A CASE STUDY OF SCHOOL LEADERS WHO SAFEGUARD SEXUALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) youth are coming out at an earlier age. Many young adults in the GLBT community come out by the age of fifteen and some have known their sexual identity by the age of ten. Sexually diverse students who identify as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered often fear the consequences of coming out at such a young age. They fear losing friends and family and are threatened by the idea of being treated unfairly by others. Sexually diverse students are more likely to be harassed or abused by peers which can negatively affect their performance in school.

In order for students to be engaged in school they must feel safe in their school environment. School personnel can step in and help this often mistreated group by providing safeguards to protect GLBT students. School administrators have the influence and duty to create those safeguards, and therefore, can have a profound impact on GLBT students.

This doctoral research study investigates three suburban school districts that have safeguards in place for sexually diverse students. These schools are examples of what school administrators can do to help this at risk minority group of students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter One: Introduction

"Homosexuals are arguably the most hated group of people in the United States. While other minorities have gained a modicum of protection and acceptance; homosexuals remain essentially outside the pale" (Unks, 1995, p. 3).

Being gay should be a non-issue. People should be allowed to be who they are, without the fear of name calling, persecution and violence. However, this Utopian view is not the case for many sexually diverse students who enter schools to pursue their studies. Sexually diverse students who identify as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered (GLBT) often face the fear of the consequences for disclosing their sexual orientation because they could lose friends and family, and be treated unfairly by others. This disclosure of their sexual orientation is often referred to as "coming out." For the GLBT issue to be a non-issue, we must make it an issue first, and that is where schools can step in and help this often mistreated group. In order for schools to help this minority group of students, there must support by school personnel and those teachers and staff need the support of their building and district administrators.

Setting the Tone in School

"There are more than 2.5 million gay students under the age of 18 in the USA" (Alliance, 2009, p.1). Friend (1998) noted that "as a microcosm, school culture in the United States reflects the conflicts of the broader society" (p. 137). High schools are often seen as that microcosm of society at large and students who have deep beliefs that are different than their peers tend to keep them hidden because many are afraid to stand out and be different from others. One group that has a more difficult time in the high school setting is gay and lesbian students. "The culture of

the school mirrors the larger society. Schools socialize boys and girls into their presumed heterosexual destiny" (Sears, 1991, p. 55).

"When the principal sneezes, the whole school catches a cold. This is neither good nor bad; it is just the truth. Our impact is significant; our focus becomes the school's focus" (Whitaker, 2003, p.30). The significant impact that Whitaker (2003) mentions, encompasses a wide array of issues. One such issue where school leaders should focus is on safeguarding sexually diverse students. Bielaczyc states, "Clearly, the tone set by the administrator can have a great effect on the culture and attitude of the school population" (2001, p. 9). The culture and attitude to which Bielaczyc (2001) is referring is one of openness and acceptance toward students, regardless of their race, creed or sexual orientation.

Safeguarding and Supporting Students

One of the issues that is still prevalent regarding safeguarding sexually diverse students is that of harassment. Although this is an issue all students face, it is more prevalent for sexually diverse students. Students hear homophobic remarks while walking down the hallway to class. As staff that are supposed to keep all students safe, it is up to the teachers and staff patrolling the hallways to step in and prevent this from happening. They need to intervene and protect this student population from harmful words and threats.

"Despite the greater willingness of some homosexuals to be open about their experiences, many educators continue to avoid the issue of sexual orientation-both in school and with regard to parents-because it is such a volatile social issue" (deMarrais, 1999, p. 321) .

"While the intersections of social class, race, gender, sexuality, and religion vary for each person, their existence and importance within our culture are, for those who do not share membership in the dominant groups, social facts with social consequences" (Sears, 1991, p. 55).

84.6% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported being physically harassed and 18.8% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation. 72.4% heard homophobic remarks, such as "faggot" or "dyke," frequently or often at school (GLSEN, 2009, p. 26).

It should be unacceptable that students come to school afraid of being harmed on a daily basis because they are GLBT. Everyone who enters the school doors in the morning is entitled to a safe environment to learn, no matter their sexual orientation. It is vitally important that teachers and staff in the public school system address issues of sexual diversity with students in their class because the public school system is a microcosm of society at large, and children need to be exposed to many different lifestyles. Schools have an opportunity and obligation to prepare students for the outside world, where they will work with sexually diverse men and women. Students must be prepared to enter society with a more open mind, where all individuals deserve the right to be who they are, whether they are gay or straight.

Teachers need the support of administrators because of the possible scrutiny they may receive from parents, other students and the community. Teaching curriculum that explores sexual diversity, whether it is through literature or clubs, is considered controversial. As society moves forward with accepting this minority population, school districts have received support from the court systems. "Local school districts generally have a great deal of latitude with respect to curricular content, and courts typically have rejected parental efforts to dictate or alter

it" (GLSEN, 2010, p. 7). Schools, therefore, have created policies that address the need to teach controversial topics, which provides educators with the academic freedom they deserve, so they can fairly educate our youth on topics they need to know for their future.

Purpose of the Study

Creating a safe learning environment helps nurture sexually diverse students so they can grow as lifelong learners as well as become contributing members to society. Students who are engaged in the educational process are more successful academically. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover the extent to which, and in what specific ways, school leaders make a difference in the learning environment for sexual minority youth. School leaders investigated in this qualitative case study made a difference for sexually diverse students through the use of sexually diverse literature, after-school clubs and policies which helped create a school environment of acceptance.

"Leaders in all organizations, whether they know it or not, contribute for better or for worse to moral purpose in their own organizations and in society as a whole" (Fullan, 2001, p.15). Without the assistance and support of a school leader, many teachers find it difficult to broach the topic of sexual diversity, which creates a domino effect because sexually diverse students who go unsupported have a more difficult time in school. Their peer relationships can suffer which leads to a lack of engagement in school. Lack of engagement has negative effects on grades and the whole school experience.

Fullan cites Von Krogh et al. stating, "a culture of care is vital for successful performance, which they define in five dimensions: mutual trust, active empathy, access to help,

lenience in judgment, and courage" (2000, p.82). All five dimensions are important to the issue of sexual diversity. Schools need these dimensions when considering safeguards for these students.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover the extent to which, and in what specific ways, school leaders make a difference in the learning environment for sexual minority youth. In this research study, sexual minority students were defined as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, trans-gendered (GLBT) youth. This qualitative study used interviews of school leaders and teachers in the public school system. The research questions which guided the study are:

a. **Question 1:** What school district actions have been used to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for sexual minority students?

b. **Question 2:** What leadership practices are perceived to promote a safe and supportive environment for students of sexual diversity?

Significance of this study

Sexually diverse students need support from teachers and administrators because of the discrimination they often feel when they are coming out to peers and family. Sexually diverse students who are supported by teachers and administration feel a sense of safety in their school environment and that sense of safety allows them to take healthy and positive risks, which builds their engagement in the school community. Students who are engaged in school are more inclined to succeed academically.

This study has significance for sexually diverse students and the schools they attend. Teachers who feel supported by their school leaders are more likely to support the needs of their students. There is a great deal of research that supports this statement. For example, Cha (2003) states, "Previous research has found that leadership attitude (supervisory support or sanction) is the most influential factor in facilitating or hindering trainees' transfer of learning to their workplace" (p. 1).

Limitations

There were limitations to this qualitative case study beginning with the number of school districts investigated. The researcher made a conscious effort to choose three suburban school districts in New York State that have practices that support sexually diverse students. To the researcher, these practices include safeguards such as school policies and codes of conduct as well as an established Gay-Straight Alliance. Not all schools in New York State have these three safeguards.

Another limitation of the study was the fact that all three school districts are suburban school districts in the northeastern United States and each only has one high school per district. Investigating only public suburban school districts does not give a well-rounded perspective into the different ways school leaders safeguard sexually diverse students. In addition, this small sample does not take into account other geographic areas where homosexuality is considered more controversial and it does not involve county school districts with multiple high schools.

In addition, the researcher found a limitation in using Violence and Disruptive Incident Reports (VADIR) as data to investigate the harassment issues that sexually diverse students face in the public school system. Although VADIR data does count harassment that is done to the student population it does not disaggregate by race, gender and sexual orientation.

The issue of safety for sexually diverse students is an issue that takes place in all schools, whether they are suburban, rural or urban districts. It would be beneficial for this type of qualitative case study to take place in a variety of districts around the United States with diverse student populations and diverse demographic backgrounds.

Conclusion

Being gay should be a non-issue and this research focused on school districts who believe that GLBT students deserve the same opportunities that all students receive on a daily basis. The school districts investigated all have safeguards for students who identify as GLBT. The safeguards include, but are not limited to, school board policies, student codes of conduct and Gay-Straight Alliances.

It is vitally important that teachers, staff and administrators embrace sexually diverse students and provide safeguards for this "at risk" population because, as readers will learn in chapter two, statistics show that these students are at a higher risk of dropping out of school or taking part in risky behavior. With the help of school personnel, sexually diverse students can find their place in the school community and show higher levels of academic achievement.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Only in an open, nonjudgmental space can we acknowledge what we are feeling. Only in an open space where we're not all caught up in our own version of reality can we see and hear and feel what others really are, which allows us to be with them and communicate with them properly (Chodron, 2000, p. 78).

Sexually Diverse Students

Identifying, whether privately or publicly, as gay or lesbian can be a very traumatic experience for anyone, but it can be especially difficult for a teenager who has to enter a school setting on a daily basis. Sears states, "Our capacity to relate emotionally and physically to other human beings is not limited to the other gender" (1991, p. 54). There are a variety of steps those going through the experience can take after this realization. One possible step is to hide those feelings and try to fit in with their heterosexual peers, which has often been done in the school setting. Another step is to "come out" to friends and family by openly admitting to being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered (GLBT). Edwards refers to this as when "people have to self-identify (come out) as homosexual" (1997, p. 68). This act of coming out often takes a great deal of thought and reflection because there is a possibility that the teenager coming out could lose close friends or be disowned by family.

Harbeck states that, "many of us have grown up with a feeling that our being lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) is bad, and that we must hide it" (1995, p. 126). Anderson agrees, stating, "Most adolescents realize that the expression of homosexual feelings within the dominant peer group, where there is tremendous pressure to conform to heterosexual norms, will result in

alienation from peers at best, and violence at worst" (1995, p. 24). All students face those heterosexual norms in the public school setting, where students often feel stress about fitting in with their peers.

Teens in the GLBT community lack role models around them and are typically in the minority with their peers. Anderson says, "It is not surprising that gay and lesbian adolescents, wanting involvement in a peer group that accepts them, and offers the possibility of establishing intimate relationships, often begin to search for other gay persons" (1995, p. 25). Most heterosexual teens can look to their parents or other members of society to learn about gender roles in relationships but GLBT teens often cannot do the same.

Discrimination against Sexually Diverse Students

Heterosexual couples engage in public displays of affection that gay and lesbian teenagers and adults cannot always engage in for fear of retaliation, harsh comments and glares from passers-by. "While the intersections of social class, race, gender, sexuality, and religion vary for each person, their existence and importance within our culture are, for those who do not share membership in the dominant groups, social facts with social consequences" (Sears, 1991, p. 55).

At a time in life when teenagers do not want to be seen as different from their peers, being gay, which puts students in the minority of a school population, makes those students feel as if a spotlight is on them and often opens them up to harassment and verbal abuse.

> 84.6% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported being
> physically harassed and 18.8% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past
> year because of their sexual orientation. 72.4% heard homophobic remarks, such as
> "faggot" or "dyke," frequently or often at school (GLSEN, 2009, p. 26).

