

Principals Can and Should Make a Positive Difference for LGBTQ Students

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Abstract

School principals should lead for social change, particularly in support of vulnerable or marginalized students. An important social justice issue in which principals must provide strong leadership, but may not be adequately prepared in university training, is creating positive and inclusive school environments for lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, and questioning (LGBTQ) students. Research reveals that LGBTQ students experience high rates of discrimination, bullying, and physical assault due to their sexual orientation or gender expression. This Application Brief describes how faculty members at a Midwest university developed curriculum and pedagogy for their principal preparation program with the goal of promoting the knowledge and skills that future school leaders need to provide effective leadership for protection, acceptance, and affirmation of LGBTQ students.

Introduction

Principals are pivotal to school success (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Rice, 2010). But, what does school success look like?

The current educational reform agenda prioritizes the results of standardized achievement measures, defining school success largely in terms of students' performance on exams (Bracey, 2009; Dianis, Jackson, & Noguera, 2015; Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Ravitch, 2010). At the same time, the complex and diverse nature of American society demands that school leaders understand and address important issues of equity and social justice (Kemp-Graham, 2015; Miller & Martin, 2015; O'Malley & Capper, 2015).

School principals must pay close attention to much more than students' performance on standardized measures. Principals are responsible for leadership in social change, particularly regarding the treatment of vulnerable or marginalized students (Mugisha, 2015). One issue requiring immediate attention from school leaders is the ethical treatment and support of LGBTQ students (lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, questioning, and students of other marginalized gender identities or sexual orientations) (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Kemp-Graham, 2015; Meyer, 2009).

The call for school leaders to move beyond a focus on standardized achievement to addressing issues of social justice, considering the needs of the "whole child," is not a new concept (ASCD, 2015). Sergiovani (1992, 2009), Fullan (2003), Shapiro and Stefkovich (2001), and others have discussed the ethical dimensions of school leadership in regard to democracy, equity, and keeping students' needs at the forefront. Three decades ago, Cummins recommended specific conditions that school leaders could foster in order to support and empower minority students (1986). Sergiovanni summarized the issue succinctly in describing school administration as a moral imperative, which extends past academic achievement and includes a commitment to democratic values of justice and equity (2009).

However, studies reveal disturbing statistics regarding the mistreatment of LGBTQ students in schools. Compared to their non-LGBTQ peers, bullying rates are significantly higher for LGBTQ students (Stop.Bullying.com, 2015). Reports indicate almost nine out of ten LGBTQ students experience harassment at school and approximately two-thirds feel unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). LGBTQ students are more often injured, physically threatened, and victimized by damage to personal property (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). The consequences of being mistreated at school can be life-altering for LGBTQ youth including poor school adjustment, lower grades, increased absenteeism, higher than average drop-out percentages, and increased suicide rates (Birkett et al, 2009; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Rivers, 2000; Scourfield, Roen, & McDermott, 2008).

Clearly, school principals must strive to create conditions that allow all students to be successful, based on the moral imperative that success embodies much more than students' achievement on exams and other standardized indicators. Successful schools must provide positive environments that are responsive to students' social, emotional, and physical needs. It is a principal's professional and ethical responsibility to lead in these efforts.

Like the story of our nation, the story of American public schools is a long, slow, narrative of continuous improvement pushing towards the promise of equal quality for all

students, which is embodied in the concept of public education. Fullan (2011) makes the case eloquently for the moral imperative behind this honorable purpose of schooling. Fulfilling the true meaning of public education demands attention to unmet needs of marginalized youth. We believe school leaders must act with the understanding that many LGBTQ students are not yet provided equitable opportunities for developing positive relationships with educators in environments where they feel safe and supported. Because the needs of LGBTQ students have been largely overlooked in schools and principal preparation programs, specific and urgent educational reform is required.

