responded to the survey. School psychologists' emails were obtained from a data base with permission from the Virginia State Department of Education. They were also contacted via email and invited to complete the survey online. Six hundred sixty-five school psychologists were contacted in this manner and 88 (13%) responded. Two weeks after the first distribution of the email, the survey was redistributed for participants who may have initially missed the request. Additionally, many of the participants started but did not complete the survey, which is why response numbers in the results section may vary. Overall, there was an approximate 10% response rate.

**Instrument**

The LGBTQ+ Survey for School Psychologists and School Counselors was developed by the primary researcher for the purpose of this study. The survey questions were based on a previous study conducted by Staton, DeNobles, &Gilligan (2015) Additional specific questions concerning transgender students were included in this revised survey. Survey questions were developed to gain a greater understanding of school-based mental health practitioners' actual experiences working with the LGBTQ+ youth, including their perceptions of the level of support of their school environment from students and administration. The survey included questions regarding resources that the respondents found helpful while working with the LGBTQ+ population to allow for an update of previously compiled resources.

The survey included a consent question to complete the survey, followed by demographic information in items 2-7 (i.e., gender, highest academic degree, professional title, years working, years working in current school, grade level participant worked with, and school's general population.) Item 8 asked participants to approximate how many students they have worked with in their current job who have questioned their sexual orientation. Item 9 asked how many students they have worked with at their current job who were transitioning genders. The next item (10) was a multiple choice question which asked participants how they have previously conveyed themselves as a safe person to speak to about being a LGBTQ+ member. Item 11 was also a multiple choice question asking participants to describe the most prominent areas of focus while working with this population. Item 12 was an open response and asked for specific guides, web links, texts, or resources for students who are questioning their sexual orientation. The next item (13) asked participants for any advice or best practice recommendations they had for other

school counselors or school psychologists working with youth who are questioning their sexual orientation. Item 14 asked where the practitioners refer the student when they do not feel equipped to handle the topic discussed. Item 15 was a multiple choice question and asked what would help the practitioner feel more prepared to work with the student. This question also had a fill in option, and one could pick multiple responses. Items 16-18 asked practitioners to rate their preparedness for working with students who are transitioning or questioning their sexual orientation, the alleged bullies of the LGBTQ+ students, and the parents of students in the LGBTQ+ community, respectively. Items 19-21 asked participants to rate the support of their school's administration and faculty for LGBTQ+ students, indicate how their school shows this support (or lack thereof), and how supportive the overall student population is of the LGBTQ+ community. Item 22 contained four parts, and asked if the participants' schools let transgender students be called by their preferred name, use their preferred bathroom, use their preferred locker room, and perform for their preferred sports team. The next item (23) asked does your school system believe it is the school psychologist, school counselor, or both person's job to work through issues related to LGBTQ+ needs. This item also had a fill-in response in case the answer was neither and required further explanation. Item 24 asked if there was a GSA within the school building. Item 25 asked how supportive is the system's perspective on adults in the school being "out" to the community. And lastly, for item 26, it asked when the school psychologist/counselors are faced with non-tolerance to the LGBTQ+ community, what do you do? This item was multiple choice with the ability to choose more than one response, as well as containing a fill in option to add one's own input.

The survey resulted in quantitative data from 16 questions and qualitative data from 9 questions. The quantitative data is summarized below, followed by an explanation of the data used for the open-ended survey questions.

## Results

### Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive data from both groups of participants is provided in the table below. Questions are asked in the same order that were listed on the survey, and placed side-by-side for comparison of the response rate of psychologists and counselors. Overall, counselors responded to be more prepared than psychologists to work with LGBTQ+ students across all areas, including working with their parents, potential bullies, and getting administrational support.