That type of discrimination creates a fear for students as they walk into the public school setting. These students who have "come out" as gay or lesbian often hear harassing remarks from peers, and other students who are gay and lesbian do not come out at all in fear that they will lose friends and alienate themselves from their families. This discrimination that sexually diverse students face, creates a feeling of helplessness and isolation which leads some students in the GLBT community to drop out of school or run away from home. It can also lead to more extreme behaviors such as suicide.

Unks explains that, "picking on persons because of their ethnicity, class, religion, gender, or race is essentially taboo behavior, but adults and children alike are given license to torment and harm because of their sexuality" (1995, p. 3). This fear of torment, discrimination and the isolation gay and lesbian teenagers face when coming out can be detrimental to their existence, not only as students in a school system, but as human beings as well. The constant concern about losing those around you is a debilitating experience. Having the right support system, whether it's through school, friendships or family is vitally important.
No one should underestimate the value of teachers' including gay people when they talk with students about cultural diversity. Just hearing the words "homosexuality" or "gay/lesbian/bisexual" in an accepting context sends a powerful message to young people, and creates the potential for a tolerant environment" (Lipkin, 1995, p. 39).

Negative Stereotypes of Sexually Diverse Students

"Speaking out about homosexuality is risky, both for academic writers and gay teens. Regardless of which side of the debate you are on, it is critical to address this topic" (O'Conor, 1995, p. 15).

Social justice issues are based on gender, race, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation. Much of the research in the social justice field revolves around gender, race and economic status. Sexual orientation is a topic that has been explored but it is an area that needs further exploration because it affects a large population of students and adults. "The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, a sexual orientation law and public policy think tank, estimates that there are 8.8 million gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons in the U.S based on the 2005/2006 American Community Survey, an extension of the U.S. Census" (Gates, 2006, p.1). Most of the existing research revolves around promiscuity, HIV/AIDS, suicide and mental health services, which is all very grim, but they are all realities in the homosexual community. Harbeck states, "With this extreme and sole focus on teen suicide we may be trading one negative stereotype for another" (1995, p. 126). Although the suicide rate of gay and lesbian teens is high, it is one more perceived negative consequence of being gay to those sexually diverse students who want to come out. Harbeck goes on to say, "young people who are exploring identities may conclude that suicide is the consequence of being LGB" (1995, p. 126).

Harassment of Sexually Diverse Students

The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) is doing landmark research in the area of sexual diversity and school climate. GLSEN's 2005 report stated the following,

As leaders of their schools, principals strive to ensure a positive learning environment for all students; one where students feel safe and free from harassment. Yet for many students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), school can often be a very dangerous place. The 2005 report, *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America* by Harris Interactive and GLSEN found that the most common reasons for

bullying and harassment in America's middle and high schools were physical appearance, sexual orientation and gender expression, showing that LGBT-related characteristics account for two of the top three reasons students are singled out for mistreatment. (GLSEN, 2005, p. 1)

Students who identify as gay and lesbian often face a great deal of criticism and harassment from peers. If this is mixed with a lack of support from home, many gay students turn toward behaviors that can be harmful to them. "One in three have reported committing at least one self-destructive act. Gay and lesbian youth make up approximately one quarter of all homeless youth in the U.S." (Gibson cited in O'Conor, 1995, p. 13). These statistics are staggering, but only through education and awareness can teachers and administrators understand how to meet the needs of these students. Lugg states, "Educators should ensure that public schools would become models of democratic and socially just practices. Quite simply, public schools would become exemplars of American democracy" (2006, p. 200).

Media Portrayal of Gay Characters

"Gay people often know their orientation during the first 10 years of life, making them vulnerable to discrimination at a very early age. Much of civil society fails to internalize this reality. Thankfully allies exist with a greater understanding" (Alliance Website, 2009).

We seem to live in a time that is more open minded than the days when being gay was referred to as a psychological disease. However those students identifying as gay and lesbian in the GLBT community still have a long way to go in gaining acceptance on a national level. Those students who have nowhere to turn often turn to social networking sites and television to identify with someone they can look up to. There are not many gay characters on television,

which Gross (2001) refers to as "invisibility." However, a majority of the gay characters on television may be sending the wrong messages according to Freymiller (2006).

> Analysis finds that gay *characters* are portrayed as struggling with integrating gay identity into their personhood (*Six Feet Under*), as committed but strained in their relationships with other gay as well as straight *characters* (*Will & Grace*), and as experiencing tensions between gay and straight community as well as within their own community (*Queer as Folk*) (p. iii).

Gross states that, "indeed, representation in the media is in itself a kind of power, and thus the media invisibility helps maintain the powerlessness of groups at the bottom of the social heap" (2001, p. 4). Many of the gay characters seen on television are portrayed as the comical feminine character that cracks all the jokes and lives life alone, exploring relationships with multiple partners in open relationships. "When previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda" (Gross, 2001, p. 4).

Gross says, "the images of women and minorities that do appear on the country's big and little screens will be those that make sense to those who have decision-making power- the images that fit their own worldview or that have succeeded in the past" (2001, p. 5).

Although events such as Gay Pride are vitally important to the gay community, the media often only shows pictures of gay men and women who are barely clothed, dancing and drinking heavily, which can be a disservice to the gay community. Many people in the gay community volunteer a great deal of their time to make their surroundings a better place. There are also

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many gays and lesbians fighting for equal rights and the ability to get married. Those types of images do not often make it to the mainstream media through television shows. In the future it would be beneficial to show stronger gay characters so young adult homosexuals have people to look up to. "In the absence of adequate information in their immediate environment, most people-gay or straight- have little choice but to accept the media stereotypes they imagine must be typical of all lesbians and gay men" (Gross, 2001, p. 16).

The media is often where teenagers turn to identify with characters with whom they find similarities, when they have no one in their own lives with whom to identify. The media and homosexuality have long had a strained relationship. The portrayal of gay characters has often focused on stereotypes. In his book entitled, *Up From Invisibility* (2001), Larry Gross writes,

> Television's new realism regarding lesbian and gay people is apparently translated into a license to be joked about; after all, we're all sophisticated now. Complain and you'll likely be told that the writer, director, or producer are gay, and besides, haven't we gotten to the point where we can take a joke (2001, p. 257)?

In addition, it is not just within television sitcoms that we have seen the portrayal of these stereotypes; the news will often focus on them as well. It started long ago with the news stories focusing on the "sexual revolution" and it magnified those stereotypes when the AIDS epidemic hit the United States (Gross, 2001).

> AIDS provided society and the media with a double-edged opportunity and challenge, the truly frightening specter of a deadly disease that could be associated with sexual

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permissiveness, showing up among a group the media have consistently defined as being outside the mainstream (Gross, 2001, p. 95).

Over the years gay characters are becoming much more prevalent than ever before, which is encouraging for teenagers identifying, or hoping to one day openly identify as gay or lesbian. "Analysis found a wide array of representations, some encouraging and some problematic" (Freymiller, 2006, p. 70). Freymiller goes on to state that, "the characters do find many challenges in life that are apparently precipitated by their sexual identities" (2006, p. 70).

The media drives how society sees the GLBT community, and has a large impact. However, they often focus on stereotypes and use those stereotypes for ratings. Unfortunately in the quest for ratings, monogamous healthy relationships are often unseen by the mainstream audience. "Gay novelist Ethan Mordden wrote that "gays invariably comprehend straights, because whatever our sexuality, we all grow up within the straight culture…Gays understand straights; but straights don't understand gays" (Gross, 2001, p. 150).

The Role of Schools in the Lives of Sexually Diverse Students

School personnel can proactively deal with the negative realities that sexually diverse students face and help limit the impact on the gay community. Education and awareness help make a positive impact and can change some of these negative issues regarding sexually diverse students. Creating policies, covering sexually diverse literature that depicts same sex couples in a positive way, and offering groups like Gay-Straight Alliances can help foster a more positive attitude toward sexually diverse students. Unfortunately, many schools do not offer these supports, and sexually diverse students can feel very alone.

"I knew I was queer when I was a small child. My voice was gentle and sweet. I avoided sports and all roughness. I played with girls" (Rofes, 1995, p. 79). Eric Rofes' depiction of himself is one example of the plight of sexually diverse students in the public school system. However, in the elementary and middle school, teachers often have difficulties finding ways for students to fit in. Rofes goes on to state what can happen to these children who do not fit in with their peers.

> As I got older and fully entered the society of children, I met the key enforcer of social roles among children: the bully. The bully was the boy who defined me as queer to my peers. If they had not already noticed, he pointed out my non-conformity. He was ever-present throughout my childhood, like an evil spirit entering different bodies on different occasions (Rofes, 1995, p. 79).

Rofes' depiction of his fear of torment in school is a good example why it is important for school personnel to step in and help safeguard this "at risk" population. Offering safeguards helps the sexually diverse students know they are protected, and tells the bully that there negative actions will not be tolerated.

When people who identify themselves as gay are coming out, many do not have a variety of places to turn for assistance. If the right school leader is involved, it is important that schools show the same support to GLBT students that they do for any other students going through difficult times. Rofes states, "Teachers and administrators must play an active role in interrupting bullying. No longer should teachers pretend that this kind of persecution is not taking place and that boys who are named sissies are themselves at fault for their predicament" (Rofes, 1995, p. 83).

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Professional Development for Teachers

Hirsch (2007) studied the attitudes of 206 pre-service teachers. She states, "respondents generally reported moderately positive attitudes toward sexual minorities" (Hirsch, 2007, p. 43). This has implications for sexually diverse students because it means many people entering the teaching profession have a positive attitude towards sexual minorities and may be more likely to have positive interactions with sexually diverse students. Hirsch (2007) also found that there was a large majority of people who hold non-homophobic feelings and a very small percentage (15.6%) of people who do hold homophobic feelings toward sexual minorities. Although this was a small sample, the implications of it are important because it researched the attitudes of people who will be working day to day with sexual minority students, and how these people feel about students based on students' sexual orientation.

Research related to professional development training for teachers who must deal with GLBT issues is scarce, but organizations like GLSEN are setting the standard for addressing these issues. GLSEN's research shows that school leaders believe there needs to be more professional development in the area of teaching educators about the needs of sexually diverse students. In their 2005 Principal Survey, 1580 K-12 school leaders were surveyed, and GLSEN found the following:

> Professional development addressing lesbian, gay or bisexual student issues and transgender issues emerges as another unmet need among principals. Only 4% of principals reported that their school provides training for staff on LGBT issues. However, one-quarter (24%) of principals indicate that LGB student issues are among the

areas where staff need the most support or training and two in ten principals (20%)

indicate that teachers need the most support and training on transgender issues. (p. 69)

Teacher Attitudes

In a small study of nine elementary school teachers in Los Angeles, Gabriel Flores

investigated teacher attitudes toward gay-themed literature, focusing on the importance of

incorporating a diverse curriculum in schools. He concluded that, "a goal of multicultural

education is to accomplish the development of togetherness among people through knowledge,

skills, and positive attitudes that are imperative for dealing with diversity and may foster mutual

relationships and a harmonious coexistence between people of different cultures. Schools are the

most effective place for educating minds toward a pluralistic society" (Flores, 2009, p. 59).

Rofes says, "meaningful remedies which foster self-esteem and promote security are a bottom-

line responsibility of all of our schools" (Rofes, 1995, p. 84).

Diverse Literature at an Age Appropriate Level

From kindergarten through high school there are many books that show characters that

are, either gay, or live in a home with gay parents. These are important characters and families

for children and teenagers to see for a variety of reasons. If the student is gay or living in a

family with gay parents, the books provide a familiar setting that those students can identify with

on a daily basis. If the students listening to the story are neither gay nor are they growing up in a

family with gay parents, the books provide exposure to diverse families that they have never

seen.