Issue Statement

There are concerns that some principal preparation programs are out of touch with the holistic focus needed in today's schools, therefore, insufficient in preparing candidates for effective and responsive leadership in today's diverse society (Cowie & Crawford, 2007; Hess & Kelly, 2005, Kemp-Graham, 2015; Mugisha, 2015). An important social justice issue in which principals must provide strong leadership, but may not be sufficiently prepared, is creating positive and inclusive school environments for LGBTQ students.

Review of Related Scholarship

Research suggests that university training programs are inadequate in preparing principals for the important role they play in effective school leadership in LGBTQ issues (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2008; Kemp-Graham, 2015; O'Malley & Capper, 2015; Mugisha, 2015). To illustrate, a Texas study involving recent graduates of principal preparation programs found that more than half of respondents (57%) agreed that being lesbian, bisexual, or gay was a choice. The respondents also rated themselves low in knowledge and understanding of LGBTQ needs, traditions, values, history, family systems, and artistic expressions (Kemp-Graham, 2015). In a 2008 study, 90% of principal respondents reported having heard anti-gay slurs in their schools, yet only 21% had engaged in activities to foster safer school climates for LGBTQ students (GLSEN & Harris Interactive). A recent national study representing a cross-section of 53 universities revealed that LGBTQ themes and identities were only marginally integrated in principal preparation programs, leading the authors to conclude that, "Strategies are clearly needed for integrating LGBTQ equitable leadership into U.S. principal preparation" (O'Malley & Capper, 2015, p. 290).

Without question, LGBTQ students are an exceptionally vulnerable population in need of school leadership that establishes equitable protection, acceptance, and support. While 63% of LGBTQ Americans report being discriminated against in their personal lives (Bailey, 2015); research suggests even higher percentages of LGBTQ students regularly face discrimination, harassment, homophobic bullying, and even assault in the school environment. The 2011 National School Climate Survey found that at school, 81.9% of LGBTQ students had been verbally harassed in the last year because of their sexual orientation and 63.9% had been verbally harassed due to gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2012). In addition, 38.3% of students had been physically harassed (e.g., shoved) in the last year because of their sexual orientation and 27.1% because of gender expression. Furthermore, 18.3% of students had faced physical assault (e.g., punched, injured with a weapon) due to sexual orientation and 12.4% because of their gender

expression (Kosciw et al., 2012).

Exposure to hostile environments places LGBTQ students at greater risk for absenteeism, poor academic performance, dropping out of school, mental health issues, and even suicide (Birkett et al, 2009; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Rivers, 2000). The issue appears to be exacerbated by school staff who themselves are biased, use biased language at school, or do not intervene on behalf of LGBTQ students when there is an incident. For example, on the 2011 National School Climate Survey, 56.9% of LGBTQ students reported hearing negative or homophobic remarks from school staff members. Experts believe that negative staff attitudes towards LGBTQ students result in underreporting of incidents because students believe either no action will be taken or reporting an incident might actually make the situation worse (Kosciw et al., 2012). Of LGBTQ students who did report an incident in 2011, 36.7% indicated that the school staff did nothing to respond (Kosciw et al., 2012).

Principals have an obligation to protect students from anti-gay harassment, just as they have an obligation to protect students from other forms of harassment (Cordeiro & Cunningham, 2013). However, this obligation goes beyond simply protecting LGBTQ students. It also includes the promotion of attitudes and school cultures of acceptance and appreciation of diversity. Principals are essential in the development and support of inclusive curricula that Mugisha (2015) identifies as both formal (e.g., instructional content), and informal (e.g., presence of LGBTQ clubs, strong stance against bullying, focus on inclusive culture). These curricular elements have been shown to encourage positive shifts in people's attitudes about LGBTQ identity. Principals are also important in modeling and encouraging constructive relationships between educators and minority students, which Cummins believed promoted students' school success (1986, 1992). In short, principals are key players in setting expectations for student and staff behavior, and their own responses to LGBTQ issues have the potential to influence the attitudes of others.