### Table 1

*Quantitative Data Results for School Psychologists and Counselors*

| Item | School Psychologists | School Counselors |
|---|---|---|
| Worked with at least 1 student who was questioning their sexual orientation? | Yes: 73% (n=41)<br>No: 27% (n=15) | Yes: 91% (n=31)<br>No: 9% (n=3) |
| Worked with at least 1 student who was transgender? | Yes: 50% (n=28)<br>No: 50% (n=28) | Yes: 68% (n=23)<br>No: 32% (n=11) |
| How prepared do you feel to work with a student who is questioning their sexual orientation? | Very Prepared: 12% (=7)<br>Prepared: 42% (n=25)<br>Somewhat Prepared: 34% (n=20)<br>Not Prepared: 12% (n=7) | Very Prepared: 29% (n=12)<br>Prepared: 38% (n=16)<br>Somewhat Prepared: 24% (n=10)<br>Not Prepared:7% (n=3)<br>Unsure: 1% (n=1) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| How prepared do you feel to work with a student who is transitioning genders? | Very Prepared: 5% (n=3)<br>Prepared: 20% (n=12)<br>Somewhat Prepared: 44% (n=26)<br>Not Prepared: 28% (n=17)<br>Unsure: 1% (n=1) | Very Prepared: 23% (n=10)<br>Prepared: 21% (n=9)<br>Somewhat Prepared: 26% (n=11)<br>Not Prepared: 21% (n=9)<br>Unsure: 7% (n=3) |
| How prepared do you feel to support the alleged bully of a LGBTQ+ student? | Very Prepared: 20% (n=11)<br>Prepared: 28% (n=15)<br>Somewhat Prepared: 35% (n=19)<br>Not Prepared:15% (n=8)<br>Unsure: 1% (n=1) | Very Prepared: 33% (n=12)<br>Prepared: 44% (n=16)<br>Somewhat Prepared: 14% (n=5)<br>Not Prepared:6% (n=2)<br>Unsure: 1% (n=1) |
| How prepared do you feel to support a parent of a student that is questioning their sexual orientation? | Very Prepared: 14% (n=8)<br>Prepared: 39% (n=22)<br>Somewhat Prepared: 26% (n=15)<br>Not Prepared:18% (n=10)<br>Unsure: 4% (n=2) | Very Prepared: 21% (n=9)<br>Prepared: 26% (n=11)<br>Somewhat Prepared: 37% (n=16)<br>Not Prepared: 7% (n=3)<br>Unsure: 9% (n=4) |
| How prepared do you feel to support a parent of a student that is transitioning genders? | Very Prepared: 7% (n=4)<br>Prepared: 20% (n=11)<br>Somewhat Prepared: 33% (n=18)<br>Not Prepared: 35% (n=19)<br>Unsure: 4% (n=2) | Very Prepared: 18% (n=7)<br>Prepared: 26% (n=10)<br>Somewhat Prepared: 31% (n=12)<br>Not Prepared: 28% (n=11)<br>Unsure: 8% (n=3) |
| How prepared do you feel to support parents of a student who has just come out publicly? | Very Prepared: 11% (n=6)<br>Prepared: 26% (n=15)<br>Somewhat Prepared: 39% (n=22)<br>Not Prepared: 21% (n=12)<br>Unsure: 4% (n=2) | Very Prepared: 18% (n=7)<br>Prepared: 31% (n=12)<br>Somewhat Prepared: 33% (n=13)<br>Not Prepared: 8% (n=3)<br>Unsure: 10% (n=4) |
| How supportive are the faculty and administration of the LGBTQ+ students? | Very Supportive: 16% (n=8)<br>Supportive: 45% (n=23)<br>Somewhat Supportive: 29% (n=15)<br>Not Supportive: 8% (n=4)<br>Unsure: 12% (n=6) | Very Supportive: 39% (n=10)<br>Supportive: 19% (n=5)<br>Somewhat Supportive: 23% (n=6)<br>Not Supportive: 0%<br>Unsure: 19% (n=5) |
| How supportive is the overall student population of the LGBTQ+ students? | Very Supportive: 6% (n=3)<br>Supportive: 31% (n=16)<br>Somewhat Supportive: 43% (n=22)<br>Not Supportive: 8% (n=4)<br>Unsure: 12% (n=6) | Very Supportive: 12% (n=3)<br>Supportive: 36% (n=9)<br>Somewhat Supportive: 28% (n=7)<br>Not Supportive: 12% (n=3)<br>Unsure: 12% (n=3) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Does the school allow transgender students to go by their preferred name? | Yes: 71% (n=36)<br>No: 0%<br>Unsure: 29% (n=15) | Yes: 74% (n=20)<br>No: 0%<br>Unsure: 26% (n=7) |
| Does the school allow transgender students to use their preferred restroom? | Yes: 27% (n=13)<br>No: 20% (n=11)<br>Unsure: 56% (n=31) | Yes: 38% (n=11)<br>No: 14% (n=4)<br>Unsure: 48% (n=14) |
| Does the school allow transgender students to use their preferred locker rooms? | Yes: 19% (n=10)<br>No: 21% (n=11)<br>Unsure: 60% (n=31) | Yes: 33% (n=8)<br>No: 8% (n=2)<br>Unsure: 58% (n=14) |
| Does the school allow transgender students to play on their preferred sports team? | Yes: 17% (n=9)<br>No: 15% (n=8)<br>Unsure: 67% (n=35) | Yes: 19% (n=5)<br>No: 8% (n=2)<br>Unsure: 73% (n=19) |
| Is there a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) within your building? | Yes: 34% (n=17)<br>No: 66% (n=33) | Yes: 35% (n=9)<br>No: 65% (n=17) |
| How supportive is your system of adults being "out" to the community? | Very Supportive: 18% (n=9)<br>Supportive: 28% (n=14)<br>Somewhat Supportive: 22% (n=11)<br>Not Supportive: 8% (n=4)<br>Unsure: 26% (n=13) | Very Supportive: 27% (n=7)<br>Supportive: 27% (n=7)<br>Somewhat Supportive: 15% (n=4)<br>Not Supportive: 4% (n=1)<br>Unsure: 27% (n=7) |