Books that appropriately expose children to sexually diverse families have been a controversial topic because conservatives and religious groups believe that books that have a theme of introducing sexually diverse families or characters are pushing the gay agenda. Whether these groups agree or not, there are a percentage of students who do not identify with the nuclear family and deserve to read about families such as their own. School is the important venue for this because these sexually diverse families are involved in the school system.

> The American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom only documents written challenges to library books and materials (there were 420 cases in 2007), and even then, it estimates that only one out of five cases are reported. But when it comes to self-censorship, it's almost impossible to quantify because no one is monitoring it or collecting stats, and there's no open discussion on the subject (Whelan, 2009, p. 1).

Although it seems surprising that books are still being banned, whether publicly or silently through the use of self-censorship, this widely accepted practice happens on a daily basis and gay-themed books are often the genre that is at the heart of self-censorship. There are numerous reasons why this genre is often banned. "In the first survey of its kind, *School Library Journal* (*SLJ*) recently asked 655 media specialists about their collections and found that 70 percent of librarians say they won't buy certain controversial titles simply because they're terrified of how parents will respond" (Whelan, 2009, p.2).

Supportive Learning Environments for Sexually Diverse Students

Teaching children to be critical of oppression is teaching true morality, and teachers have the right, indeed the obligation, to alert their students to all forms of oppression. Educating children not to be homophobic is one way to show the difference between oppressive and non-oppressive behavior (Gordon, 1995, p. 40).

Szalacha states, "A key factor in studies of school climate has been optimal school size: one that is best at attaining a climate that enables all members of the school community to teach and learn at optimal levels" (2001, p. 12). Edwards says, "Whether we realize it or not, we as educators are dealing with a hidden minority of gay and lesbian students, as well as gay and lesbian parents" (1997, p. 68). This hidden minority that Edwards refers to are looking for supportive learning environments. The nuclear family has increasingly changed over the past twenty years, and schools are inhabited by sexually diverse students as well as parents who were once married trying to identify as heterosexual.

One of the issues that come with the increasing number of sexually diverse students and parents entering the school system is how educators can address homosexuality. It is critical that these sexually diverse students and parents are educated in an environment that supports them but often schools do not know how to address the issue because of a lack of professional development and literature on the topic of sexually diverse students. Sears states, "Too many educators are partners in the conspiracy of silence in which sexual knowledge is what is salvaged after the scissors-and-paste philosophy of religious zealots or anti-homosexual activists apply" (1991, p. 55). O'Conor states that, "discussions of heterosexism, homophobia, and the lives of

lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth have been noticeably absent in the educational literature" (1995, p. 95). Since O'Conor wrote "Who Gets Called Queer in School (1995)?" there have been studies done in the area of student homosexuality but more research is needed to address the issues of absent sexually diverse characters that O'Conor identified.

In New York City, the Harvey Milk School is trying to change negative outcomes for GLBT students. The school in Manhattan is part of the New York City Public School System and is specifically designed to help students in the GLBT community who are at extreme risk of some of the aforementioned behaviors. It is an example of a school that is trying to create a safe and nurturing atmosphere for its GLBT students.

> They've been harassed and bullied and beaten up so often, they have a thick armor. We're trying to teach them how to manage difficult emotions, how to be confident about who they are. We help them with coming-out issues, and the struggle of gender identity (Maria Paradiso as cited in Colapinto, 2005).

However, not all sexually diverse students have the benefit of attending an all gay high school, and those students need teachers and administrators who are going to support them as they come out, or continue to live life openly as a gay or lesbian student.

Policies Concerning Harassment and Discrimination

Some schools have made attempts at helping sexually diverse students through school board policies designed to reduce harassment and discrimination. These policies provide the guidance and support school personnel need to move forward in accepting sexually diverse students. A board policy in the Averill Park Central School District in upstate, NY states,

"employees shall not discriminate on the basis of age, color, religion, genetic predisposition, carrier status, sexual orientation in its educational programs, services and activities"(2001). Policies of this kind make it easier for teachers, staff and administrators to support GLBT students.

McLaren says that, "we rely as a society on perceptions that have been filtered through constellations of historical commentaries rooted in xenophobia, homophobia, racism, sexism, the commodification of everyday life, and the reproduction of race, class and gender relations" (1995, p. 105). Just like the media focuses on the stereotypes of sexually diverse individuals, McLaren stated that schools do these things as well. "Schools both mirror and motivate such perceptions, reproducing a culture of fear that contributes to a wider justification for vigilance surrounding sexual practices through polar definitions of youth as morally upright/sexually deviant, and approvingly decent/unrepentantly corrupt" (1995, p. 106). Schneck citing McGrath, says that, "parents and students are suing in civil courts to hold schools responsible for investigating and intervening in bullying cases; school districts and individual employees have been found liable for their lack of response" (2008, p. 19). Schneck cites a court case from 2005, in which the Toms River Regional School System was sued because a student in the district was the target of antigay harassment, beginning in fourth grade and continuing through his high school years (2008, p. 20).

New York State introduced the Dignity for All Schools Act (DASA). The goal of this bill, which was passed by the Senate on June 21st, 2010, is to amend New York education law to prohibit harassment against students in school. This important bill authorizes the commissioner

of education to create policies to safeguard sexually diverse students in all schools in New York State.

The reality is that some schools want to create a safe and nurturing atmosphere for all students, including those that are sexually diverse. Szalacha asserts that, "educators are coming to believe that they have a social responsibility to provide an environment that both supports the ability of all students-including lesbians and gays to learn and is free from physical and psychological abuse" (2001, p. 8).

Laws that Support School Decisions

Another strategy to support schools as they safeguard sexually diverse student is through the use of state laws. In New York State Executive Law, Article 15 prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. Schools within New York State must comply with this law and many set policies based on it. In the event that discrimination does happen, based on someone's sexual orientation, schools have the law to support any decision they make. Schools can make bold statements by highlighting these anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies yearly in school newsletters.

Monroe (1999) is cited in Stader et al (2007) when saying, "Title IX provides statutory protection for student-on student sexual harassment under the following conditions: (a) school personnel have actual knowledge of the harassment; (b) school officials demonstrate deliberate indifference or take actions that are clearly unreasonable; and (c) the harassment is so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it can be said to

deprive the victim(s) of access to the educational opportunities or benefits provided by the school (p. 119).

Gay-Straight Alliances

Research on the topic of sexually diverse students is beginning to focus on what schools can do to assist sexually diverse students. Some school leaders try to safeguard students by offering a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) and/or anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies in their schools. "One of the most visible manifestations of the contemporary movement for social justice is in the emergence of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) across the United States" (Russell et al, 2009, p. 892). GSA's involve students who identify as GLBT and straight students. These students find a supportive environment that helps open up a conversation about what it means to be gay in a public high school where they are in the minority. In more and more states, schools are free to offer such a club to support GLBT students.

In a study of 1700 students in Massachusetts, Szalacha found that "more than 50% of the public school systems in Massachusetts have GSA's" (2001, p. 11). Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) are being implemented in many high schools to support student needs. GSA's are open to every student in a school population and allows students to openly discuss issues that all students face. Implementation of anti-discrimination laws and harassment policies also provide zero tolerance to students who harass students based on sexual orientation. Szalacha (2003) states, "in schools that have GSA's, students and school personnel report more supportive climates for LGBT students" (2003). Lipkin (1995) believes schools need to take a stronger stance in addition to having a GSA.

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If schools are going to have an impact on the attitudes and behaviors of their sexually

concerned and often active students, they must acknowledge in their curricula the

importance of sexuality in our lives and in the lives of those who have gone before us

(Lipkin, 1995, p. 32).

School Leaders Embracing the Sexual Diversity of Students

"Recognizing the existence of [GLBT] students and faculty, as well as including any

sexual issues in core programs of study can threaten the social structure of the school, especially

for those who gain from that structure" (Bielaczyc, 2001, p. 9).

Being supportive of programs and discussions of sexual diversity can create stress for

those administrators who support them and the teachers who teach them. However, teachers

need administrators who will support them because there are community members who are

against the teaching of sexual diversity. One such critic against the gay community is Kathleen

Melonakos who posted and subsequently removed the statement, "My primary question is: W*hy*

isn't homosexuality considered a disorder on the basis of its medical consequences alone? Dr.

Satinover and others have made a solid case for why homosexuality parallels alcoholism as an

unhealthy addiction. It should have a parallel diagnosis" (Melonakos, 2003).

Cochrane states, "alongside specifically religious institutions, lobby groups have formed

to influence legislators to preserve traditional concepts of family and to regulate desire" (2004, p.

164). This has implications for school systems because they receive state and federal funding,

and there is often a fear that they will be under scrutiny because of their desire to implement

sexual diversity curriculum. However, states that have laws that focus on anti-discrimination can

change that because those laws support the teaching of controversial issues. Therefore, schools should be obligated to teach about sexual diversity if they do receive state funding.

In the 2007 GLSEN survey of 1,580 K-12 school principals, researchers found that, "Three quarters of principals (75%) believe that administrators in their school would be supportive of efforts that specifically address issues of school safety for GLBT students and families" (2005, p. 12). In the same survey "Six in ten principals (57%) believe that students would be supportive of such efforts" (2007, p. 12). Bielaczyc states, "Clearly, however, the tone set by the administrator can have a great effect on the culture and attitude of the school population" (2001, p. 9). Given the results of both studies, administrators can have a powerful impact on their school's culture.

Over the past ten years schools have begun to see the importance of creating safe and nurturing environments for sexually diverse students. Szalacha (2001) focused her research on the Massachusetts Public School System. Schneck (2008) researched the need to change anti-gay language that has been allowed to abuse gay and lesbian students for years. One of the common threads in both studies was the idea that school districts had to set policies in order to change behavior on the part of students, parents and staff. The reason for the need to have policies in place is the fact that they are often what school boards use to support decisions they make within school systems. "Students attending schools with an anti-bullying policy that included protections based on sexual orientation or gender identity/expression experienced lower levels of harassment and were more likely to report that staff intervened when hearing homophobic remarks" (GLSEN, 2009, p. 126). As important as it is for school leaders to embrace sexually diverse students so their staff feels supported, it is just as important for school boards to support students in the GLBT community so their school administrators feel supported.

Conclusion

Research related to school leaders who embrace sexually diverse students is minimal. Across the country there are model schools that are offering GSA's and have zero tolerance for anti-gay harassment and discrimination against GLBT students. Therefore, research that focuses on school leaders who embrace sexually diverse curriculum and safeguard sexually diverse students will add to the current research being done on GLBT issues. It will also show the impact school leaders can have in this important area which will affect a large percentage of students.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The researcher investigated how school districts implement safeguards and curriculum for sexually diverse students in the high school setting. The following questions were explored.

Question 1: What school district actions have been used to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for sexual minority students?

Question 2: What leadership practices are perceived to promote a safe and supportive environment for students of sexual diversity?

Sexual diversity curriculum and safeguards go beyond lessons taught to students in a classroom. The school systems investigated in this research study have also implemented non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies, as well as codes of conduct that address punishment for students who actively discriminate against students based on sexual orientation. These three schools understand the needs of sexually diverse students. In addition, all of the high schools have Gay-Straight Alliances that meet monthly, which have been established for at least seven years.

In this qualitative case study, interviews were administered to school leaders, guidance counselors and teachers in three suburban public school systems in New York State. Interviews were conducted in March and April of 2010. The interviews were conducted in person at each school district and all of the interviews were audio-taped with a digital recorder to maintain accuracy. In addition to the interviews there was a review of records done in each high school.

