

WISCONSIN SCHOOL COUNSELOR PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL  
CLIMATE EXPERIENCES OF GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH

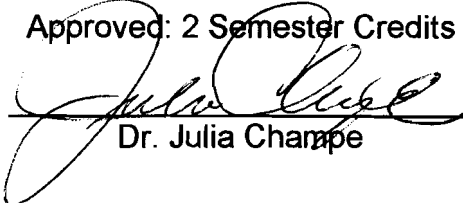
by

Rebecca Busch

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the  
Master of Science Degree  
in

Family Studies and Human Development

Approved: 2 Semester Credits

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Julia Champe", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Dr. Julia Champe

The Graduate School  
University of Wisconsin-Stout

May, 2006

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ABSTRACT

Prior to this decade, research on gay and lesbian adolescents has been scarce and has focused on the 'coming out' process, mental health issues, and stereotypes and discrimination the population encounters. More recently, research has begun to examine school experiences of gay and lesbian youth. Gay and lesbian adolescents face the same developmental challenges as their straight peers do with the added burden of dealing with negative social and psychological school climate experiences that significantly impact their ability to learn. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2001), note that gay youth spend a high level of energy planning how to get to and from school safely, avoiding hallways to avoid homophobic slurs, and escape being beaten up in gym class. Succinctly, gay and lesbian youth learn to become invisible to avoid verbal and physical attacks. Numerous research studies (Thurlow, 2001; Peters, 2003; Frankfurt, 1999; Ngo, 2003; HRW, 2001) have shown that homophobic language and

types of harassment are two of the more prevalent experiences gay and lesbian youth experience in the school setting.

The purpose of this study is to gain the perspective of Wisconsin school counselors on identifying school climate experiences of gay and lesbian youth, as related to overall climate experiences, homophobic language, and harassment. A survey was designed to explore homophobic language, including the words and phrases used to offend gay and lesbian youth in the school setting. Various forms and effects of harassment were also explored on the survey. An analysis of the literature, explanation of methodology, discussion of results from the study, limitations, and recommendations for future research and the profession are also included.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Until recently, homosexuality has been viewed as an adult issue and little was known about the experiences of gay and lesbian adolescents, including the number of gay students within a school setting (McFarland & Dupuis, 2001). A study by Ginsberg (1998) concluded that one in twenty students in a public school is likely to be gay or lesbian, or approximately one student in every classroom in the United States. Therefore, in a high school with 1,000 students, it is estimated that approximately 50 students identify as gay or lesbian. Research has shown that this population is often identified as a minority in the school setting, due to the estimated low number of students. Due to their minority status, and the heterosexism and homophobia prevalent in society, gay and lesbian youth face stigmatization and numerous stressors in the school environment. Stressors include social stigmatization, isolation, threats of physical violence, verbal harassment from peers and teachers, and actual acts of physical violence. One main stressor in the school setting for gay and lesbian youth is homophobic language.

Homophobic language is a significant contributor to the social and psychological stressors in the lives of gay and lesbian students (Thurlow, 2001). The continued use of homophobic, belittling terms jeopardizes the mental health of young gay and lesbian individuals. As a result of continual verbal assaults, these students grow to believe that their sexual orientation is wrong and shameful (Thurlow, 2001; Peters, 2003; Frankfurt, 1999; Ngo, 2003, HRW, 2001).

Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth (1997) found that gay and lesbian students surveyed indicated a desire for adults to show greater acceptance and tolerance of their



needs; they want schools to be safer places for learning, without the fear of becoming victims of homophobic acts. The researchers claimed that, when gay and lesbian youth witness derogatory language use by peers and teachers, paired with a lack of discipline towards the offending student for using homophobic language, an increase in negative feelings occurs. Negative feelings are associated with higher incidences of running away, higher risk of suicidal ideation, deterioration in academic performance, and suicide attempts for gay and lesbian youth (Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1997).

When school systems fail to protect gay and lesbian students from homophobia and harassment, the victimized youth may feel they are faced with a traumatic dilemma. HRW (2001) argued that the youth must decide between struggling in isolation to survive the harassment as they try to gain an education, or escaping the negative environment by dropping out of school. Moreover, the problems gay and lesbian youth experience at school may be exacerbated if they experience rejection from their families and communities (HRW, 2001). Many choose the easier of the two struggles and drop out of school. Therefore, the importance of staff interactions with gay and lesbian youth are crucial in order to increase the overall school climate experience and to work against homophobic language and harassment.

### *Statement of the Problem*

The purpose of this study is to gain the perspective of Wisconsin school counselors on identifying school climate experiences of gay and lesbian youth, as related to overall climate experiences, homophobic language, and harassment. The paper investigates current research on school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth. It also explores homophobic language, including the words and phrases used to

offend gay and lesbian youth in the school setting. Various forms and effects of harassment are also explored. An analysis of the literature, explanation of methodology, discussion of results from the study, limitations, and recommendations for future research and the profession are also included.

### *Research Objectives*

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Investigate school counselor perspectives on school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth in Wisconsin.
2. Identify school counselor awareness of frequency and forms of homophobic language used between students in the school setting.
3. Recommend interventions schools can use to decrease levels of harassment and increase the safety for gay and lesbian students.

### *Definition of Terms*

The following terms are defined because they appear frequently in literature and research on school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth.

*Gender Expression*- All of the external characteristics and behaviors that are socially defined as masculine or feminine, including dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interaction (HRW, 2001).

*GLBTQ*- A common abbreviation used to denote sexual minority individuals who self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning their sexual orientation (HRW, 2001).

*Heterosexism*- The belief that the only natural and acceptable orientation is heterosexuality (Ngo, 2003).

*Homophobia*- An irrational and distorted view of homosexuality and homosexual individuals (Owens, 1998).

*Sexual Orientation*- One's attraction to the same sex, the opposite sex, or both sexes (HRW, 2001).

### *Assumptions and Limitations*

It is assumed that there are some gay and lesbian students in every school in Wisconsin. It is also assumed that these students have experienced some type of homophobic language, and other forms of harassment. The researcher also assumed that school counselors in Wisconsin have their own perception on school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth and that their perceptions are relevant for understanding current school climates in Wisconsin.

Limitations to the study include that the survey used was developed specifically for this study and had no measures of reliability or validity. Second, the sample was not random. The participants were attendees at the Wisconsin School Counselor Association Conference and it was assumed that they were practicing, licensed school counselors who are currently working in the profession. While attempts were made to distribute surveys to all attendees, return rates indicated that due to the high volume of conference participants, it was very difficult to distribute a survey to everyone entering the opening ceremony.

### *Methodology*

The study was conducted at the 2006 annual Wisconsin School Counselor Association (WSCA) conference on February 23-24, 2006. Data was collected through a survey distributed to the attendees before the opening ceremony at the conference.

The researcher and eight assistants handed out the survey as the school counselors entered the room before the opening ceremony. Participants had the choice to fill out the survey and turn it into a drop box anonymously following the ceremony, or throughout the day. The researcher then analyzed and reported the data using simple percentages and descriptive statistics.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review analyzes recent research on school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth. Research and literature from peer reviewed journals and books found homophobic language and various forms of harassment to be part of gay students' experience in school. A majority of the research focuses on 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students, or students who are 15-18 years old.