## Qualitative Analysis

The researcher was particularly interested in capturing the varied experiences, beliefs, and suggestions of the respondents. Qualtrics (the system used for the survey) uses its own software for data analysis. Many of the items were multiple choice, so responses were calculated by total. And for short answer responses, responses were calculated by key word total by the researcher.

Nine survey questions yielded narrative data. Item 10 asked, *How have you previously conveyed that you were a safe person to talk to about these topics?* School psychologists provided 78 total responses. The categories identified for these responses included all the examples provided with the number of responses fitting each category in

parentheses: *I have not conveyed this* (27), *word of mouth* (22), *stickers on door* (15),

*other* (4), *groups* (4), *available resources* (3), *facilitate GSA* (3), and *bulletin boards* (3).

School counselors provided 80 total responses which included: *I have not conveyed this*

(7), *word of mouth* (23), *stickers on door* (17), *other* (14), *groups* (4), *available resources*

(7), *facilitate GSA* (3), and *bulletin boards* (5). Responses in the other option included:

classroom lessons, lanyard with pin, stickers also in classroom by desk, rapport building,

and relationship of trust.

Item 11 asked, *When working with this population of students, which of these*

*areas seem to be the most relevant to them?* School psychologists offered 78 responses.

The identified categories for the responses were: *Self-esteem* (36), *Responding to bullying*

(32), *Coming out concerns* (27), *Fill in* (12), *Clarifying sexual orientation myths and*

*facts* (9), *Dating* (5), and *medical questions* (3). School counselors provided 107

responses and are as follows: *Self-esteem* (26), *Responding to bullying* (24), *Coming out*

*concerns* (22), *Fill in* (8), *Clarifying sexual orientation myths and facts* (11), *Dating* (13),

and *Medical questions* (3). The most common fill in responses were parental issues,

needing affirmation/validation from others, transitioning issues (name changing, locker

room usage, surgeries, etc.) and none applicable.