For school leaders, this means choosing leadership behaviors that lead to implementation of school practices and policies that address bullying, promote diversity, and provide support to LGBTQ youth. However, it appears that many universities have largely avoided this topic in their principal training programs (Kemp-Graham, 2015; Mugisha, 2015; O'Malley & Capper, 2015). It is important that future school leaders understand the issues and rights of LGBTQ youth and be provided with specific strategies to build school cultures of acceptance and support of diversity. Today's principal candidates must leave their preparation programs with the knowledge and ability to create school cultures of inclusion, safety, and support for all students.

In this Application Brief, we describe how one Department of Educational Leadership is attempting to respond to this call for improvement of administrator preparation. Faculty members spent a year developing curriculum and pedagogy for their principal preparation program with the goal of promoting the knowledge and skills future school leaders need to provide effective leadership in support of LGBTQ students.

Conceptual Framework

Early in this process, we were introduced to the work of Cummins (1986), through an article by Sanelli and Perreault (2001), about challenges of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students in schools. After further research, we affirmed that Cummins' theory on minority empowerment was the appropriate framework to build our project, as it aligned with our personal philosophies regarding the need for school atmospheres of caring and support. Although Cummins work is primarily focused on ethnic minority students, it provides a structure for empowerment, which is applicable to any minority group facing discriminatory practices and attitudes. Like all minority students, LGBTQ students need to feel safe and supported at school.

Cummins' empowerment theory, at its heart, proposes that students from marginalized minority groups can be either disabled or empowered by their interactions and relationships in the school environment, particularly with the school's educators. School leaders, Cummins proposed, make important moral choices that enable belief systems and practices within their schools that either empower or disable minority students (1986, 1992). Schools that empower minorities show specific factors including thoughtful inclusive pedagogy and curriculum, minority community involvement, and professional staff who become advocates for and build relationships with minority students. At the core of Cummins' theory is the idea that supportive and positive relationships between minority youth and educators are necessary for students' school success. The school leader is seen as essential in reinforcing and communicating expectations, as well as in role-modeling relationship-building efforts with minority students.

Description of the Application

Context. The authors of this Brief include three professors in a Department of Educational Leadership and two university students, who assisted by compiling and summarizing previous research. We represent a mid-sized university with an enrollment of approximately 21,000 students, located in a rural community in the Midwest. The focus of this paper is the principal preparation program, which culminates in a Master's degree in Educational Administration. We refer to our adult students as "candidates." Our principal preparation program consists of approximately 300 candidates at varying places in their programs. The core courses for the Master's degree are offered online, followed by a two-semester school-site internship.

After a review of the Master's program curriculum leading to principal licensure, we realized that we were not doing enough to prepare school leaders for the critical role they play in creating positive environments for LGBTQ youth. Although we addressed issues of diversity across our courses, we only briefly touched on specific LGBTQ issues in one Master's course, with no follow-up activities or resources. Because of this gap, we felt that school principals who graduated from our program, in all likelihood, would not be adequately prepared to deal with issues and attitudes relating to students' sexual identities. In short, our program exemplified what O'Malley and Capper (2015) discovered in their recent study of principal preparation programs: LGBTQ themes and identities were only marginally integrated.

Getting Started. We began our project by conducting an in-depth review of research on LGBTQ issues in the schools. This review provided important background information and disturbing statistics regarding concerns such as bullying, social isolation, unmet physical needs, mental health issues, and negative impacts on learning, attendance, and retention. We then conducted an inquiry into the legal rights and protections afforded to LGBTQ individuals under state and federal laws, followed by a search for evidence-based school practices that have been shown to make a positive difference for LGBTQ youth.

Next, we participated in a four-hour LGBTQ ally training program called *Safezone*, which helped us develop a deeper understanding of the struggles LGBTQ individuals face. *Safezone* is a voluntary network of university students, faculty, staff, and community members who believe in fostering a safe and caring university environment and are committed to being advocates for LGBTQ individuals. Through this training, we were provided specific strategies to reduce discrimination for those who identify as LGBTQ (Gay Alliance, 2015).