Research Design

Qualitative case study research was chosen for this project because the researcher felt it was the best way to investigate programs that help safeguard sexually diverse students. McMillan states that qualitative research, "focuses on understanding and meaning and is based

on verbal narratives and observations" (McMillan, 2008, p. 13). In addition, McMillan (2008) feels that qualitative research is best suited for small purposeful studies.

Research suggests that sexually diverse students learn better in a safe climate and school leaders have an impact on creating a safe atmosphere in their school systems. The researcher investigated three school districts in New York State that created a safe climate for sexually diverse students. Using a case study approach allowed the researcher to investigate many keys to the success of the districts. In qualitative case studies, using interviews is an integral method of getting the most honest and important information available. McMillan states that "case studies concern in-depth study of a single or a few programs, events, activities, groups or other entities defined in terms of time and place" (2008, p. 13). Creswell defines a case study as "a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process or one or more individuals" (2009, p. 13).

Sample Selection

Interview respondents were drawn from a list of school leaders and teachers in the public school systems who work with sexually diverse students. The reason for this sample selection was that these respondents were somehow involved with sexual diversity curriculum and safeguards in their high school setting. Not all individuals interviewed were supportive of sexually diverse students but they did have some level of contact with that student population. These individuals had a level of contact with sexually diverse students because they were either administrators or classroom teachers.

"Qualitative methods usually achieve a collection of rich data and details from a small sample so that the depth of understanding of a phenomenon is increased" (Flores, 2009, p. 106).

The researcher explored the use of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA), board policies and student codes of conduct to safeguard sexually diverse students in several suburban school districts. Interviews involved teachers, guidance counselors, principals and superintendents.

The names of the three school districts chosen for this small qualitative case study are confidential to protect the programs and names of the interviewees. In addition, a confidential interview allows the researcher a true understanding of what is happening in the school setting. The three suburban school districts are identified as School District One, School District Two and School District Three. The three school districts are perceived as having progressive methods of safeguarding sexually diverse students. Many of the interviewees provided examples of how the school districts can progress even more, which is an additional reason for maintaining confidentiality. Interviewees provided specific information about sexually diverse students and their parents, as well as other faculty and staff.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews

The researcher collected data through the use of digital audiotapes of individual interviews with superintendents, school principals, guidance counselors and teachers. Interviewees were selected based upon the position in the school district and their involvement with sexually diverse students. The researcher completed nineteen interviews for this qualitative case study. Interviews in one district were completed over the course of one week. The researcher spent a day in each of the other two districts. Interviews were completed in those particular school districts in one day and observations of student interaction were made as well.

In School District One and School District Two the interviews took between fifteen and twenty minutes. In School District Three, each of the interviews lasted between twenty and thirty minutes. After each interview in School District Three, the interviewee walked the researcher to the next interview and spoke about different ways that the school district safeguards sexually diverse students and gave the researcher demographic and student data as well which helped the researcher feel welcome during the interviewing process.

Observations

The researcher observed student interactions while in the three school districts. Observations took place because the researcher was in the school environment while school was in session for the interviews and had to walk from classroom to classroom and office to office to conduct interviews. The observations of students were not documented as part of this research; however the researcher did observe posters and documents hung up on the wall that focused on sexual diversity issues in School District Three.

The researcher also documented observations of body language of the interviewees while the interviews were being conducted. Body language of interviewees can offer the researcher insight into the level of comfort of the interviewee. For example, one interviewee glanced at the digital recorder before he/she answered a question and did not use the word gay during the interview, which could denote a level of discomfort with the subject matter.

Document Review

In addition to interviews, there was a review of public documents involving sexual diversity curriculum, information from each high schools' Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), as well as anti-discrimination policies and harassment policies. The researcher collected data from

Violent and Disruptive Incidents Reports (VADIR), which can be acquired through the Freedom of Information Legislation (FOIL) through the school districts made that information readily available. All districts researched were forthcoming with this information.

Coding

All information collected from the three school districts involved in this study was properly coded. Coding is the process of "translating data from one language format into another – often to make it possible for a computer to operate on the data thus coded" (Vogt, 2005, p. 47).

When first triangulating the data collected during this study, the researcher looked for common themes that emerged during the interviews. Those common themes were then organized into larger categories. It was important to view and review answers to interview questions to gain a true understanding of the school climate in each school district, which led to the creation of the common themes. Besides nineteen interviews, the researcher collected Violent and Disruptive Incident Reporting (VADIR) data from each school district, as well as materials used by the Gay-Straight Alliances and letters of support for the GSA written by the school administrators. All interviews took place on school days when classes were in session, although the researcher did not interview any students for this research. Spending time in school while classes were in session provided the researcher with the opportunity to informally observe and assess the school climate.

The amount of time spent in each interview, the body language of the person being interviewed and the level of involvement each interviewee had in the process were also important aspects for this qualitative study.

Validity

In a qualitative study three sources for collecting data increase the validity of the study (Merriam, 1998). The researcher collected agendas and notes from GSA meetings, VADIR reports from each school, correspondence from parents and administrators, as well as information about school wide events that support sexually diverse students. Nineteen interviews were completed, while school was in session to allow for observation, in three school districts to get a better understanding of the safeguards they provided to students. All interview questions were piloted by a group of confidential participants to ensure that all questions had validity before completing the interviews in all three school districts. The piloted group consisted of teachers and administrators from various suburban, rural and urban school districts.

In this study, the researcher controlled internal validity by examining evidence from multiple respondents to identify themes based on converging perspectives of participants (triangulation). Although a small sample size, the names of the respondents and the schools remained confidential. All respondents were given a number depending on the school district. All digital recordings were sent to an independent transcriber with titles provided by the researcher (School District One, School Teacher 2, etc.) and the names of the school districts were also confidential.

Reliability

McMillan states, "Reliability is the extent to which what is recorded as data is what actually occurred in the setting that was studied, as well as whether interpretations and conclusions are accurate" (2008, p. 297). The researcher made as many steps during this process as operational as possible, which added to the reliability of the research. In addition, the researcher used a multiple case study approach in which several school districts were

investigated and the same protocol was followed in each of the school districts. The use of the multiple case study approach helps increase the reliability of a study because the researcher is investigating the same data and outcomes, as well as asking the same interview questions in the same order, from three different sources.

McMillan states, "Reliability is also enhanced by an abundant use of detail" (2008, p. 297). The researcher followed the same protocol for every interview. Interviews were completed in the office or space of the interviewee to allow for interviewees to feel comfortable. The researcher asked every question and follow up question in the same order. Interviews were digitally audio-taped and then were transcribed by an independent transcriber. The independent transcriber provided the researcher with the written text recorded during the interviews and the researcher compared the transcriptions to the field notes taken during the interviews. Field notes consisted of setting on the interview as well as the time and duration of the interviews. Field notes also included number of e-mail correspondence as well as personal notes on the climate of the school.

Instrumentation

"An interview is both the most ordinary and extraordinary of ways you can explore someone else's experience" (Richards, 2005, p. 42). The method of interviewing was chosen as the primary instrumentation for this qualitative case study because the researcher felt it was the best way to get a true sense of the climate for sexually diverse students in each of the school districts. Although students were not interviewed because of constraints with the Institutional Review Board, those teachers most closely related to sexually diverse students were interviewed as part of the research. Those teachers, who also have an active role in the Gay-Straight

Alliances in their high schools, told the researcher that they had a group discussion about the issues of harassment and over all building climate with the students involved with the Gay-Straight Alliance.

Nineteen faculty and administrators were chosen based on their relationships with students in the GLBT community. Since this research was based on the administrative role in safeguarding sexually diverse students, the researcher interviewed many building and district administrators to get a sense of how important safeguarding sexually diverse students was to them. Interviewing school leaders, faculty and staff also allowed the researcher to understand the depth of understanding each interviewee had of sexually diverse students, as well as explore the specific ways they help safeguard this at risk population.

Richards states that interviews, "are as ordinary as a conversation and as intrusive as a spy camera" (2005, p. 42). The researcher created the questions for the interview and interviewed nineteen faculty and staff in three different suburban school districts. The fifteen interview questions were piloted with a small group of professionals who are both in the education field and fields other than education. Individuals were selected by the researcher to participate in mock interviews. The purpose of this process was to make sure that the questions used in the study were understandable to the interviewees and helped to clarify any research bias.

Researcher Interview Settings

All faculty and staff were contacted through e-mail, which followed Sage College Institutional Review Board procedures. Confidential one-on-one interviews were scheduled and the interviewees received an informed consent form allowing interviews to be audio taped with a

self-addressed stamped envelope from the researcher, which needed to be signed and sent back to the researcher before any interview took place. The researcher interviewed seven staff members in School District One, six staff members in School District Two, and six staff members in School District Three.

All interviews were conducted through one-on-one meetings in each of the school systems on days when school was in session, and the interviewees did not receive the questions before the interviews took place. All interviews ranged from fifteen to thirty minutes in duration. The researcher was given access to walk through the halls as students moved between classes, which happened because the researcher conducted interviews in the natural setting of each interviewee's classroom or office. Participants in the interview were chosen by their position in the school district and the fact that they were, or presently are, involved with the sexually diverse curriculum, policies, and sexually diverse clubs in their high schools.

The following are the interview questions that were asked in the same order of all interviewees.

How has the district implemented safeguards for students of sexual diversity?
- How well do you/school leader address the needs of sexually diverse students?

- How well did the school district implement safeguards and create curriculum for sexually diverse students?

- What is your involvement in this area?

Safeguarding Students of Sexual Diversity
- To what extent have these safeguards been necessary at your school?

Curriculum on Sexually Diverse Students
- What specific curriculum do you have that addresses sexual diversity?

- How has that curriculum been accepted by students, staff and parents?

School Environment
- What changes in the building climate have you seen across the building since implementing the safeguards for sexually diverse students?

- What types of harassment and discrimination toward students of sexual diversity continue to happen?
    - If so, how is it dealt with?

GSA
- What purpose does the GSA serve in your school system?

- How many students belong to the GSA and how many staff are involved?

- What events do the GSA students plan in your building?

Professional Development for Staff
- What types of professional development opportunities were offered to staff focusing on sexually diverse students?
    - Is there on-going professional development?

Future Steps
- In what areas do you think the district can improve in its work with sexually diverse students?

- Why is it important for school leaders to embrace sexually diverse students?

- Do school leaders have an impact in this area?

Data Collection

The interviews were audio-taped using a digital recorder. All interviewees signed a consent form allowing the researcher to tape the interviews. The interviews were transcribed by an independent transcriber and converted into a Microsoft Word document. The researcher was the sole individual with the list of names of the interviewees and school districts and all interviews were destroyed after the completion of the dissertation.

The researcher will report the findings to those professors involved with the Sage College School of Education Doctoral program, as well as those who attend the Sage College Doctoral Colloquium in November of 2010. The school leaders for the districts in the Public School System will receive the findings as well.

Demographic Information

School District One

School district one is a rural suburban school district located ten miles outside of Albany, New York, which is the capital of the state. The school district has one high school, one middle school and four elementary schools. There are over 3,200 students in the district with around 600 staff members which include transportation, custodial, buildings and grounds, support staff, teachers and administration (Education, 2009). The district encompasses one hundred and twenty miles. The high school has a student population of around 1,100 students and there is one principal, two assistant principals and one athletic director who also works as the Director of Safety. 97% of the school district is white, with the other 3% being Hispanic, Black or African American and Asian. Under 10% of the school population qualifies for free/reduced lunch and they have a 96% attendance rate (NYSED, 2009).