Item 12 asked, *When working with youth who are questioning their sexual*

*orientation, what specific guides, web links, texts, or other resources have you used to*

*give them?* School psychologists responses (n=39) are grouped by theme, and the list of

resources are included in the recommendations section. The themes are: *none* (21), *Local*

*Agencies* (4), *National Agencies* (12), and *Outside Therapy* (2). School counselors also

provided responses (n=23) and are themed *none* (10), *Local Agencies* (6), *National Agencies* (4), and *Outside Therapy* (3).

Item 13 questioned, *What advice or best practice recommendations would you have for other school counselors/psychologists working with youth who are questioning their sexual orientation?* Once again, school psychologists' responses (n=41) are grouped by theme, and include: *Listen and support* (17), *Be open-minded* (9), *Educate yourself/ Educate student* (9), *Consult with others* (4), and *none* (2). Similarly, school counselor's responses (n=29) indicate the same themes: *Listen and support* (13), *Be open-minded* (9), *Educate yourself/ Educate student* (4), *Consult with others* (1), and *None* (1).

Item 14 asked, *If you do not feel equipped to handle a topic a student who is questioning their sexual orientation has brought to you, where do you refer the student?* Themes were also grouped again by similar responses. School psychologists responses (n=47) indicate the following: *School Counselor* (12)*, Local Agency* (12)*, Outside Therapy* (10)*, Self (feel equipped)* (9)*, and None* (4). Counselors' responses (n=27) were also grouped into the same themes: *School Psychologist* (10)*, Local Agency* (1)*, Outside Therapy* (6)*, Self (feel equipped)* (5)*, and None* (5).

Item 15 asked, *What would help you feel more prepared to work with LGBTQ+ student?* Participants could pick from 4 different choices, or respond with a Fill-In answer. School psychologists provided 78 responses and are as follows: *Experience* (31), *Consultation with Other Professionals* (30), *Professional Development* (25), *Online Resources* (22), and *Fill-In* (4). School counselors provided 56 responses and said they would feel more prepared with: *Professional Development* (27), *Consultation with Other Professionals* (25), *Experience* (22), *Online Resources (21),* and *Fill-In* (1). The

responses that were entered in the Fill-In category include: "I am prepared," (2) "I prefer not to work with this population," "General Resources," and "Buy in by the school board."

Item 20 questioned, *How does your school demonstrate this support, or lack of support?* This item was also categorized by theme. School psychologists provided 34 responses. The themes are: *Inclusive Culture/Environment of School* (13), *Does Not Support/ Will Not Address Issue* (8), *Accommodations for Student* (5), *Diverse/Out Staff* (3), *Bullying Prevention Policies* (3), and *School Clubs* (2). Counselors provided 24 responses and were: *Inclusive Culture/Environment of School* (11), *Does Not Support/ Will Not Address Issue* (6), *Accommodations for Student* (3), *Bullying Prevention Policies* (2), and *School Clubs* (2).

Item 23 asked, *Does your school system believe it is the school psychologist's or school counselor's role to work through issues related to LGBTQ+ needs with students?* This question is best answered as a group total. The most common answer by school psychologists and counselors was *both* (53), *School Counselor* (12), *Fill-In* (12), and *School Psychologist* (1). Fill in responses included: "it is not designated," "to the parents" "social worker," "outside therapy," and "it takes a village." "It is not designated" was the most common fill-in response.

Item 26 asked, *When the school psychologist/ counselors are faced with non-tolerance to the LGBTQ+ community, what do you do?* School psychologists (n=71) answered *Consult Administration* (37), *Consult Outside Resources* (23), and *Fill-In* (11). School counselors (n=56) responded *Consult Administration* (18), *Consult Outside*

*Resources* (7), and *Fill-In* (8). The most frequent Fill-In responses included: "consult peers/admin/the student," (7) "has not happened," (9) and "support the student" (3).