### School Climate Experiences

Jordan, Vaughan, and Woodworth (1997) completed a comprehensive study of school climate experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. The researchers surveyed 34 gay, lesbian, and bisexual high school students (14 females and 20 males) ranging from 15-19 years old from a metropolitan area in Chicago. The questionnaire used previously developed scales and original questions to gather student descriptions about positive experiences, coping skills, and negative experiences that occurred in the school setting. Emotional experiences were assessed using a five-point likert scale.

Results indicated that 70.5% of participants reported feeling positive about their sexual orientation and 85% reported a positive coming out experience. Forty-one percent of students reported that information related to their sexual orientation was available from staff and 73.5% said at least one person in the school was supportive of their sexual orientation (Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1997).

Negative experiences and behaviors were also reported by the youth. On average, participants reported hearing words like 'faggot' or 'dyke' at least once a day from their fellow students. The results showed that participants felt threatened or afraid, separated, alienated, alone, and rejected on a likert range of 2.5-3, meaning

'sometimes'. A total of 50% of participants reported experiences of harassment, with 47% of those resulting in a physical fight.

For gay and lesbian youth, the presence of homophobic language and the threat of violence are often part of their negative school climate experience.

### *Homophobic Language*

Derogatory and homophobic slurs cause a decrease in the social and psychological climate of gay youth (Thurlow, 2001). Gay youth hear particular homophobic phrases used repeatedly and do not hear school staff intervening. Several authors (Thurlow, 2001; Ngo, 2003; Peters, 2003; & Woody, 2003) have researched what phrases are being used and what meanings those have for gay youth.

### *Words Used*

"That's so gay" is a frequently used phrase by youth in today's schools. Oftentimes, youth are not trying to harass their peers with this statement, but rather use it to denote difference or describe something stupid or undesirable (Thurlow, 2001; Ngo, 2003; Woody, 2003). Nevertheless, research indicates such commonly used phrases do carry negative and potential damaging consequences for GLBTQ youth.

Thurlow (2001) surveyed 377 students who were 14-15 years old from five different high schools. Subjects were collected through a random convenience sample in two major English or Welsh cities. The participants were 51% male and 49% female, with a third of them identifying themselves as coming from ethnic minority backgrounds. The teens were asked, "What words do people at school use for slugging someone off? Write down as many words as you can." The participants listed the belittling words they heard at school and those that the students felt were the most inappropriate or taboo.

Thurlow argued that regardless of the intention, the degrading meanings of these terms contaminates the social- psychological climate that GLBTQ teens must live in.

Homophobic words accounted for 10% (590 words) of the 6000 terms identified (Thurlow, 2001). This list was smaller than the sexist items (28%), but much larger than the racist terms (7%). Out of the 590 homophobic terms identified, the participants rated only 28% of them in the "worst" category. A higher number of homophobic words were reported by the female participants, while the male participants identified more of the terms in the 'worst' category. Thurlow's study has shown that homophobic terms are in teens' vocabulary and the words are used to belittle someone else.

Thurlow (2001) identified one of the most derogatory common words to be 'gay.' He described the word "gay" as the "playground weapon of preference," but also finds it ironic that young homosexual people use the same word to describe themselves. Thurlow argued that, because many students belittle each other using a word that also serves as an identity descriptor for some, the result for the GLBTQ victimized teen is often a lower self-esteem.

The attitudes that the teens reported in regards to homophobic words do not mean that this is indicative of how the teens actually feel towards the gay and lesbian population (Thurlow, 2001). Rather, some teens simply use terms like 'gay' to describe something that is undesirable or stupid. Thurlow argued that the use of the term in that context does not necessarily mean that the teen has negative feelings towards their gay and lesbian peers, but rather, teens may be unaware of the damage that their words cause when used carelessly.

Ngo's (2003) research also found homophobia and heteronormativity specific to language use. The phrase "that's so gay" referred to anything the students found to be stupid. The observer also heard phrases such as "That's gay," "You're gay" and "Fag." Students reported using these terms to describe something stupid or boring.

In connection with Ngo's research results on homophobic language, a network of students, school counselors, school social workers, teachers, and administrators used action research to address the problem of homophobia and language in Nassau County, on the eastern side of New York (Peters, 2003). School climate surveys were returned by 1,166 students and 12 participated in comprehensive peer interviews. The high school students surveyed were equally divided amongst males and females, and most were in 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Results indicated that 94% of participants had heard 'that's so gay' as a putdown and 65% had heard 'faggot' and 'dyke' used. Participants stated that these putdowns are heard in all parts of the school. Fifty-six percent of students also heard anti-gay expressions used by their family members. Forty-four percent of participants stated that no one intervenes when these comments are made. Students were identified as the most frequent group making the comments, while 18% of participants reported hearing comments from coaches, 15% heard comments from teachers, and 14% heard comments from security guards (Peters, 2003).

Homophobic language has been identified as having a negative impact on the social and psychological climate of gay and lesbian youth. "That's so gay" is a frequently used phrase by youth in today's schools. The phrase is often used to denote



difference, describe something stupid, or to explain behavior that deviates from stereotypical gender roles (Thurlow, 2001; Ngo, 2003; Woody, 2003).

### *Staff and Administration Role*

Much of the research on homophobic language in high schools has investigated the role staff and administrators have in response to language overheard between students. Some studies (Frankfurt, 1999; Carter, 1997; HRW, 2001; Horn & Nucci, 2003) found students reported that staff and administration condoned homophobic language when the adults failed to intervene.

Frankfurt (1999) argued that when staff and administrators hear homophobic language in the hallways and do nothing about it, they send a message to students that phrases like "That is so gay" and "You're dead, fag" are acceptable. Schools with a large student body are challenged by the high staff to student ratio. This can lead to increased homophobic remarks and teasing because fewer staff are available to monitor and supervise student behavior. Frankfurt recommended that staff stop name-calling immediately when it is heard to increase the chance that it does not escalate into physical violence.

Carter (1997) found that students from Des Moines, Iowa heard anti-gay comments an average of 25 times a day or every 14 minutes in school and in 97% of those cases, students reported that teachers did nothing. Students who joke around using homophobic phrases often may have the assumption no one around them is gay, and therefore, phrases are okay and acceptable. One student stated, "I was here for four years and I never once felt valued. People would call me 'fag' and adults would never say anything" (p. 25).

Horn & Nucci (2003) also reviewed the consequences of staff not intervening in homophobic language and harassment in the school setting. The researchers argued that failure to intervene when homophobic language is used legitimizes a norm that it is appropriate for gay and lesbian students to be victims of harassment. The acceptance of homophobic language can then lead to the legitimization of more severe forms of prejudice in the future.

### *Harassment*

O'Connor (1994) reported that the U.S. Department of Justice states that gay and lesbian youth are the most frequent victims of hate crimes; the school setting being the primary place for this type of violence. Harassment and abuse directed towards gay students exists within the broader issue of sexual and gender violence in society. The effects of harassment for gay and lesbian youth are often severe and damaging to the youths' self esteem (HRW, 2001; McFarland & Dupuis, 2001; Peters, 2003; Fontaine, 1998).

HRW (2001) argued that the failure of staff to address homophobic harassment affects the education of all students, not just the students who are being harassed. The participants noted that sometimes harassment is not verbal, but includes looks, whispering, rumors, and gossip. One participant claimed, "It's not just name calling. I don't know how schools can isolate it like that. When are they going to see it as a problem? When we're bloody on the ground in front of them" (p.35)? Students who are targets of physical harassment receive the message that they are not worthy of protection, while the students perpetrating the harassment come to understand that they are free to harass their gay peers.