School District Two

School District Two is located in the Capital District Region of New York State and is a large suburban school district. There are six elementary schools, one middle school and one large high school in the district with a total number of 6,900 students district wide (Education, 2009). The high school has over 2,200 students and one high school principal and four assistant principals who all oversee one grade level and there are approximately 1,100 employees district

wide. 93% of the school district is white, with the other 7% being Hispanic, Black or African American and Asian. Under 9% of the school population qualifies for free/reduced lunch and they have a 95% attendance rate (NYSED, 2009).

School District Three

School District Three is located outside of New York City and has a total number of 3,600 students district wide. The school district encompasses five elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. There are 1,200 students in the high school, with one high school principal and four assistant principals who act as grade level principals (Education, 2009). 76% of the school district is white, with 12% being Hispanic, 9% Black or African American and 3% Asian. 10% of the school population qualifies for free/reduced lunch and they have a 95% attendance rate (NYSED, 2009).

Conclusion

The three school districts involved in this qualitative case study provided the researcher with open access. The researcher was encouraged to walk around the hallways, and was given the offer to ask follow-up questions when the research was being investigated. In addition, several school districts sent the researcher information prior to the interviews and tour of the schools to allow a deeper understanding of the role of the school in the lives of sexually diverse students.

Researching safeguards of sexually diverse students is best done qualitatively because it provides the researcher with a deeper understanding and gives insight into what school districts are doing through the use of policies, codes of conduct and curriculum to address those needs.

Although this research focuses on sexually diverse students the information offered in this research is important for all students, regardless of sexual orientation because it will give all readers a better understanding of the needs of sexually diverse students.

Chapter Four: Analysis/Presentation of Data

Safeguards for sexually diverse students are absolutely necessary because kids can be tough on one another. High School is the most traumatic time of life and if you can survive it, you can survive most things. They (students) are exploring who they are and what direction they want to take in life. We have a student who explores his feelings of sexual identity through his art because his parents do not allow him to explore that identity at home (School District Three interview).

Research Methods

Research Questions

The interview questions focused on the main themes related to the implementation of safeguards for sexually diverse students in the public school system. The main themes were: (a) building climate (b) safeguards (c) and support. The researcher focused on two main questions to investigate how those school districts addressed the needs of sexually diverse students. Those research questions were as follows:

Question 1: What school district actions have been used to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for sexual minority students?

Question 2: What leadership practices are perceived to promote a safe and supportive environment for students of sexual diversity?

In researching the two guiding questions for the study, the researcher asked fifteen questions that would provide more insight into the school climate for sexually diverse students. Each school district staff member interviewed for this study provided the researcher with information regarding the school's practices that address the needs of sexually diverse students.

Some of the staff members did not have a great deal of information regarding sexually diverse students, while other staff members had insight into the challenges of sexually diverse students as well as specific areas of concern. Those areas of concern, as well as the number of individuals with and without insight will be further explained later in this chapter.

Table 4.1 illustrates the themes established during this research study.

Table 4.1	Themes For Sexually Diverse Students
Common Theme	Major Theme
Teacher Attitude	Building Climate
Administrator Attitude	Building Climate
Uninformed	Building Climate
Policies	Safeguards
Codes of Conduct	Safeguards
Harassment	Safeguards
GSA	Support
Curriculum	Support
Unconcerned	Support
Leadership Support	Support
Empathy	Support
Outside Perception	Support

The reason why these themes were chosen for this study is based on the interview process. Each of the nineteen interviewees had different perceptions about the level of support provided to sexually diverse students by school administrators.

General Observations

During the interviews, many interviewees used the words gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered. However, there were other interviewees who did not say the words gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered and only referred to the target student population as "those students," and they did not take as much time to answer the researcher's questions which made for a shorter interview. In addition, their body language suggested that they felt uncomfortable with some of the questions. One individual kept his/her arms crossed and shifted frequently in his/her seat when asked a question. Those individuals who did not use a common language, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, felt the school was doing a good job with that student population but did not provide examples of best practices for sexually diverse students. They stated that since the school had safeguards in place, it proved the school addressed the issues of sexually diverse students.

Results

The three school districts safeguard students in a number of ways. Certain individuals interviewed were heavily involved with sexually diverse students, while other interviewees supported students through the use of policies and codes of conduct.

The researcher primarily used Violent and Disruptive Incident Reports (VADIR) from each school district as well as interviews and safeguards such as policies and codes of conduct. One of the school districts has a link on its website for its GSA and the GSA does Public Service Announcements (PSA) and uploads them to the site. All of this information was used in researching these districts.

Violent and Disruptive Incidents Reports

As the first step in the analysis process, the researcher investigated VADIR data from each high school in each school district. School districts in New York State are required to provide VADIR data to the New York State Education Department on a yearly basis. This data provides the State Education Department with information on school safety issues and is available to the public under the Freedom of Information Legislation (FOIL).

The VADIR data provided the researcher with information regarding the reporting of harassment incidents in each school district. The following graphs illustrate the past three years of VADIR data from School Districts One, Two and Three and specifically focuses on harassment and intimidation as well as minor altercations.

School District One

The researcher investigated Violent and Disruptive Incident Reports (VADIR) data from the high school in School District One. The following graphs illustrate the past three years of VADIR data from School District One.

School District One
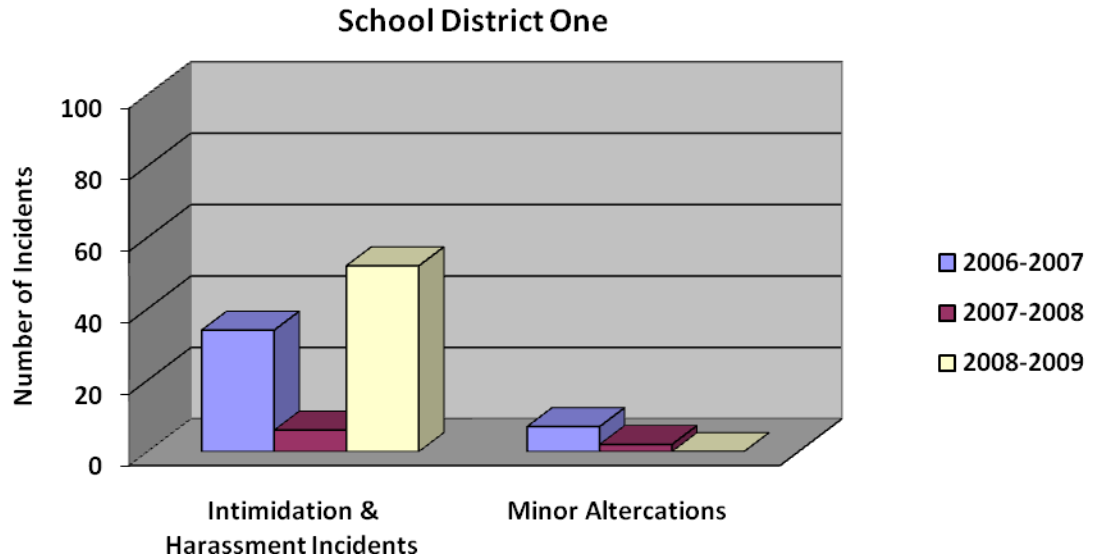
(Table 4.2)

The number of incidents of harassment, intimidation, and minor altercations declined

from the 2006-2007 school year to the 2007-2008 school year. However, the number of

incidents of intimidation and harassment increased dramatically in the 2008-2009 school year.

Minor altercations went down over the three year period used in this study. Since the VADIR

report does not categorize students based on sexual orientation, it is not possible to know the

number of incidents involving GLBT students. Instead it represents the total number of

harassment and intimidation incidents, and minor altercations in the school setting in School

District One.

> *We always follow up on harassment. Enforcing the Code of Conduct and dealing with issues that arise which include conducting mediations, which involves sitting down with the student. During mediation I ask what direction the person wants and I offer them a menu of ideas of what the outcome can be. Sometimes they don't want anything to happen necessarily at that particular point in time but they just want to talk about it. I'm going to respect what they want and offer them a safe place (School Leader, School District One Interview).*

The high school in School District One has a zero tolerance policy for harassment and

intimidation. The high school in School District One has a policy to protect all students from

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harassment and discrimination. Within the student handbook there are consequences such as

detention, suspension, and community service for each action and the school administrators

follow through with those consequences.

School District Two

The researcher investigated Violent and Disruptive Incident Reports (VADIR) data from

the high school in School District Two. The following graph illustrates the past three years of

VADIR data from School District Two.

School District Two
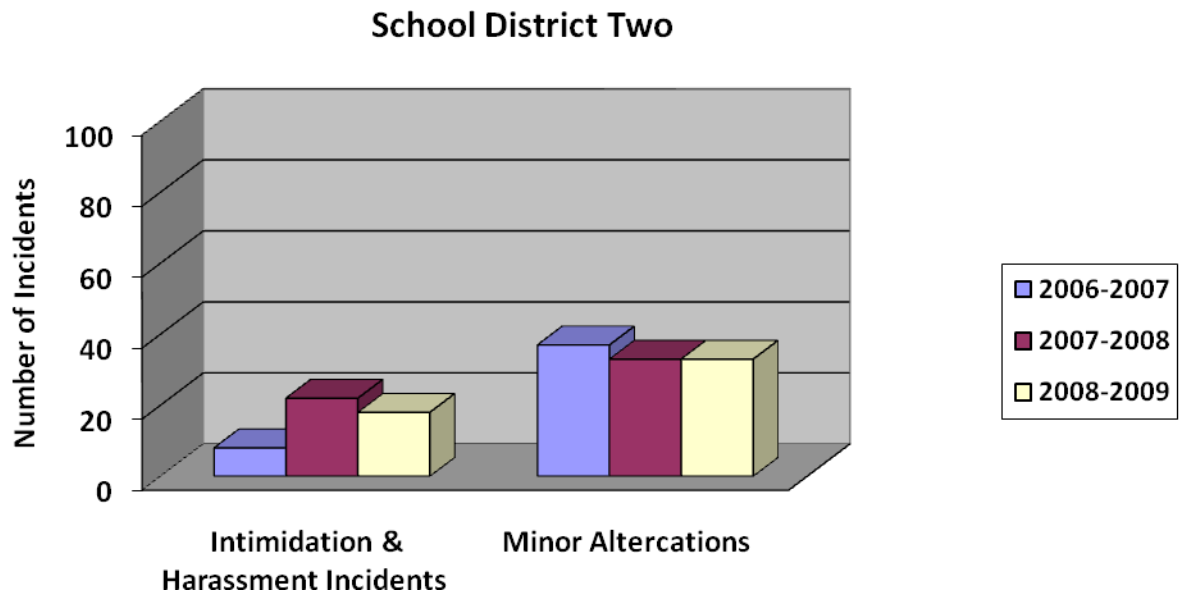
(Table 4.3)

The number of incidents of harassment and intimidation in School District Two went up

from the 2006-07 school year to the 2007-08 school year but declined during the 2008 -09 school

year. Minor altercations showed a small decline over the three year period. As stated earlier

with respect to District One, VADIR data does not categorize students based on sexual

orientation and the number of incidents on this graph does not mean that all student victims were

GLBT students. It represents the amount of harassment and intimidation in the school setting in School District Two.

During interviews with school administrators they stated that they were more concerned about incidents of racial harassment than harassment of sexually diverse students. That is not to say that they are not concerned about sexually diverse students, but that racial incidents are much more prevalent.

The high school in School District Two has a policy to protect all students from harassment and discrimination, and it does specifically address sexually diverse students. Within the student handbook there are consequences for each action and the school administrators follow through with those consequences. The consequences range from detention to suspension. In addition, the school administration and staff may have created a climate of acceptance and respect in the Code of Conduct so there are less incidents of student harassment.

The number of incidents of harassment and intimidation went back down during the 2008-2009 school year, although it was still much higher than during the 2006- 2007 school year.