We then finalized our learning objectives:

- 1) Principal candidates will understand current terms, issues, and legal rights of LGBTQ youth.
- 2) Principal candidates will learn to implement proactive measures that can assist LGBTQ students in feeling supported and accepted at school.
- 3) Principal candidates will learn school-wide strategies for building a positive and welcoming school culture for LGBTQ youth and members of other diverse groups.

Developing and Implementing our Project. Using empowerment theory as a framework (Cummins, 1986), we developed our initial content with the intention of providing necessary background information while promoting candidates' leadership capacities for minority youth advocacy. We included information about successful practices at other schools and aligned our content to national standards for educational leadership preparation, ISLLC Standard 4 (CCSSO, 2015) and ELCC Standard 5.3 (ELCC 2011).

To build the foundation, we determined that future principals needed information and direct instruction regarding research on LGBTQ students' experiences in schools. Therefore, our first instructional piece was the development of a unit on LGBTQ students in the schools. This unit addressed special issues of LGBTQ youth and included statistics on bullying, violence, and discrimination towards LGBTQ students. The unit also provided strategies for school leaders to combat these issues while encouraging educators to develop supportive relationships with minority students. This unit was composed of a video presentation (made by the professors), a group discussion activity, a reflection assignment, follow-up activities, and resources. A condensed outline for the LGBTQ presentation is included at the end of this Brief.

Then, we contacted the president of the student Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at our university and asked if any members would be interested in being interviewed for a class presentation. We explained that we would be asking the volunteers specifically about their P-12 school experiences as members of the LGBTQ community and their opinions on what educators could do to create better school environments for LGBTQ youth.

There were five university students who volunteered and participated in a 60-minute panel session, which was conducted live and recorded for future classes. The GSA student volunteers openly discussed school experiences, both positive and negative, that stemmed from their sexual orientations. The volunteers also shared several thoughtful ideas about ways principals and teachers could foster responsive and inclusive school environments for LGBTQ youth.

Discussion of Outcomes

The entire LGBTQ unit was implemented in the principal preparation program in the summer and fall semesters, 2015. After unit completion, candidates were asked to provide feedback by responding to several questions. Participation was optional and candidates were not identified in response analysis. The first question asked candidates, “Did the presentations on LGBTQ youth change you in any way?” Thirty-four candidates, out of 57, responded to this question with six indicating “yes,” seven indicating “somewhat,” and 21 indicating “no.” The next question asked candidates, “Did the presentations increase your understanding of this topic and LGBTQ issues?” Thirty-three candidates responded, with 27 indicating “yes,” four indicating “somewhat,” and two indicating “no.” The overall response rate was 59%.

In summary, 62% of participants indicated that the lessons had not changed them, while 82% indicated that the presentations increased their understanding. These data seemed incongruous as they suggested a high percentage of candidates’ perceived the unit helpful in terms of enhancing their understanding of LGBTQ issues, yet a majority did not perceive the unit to be effective in promoting personal change.

To probe deeper, we examined candidates’ open-ended responses to the two questions using content analysis. Holistic coding was employed and then refined through a categorization process to identify themes (Saldana, 2013). For question one, “Did the presentations on LGBTQ youth change you in any way?” we hand-coded 30 comments. Prominent views from participants suggested that they valued the information presented, but already considered themselves to be “open-minded,” “supportive,” and “accepting,” of LGBTQ students; therefore, the unit had not changed them. Predominant comments were categorized under the theme of the unit reinforcing previous beliefs. There were reoccurring positive comments about the interview panel with LGBTQ students and several comments noting appreciation for being open about the topic. There were also a few negative comments, but these were not focused on the unit, but expressed disagreement with LGBTQ lifestyles for personal or religious reasons.

For the second question, we analyzed 26 responses to, “Did the presentations increase your understanding of this topic and LGBTQ issues?” Reoccurring comments from participants’ suggested emotions of empathy or compassion regarding LGBTQ students’ issues and struggles. Candidates repeatedly commented on the need for strong school leadership to combat discrimination, bullying, and social isolation of LGBTQ students. There were also reoccurring comments on the need for educators to build strong and positive relationships with students. Predominant comments were categorized into two themes: Understanding and empathy for LGBTQ individuals, and principal leadership towards supportive environments for LGBTQ students. Under this theme, several subcategories were identified, such as the need for staff

training, strengthening student-teacher relationships, community and parent involvement, inclusive curricula, setting high expectations for student and staff behavior, and taking a strong stance/having firm policies against bullying and mistreatment of LGBTQ students. These subcategories were notable as they indicated candidates' recognition of specific lesson concepts regarding the principals' role in creating positive environments for LGBTQ students.