Participants also reported that physical harassment occurred out of the direct view of school staff (HRW, 2001). Consequently, students avoid spending time in hallways, bathrooms, stairs, locker rooms, or other 'teacher free' areas. Any areas such as the lunchroom, buses, or athletic fields where students are likely to be grouped in large numbers are also avoided. Some of the participants also reported feeling unsafe in their own homes due to violent phone calls and vandalism to their property.

In a survey of school counselors' attitudes, Fontaine (1998) also identified verbal and physical harassment of gay and lesbian students as an issue. The researcher distributed 350 surveys at the Annual Conference of the Pennsylvania School Counselors' Association (PSCA) in 1995. Fontaine (1998) used the School Counselor Survey of Sexual Minority Youth Issues (SCSSMY) to gather the results. A total of 101 surveys (29%) were returned from counselors representing all grade levels. The average participant was a 42-year-old, White female from a junior or senior high school setting with 11 years of work experience. A majority of the respondents worked in small to moderately sized (501-1,000 students) rural or suburban school.

Contrary to HRW's (2001) finding of harassment occurring outside the view of staff, Fontaine (1998) reported that 33% of counselors had observed over 43 separate incidents of student harassment that included name calling, teasing, pushing, hitting, shoving, and ridicule. Some counselors also reported that students had dropped out of their schools due to persistent physical harassment. Students who are physically harassed on a frequent basis often do not want to report it to staff and administration or their parents, for fear of the violence becoming worse (HRW, 2001).

Physical harassment of gay and lesbian youth occurs in the school setting often as an escalation of verbal harassment that went unchallenged by school staff. HRW (2001) found that harassment often occurs outside of the view of staff members, while Fontaine (1998) found that school counselors observed incidents of harassment. The victims of physical harassment receive the message that they are not protected and their school is an unsafe environment to learn in. Due to a lack of staff intervention, the perpetrators of the violence learn that it is acceptable to harass their gay peers (HRW, 2001). The effects of physical harassment for gay and lesbian youth are often severe and damaging to the youths' self esteem (HRW, 2001; McFarland & Dupuis, 2001; Peters, 2003; Fontaine, 1998).

Homophobic language, physical harassment, and staff attitudes are all part of gay students' school climate. This review of literature demonstrated that gay and lesbian youth are socially and psychologically impacted by their peers' derogatory and homophobic slurs, physical attacks, lack of staff intervention, and school staff attitudes. There are numerous ways schools can enhance the school climate for gay and lesbian youth so that their energy can be spent learning, rather than using energy to remain invisible.

A majority of research surveyed students' perceptions of their gay and lesbian peers. Only Fontaine's (1998) study included counselor attitudes towards gay and lesbian youth. More research is needed on this important topic in order to raise the awareness school counselors have about gay and lesbian youth. Increased awareness leads to decreased ignorance and more opportunity to provide and recommend appropriate interventions within the school setting. The goal is that with increased

understanding, school counselors can be safe people for gay and lesbian youth to reach out too. The following chapter explains the methodology for the researcher's study, which was created to gain school counselor perceptions of school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth.

### Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to identify school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth in Wisconsin. The objectives of the study are to identify school counselor perceptions of current school climate experiences evidenced by homophobic language and harassment present in school. It is hoped that, as a result of the findings, suggested interventions will be developed to improve the school climate for gay and lesbian youth. The sections addressed in this chapter include subject selection and description, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis, and limitations.

#### *Selection and Description of Sample*

The subjects of the population include Wisconsin school counselors who attended the annual WSCA conference on February 23-24, 2006. It has been assumed that the subjects were currently working as licensed school counselors in Wisconsin. The co-chair of the conference was contacted to approve the study prior to the researcher distributing the instrument at the conference. The non-random sample consisted of those counselors who were willing to participate in the survey during the conference. The school counselors willing to participate then read the implied consent form and completed the survey. A copy of the consent form is located in Appendix A. There were 700 surveys produced for distribution and a total of 580 were handed out to the attendees due to a high volume of people entering the room at one time.

#### *Instrumentation*

The survey was created specifically for the study in order to gain insight on the objectives of the study; therefore no measures of validity or reliability have been documented. The content and questions included in the instrument were created by

examining the pertinent literature related to school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth. The survey was designed to be easy to fill out in a short period of time during the opening ceremony of the conference, or at a later time throughout the day.

The one page survey included 12 questions; three of them were fill in the blank, and the following nine required a checkmark at the appropriate response. The first three items were questions regarding the demographic information of the subjects. The demographic items asked for the subject's gender, age, years as a school counselor, school setting, community setting, and size of school. The next three items were questions regarding overall school climate demographics in relation to the gay and lesbian population. Following those, five questions regarding language between students were asked. The last question asked about the prevalence of physical, verbal, and sexual harassment, as well as rumors and gossip towards gay and lesbian students. A copy of the finalized survey is located in Appendix B.

#### *Data Collection Procedures*

Data was collected through a survey that was distributed before the opening ceremony at the 2006 annual WSCA conference. The researcher and eight assistants handed out the survey as the school counselors entered the room before the opening ceremony. Attendees could choose to participate and were able to turn the survey in anonymously into a drop box following the ceremony. Four brightly colored drop boxes were located in the back of the room, one at the main registration table, and one at the University of Wisconsin-Stout table. The researcher and the assistants handed out breath mints at the completion and dismissal of the opening ceremony as participants turned in their surveys. The researcher then picked up the drop boxes containing the

completed surveys. The other two boxes remained available throughout the conference so that counselors had more than one opportunity to turn in their results to the survey.

### *Data Analysis*

The information provided by the counselors was examined to determine their perspective on school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth in Wisconsin. The researcher separated the surveys by school level, including elementary, middle, and high school, and those counselors who work in a kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> (K-12) grade building. The information was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

### *Limitations*

The survey was developed specifically for this study and therefore had no measures of reliability or validity. Second, due to the high volume of conference participants, it was very difficult to distribute a survey to everyone entering the opening ceremony, which lowered the response rate. Thirdly, the survey could have gotten mixed in with other paperwork from the conference, which would mean the counselors would not put it into the drop box. This would also lower the return rate and total number of participating subjects. Upon the dismissal of the opening ceremony, it was also difficult for the participating counselors to return their surveys into the drop boxes as numerous people were trying to exit and attend their first informational session.

Another limitation of surveys includes that some participants chose not to answer all of the questions. Attendees handed in surveys with missing answers and incomplete information, or participants gave more than one answer to a question, which only required one response. The survey also stated to "please mark any that apply" for two



questions that should have required only one answer, so some attendees may have been confused by the question.

## Chapter IV: Results

This chapter will include a discussion of the demographics of the population surveyed at WSCA, an analysis of the questions asked, qualitative information received, and a summary of the findings.

### *Summary of Participant Demographics*

The researcher received 213 out of the 580 surveys that were distributed at the WSCA conference, a 36.7% response rate. Overall, elementary, middle, and high school counselors were represented proportionally. From the surveys received, 31.5% ( $n=67$ ) were from elementary counselors; 26.8% ( $n=57$ ) from middle school; 28.6% ( $n=61$ ) from high school, and 13.1% ( $n=28$ ) of the surveys received were from counselors who worked in a K-12 grade school.