School District Three

We create a niche for all students whether in the GSA, various club and extra-curricular activities. Methodology in this school is to deal with acceptance and understanding for all people. Within that window are a lot of people who are traditionally marginalized. A couple of weeks ago we were meeting with parents to discuss risky business and sexual promiscuity among students. It was powerful and dynamic because it was more of a discussion than a lecture. A parent raised her hand and asked how we were addressing sexual promiscuity amongst gay youth. I realized at the moment that we were only talking about heterosexual

students. When she asked the question you could feel the discomfort in the room. It made me

think about how many times we take it for granted and we have a lot of work to be done in

terms of specific needs (School Leader, School District Three Interview).

Once again, the researcher investigated VADIR data from the high school in School

District Three, which was readily available to the researcher when arriving to the school. The

following graph illustrates the past three years of VADIR data from School District Three.
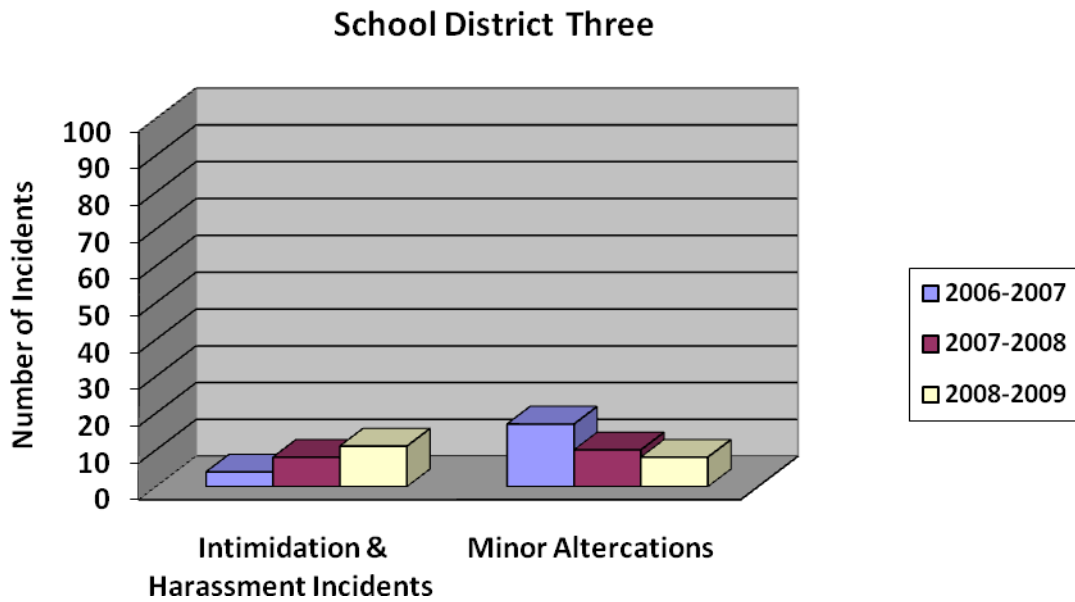
(Table 4.4)

The number of incidents of harassment and intimidation showed an increase over three

years. The number of incidents of harassment and intimidation were lower than School District

One and Two. Minor altercations showed a decrease over the three years collected by the

researcher. As in the case of school districts one and two, the harassment, intimidation, and

minor altercations of students do not mean that student victims were GLBT students. VADIR

data does not categorize students based on sexual orientation and the number of incidents on this

graph does not mean that all student victims were GLBT students. It represents the amount of harassment and intimidation in the school setting in School District Three.

The number of incidents of harassment and intimidation can be perceived in a few different ways. It could mean that there is zero tolerance for harassment and intimidation in the high school. Much like the other two school districts, the high school in School District Three has a policy to protect all students from harassment and discrimination and the policy specifically addresses sexual diversity. Within the student handbook there are consequences for each action and the school administrators follow through with those consequences.

Student Code of Conduct
Discrimination, which includes the use of race, color, creed, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability as a basis for treating another in a negative manner. Using vulgar or abusive language, cursing or swearing, as well as slurs that refer to race, gender, sexual orientation or disability. Intimidate, harass or discriminate against any person on the basis of race, color, creed, national origin, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation or disability.

The number of incidents of harassment and intimidation, although lower than School District One and Two, has risen over the three year period that the researcher investigated, which could mean that the teachers and staff felt more empowered to report such incidents to their school administrators.

The reality is how we treat our students is how we are teaching them how to treat one another. If we don't create a safe place, it makes it really difficult for them to have to come to school and focus on their education (School District Staff, School District Three Interview).

VADIR Data Conclusions

When completing a qualitative case study it is important to put all of the pieces of the research together like a puzzle to get a better picture and understanding of what is going on in the school district. Although the VADIR data provided the researcher with a level of understanding of how many incidents of harassment, intimidation, and minor altercations happen in the high school during the school year, it is important to delve deeper into the climate of the building to find out how sexually diverse students are safeguarded.

Overall, the three school districts investigated for this research safeguard all students from harassment and intimidation. School Districts Two and Three were similar in the number of incidents of harassment and intimidation as well as the number of incidents which involved minor altercations. School District One was different from the other two districts because they had a higher number of harassment incidents but a much lower number of minor altercations.

School Board Policy, Codes of Conduct and Other Safeguards

School District One has a school board policy that is designed to protect all students from harassment and discrimination. Sexual orientation is one of those protected student groups. There is also a board policy entitled, "Teaching About Controversial Issues" which protects teachers and staff when they teach subject matter that some parents may find controversial.

In addition, the high school in School District One has a Code of Conduct which states the discipline procedure for students who harass or intimidate other students based on sexual orientation. The following chart illustrates School District One's discipline policy safeguarding sexually diverse students.

Intimidation and Harassment	Each Offense:
(physical/emotional), intimidation, hazing, bullying, threats of harm, threatening language, assault, fighting, attempting to incite a serious incident which compromises the school environment or student safety, etc.) • Use of **slurs relating to ethnicity, disability, religion, race, sexual orientation or physical condition** of another, and any form of **sexual harassment**	• investigation of complaint • contact parent/guardian • 1 to 5 day(s) extended school detention (ESD) or out of school suspension, at discretion of investigating administrator. Physical injury of another student will always result in a minimum of 1 day out of school suspension. • superintendent's hearing, as warranted • police notified, as warranted • referral to school counselor • loss of parking privilege for up to twelve months

School District Two has a school board policy against harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation. In addition, the high school in School District Two has a Code of Conduct which states the discipline procedure for students who harass or intimidate other students based on sexual orientation. The following chart illustrates School District Two's discipline policy safeguarding sexually diverse students.

Student Rights
In addition, to promote a safe, healthy, orderly and civil school environment, all district students have the right to: • Take part in all district activities on an equal basis, regardless of race, color, creed, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability.
Intimidation, Harassment, Menacing, or Bullying Behavior and No Physical Contact
Threatening, stalking, or seeking to coerce or compel a person to do something; intentionally placing or attempting to place another person in fear of imminent physical injury; or engaging in verbal or physical conduct that threatens another with harm, including intimidation through the use of epithets or slurs involving race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, religious practices, gender, sexual orientation, age or disability that substantially disrupts the educational process.

The high school in School District Three has a Code of Conduct which states the discipline procedure for students who harass or intimidate other students based on sexual orientation. The following chart illustrates School District Three's discipline policy safeguarding sexually diverse students.

Student Rights
The district is committed to safeguarding the rights given to all students under state and federal law. In addition, to promote a safe, healthy, orderly and civil school environment, all district students have the right to: Treat other students with respect. • Take part in all district activities on an equal basis regardless of race, color, creed, national original, religion, gender or sexual orientation or disability. • Present their version of the relevant events to school personnel authorized to impose a disciplinary penalty in connection with the imposition of the penalty. • Access school rules and, when necessary, receive an explanation of those rules from school personnel. • To proceed in a safe school atmosphere without the fear of threat to their well being.

Interviews with Teachers, Staff and Administration

Without administrative support there would be less tolerance. I have seen in the past few years that I've been here that we continue to take a step in a good direction. The first couple of years there was all kind of trouble with bias. Groups of students wore white hats to identify with white supremacists. Part of the reason we have a hat policy (that they can't wear them) is because we don't want that kind of environment. It was a situation where we try to educate kids that it doesn't matter the color of your skin, your sexual preference, any of those kinds of things. Everybody has the right to feel safe and not harassed. I do feel a point in time that things needed to change around here and I think we've made great strides toward that. It's just that we can't do anything when they step outside of here (School Leader, School District One Interview).

Interviewing staff and administration was the next logical step in the research of sexually diverse students and provided the researcher with the ability to step into the school community and get to know key individuals in the school who safeguard sexually diverse students. Most of the interviewees were very accommodating and made the researcher feel welcome, which helped create a better understanding of the building climate.

School District One

   Seven interviews were completed in School District One. Four of those interviews were with school administrators at the building and district level. Three interviews were done with teachers who had been involved, and are presently involved with, the high school Gay-Straight Alliance. The interview questions focused on safeguards, the use of Gay-Straight Alliances, the amount of professional development done for staff that addressed the needs of sexually diverse students, and the suggested next steps the staff felt the school district should take in addressing the needs of sexually diverse students.

   The strength of the GSA is the whole premise that you're not going to harass people

   for any reason. Sexual orientation is a part of it but not going to harass for any reason is

   also a part of it. The whole focus is on how to be accepting of differences (School Leader

   interview, School District One).

   School District One has done a great deal of work in the area of sexually diverse students. There is a GSA that meets on a monthly basis and during the interviews the researcher found out that the GSA plans a couple of events during the school year. The GSA participates in and plans "No Name Calling Week" and "Day of Silence." All students are supported, but not encouraged, to participate in the Day of Silence and the majority of teachers and staff are supportive of those students who choose not to talk on that day. The Day of Silence is a day where students take part in an all day event where they remain silent which is symbolic of all of those GLBT individuals silenced because of bias, harassment and abuse. The district implemented the GSA in 2002 because there were issues of discrimination and they wanted to provide safeguards for students. This group was teacher initiated but well accepted by the school administration.

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Leadership has made it very clear that all students should be safe and that includes sexually diverse students and overall climate of the school makes that clear. Our high school principal made it very easy to have GSA and supports GSA (School Teacher, School District One Interview).

In addition to the work the GSA does in the high school, interviewees spoke openly about the level of support they feel from the administration. The interviewees stated that the administration follows through fully on all reports of discrimination against sexually diverse students. One of the administrators is openly gay and states that he tries to model appropriate behavior and be a good role model for students, whether they identify as gay or straight. Other administrators interviewed stated that they have a zero tolerance policy for students who harass other students based on sexual orientation.

I spent a lot of time with my assistant principals even during the year when we notice something in the Code of Conduct we say we have to look at this. I reach out to other suburban principals to do comparisons. Almost every year we do a swap at one of the fall meetings to do comparisons. They strengthen harassment, intimidation, and bullying language so it addresses any kind of harassment whether sexual orientation or racial or religious (School Leader, School District One Interview).

Every interviewee in School District One spoke openly about the support they receive from the high school principal, who makes a strong impact in this area every day. At one point, before an event sponsored by the GSA, the high school principal received an angry letter from a parent who did not understand why the school would support a "gay" event such as the Day of Silence. The following is an excerpt from a letter written from the principal in response to that

parent. The researcher feels that this is a good example of the tone set by the school administration.

Mr. & Mrs. XXXXX

The Day of Silence is sponsored by several organizations including the Human Rights Campaign and Gay, Straight, Lesbian Alliance. From their web site, "The Day of Silence is about safer schools, tolerance and positive change. Some organizations misrepresent these facts."