## Discussion

The survey data provides a snapshot of school psychologists' and school counselors' experiences and perceptions regarding working with the LGBTQ+ youth. The results from this data suggests that the total majority of the participants (79%) have worked with at least one student who was questioning their sexual orientation and transitioning genders (57%). However, 42% of psychologists and 38% of counselors feel prepared to work with students who are questioning their sexual orientation, while only 20% of psychologists and 21% of counselors feel prepared to work with a student who is transitioning genders. Additionally, participants responded that they are prepared to work with parents of students who are questioning their sexual orientation (39% for psychologists, 26% for counselors) and coming out publicly (26% for psychologists, 31% for counselors), but had only a lower level of confidence for psychologists when working with a parent who has a child transitioning genders (20% for psychologists, 26% for counselors). To build up confidence across the domains of working with these students, it is imperative that school psychologists and school counselors continue to receive the most updated information on working with LGBTQ+ students and their parents.

The responses on the survey indicate that overall faculty/admin and school support for students who are in the LGBTQ+ community varies, however, the majority response of school psychologists stated that their faculty was supportive (45%) while counselors had the majority response of very supportive (39%). One stated reason for a school system to be considered supportive was the inclusion of a GSA in the building, as

34% of respondents who were school psychologists and 35% of counselors also said their school has this resource. Conversely, when asked about the student population support in the schools, the school psychologist majority response was only somewhat supportive (43%) and the counselor majority was supportive (36%). Furthermore, 28% of school psychologists and 27% of counselors indicate that administration is supportive of adults being out in the community, seen through allowing them to be facilitators of the GSA and positive role models to other students who identify in the LGBTQ+ group.

When asked questions regarding the transgender community, a majority of the responses were *unsure*. Seventy-one percent of school psychologists and 74% of counselors said their schools allow students to go by the name that they want. But, the other 3 parts of the question all had the majority response of *unsure:* bathroom use 56% for psychologists, 48% for counselors; locker room use 60% for psychologists, 58% for counselors; and sport teams played on 67% for psychologists, 73% for counselors. As school psychologists and counselors who want to better serve this community, collaboration with administration to develop policies that align with students' legal rights is an appropriate starting place to ensure transgender students are treated fairly.

Several participants indicated that they used resources to connect students with when they are searching for one (discussed later) however, the most frequent response to that question was "none" (50%). School psychologists and school counselors need tools and resources. This is also supported by the large number of respondents that indicated professional development and consultation with professionals as the most common response to what would help them feel more prepared to work with the LGBTQ+ population, especially the transgender community, as participants seemed to lack the

most confidence while working with this group. A main reason that is holding

practitioners back from receiving the resources they need is due to overall lack of training

in professional development. Although there are becoming an increasing amount of

resources through national professional organizations, it is still challenging to find

professional development that is beneficial and not incredibly expensive. With the help of

the school, professional training can be served to the entire faculty, deeming it a

worthwhile investment.

## Recommendations

Based on the moderate level of responses from participants, the following

recommendations providing best practices associated with intervention at both the

individual and systemic/professional level are warranted due to differences in school

system regulations and personal beliefs just within the participants surveyed. A variety of

ideas are needed, as the differences between the communities as well are vast. The

included list are best practice recommendations suggested by the data and a review of

recent literature.

## Role at the Individual Level

**Use basic counseling skills**. The LGBTQ+ youth deserve the same therapeutic alliance,

empathy, and acceptance that their heterosexual peers receive in a counseling setting.

This includes being aware of one's own biases, allowing the client to lead the

conversation, and displaying unconditional positive regard. Many of the responses from

the participants included advice for other practitioners like "listen without judgement" or

"be open-minded with no preconceived notions." LGBTQ+ students may seek counseling

for a variety of reasons, and it should not be assumed these specific reasons are related to their LGBTQ+ status. Although the landscape for LGBTQ+ youth is continually shifting, knowledge is key for a culturally responsive service. A way of doing this is being aware of appropriate terminology, including the pronoun the student goes by. (NASP, 2017). To facilitate alliance, it is best practice to utilize gender-neutral terms such as "my person," or "romantic interest." Furthermore, being knowledgeable about historical and more recent events that impact this population can help many different aspects including; provide a context for understanding students' experiences, build rapport with them, establish a sense of community/a connection within the school building, and potentially counter feelings of isolation (NASP, 2017).