In comparison to the overall WSCA membership, the sample received was fairly proportional. The researcher contacted WSCA to obtain data on their overall membership demographics. Out of 1,319 WSCA members listed, 953 counselors are employed in an elementary, middle, high, or K-12 school setting. The remaining members were either students, retired, or worked at the post-secondary level. According to WSCA's membership data, 28.4% ( $n=271$ ) of members work at the elementary level; 17.6% ( $n=168$ ) at the middle school level; 33.4% ( $n=318$ ) at high school, and 20.6% ( $n=196$ ) are employed in a K-12 setting. Overall, in comparison with the WSCA demographics and survey results, the middle school counselors were over-represented in this study.

## Demographics

The researcher asked six demographic questions to gather information about the participants. Those questions included age, gender, years as a counselor, school level, community setting, and school size.

### *Age*

Overall, the participants' ages were on a close distribution. Out of 213 participants, 18.3% ( $n=39$ ) were between the ages of 50-54; this represented the most prevalent age group. Following that, a majority fell equally between the ages of 25 and 59.

### *Gender*

A majority of the participants, 81.7% ( $n=174$ ) were female, with males accounting for only 18.3% ( $n=39$ ) of the population. The high school level had the highest number of male counselors ( $n=18$ ).

### *Years as a School Counselor*

Participants' years in the profession ranged from 0-34 years. The highest representation were those counselors who have worked in the profession for 5-9 years, 26.8% ( $n=57$ ), closely followed by those who have worked for 0-4 years as a school counselor (25.8%). Participants who have worked from 10-14 years represented the next highest group of participants, 25%. Only 2.3% ( $n=5$ ) of the participants reported they had worked in the profession for 30-34 years.

### *School Level*

As mentioned previously, elementary, middle, and high school counselors were represented proportionally. From the surveys received, 31.5% ( $n=67$ ) were elementary

counselors, 26.8% ( $n=57$ ) from middle school, 28.6 % ( $n=61$ ) from high school, and 13.1% ( $n=28$ ) of the surveys received were from counselors who worked in a kindergarten-12<sup>th</sup> (K-12) grade school.

#### *Community Setting*

The survey asked the participants to determine if their school was located in rural, suburban, or urban settings. A majority, 52.1% ( $n=111$ ), reported working in a rural school. A total of 31% ( $n=66$ ) of participants work in a suburban setting, and 14.6% ( $n= 31$ ) of participants are employed in an urban setting. Five participants did not identify their school setting.

#### *School Size*

For the purposes of this study, a small school was defined as having 1-501 students. A moderate sized school was defined as having 501-1,000 students and a large school was defined as having an enrollment of over 1, 001 students. A total of 45.1% ( $n=96$ ) of participants reported being employed in a small school. Thirty-one percent ( $n=66$ ) are employed at a moderate sized school and 15% ( $n=32$ ) of participants are employed at a small school. In addition, 8.9% ( $n=19$ ) of participants did not identify size of school.

#### *Item Analysis-School Climate Demographics*

The following three questions were asked to obtain information on the participants' perspectives on current school demographics in relation to the GLBTQ population.

*In your school, how many students identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (GLBTQ)?*

Participants were given the choice of ranges between 0 and 38 or more individuals. A majority, 83.1% ( $n=177$ ) of participants, reported there were 0-5 students in their school who identify as GLBTQ. Only 8.5% ( $n=18$ ) of participants reported they believed there were 6-11 students who identify as being GLBTQ in their school. Only four participants reported they believe that 38 or more of their students are GLBTQ.

*Have you met with any gay students on an individual basis?*

This question, to which participants could reply yes or no, received almost equal responses. A total of 46.9% ( $n=100$ ) stated that they have met with gay students in the past. Fifty-two percent ( $n=111$ ) stated that they had not met with any gay students on an individual basis. Two participants did not answer the question. On a school level basis, 70.5% ( $n=43$ ) of high school counselors stated they had met with a gay student individually, while only 19.4% ( $n=13$ ) of elementary counselors reported they had done so.

*In your school, how many staff or faculty members identify as GLBTQ?*

A majority of participants, 98.6% ( $n=210$ ) stated that 0-5 staff or faculty members at their school identified as GLBTQ. One participant responded that 6-11 faculty members identified as GLBTQ, and two participants chose not to respond to the question.

#### *Item Analysis-Language Use between Students*

The next five questions asked participants to report their perceptions of the frequency of homophobic language use between students and the meaning of certain phrases in use in their schools. The participants were also asked about their perceptions of frequency of interventions when the language is heard.

*In one day, how many times do you hear students call each other terms such as 'Dyke' or 'Faggot'?*

A total of 77.5% ( $n=165$ ) participants responded that students use these terms 0-3 times a day. Following that, 15% ( $n=32$ ) reported the terms are used 4-7 times in one day. Only eight participants reported the terms are used 8-11 times a day.

*In one day, how many times do you hear the phrase 'That's so gay' used by students?*

Approximately half, 56.3% ( $n=120$ ), of the participants felt that the phrase was used only 0-3 times a day. A total of 24.9% ( $n=53$ ) felt that the phrase was used 4-7 times a day between students. Only four participants (1.9%) responded that they heard the phrase 32 times or more in day.

*Do you perceive this language use as harmful, negative, meaningless, homophobic, or other? (Please mark any that apply)*

This question received a total of 453 responses since participants were able to check more than one response. Out of the 453 responses, 37.7% ( $n=171$ ) felt the language was harmful. One hundred sixty-nine participants (37.3%) believed such language was negative. A total of 6.8% ( $n=31$ ) of participants thought that this language is meaningless to students. Sixty-nine participants, 15.2%, felt that the language was homophobic. Lastly, 2.6% ( $n=12$ ) responded that the language had 'other' meanings.

*How often do you intervene when you hear these words or phrases between students?*

Participants had the option of choosing always, often, rarely, or never for this question. A majority of participants, 57.3% ( $n=122$ ), stated that they 'always' intervened

when they hear such language used between students. Eighty participants, 37.6%, reported they intervene 'often.' Four percent ( $n=9$ ) stated that they 'rarely' intervene. Only one participant stated that they 'never' intervene when they hear the language used between students.

*How often do others intervene when these words or phrases are heard between students?*

Only 16.9% ( $n=36$ ) felt that others intervene 'always.' Following that, 48.4% ( $n=10$ ) felt that others intervened 'often' when they heard the words and phrases between students. A total of 29.6% ( $n=63$ ) felt that others 'rarely' intervened. Lastly, only two participants felt that others 'never' intervened when they heard the language. Nine participants did not respond to the question.

#### *Item Analysis-Harassment*

The last survey item questioned participants on their awareness of various forms of harassment toward GLBTQ students in their schools. Physical harassment was defined as pushing, shoving, or hitting. Verbal harassment was defined as name calling, teasing, or threatening. Sexual harassment was defined as inappropriate touching, sexual comments, or assault. Rumors and gossip were also included as a choice for form of harassment.

*Are you aware of any of the following occurring toward GLBTQ students in school?*

A total of 9.8% ( $n= 33$ ) stated that physical harassment towards the GLBTQ population happens in their school. Many participants, 27% ( $n=91$ ) stated that verbal harassment occurs. A total of 6.2% ( $n=21$ ) reported that sexual harassment occurs.

Lastly, 37.7% ( $n=127$ ) responded that rumors and gossip towards GLBTQ students occurs. In addition, 19.3% ( $n=63$ ) chose not to respond to the question.