Reflections of the Practitioners

Our efforts are early steps. We realize that candidates' optional self-reporting represents a limitation to the evaluation of the unit and much more comprehensive analyses of candidate outcomes in relationship to the learning objectives are required in future efforts. Still, participant feedback revealed several strengths and areas for improvement useful for further unit development. Strengths included participants' understanding of specific leadership activities and strategies to foster supportive school climates, while an area for further development involved the unit challenging candidates towards personal growth in LGBTQ advocacy.

In the bigger picture, there is a need for inclusive curricula throughout our principals' preparation program and plans are underway for increasing diversity content in several courses. Ultimately, our goal is to move away from diversity content towards inclusive pedagogy throughout the program.

Nevertheless, at this first stage, we were pleased by the overall positive response from our candidates towards LGBTQ topics and identities. The vast majority of our candidates are practicing teachers, studying to be principals. Their supportive responses towards LGBTQ students reminded us that Cummins (1986) indicated change in the behaviors and attitudes of educators are needed in order to put an end to the disabling of minority students, instead building school cultures that empowered them. Moving forward, we have growing faith in the next generation of school leaders to be the change that Cummins described.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Principals must act ethically and compassionately on behalf of every child. Visions of an equitable, respectful, and inclusive society mean that school leaders must focus on more than student achievement, they must also understand and pay close attention to issues of justice (Rebore, 2014). This call to move towards a more holistic and moral focus requires that principals have the skills allowing them to lead for social justice and courageously intervene on behalf of marginalized individuals and minority groups (Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009; Sanelli & Perreault, 2001). It is a worthy cause to position candidates to be future leaders of global social change (Mugisha, 2015).

Considering the toxic school environments that many LGBTQ students face on a daily basis, it is imperative that principal preparation programs educate and train future school leaders for the important role they play in creating school cultures of acceptance and support of LGBTQ students and other underrepresented groups. We strongly recommend that faculty members at other universities examine their administrator preparation curriculums for inclusion of LGBTQ identities and topics pertinent to promoting positive school environments for all students. At our

university, we intend to do more to educate and prepare school principals for the important role they play in creating school cultures of acceptance and support of LGBTQ youth, and this project represents initial steps.

Outline of LGBTQ Unit for Principal Preparation Program

Learning Objectives

1. Principal candidates will understand current terms, issues, and legal rights of LGBTQ youth.
2. Principal candidates will learn to implement proactive measures that can assist LGBTQ students in feeling supported and accepted at school.
3. Principal candidates will learn school-wide strategies for building a positive and welcoming school culture for LGBTQ youth and members of other diverse groups.

Why? It is an ethical issue. Relevant Standards:

1. ISLLC Standard 4 (2015 revised draft) - Education leaders cultivate a caring and inclusive school community dedicated to student learning, academic success and personal well-being of every student.
2. ELCC Standard 5: Ethics and integrity. ELCC 5.3: Candidates understand and can safeguard the values of democracy, equity, and diversity within the school.

Why? It is a legal issue. Legal rights of LGBTQ students:

1. State level - Many states have anti-bullying laws protecting all students, but they often do not name specific groups or cover cyberbullying. <http://nobullying.com/discrimination-and-bullying-laws-by-state/>
2. State level - Nineteen states have passed specific laws prohibiting discrimination of LGBTQ students. <http://glsen.org/article/state-maps>
3. Federal level - Title IX of the federal Education Amendment Acts of 1972 protects all students from sex discrimination in educational programs receiving federal funds. Recently, courts have ruled that schools must attempt to protect LGBTQ students from harassment just as students must be protected on the basis of other characteristics (e.g. race, religion, gender). Additionally, schools cannot ignore harassment on the basis that LGBTQ students should expect to be harassed. Students have a constitution right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to be open about their sexual orientation and gender identity. Principals should remember that federal law always trumps state law.