Our own extra-curricular club (GSA) is the foundation of creating respect for all humans in this building, regardless of race, religion, economic status, physical characteristics or abilities, interests, or sexual orientation. I am proud of the example they set for all of us. They have been a lead group in this building for seven years to promote respect for everyone. The focus this Friday is indeed to respect all…especially homosexuals. I would encourage you to read the heartbreaking story of Lawrence King, a fifteen year old young man who was shot and killed in school in February because of his sexual orientation (School Leader, School District One).

School District Two

Six interviews were completed in School District Two. Five interviews were completed with school and district administrators, and one interview was completed with the student advocate who is also the advisor for the Gay-Straight Alliance. It is important to mention that the GSA has been in existence since 1988 and is one of the longest running Gay-Straight Alliances in the state of New York. It was created in response to students' need and had a

student advocate, who is the guidance counselor, taking a lead role. Several female students approached the student advocate with research about GSA's and he brought it to administration which then supported the creation of the GSA. "*When the club started they put up signs and they were ripped down but the girls were determined and put more signs up (School Leader, School District Two Interview).* When the student advocate took on the role as advisor for the GSA, he was harassed by a parent who threatened his life and the police had to be involved but he was determined to keep moving forward.

As in School District One, the interview questions focused on safeguards, the use of Gay-Straight Alliances, the amount of professional development done for staff that addressed the needs of sexually diverse students, and the logical next steps that the staff felt the school district should take in addressing the needs of sexually diverse students.

School District Two has done a great deal of work in the area of sexually diverse students. Besides the GSA, the student advocate has developed professional development for students and staff with the use of the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) which teaches students and adults about respecting diversity and building a caring school environment. This very powerful group brings together students and adults to share their experiences of being harassed and discriminated against. The student advocate leads the NCBI and it brings together two large suburban school districts in upstate New York. Over fifty staff members in School District Two have been trained in NCBI and twenty-five of those staff members take an active role in the process.

In addition to NCBI, the GSA participates and plans "No Name Calling Week" and "Day of Silence." All students who participate in the Day of Silence are supported by administration

and staff. All interviewees stated that it is very common to see same sex couples holding hands in the hallway, and the high school in School District Two has accepted the practice of same sex couples going to the prom since the early 1990's. *"Two boys wanted to go as a couple to the Prom and they had to have an unofficial chaperone to make sure there was no fallout from the Prom goers" (School Leader, School District Two Interview).*

In addition to the work the GSA does in the high school, interviewees spoke openly about the level of support and understanding they have gained from the student advocate, who has worked tirelessly with this group of students. The student advocate stated that he felt a great deal of support from administration and strongly believes all students should be accepted within the school setting.

> *The student advocate is excellent and he rises to every occasion. When we started seeing people that were identifying as GLBT, he stepped up for support. He's been right on top of things telling all of us that this is where society is going and these are the types of supports we need to put in for these kids (School Leader Interview, School District Two).*

Every interviewee in School District Two spoke about the school district culture which is supportive and accepting of sexually diverse students. The superintendent and administration have policies in place that safeguard sexually diverse students and they believe that only in such an environment can students maximize their full potential.

> *If there is one student that feels our education has not treated them with respect or acceptance then we have more work to do. I don't think you are ever where you want to*

be. I think acceptance is the first line to achievement. We need to develop a goal setting

approach for students and have students take ownership of what they are here for. One

goal is cultivating leadership within students (School Leader Interview, School District

Two).

School District Three

Six interviews were completed in School District Three. Four of those interviews were with school administrators at the building level and two interviews were completed with school counselors who are involved with the high school Gay-Straight Alliance. The interview questions focused on safeguards, the use of Gay-Straight Alliances, the amount of professional development done for staff that addressed the needs of sexually diverse students, and the logical next steps that the staff felt the school district should take in addressing the needs of sexually diverse students.

The Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in School District Three has been in existence for seven years and was created to fill a student need when administration began noticing students coming out at an earlier age and the school superintendent and high school principal were very supportive of creating a GSA.

The GSA meets on a monthly basis and during the interviews the researcher learned that the GSA plans a couple of events during the school year. The GSA participates and plans "No Name Calling Week" and "Day of Silence", movie nights; it also hangs pictures focusing on sexual orientation, hands out tolerance buttons and sets up staff information tables at school events. All students are supported when they participate in the Day of Silence and the majority of teachers and staff are supportive of those students who choose not to talk that day. In addition

to the events planned by the GSA, they also do Public Service Announcements (PSA) on the morning news in the high school. The GSA also hangs posters around the building supporting diversity and promoting events. They have also put on a production of The Laramie Project and are very active in the school community offering student awareness campaigns.

The primary way we support gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students is through our GSA. Beyond that, all or our guidance counselors, social workers, psychologists are very sensitive to the needs of kids that are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered and they make sure that they know they have a safe place, that they are accepted and that they can be referred to other counseling agencies. Counselors have helped them talk to parents. Time has changed. Now, it just seems as a non-issue (School District Three Leader Interview).

The above statement was made by the school leader in School District Three and shows the progressive nature of the school because each interviewee used common language when describing sexually diverse students. School District Three sets a tone of openness and acceptance through the use of policies and safeguards such as the GSA. Each administrator had specific ideas on how their school district can progress in the area of sexual diversity, and they are moving forward with some of those ideas.

It's difficult to reach the entire student body. I wish we could bring in more speakers or possibly a GSA in Middle School. In terms of curriculum, it's often more heterosexual (mom and dad), so I would like to sensitize it more for all diverse groups (School Counselor, School District Three Interview).

Addressing Student Needs

When instances come up, a lot of these students are struggling or coming to terms with their sexual identities. In the high school they find a culture of acceptance. A lot of the upperclassmen are more comfortable with it and are out publicly (School Leader Interview, School District Two).

The following charts illustrate the perception of staff and administrators when asked interview questions regarding safeguards for sexually diverse students. Numbers indicate the how many interviewees believe the school districts address the needs of sexually diverse students. The first row is the total number of responses from all of the interviews. Following the combined number of responses are the responses categorized by school district. After each table, there is an explanation of the answers given by each school district investigated in this research study. Some of the questions resulted in very similar answers by school district leaders and staff. In some of the other questions there was a discrepancy in the answers given by interviewees.

Safeguards

Table 4.5

Individuals Who of Implement Safeguards for Sexually Diverse Students			
How the district implemented safeguards for students of sexual diversity	**Does not Address**	**Addresses**	**Addresses Very Well**
How well do you/school leader address the needs of sexually diverse students?	1	2	16
School District One	1	1	5
School District Two			6
School District Three		1	5

Sixteen of nineteen people interviewed believe that, they as individual staff members in each school district address the needs of sexually diverse students and the number is distributed rather evenly. Each interviewee stated that they felt that they provide a safe place for sexually diverse students and work hard to make students feel comfortable and engaged in their class.

Interviewees felt that they are proactive and cover sexually diverse topics in class, even if it is not in their formal curriculum. In addition, those individuals interviewed felt as though they step in and safeguard sexually diverse students when they are being harassed and follow through with the appropriate discipline.

Two staff members felt that they can do a better job of addressing the needs of sexually diverse students and one staff member felt that they do not address the needs of sexually diverse students at all.

Table 4.6

School Districts Implementation of Safeguards for Sexually Diverse Students			
	Not Well	**Well**	**Very Well**
How well did the school district implement safeguards and create curriculum for sexually diverse students?	4	9	6
School District One	2	3	2
School District Two	2	3	1
School District Three		3	3

When the question of how well the school districts implemented safeguards and curriculum was asked during the interview, there was more of a discrepancy. School Districts One and Two had interviewees who believed that the school districts did not do a proper job of implementing safeguards. These interviewees were both staff and school leaders. Those interviewees believed that the school districts could have greater safeguards for sexually diverse students, such as curriculum that focuses on the GLBT community. School District Three interviewees were more confident that their school district did a good job of implementing safeguards for sexually diverse students.

Nine individuals interviewed believe that their school district does a good job of

implementing safeguards for sexually diverse students. Six individuals believe their school

districts implement safeguards very well.

Overall, the individuals interviewed believe they do a good job safeguarding students, but

the school district as a whole could do better. They believe not all staff are on board with

safeguarding sexually diverse students.

Table 4.7

Interviewee Involvement in Safeguards for Sexually Diverse Students		
	No Involvement	**Involvement**	**Much Involvement**
What is your involvement in this area?		8	11
School District One		2	5
School District Two		4	2
School District Three		2	4

All nineteen individuals interviewed believe that they have involvement with sexually

diverse students and that they address the needs of sexually diverse students. Involvement is

defined as supporting sexually diverse students through safeguards. Much involvement in

safeguarding sexually diverse students is defined as an individual who provides a safe place for

sexually diverse students, as well as creates curriculum (mostly through informal conversations

in class) or they have a heavy involvement in the school's GSA.

Table 4.8

Necessity of Safeguarding Sexually Diverse Students			
Safeguarding Students of Sexual Diversity	**Not Necessary**	**Necessary**	**Very Necessary**
To what extent have these safeguards been necessary at your school?	3	6	10
School District One		2	5
School District Two	2	3	2
School District Three	1	1	4

Sixteen of the nineteen individuals interviewed believe there is a need for safeguards for sexually diverse students. Three of the nineteen individuals do not believe the safeguards have been necessary because their school district does not have an issue where sexually diverse students are concerned. Two of those three individuals believe they work in an open and accepting building where harassment of sexually diverse students does not take place. The one other individual who does not believe the safeguards have been necessary stated, "*Hazing Policy is actually driven by athletic team experiences. Harassment aspect as far as bullying that is more of an adolescent behavior not necessarily to this particular group of students. Issues between blacks and whites, preps and jocks, freaks and jocks, goths and athletes*" (*School District Two Interview*).

School District One interviewees believed there was a need originally for safeguards because there had been issues with white supremacists and they needed to make sure that everyone was safe in their school. At the same time they were having issues with white

supremacist students the high school's GSA was being created and they wanted safeguards for those students in case an issue arose. School District Three originally implemented safeguards as a reaction during a time when there was racial unrest in the late 1980's and safeguarding sexually diverse students were included in those safeguards when students coming out at an earlier age.

Curriculum

I think it would be interesting to take a better look at curriculum. We should look at actual instruction to curriculum because we don't do that right now (School Leader, School District One Interview).

Table 4.9

Sexually Diverse Curriculum		
Curriculum on Sexually Diverse Students	**No Specific Curriculum**	**Specific Curriculum**
What specific curriculum do you have that addresses sexual diversity?	7	12
School District One	2	5
School District Two	3	3
School District Three	2	4

Curriculum was an area of deficit in all three school districts. Interviewees stated that there is not a formal curriculum that focuses on sexually diverse issues. Health classes address sexual diversity during the teaching of the AIDS epidemic, and sometimes during health and wellness class, but that is not a formal curriculum. Sixteen out of nineteen interviewees stated

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that they would like to see a formal curriculum that focuses on diversity because the school district itself is not diverse and they feel that students need a better understanding of diversity. Diversity not only covers sexually diverse students but also racial and economic diversity, and interviewees were concerned that students will not be prepared for the diverse world we live in.

Besides the NCBI curriculum, sexually diverse curriculum was an area of deficit in School District Two. As in the other two school districts, interviewees stated that the only formal curriculum for sexually diverse students takes place in Health class and focuses on AIDS. However, one school leader stated that their school district curriculum is aligned with New York State curriculum, which does not specifically address sexually diverse students.