### *Qualitative Responses*

While the survey did not include space for written responses, some participants chose to write additional information on their surveys. These qualitative responses were helpful because they provided in-depth information about participants' perceptions about particular issues or programs that occur at these participants' schools.

In response to the question, *"Do you perceive this language use as..."*, participants wrote in additional descriptors next to the 'other' category. Words included "degrading," "illegal," "ignorant," "overused," "uninformed," "senseless," "uneducated," and "bigoted." One participant wrote, "Too them, it's like slang and it is way too commonly used." An elementary counselor commented, "Most students using such terms have no idea of the gravity or meaning of what they are saying." Another stated, "Many middle school students know it's a putdown, but are not aware of the actual meaning."

Other participants offered information regarding policies and programming within their schools. One participant stated, "We take care of harassment when it occurs. If I was aware of any, it wouldn't be happening." Another stated, "I also do a discussion on the appropriateness of the comment 'That's gay'; with all my sixth graders within a boundaries lesson and with all of the seventh graders within a sexual harassment presentation." In response to terms used, a participant shared, "We recently implemented a plan of 'Stepping up Respect' and don't allow the terms." One participant wrote a paragraph on school policy regarding harassment in response to the question



about harassment in the school setting. "You need to ask what is done about this- at our school, all of the above causes a discipline referral to an administrator. If it continues, it becomes a police referral. As the LGBTQ support group facilitator, I deal with this on a weekly basis. It is most prevalent in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and then the kids learn it's not acceptable." This participant was employed at a large, suburban high school.

Two participants shared their thoughts on how many students that they believed were GLTBQ in their school. A middle school counselor from a suburban, moderate sized school stated, "I've met with students who have later 'come out' but were not at that point in middle school. Presenting issues were depression, self-mutilation, and suicidal thoughts." Another middle school counselor from a rural, small school shared, "FYI, I have suspected students to be GLBTQ, but in middle school I have yet to actually know of those being identified. When I worked in a high school, I ran a group for gay students."

### *Summary of Data*

The data collected at the 2006 WSCA conference of school counselor perceptions of school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth gave some interesting and noteworthy results. This study was conducted to educate school counselors on the reality of school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth. The researcher received 213 out of the 580 surveys that were distributed at the WSCA conference, a 36.7% response rate. From the surveys received, 31.5% ( $n=67$ ) were from elementary counselors; 26.8% ( $n=57$ ) from middle school; 28.6% ( $n=61$ ) from high school, and 13.1% ( $n=28$ ) of the surveys received were from counselors who worked in a K-12 school.

In comparison to the overall WSCA membership, the sample received was fairly proportional. According to WSCA's membership data, 28.4 % ( $n=271$ ) of members work at the elementary level; 17.6% ( $n=168$ ) at the middle school level; 33.4% ( $n=318$ ) at high school, and 20.6% ( $n=196$ ) are employed in a K-12 setting. Overall, in comparison with the WSCA demographics and the researcher's survey results, the middle school counselors were over-represented.

When analyzing the demographic data, the most prevalent participant was female, between the ages of 50-54, who worked at a small middle school (1-501 students) in a rural setting. School climate demographics concluded that a majority, 83.1% ( $n=177$ ) of participants, reported there were 0-5 students in their school who identify as GLBTQ. In addition, 52% ( $n=111$ ) stated that they had not met with any gay students on an individual basis. A majority of participants also stated that 98.6% ( $n=210$ ) only 0-5 staff or faculty members at their school identified as GLBTQ.

The following chapter will discuss the results of the questions regarding language and harassment, and therefore provide implications for how school counselors can intervene to make their schools safer for all students and staff.

## Chapter V: Discussion

This chapter will include a discussion of the results, limitations of the study and provide conclusions. It will also give recommendations for future research and for educators.

### *Discussion of Results*

Data from the 2006 WSCA conference gave some noteworthy results. The most interesting statistic included that 83.1% ( $n=177$ ) of participants think that 0-5 students at their school identify as GLBTQ. A study by Ginsberg (1998) concluded that one in twenty students in a public school is likely to be gay or lesbian, or approximately one student in every classroom in the United States. Therefore, in a high school with 1,000 students, it is estimated that approximately 50 students identify as gay or lesbian. Results from this study indicated that a majority of counselors are not aware of how many students in their school may be GLBTQ and therefore, could be facing issues such as homophobic language, or harassment within the school setting. It is important to remember, however, that elementary counselors were the most highly represented group in this study ( $n=67$ ), and therefore that could be why this statistic is high. A total of 24 high school counselors (42.6%) reported that there may be six or more students in their school that identify as GLBTQ, whereas, only two elementary counselors felt this way.

Approximately 99% ( $n=210$ ) of participants reported that there are only 0-5 staff or faculty members in their school that identify as GLBTQ. This high percentage could be related to many different ideas. Staff or faculty may not be 'out' to their co-workers in a school setting, which would cause participants to think the numbers are very low.

Also, GLBTQ individuals may feel that the school environment is not conducive to their sexual orientation and therefore they have chosen not to enter the profession of education. Lastly, this high percentage could be related to lack of awareness of how many staff or faculty do in fact identify as GLBTQ.

Related to the number of gay students in school, on a school level basis, 70.5% ( $n=43$ ) of high school counselors stated they had met with a gay student individually, while only 19.4% ( $n=13$ ) of elementary counselors reported they had done so. This finding would support Human Rights research that states that individuals often do not 'come out' as gay until their high school years or beyond (HRW, 2001). Results from the high school counselors in this study would also support HRW's research because they showed greater awareness than elementary counselors about how many students in their schools may identify as GLBTQ.

Regarding prevalence of homophobic language in the schools, this study found that 77.5% of counselors hear students call each other terms such as 'dyke' or 'faggot' 0-3 times a day. Similarly, Jordan, Vaughan, and Woodworth (1997) completed a comprehensive study of school climate experiences of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. On average, participants reported hearing words like 'faggot' or 'dyke' at least once a day from their fellow students. Also, Peters (2003) results indicated that 94% of participants had heard 'that's so gay' as a putdown and 65% had heard 'faggot' and 'dyke' used. These studies strongly support the results mentioned above.

While previous research has studied students' perceptions of the meaning of such language use, this study attempted to explore the perceptions of school counselors. An elementary counselor commented, "Most students using such terms

have no idea of the gravity or meaning of what they are saying.” Another stated, “Many middle school students know it’s a putdown, but are not aware of the actual meaning.” Thirty-one (6.8%) Wisconsin school counselors thought that this language is meaningless to students, while 2.6% ( $n=12$ ) responded that the language had ‘other’ meanings such as “degrading,” “ignorant,” “overused,” “uninformed,” “senseless,” “uneducated,” and “bigoted.” This study also supports Ngo’s (2003) research, which stated that the terms and phrases are usually used to denote something stupid or undesirable, and that the meaning is not realized.

A majority of participants, 94.9%, stated that they intervene ‘always’ or ‘often’ when these words are heard between students. Frankfurt (1999) argued that when staff and administrators hear homophobic language in the hallways and do nothing about it, they send a message to students that phrases like “That is so gay” and “You’re dead, fag” are acceptable. Carter (1997) found that students from Des Moines, Iowa heard anti-gay comments an average of 25 times a day or every 14 minutes in school, and in 97% of those cases, students reported that teachers did nothing. That such a high percentage of participating school counselors in this study self-report intervening, suggests that they are sending a message to other students that the word choices are not acceptable or legitimate.