In summary, principals have an ethical and legal responsibility to protect all students, including LGBTQ students, from harassment or discrimination.

Research on LGBTQ Students in Schools

Research on LGBTQ students indicates that many have negative school experiences, primarily in the following areas (outlined in the 2011 National School Climate Survey):

1. Hearing biased language at school from other students and staff members.
2. Feeling unsafe at school due to experiences of harassment and assault.
 - a. Lack of intervention on behalf of LGBTQ students by staff members exacerbates this.

- b. LGBTQ students are more likely to have poor attendance and may miss school in order to avoid hostile environments.
- c. Students who experienced victimization reported a negative impact on their academic achievement and long-term educational aspirations.
- d. Harassment and assault in schools are related to increased psychological issues.
3. Discriminatory school policies and practices:
 - a. Comprehensive school policies and practices that explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identify/expression are most effective at combating bullying, but are not found in most schools.
 - b. For transgender students, proper use of names, nouns, and terms, are important.
 - c. Protection of students' confidentiality in terms of gender identification is important.
 - d. Restroom availability, dressing/showering for PE, athletic wear, etc., are issues to be considered ahead of time.
 - e. There is evidence of increased negative incidences for LGBTQ students in athletics and physical education programs.
4. The availability and impact of supportive school resources:
 - a. The presence of Gay-Straight Alliances has been shown to increase LGBTQ students' feelings of "connectedness" and also increase school safety.
 - b. Inclusive curricula (curricula that positively represent LGBTQ people, history, language, and events) promote school safety and greater acceptance of LGBTQ students.
 - c. LGBTQ students report that supportive educators make a crucial positive difference in terms of their school experiences and their psychological well-being.
5. Interesting demographic differences in the 2011 National School Climate Survey:
 - a. Compared to other LGBTQ students, transgender and gender non-conforming students face the most hostile school environments.
 - b. LGBTQ students in the Northeast and West report lower levels of victimization than those in the Midwest and South.
 - c. LGBTQ students in urban areas report lower levels of victimization than those in rural/small town. Students in rural/small town report lower levels of supportive services.
 - d. Middle school LGBTQ students reported the highest levels of victimization and the lowest levels of school supports (Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Bartkiewicz, M. J., Boesen, M. J., & Palmer, N. A. (2012). *The 2011 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN).

What Principals Can and Should Do

1. Establish, publicize, and enforce a harassment policy that specifically names LGBTQ. Make sure cyberbullying is included. Throughout the year, provide written and verbal reminders of the policy (especially important during first few years).
2. Model and expect staff to intervene in support of LGBTQ students.
3. Support the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance or similar student club.
4. Involve and communicate expectations with parents.
5. Make sure LGBTQ students know where to go for information and support, and that supportive staff and services are in place.
6. Implement inclusive curriculum.

7. Establish norms for logistics of handling LGBTQ students' records and facility issues like restrooms and locker rooms.
8. Provide staff training on preventing LGBTQ harassment and discrimination (Griffin & Ouellett, 2002; Kosciw et al, 2012; Strom, Strom, Wingate, Kraska, & Beckert, 2012; Szalacha, 2003; Wormer & McKinney, 2003).

Recommended Resources

1. Southern Poverty Law Center: <http://www.splcenter.org/what-we-do/LGBTQ-rights>
2. The Welcoming Schools approach: <http://www.welcomingschools.org/pages/what-is-the-welcoming-schools-approach>
3. Inclusive curriculum: <http://www.glsen.org/educate/resources/curriculum>
4. For P.E. teachers, coaches, and athletic directors: <http://sports.glsen.org/resources/>
5. GSA Network: <http://www.gsanetwork.org>
6. Teaching Tolerance: <http://www.tolerance.org>

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