**Be open to unique range of concerns LGBTQ+ students may face.** As previously stated, several respondents made the recommendation that school counselors and psychologists should make no assumptions about their students' sexual orientation or transition. This suggestion is consistent with NASP's statement (2017) that it is important for school psychologists and counselors to understand the unique needs and experiences of the transgender and gender diverse (TGD) youth.

**LGBTQ+ Resources.** A list of local and national resources were obtained (in addition to professional development) from the survey and include:

Local: DC Area TransMasculine Society (DCATS), SMYAL, Arlington Gay and Lesbian Association (AGLA), FCPSpride.org, Children's Hospital DC

National: The Trevor Project, GLSEN, Side by Side, It Gets Better (YouTube Channel), Planned Parenthood, PFLAG, Rainbow Families, SecondStep, Human Rights Campaign,

Children's Books (including *Red, The Boy with the Pink Hair, Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress.)*

## Role at the Systems Level

**Develop and implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies.** As school psychologists and counselors develop affirming attitudes and knowledge about LGBTQ+ youth, they can use their skills to ensure districts/schools have comprehensive anti-bullying policies that specifically protect individuals based on actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. The second most common response to the survey question of "which areas are most relevant when working with this population" was bullying. This is a widespread and serious issue, as TGD experience greater school victimization than their straight peers. Through educating staff members, students, and families about these policies, clear expectations of student behavior, how to report violations, and the consequences for policy violations can be established that fit the district's needs. Working with the administrators to intervene with students who violate policies will ensure that support is provided for students who are targets of bullying and harassment (Kosciw et al., 2018)

**Provide professional development.** According to the participants, professional development was the third most common response to help practitioners feel more prepared to work with members of the LGBTQ+ community. Providing ongoing professional development to educate school staff about LGBTQ+ issues, will help them recognize and intervene when there is relayed harassment or bullying occurring, and to help develop skills and strategies to serve as supportive allies (Kosciw et al., 2018).

**Support a gender and sexuality alliance.** Working with students and allies at school to establish a Gender and Sexuality Alliance or Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) or other similar clubs will allow for an environment of support, for a group of people that have a higher tendency to feel marginalized. Getting administrators on board can provide for a culture of inclusivity as students will know their faculty is there to support them.

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**Conclusion & Limitations**

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While helpful information was gained from this study, limitations were noted. First, participants were school counselors and school psychologists only in the Commonwealth of Virginia, thereby limiting generalizability of these findings, especially because the survey was taken by so few practitioners in rural communities. Additionally, the school counselors were obtained through their school's websites which may or may not have been current with listings and contact information. Similarly, school psychologists were contacted through the Virginia Department of Education, so if they were not listed, there was no contact. Second, it is not possible to know the exact reason for the low response rate, however the comfort level of working with the LGBTQ+ community cannot be neglected. Those who responded may have had a particular interest or expertise in this topic. One must also take into account the impact of COVID-19 as well that may have reduced participants access to emails or opportunity to respond.

The findings of the current survey study suggest that school psychologists and counselors want and need ongoing professional development and experience in order to gain the competence necessary to work effectively with the students within the LGBTQ+ community. This is particularly relevant for transgender students. Professional development was also concluded as necessary for practitioners in the Staton, DeNoble,

Gilligan pilot study (2015). Practitioners would like consultation with other professionals followed by experience, and then professional development itself. Although challenging to implement change at the systematic level, one can take action on the personal/professional level,

Overall, mental health practitioners in the schools within Virginia report some degree of preparedness for working with the LGBTQ+ community, however, more (in many occasions) can be done to better serve these students.