Interestingly, only 65.3% of school counselors surveyed for this study reported that ‘others,’ such as teachers, administration, or other staff members in their school intervene ‘always’ or ‘often’. However, the percentage of ‘others’ intervening was much lower than what the participants reported on their own levels of intervention. It can be speculated that participants over-reported their willingness to intervene, are more aware

of the acts occurring, have more training on the subject than the 'other' staff in their school, or that they are working hard to combat harmful language between students.

The last question on the survey asked counselors their awareness of any occurrences of physical, verbal, and sexual harassment, as well as rumors and gossip towards GLBTQ students in school. It was interesting that 19.3% ( $n= 65$ ) of participants did not answer this question. Reasons for this may include lack of time to finish the survey, lack of knowledge about the question, uncomfortable feelings related to the question so they chose to ignore it, or a lack of awareness that such forms of harassment occur, which could be dangerous for vulnerable students. HRW (2001) has also reported that verbal harassment towards GLBTQ youth is just a part of their daily routine. In this study, verbal harassment accounted for 27% of the 337 responses. In addition, rumors and gossip, received 37.7% of the responses. It can be concluded that social slander is a large part of the social climate in the school setting for GLBTQ youth.

This data has shown that school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth often include homophobic language, and various acts of harassment. The prevention and intervention of such acts needs to start with counselors to ensure a more enjoyable, safe learning experience for all GLBTQ youth. Through numerous qualitative responses, counselors in Wisconsin reported on various programs currently at their schools. There is evidence that these programs are being used to take a stand and advocate to administrations, fellow staff members, students, parents, and the community for a positive school climate experience for all students, regardless of students' sexual orientation.

### *Limitations of Study*

There were several limitations of this study. The survey was developed specifically for this study and therefore had no measures of reliability or validity. Second, there were several unanticipated issues related to survey distribution and collection during the conference. For example, despite having eight volunteers charged with handing out surveys to conference attendees entering the opening ceremony, due to the high volume of attendees, it was very difficult to distribute surveys to everyone entering the opening ceremony. Upon the dismissal of the opening ceremony, it was also difficult for the participating counselors to return their surveys into the drop boxes as numerous people were trying to exit and attend their first informational session. Of the 700 surveys prepared for distribution, only 580 were distributed. Of these, only 213 were returned. This low response rate may be related to other distractions during the opening ceremony. Such distractions may have included other paperwork, finding a seat, reviewing the conference program, etc. Low interest in the topic and/or willingness to participate in research may have also contributed to the low response rate. Therefore, study participants were only those WSCA attendees who received and returned surveys due to their interest in the topic and a desire to assist a graduate student in research.

Another limitation of all surveys is that some participants may not answer all of the questions. Attendees handed in surveys with missing answers and incomplete information, or participants gave more than one answer to a question, which only required one response. Due to the relatively low return rate and because this survey is only designed to collect descriptive data, incomplete surveys were still included. Finally,

two survey items contained unclear directions and therefore may have created confusion for some participants.

The literature presented here suggests there is strong evidence that gay and lesbian youth need help and support with the crises they face during adolescence. Research from this study has shown that Wisconsin school counselors have some awareness of the issues faced by gay and lesbian youth. However, homophobic language, physical harassment, and staff attitudes continue to have frequent and damaging effects on the social and psychological school climate of gay youth. School counselors in Wisconsin are making progress on building safer school climates for students and through further research, this issue will continue to decrease, thus creating a healthier learning environment for all students.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

Limitations of this study and other current research, grants many opportunities for future research to be completed. An observable limitation was that this study was conducted with school counselors in Wisconsin who attended the WSCA conference and were willing to participate. Future research could identify a much larger sample of school counselors throughout the nation, which would result in much more generalizable data. In addition, while the current study focused on negative language and acts of harassment towards GLBTQ youth, a study that questioned these youth on the strengths in their lives would be interesting. It would also be beneficial to extend the current research to include reported effects of adult allies within the school setting. Also, more research that focuses on adult perceptions rather than student perspectives is



needed because there are few studies that question adult beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about the topic.

It is obvious that researchers want to better the lives of gay and lesbian youth. They do this by highlighting the difficulties and victimization these youth face. Their hope is that research will then bring a needed change for gay and lesbian youth. However, more research is needed on the strengths and resiliencies many gay and lesbian youth portray (Savin-Williams, 2001). This research would be beneficial for gay youth to learn new ways to cope with stressors in their lives. Strength and resiliency based research would also change the focus for counselors when they are working with sexual minority students; counselors could focus on the positive instead of having a problem based focus. More research is needed on the developmental milestones that go well for gay and lesbian youth.

More empirical research is also needed on the effects of having a safe adult ally in the school, such as a teacher or counselor. For gay and lesbian youth, it would be important to survey them to investigate whether or not they feel more safe in school knowing there is an adult ally they could reach out to when needed. This type of research is important because school counselors could use it to advocate for safe space programs and adult allies within the school system, giving gay and lesbian youth resources and support.

While a majority of the research reviewed focused on student perceptions of their gay and lesbian peers, Fontaine's (1998) study was the only one that specifically addressed the perceptions and attitudes of school staff, particularly school counselors. More research is needed on staff perceptions and attitudes about gay and lesbian youth

and how those attitudes affect the social and psychological school climate for sexual minority students.

### *Recommendations for Educators*

The results of this study highlight the importance of school counselor training on the issues of GLBTQ students. Staff and administrators need to take an active role to increase the social and psychological well being of gay and lesbian youth in the school setting. Such active roles do not necessarily need to focus on introducing and teaching students about homosexuality in general. Instead, teachers and administrators can show active support to sexual minority youth by correcting misleading viewpoints about gay and lesbian individuals and providing more educational information to all students so they can increase their understanding and awareness of the issue.

Woody (2003) suggested that, "With limited exposure to gay or lesbian individuals in their lives, and no discussion of issues of homosexuality in their classrooms, students lacked opportunities to challenge the stereotypes which informed their homophobia" (p. 157). In the school setting, the lack of discussion in the classroom and curriculum on issues of homosexuality, in particular intervening with homophobic language and harassment, is where the research supports the role of staff and administration.

Fontaine (1998) argued that schools are a source of institutionalized homophobia if they choose not to include gay and lesbian issues in curriculum, have nonexistent discrimination policies, and have a lack of visible support or resources. When schools deny the existence of gay and lesbian youth, such students remain invisible and therefore are out of reach of support and resources. Creating a safer school starts with

educating staff and reviewing policies and procedures that are already in place related to the protection of all students.

From a school administrative perspective, addressing homosexuality and safe school climate issues are just one of the many things that do not have anything to do with raising test scores, which is often a top priority. However, a principal quoted in Frankfurt's (1999) work claimed, "It is only when someone feels comfortable and valued that they will be successful. School is an opportunity for kids to grow and learn. If they don't feel that they are valued they can't grow" (p. 27). It is students' ability to feel safe in school that will allow them and help them learn. Gay and lesbian students simply may not perform to the best of their ability if they do not feel safe in school. The implication here is for all teachers and staff to be committed to the education of all students.

Numerous court cases (Davis V. Monroe County Board of Education, 1999; Nabozny V. Podlesny, 1996; and Wagner V. Fayetteville Public Schools, 1998) have shown that the abuse of gay and lesbian students is a legally risky issue and that school districts need to be more proactive rather than reactive in providing safety for all students. The cost for not protecting gay and lesbian students is high. In addition to the physical and psychological harm to students, the legal risk is significant as some gay students have sued for more than a million dollars for failure to provide a safe learning environment (McFarland & Dupuis, 2001).