*Appendix A:*

School Counselor/Psychologist LGBTQ+ Student Survey

1. Consent
2. Gender                 ___Female
   ___Male
   ___Third gender/Non binary
   ___ prefer to self describe

3. Highest Degree       ___ BS/BA
   ___MA/MS/M. Ed.
   ___ Ed.S.
   ___Ph.D.

4. Professional Title _____
5. How many years have you been a practicing school counselor/psychologist?
6. How many years have you been working at your current district?
7. What grade(s) do you work with at this school? <u>Range: K-12</u>
8. What is the general population designation of your school?
   a. Urban (population greater than 50,000 residents; like Northern Virginia or Richmond)
   b. Small City (36,001-50,000; like Charlottesville)
   c. Suburban (10,001-36,000; like Staunton or Harrisonburg)
   d. Small Town (2,500-10,000; like Bath County)
   e. Rural (population fewer than 2,500 residents)

**In our society, it has become increasingly evident that some adolescents may wonder about their sexual orientation or gender identity. The questions in this section of the survey will help to determine if Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning students seek the assistance of school counselors and school psychologists. Questions also provide information about your experiences when working with these students.**

9. Approximately how many students have you worked with in your current job centered around questioning their sexual orientation?
   a. About their gender?
10. How have you previously conveyed that you are a safe person to talk to about this topic?
    a. Drop down menu (stickers on door, word of mouth, I have not conveyed this specificially)
11. When working with these students, what is the primary focus of your work?

a. Drop down menu (including self-esteem, responding to bullying, clarifying sexual orientation myths and facts, coming out, medical questions, dating)

12. When working with youth who are questioning their sexual orientation, what specific guides, web links, texts, or other resources have you used to give them?

13. What advice or best practice recommendations would you have for other school counselors and psychologists working with youth who are questioning their sexual orientation?

14. If you do not feel equipped to handle a topic a student who is questioning their sexual identity do you mean identity or orientation or both has brought to you, where do you research for yourself?
    a. Where do you refer them?

15. What would help you feel more prepared to work with this population? (Professional development, consultation, experience, fill-in)

16. How prepared do you feel to work with students who are questioning their sexual orientation?
    Part 2:.. transitioning genders
    Very Prepared      Prepared      Somewhat Prepared   Not Prepared  Not Sure

17. How prepared are you to support alleged bullies of  LGBTQ+ students?
    Very Prepared      Prepared      Somewhat Prepared   Not Prepared  Not Sure

18. How prepared are you to support the parents of a student who is transitioning genders?
    Very Prepared      Prepared      Somewhat Prepared   Not Prepared  Not Sure

    Part 2:…is questioning their sexuality?
    Very Prepared      Prepared      Somewhat Prepared   Not Prepared  Not Sure

    Part 3:…How prepared are you to support the parents of a student who just came out publicly?
    Very Prepared      Prepared      Somewhat Prepared   Not Prepared  Not Sure

**The issue of sexual orientation in adolescents can be a controversial topic. Some schools are very supportive of their LGBTQ+ youth population, while others choose**

**not to acknowledge them. The final questions in this survey seek your perception of your school's support of the LGBTQ+ youth population.**

19. How supportive would you say your school's administration and faculty is of LGBTQ+ students?
Very Supportive          Supportive     Somewhat Supportive          Not Supportive

20. How supportive would you say your overall school's student population is of LGBTQ+ students?
Very Supportive          Supportive     Somewhat Supportive          Not Supportive

21. How does your school demonstrate this support, or lack of support?
22. When working with students who are transgender, does the school allow the children to be called by their preferred name?
    a. Use their preferred restroom?
    b. Use their preferred locker room?
    c. Perform for preferred sports team?
23. Does your school system believe it is the school psychologist's or school counselor's role when working through issues related to LGBTQ+ needs with these students?
    a. If not, who works with them?
24. Is there a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) within your school building?
25. How supportive is your system's perspective on adults in the school being "out" to the community?
Very Supportive          Supportive     Somewhat Supportive          Not Supportive
26. When the school psychologists/counselors are faced with non-tolerance to the LGBTQ+ community, what do you do? Drop down menu with room for open ended too

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