In the most recent position statements, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) (2005) detailed its commitment to education about and acceptance of the diversity of sexual orientation. ASCA describes professional school counselors as "Committed to facilitation and promoting the fullest possible development of each

individual by reducing the barriers of misinformation, myths, ignorance, hatred, and discrimination, based on sexual orientation” (n.p.). Any effort to educate about sexual orientation would enhance the ethical obligation of counselors; the more awareness people have about an issue, the less ignorant they will be.

### *Educating Staff*

In order to combat homophobic language, rigid gender roles, and physical harassment in the school setting, it would be beneficial for school districts to provide introductory and ongoing training to all school personnel, including teachers, support staff, administrators, cafeteria workers, and maintenance workers. The training could emphasize the needs and concerns of gay and lesbian youth, including how to stop harassment, and the importance of inclusive language. Such training would be in compliance with public policies that focus on how teachers and other school faculty should treat the issue of homophobia in the school system. Training may occur in conference settings, or in the formation of advocacy groups.

Sears (2003) described the resolution released by the American School Health Association. The resolution states school staff must discourage any sexually oriented, harassing, or prejudicial statements that may negatively affect a student's self-esteem. The resolution also states school districts need to provide access to counseling for students who may be concerned about their sexual orientation. Many other educational organizations, such as the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers have made official statements regarding the rights of homosexual students and proposed suggestions for combating homophobia in the schools.

### *Challenging Language*

It is important for teachers and school personnel to intervene when they hear anti-gay language to help students form an understanding that this type of harassment is wrong. If students can see the harm caused by homophobic language, they can begin to understand the moral dimensions of teasing and name-calling (Horn & Nucci, 2003).

A very important intervention of protecting gay and lesbian students in the school setting is stopping homophobic language that occurs amongst peers and staff. As the research has found, the current phrase that is commonly used is "That's so gay" (Thurlow, 2001; Peters, 2003; Frankfurt, 1999; Ngo, 2003). Sayings like those may shut out gay students from feeling like they belong and they may feel that they are stupid. Interventions should focus on explaining that "gay" is not a term that should be used to describe something stupid, but that some people are homosexuals and that the phrase is derogatory when used in that context.

When correcting students for using unacceptable word choices, school staff can explain WHY the word choice is not okay or appropriate, rather than just telling them to stop saying it. Ngo (2003) suggested teachers offer a supplemental word or phrase choice the first time the student is confronted because that allows the individual to add something new to their framework of language revolving around gay and lesbian issues.

For school staff and faculty, it is also important to be aware of how certain situations are framed with the use of language. Staff should avoid using language that presupposes heterosexuality. For example, asking a young woman, "Is your boyfriend coming to the dance with you?" because that implies that the individual is straight. It is also important to refer to adults in the household as parents or guardians instead of

Mom and Dad because a student may have gay or lesbian parents heading their household (HRW, 2001). Both examples support heteronormativity for gay and straight students alike and also continue to exclude gay students from seeing adults as a source of support; the gay students remain invisible. The importance of training in inclusive language is an element of awareness sensitivity involving gay and lesbian youth.

#### *Reviewing Nondiscrimination Policies*

The threat of physical harassment in school causes gay and lesbian youth to use a lot of their energy planning how to stay safe. They plot how to avoid certain environments just so they do not have to deal with the harassment. This avoidance and high energy spent gives them little energy left to concentrate in school (HRW, 2001).

In order for gay and lesbian youth to feel safe in their schools, zero tolerance policies must be developed and enforced for dealing with physical harassment and violence. Schools can also involve law enforcement if the acts are severe. For gay and lesbian youth, a zero tolerance policy may not completely stop the harassment, but it is a statement that they are supported and that the school cares about their safety and ability to learn.

It is also important for schools to review their discrimination policies for inclusion of protection based on gender identity and sexual orientation (HRW, 2001). If sexual orientation is not included in the policy, then, HRW argues it should be amended immediately. Gay and lesbian students are protected under various statutes that give them the rights to feel safe in school. Policies and practices should be developed to send the message that anti-gay harassment is not acceptable or legitimate (Horn & Nucci, 2003).

Students are protected by the Fourteenth Amendment, which guarantees them equal protection. The First Amendment also guarantees the right to free speech.

Related to levels of harassment that occur in the school setting, Underwood (2004) found,

Guidance from the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) states that sexual harassment directed at gay or lesbian students that are sufficiently serious to limit or deny a student's ability to participate in or benefit from the school's program constitutes sexual harassment prohibited by Title IX. (p. 10-11)

Horn & Nucci (2003) recommended a number of interventions the school personnel can use to work with adolescents to prevent harassment in the school setting. Educators need to assess in which context or environment harassment occurs so that prevention programs and policies can be targeted appropriately to create a safer school climate for GLBTQ students. Doing so may help reduce harassment of those students whose peers have identified them as not conforming to rigid gender roles.

### *Integrating Curriculum*

For many school districts, gay/lesbian issues and topics are not part of the curriculum because some schools find the content very controversial and think it safer not to acknowledge the issues. Administrators and the community may believe that any content that is sexual should be kept out of the school and kept in the home. The problem with that for sexual minority teens who are not accepted by their families is that the home may not be a safe, welcoming place to learn (Shepard, 1998).

Inclusive material in the classroom creates an atmosphere within the school that facilitates, promotes, and legitimizes the discussion of homosexuality, potentially leading to increased tolerance. For those students who are having trouble accepting their sexuality, inclusive classroom materials can give them a sense of hope and relief, which leads to a more positive self-concept (Fontaine, 1998). The acknowledgment of the topic of homosexuality in the classroom begins to dispel the myths surrounding the topic, which may help stereotypes decrease as accurate information and educational efforts will increase understanding.

The word choices and rigid views adolescents have are implications for an intervention to increase their awareness about the limiting effects of gender roles on everyone. It would be beneficial for a school counselor to develop a critical thinking guidance curriculum related to an analysis of human development. The intent would be for adolescents to become critical thinkers about the messages portrayed by the media. What does the media say about being a boy? A girl? Students could question whether or not it is healthy for people to deviate from the norm that is often portrayed in the media. This may trigger important critical discussions that could broaden all adolescent students' viewpoints about gender expression and the gender norms that society presents.

### *Resources*

McFarland and Dupuis (2001) also discussed implications for school counselors when working with gay or lesbian students, as counselors are often seen as great resources within the school setting. It is their responsibility to understand the specific stressors that these students face while helping them deal with various social and



educational obstacles they encounter due to homophobia. It is important to provide useful resources that are supportive and helpful. When defending gay and lesbian youth, counselors can explain the values of tolerating differences, equality, respect, and citizenship. As advocates for all students, counselors must inform, debate, persuade, discuss, and lobby for change to ensure safer school climates for all individuals (McFarland & Dupuis, 2001).

Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) groups in the school setting are also a great resource, although are often seen as quite controversial amongst many school districts (Underwood, 2004; Coeyman, 2000; Penn, 2000; Wright, 2004). As a resource, the counselor can participate in the formation of these groups, which facilitate safe discussions between gay, straight, and questioning students. Any student is welcome to attend. Typically, the group offers a sense of unity and deep levels of trust are formed amongst these students because they are disclosing personal information about their lives. Gay, straight, and questioning individuals can get together to support one another and speak freely about any concerns or questions they are having.

Although GSA groups are present in more than 2,000 high schools in the nation, many districts choose not to let a GSA group form because they are seen as controversial. If the administration disagrees to the formation of a GSA, it would be important to point out that all student organizations that take place in the school setting are guaranteed equal treatment under the federal Equal Access Act.

Wright (2004) explained that the Equal Access Act requires schools to give equal access to all student clubs on a nondiscriminatory basis. If a school permits any non-curricular student club to use school facilities, then it must permit all non-curricular clubs

the same access. Public schools who receive federal money and who practice an open forum are required to allow GLBTQ students to form a club under this act. These statutes and rights are important to GLBTQ youth and their allies to reduce the effects of homophobia in the school setting by offering GLBTQ students needed support from peers and faculty through involvement in GSA groups. The group also makes a strong statement in the schools to gay and lesbian youth because it shows that the school does have a safe activity to participate in, with a safe and supportive adult monitoring the group.

### *Summary*

Schools must take action to assure that all of their students, especially Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning (GLBTQ) students, are being protected from homophobic language, physical harassment, staff attitudes, and influential peers to ensure that they can learn in a safe environment. Staff and administration must have an active role in promoting a healthier social and psychological school climate for GLBTQ youth.

Gay and lesbian students should never have to confront the escalation of harassment that Jamie Nabozny, a student from Wisconsin dealt with. The student came out to his classmates in seventh grade and then fellow peers began spitting on him and hitting him. After he was subjected to a mock rape in eighth grade during a science lab, he attempted suicide, but was not successful. The abuse worsened in high school; he was urinated on, attacked in bathrooms, and had steel objects thrown at him on the bus. He attempted suicide again in ninth grade. Following that, he was beaten by eight peers one morning before school and was kicked in the stomach for five to ten

minutes. Several weeks later he collapsed from internal bleeding and left school in eleventh grade. In 1996, the student testified that he had asked the principal to intervene numerous times, but she took no action. The case quoted the principal saying 'boys will be boys' and that if he was 'going to be so openly gay'; he should 'expect' behavior from his fellow students. Jamie Nabozny won the lawsuit for over \$900,000, as the school was found liable for not protecting the student (HRW, 2001).

Intervention from adults, education of offending students, attention to anti-discrimination policy, and practiced ethics on part of the school administration, teachers, and counselors may have changed the outcome for Jamie and for the social and psychological climate of the school. As results from this survey suggested, Wisconsin school counselors, counselor educators, and other professionals need to increase their awareness on the issues presented in order to take the first step to increase students' awareness through talking about and providing education about homosexuality and homophobia. Counselors must use a voice of advocacy to implement needed changes in their schools to ensure a safer school climate that is conducive to learning for GLBTQ youth. Like other controversial topics within society, as awareness increases, ignorance decreases.

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## Appendix A

**UW- Stout Implied Consent Statement for Research Involving Human Subjects****Consent to Participate in UW- Stout Approved Research**

**Title:** School Climate Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Youth in Wisconsin

**Investigator:**

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**Research Sponsor:**

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**Description:** If you are currently working as a Professional School Counselor, thanks for taking the time to complete this survey as a partial fulfillment of the researcher's master degree. Until ten years ago, research on gay and lesbian adolescents has been scarce and has focused on the 'coming out' process, mental health issues, and stereotypes and discrimination the population encounters. More recently, research has begun to examine school experiences of gay and lesbian youth. Gay and lesbian adolescents face the same developmental challenges as their straight peers, with the added burden of negative social and psychological school climate experiences that significantly impact their ability to learn. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2001) note that gay youth spend high levels of energy planning how to get to and from school safely, avoiding hallways to avoid homophobic slurs, and escaping being beaten up in gym class. As a result, gay and lesbian youth learn to become invisible to avoid verbal and physical attacks, and their school climate is often negative. As professionals, your

perceptions of school climate experiences for gay and lesbian youth are pertinent sources for examining these issues.

**Risks and Benefits:** It is possible that reporting your perceptions of school climate experiences of gay and lesbian youth may cause some feelings of discomfort. Benefits may include contributing to the profession by increasing the understanding and research surrounding gay youth.

**Confidentiality:** All efforts will be made to ensure your participation in this survey is confidential. Your name and school district will not be included on any documents and therefore, we believe that you cannot be identified from any of this information.

**Right to Withdraw:** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate without adverse consequences. However, should you choose to participate and later wish to withdraw from the study, there will be no way to identify your anonymous document after it has been turned into the investigator.

**IRB Approval:** This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Wisconsin Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.

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**Statement of Consent:** By completing the following survey I agree to participate in the project, *School Climate Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Youth in Wisconsin*.

## Appendix B

**UW- Stout Research Survey**

Rebecca Busch- School Guidance and Counseling

February, 2006

**School Climate Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Youth in Wisconsin**

**This research has been approved by the UW-Stout IRB as required by the Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46.**

1. Please write in the following information:

\_\_\_ Age

\_\_\_ Gender

\_\_\_ Years as a school counselor

2. What school setting are you employed in? (Please mark one)

\_\_\_ Elementary School

\_\_\_ Middle School

\_\_\_ High School

3. Which best describes the area and size of your school? (Please mark one in each column)

\_\_\_ Rural

\_\_\_ Small (1-501 students)

\_\_\_ Suburban

\_\_\_ Moderate (501-1,000 students)

\_\_\_ Urban

\_\_\_ Large (1,001- 1,500 students)

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**Please mark one for the following questions:**

4. In your school, how many students identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (GLBTQ)?

<input type="text"/> 0-5	<input type="text"/> 18- 27
<input type="text"/> 6-11	<input type="text"/> 28- 37
<input type="text"/> 12-17	<input type="text"/> 38 or more

5. Have you met with any gay students on an individual basis?

<input type="text"/> Yes	<input type="text"/> No
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6. In your school, how many staff or faculty members identify as GLBTQ?

<input type="text"/> 0-5	<input type="text"/> 18- 27
<input type="text"/> 6-11	<input type="text"/> 28- 37
<input type="text"/> 12-17	<input type="text"/> 38 or more

7. In one day, how many times do you hear students call each other terms such as "Dyke" or "Faggot"?

<input type="text"/> 0-3	<input type="text"/> 12- 21
<input type="text"/> 4-7	<input type="text"/> 22- 31
<input type="text"/> 8- 11	<input type="text"/> 32 or more

8. In one day, how many times do you hear the phrase, "That's so gay" used by students?

<input type="text"/> 0-3	<input type="text"/> 12- 21
<input type="text"/> 4-7	<input type="text"/> 22- 31
<input type="text"/> 8- 11	<input type="text"/> 32 or more

**Please mark any that apply for the following questions:**

9. Do you perceive this language use as:

- Harmful
- Negative
- Meaningless
- Homophobic
- Other

10. How often do you intervene when you hear these words or phrases between students? (Please mark any that apply)

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

11. How often do others intervene when these words or phrases are heard between students? (Please mark any that apply)

- Always
- Often
- Rarely
- Never

12. Are you aware of any of the following occurring toward GLBTQ students in school?

(Please mark any that apply)

- Physical Harassment (pushing, shoving, hitting)
- Verbal Harassment (name calling, teasing, or threatening)
- Sexual Harassment (inappropriate touching, sexual comments, or assault)
- Rumors and Gossip