In terms of curriculum, we are using the state curriculum and State Curriculum does not address sexual diversity. If you get into situations, teachers are suppose to be objective and with sexual, political and religious issues hopefully teachers take a neutral objective position. We'll use good judgment in terms of the direction the conversation or questioning goes (School Leader, School District Two Interview).

The lack of sexually diverse topics in New York State curriculum does not mean that they cannot broaden the curriculum in place. There are teachers within the high school who read literature that is written by gay authors and sometimes those books focus on gay issues but it is not formalized. Many of the interviewees stated that they would like to see curriculum that focuses on sexual diversity because students are coming out at a younger age and they believe it is important to support these students.

In addition to a curriculum deficit, the school leader in School District Three stated that she would like to create a parent outreach program for parents of students who are coming out.

She feels that these parents need support as they negotiate their way through the coming out process.

> *It would probably be helpful to have an outreach to parents; maybe to help parents*
>
> *accept when their kids come out. I'd like to see educational programs for parents*
>
> *because it is a hard time for them when their children come out (School Leader*
>
> *Interview, School District Three).*

Out of the three school districts, School District Three interviewees used a common language of gay, lesbian and transgendered, which was uniquely different from the other two school districts. Hearing common language used made the researcher feel as though School District Three works hard to make sure this student population is considered important in the school community. Curriculum is an area that they feel they can address better.

Table 4.10

Curriculum Acceptance by Students, Staff and Parents			
	Not Accepted	**Accepted**	**Well Accepted**
How is that curriculum accepted by students, staff and parents?	**4**	**11**	**4**
School District One	**1**	**5**	**1**
School District Two	**2**	**3**	**1**
School District Three	**1**	**3**	**1**

Acceptance of sexually diverse curriculum by students, staff and parents was a topic of interest by many of the interviewees. A small number of students, staff and parents do not agree with curriculum that addresses the needs of sexually diverse students. However, a larger number of interviewees stated that they accept curriculum that involves sexual diversity but a smaller number of interviewees believed that such curriculum would be well accepted by students, staff and parents.

Over all the topic of how the curriculum would be implemented was discussed. Many of the interviewees felt that curriculum that involved sexual diversity would be easier to accept by students, staff and parents if it was seen as a natural part of curriculum that was already being taught. An example of implementing GLBT topics so it was a natural part of curriculum would be a social studies that debated the subject of California's Proposition 8. Another example provided by an interviewee would be the usage of the movie entitled The Laramie Project, which was a story about the brutal killing of Matthew Shepard.

Interviewees felt that their school district would face more criticism if they focused on GLBT issues during a month, much like the concept of Women's History Month. It was stated that if their district focused on GLBT issues during a specific month parents would feel that the districts were pushing homosexuality.

School Environment

Table 4.11

School Environment			
School Environment	**No Change**	**Change**	**Changed a Great Deal**
What changes in the building climate have you seen across the building since implementing the safeguards for sexually diverse students?		5	14
School District One		2	5
School District Two		2	4
School District Three		1	5

All three school districts have seen changes in the building climate since creating GSA's and other safeguards for sexually diverse students. There was a belief in many of the interviews, that the safeguards protect all students, not just those in the GLBT community, which helps foster a community of respect and acceptance. All three school districts protect all marginalized groups through their harassment policies.

None of the staff interviewed answered that they had failed to see any changes in building climate. Five individuals have seen slight changes in the building climate. A slight change is defined as a safer climate for students where more staff members intervene when students are being harassed.

Fourteen of the interviewees in all three school districts have seen major changes in the building climate. A major change is defined as an increase in the safety of the students, where they are free to express themselves in a variety of ways. Those interviewees related those

positive changes to a strong and supportive school leader as well as the establishment of Gay-Straight Alliances and other clubs that support marginalized groups, all of which have been established for over seven years.

Table 4.12

Issues of Harassment			
	No Harassment	**Harassment**	**Much Harassment**
What types of harassment and discrimination toward students of sexual diversity continue to happen?	**10**	**6**	**3**
School District One	**4**	**1**	**1**
School District Two	**4**	**4**	**1**
School District Three	**2**	**1**	**1**

When interviewing staff members, ten individuals answered that there were no issues of harassment that take place in their school setting. Six interviewees stated that there are still issues of harassment that take place and three interviewees stated that there are many issues of harassment that take place in their districts.

There were three individuals; one from each district who felt that the way harassment is dealt with has not changed. That does not mean that they have not seen changes in the climate but rather they felt that their schools code of conduct always dealt with harassment situations. However, two of those three interviewees felt that the school districts had to find ways to better educate individuals on GLBT issues. Those interviewees felt that staff members still allow students to use the words "fag" and "Gay" in a derogatory way as they walked down the hall

between classes. The interviewees felt that educating staff members on how harmful those words are to students in the GLBT community would help minimize the amount of harassment that continues to take place.

Gay-Straight Alliances

Table 4.13

Purpose of Gay-Straight Alliances			
GSA	**No Purpose**	**Purposeful**	**Very Useful**
What purpose does the GSA serve in your school system?		2	17
School District One		1	6
School District Two		1	5
School District Three			6

All three school districts have a GSA, which they feel is important, because it provides a safe place for all students. All three school district interviewees feel that their GSA serves an important purpose in their school community. School District Two has had their GSA for over twenty years which makes it a natural part of the institution because it has been in existence for so long. School District Three by far has the most visible GSA out of all three school districts investigated in this study because they promote their organization through education brochures and Public Service Announcements (PSA) done on the morning announcements. In addition, they have a page on the district website which shows that the school district is supportive of the after school club.

Table 4.14

Student Involvement in Gay-Straight Alliances			
	No Answer	**Educated Guess**	**Exact Answer**
How many students belong to the GSA and how many staff is involved?	1	8	10
School District One		4	3
School District Two	1		5
School District Three		4	2

The number of students involved in Gay-Straight Alliances in each of the three school districts has fluctuated over the years. The teachers involved with the Gay-Straight Alliances stated that the numbers have been as high as fifty students involved and as low as eight students involved in any given year. Some students are involved but do not attend the meetings based on other after-school activities that they are involved with during the school year.

When asked how many students were involved in the high school Gay-Straight Alliance, one interviewee did not have an answer and stated that they did not know how many students were involved and did not want to speculate on the number. Eight interviewees in the school districts made an educated guess, which means they began or ended the answer with the stated "but I'm not sure." Ten interviewees knew the exact number, which led the researcher to believe that they were actively involved with the Gay-Straight Alliance, because they not only knew the

number of students, but they could answer the question about what events were planned by the GSA.

Table 4.15

Events Planned by Gay-Straight Alliances			
	No Answer	**1 Example Provided by Interviewee**	**More than 1 Example Provided by Interviewee**
What events do the GSA students plan in your building?		10	9
School District One		4	3
School District Two		5	1
School District Three		1	5

All three Gay-Straight Alliances planned events in their school district and each interviewee could provide the researcher with at least one example. The Gay-Straight Alliances in each building do one major event, which is the Day of Silence, and two of the school districts are involved in "No Name Calling" Week.

Overall the interviewees felt that the GSA is a very important part of the school culture and they want to see the Gay – Straight Alliances continue to move forward with their work in educating students and staff on GLBT issues.

Professional Development

In all three school districts, sixteen out of nineteen interviews stated that they would like to see more professional development for staff because staff does not always know how to handle situations involving sexually diverse students. School District One had a speaker address diversity and acceptance four to five years ago at a staff development day but they have not had anyone address that topic since.

I don't have any particular suggestion but would be receptive to ideas from the building if they felt we needed to or if it became such a problem that we needed to deal with it. Honestly there are bigger issues that the district needs to deal with other than sexual identity (School Leader, School District Two Interview).

School District Two has NCBI which addresses many different types of diversity, and it also focuses on bullying and harassment of those marginalized groups. Not all staff in School District Two takes part in NCBI and four out of six interviewees stated that they would like to see staff take a more active role in this type of training for staff. Two interviewees believed there were more important matters to address than sexual diversity.

When interviewing staff, one interviewee mentioned that the non-profit came to the school a couple of years ago to do an in-service for staff but she found it unhelpful because she said it came off silly. She mentioned that she was disappointed because she really wanted to learn something about sexual diversity so she could help and she walked away from the in-service with very little new information.

Table 4.16

Professional Development			
Professional Development for Staff	**No Opportunities**	**1 Opportunity**	**2 or More Opportunities**
How many professional development opportunities were offered to staff focusing on sexually diverse students?	5	5	9
School District One	3	4	
School District Two	1		5
School District Three	2	1	3

Table 4.16 indicates the opinions of the interviewees regarding the number of professional development opportunities offered to them on a yearly basis. Five individuals answered that their school districts do not offer any professional development opportunities regarding sexually diverse students. None of these individuals believe that their school district addresses the needs of sexually diverse students through professional development.

Five individuals felt that their school district offered one opportunity. These five individuals were able to provide the researcher with an example of what the professional development opportunity was and who provided it.

Nine individuals interviewed. Which were specifically from School District Two and Three, felt that their school district offered two or more opportunities to engage in professional development that focuses on sexual diversity. Those nine individuals were able to provide the researcher with specific examples of the types of professional development offered by the school

district. In addition, all nine of these individuals were closely related to the GSA in each school district.

Table 4.17

On-Going Professional Development			
	Did Not Know	**No**	**Yes**
Is there on-going Professional Development?	7	5	7
School District One	4	2	1
School District Two		3	3
School District Three	3		3

Four out of six interviewees in School District Three stated that they would like to see more professional development in their school district. It is important to note that School District Three has an ongoing relationship with a non-profit organization that works with schools to address diversity and sexual orientation. Two out of six interviewees in School District Three stated that staff members are required to do sixteen to twenty hours of professional development per year and they are allowed to request an inservice with this non-profit organization. Other staff members did not provide that information during their interviews. Making that collaboration better known would help address the need for professional development in this district.

Professional Development Conclusion

We had an individual come from a non-profit to work with our teachers but it came off as almost silly. I was disappointed because I really wanted to learn something and felt like it's wasn't taken seriously by the group (School Leader, School District Three Interview).

In two of the three school districts there is a mechanism for addressing the need of professional development but many of the interviewees did not see the connection between what they are already doing and what they can be doing using those mechanisms already in place. "*All teachers are required 16-20 hours of professional development and teachers able to go to the non-profit we work with for PD. I'm not sure how often they do that though" School Counselor, School District Three).*

In School District Two, NCBI training is offered to all staff at the beginning of the year and staff can volunteer to be trained at any time during the school year. The Student Advocate would like to see all staff trained in NCBI. School District Three staff can do any of their required professional development through the non-profit organization that works with the school system. Although it will be addressed in chapter five, it would be beneficial for these two school districts to better promote the systems they already have in place.

Future Steps

Table 4.18

Future Steps for School Districts			
Future Steps	**No Examples**	**1 Example**	**More than 1 Example**
In what areas do you think the district can improve in its work with sexually diverse students?	3	10	6
School District One	1	3	3
School District Two	1	2	3
School District Three	1	5	

Many of the interviewees had ideas of where the school districts should go next when addressing the needs of sexually diverse students. Three of the interviewees out of the nineteen individuals interviewed believe that they already do a great job and should just keep doing what they are doing. They believed that, although the issue of safeguarding sexually diverse students is important, there are other issues that have much more importance.

Ten interviewees provided the researcher with one example and six interviewees proved more than one example of what their school district could do to better meet the needs of sexually diverse students. Most of those examples focused on professional development and curriculum.

Table 4.19

Importance of School Leaders Who Embrace Sexually Diverse Students			
	No Examples Explaining an Importance	**One Example**	**More Than One Example**
Why is it important for school leaders to embrace sexually diverse students?	1	9	9
School District One		4	3
School District Two	1	2	3
School District Three		3	3

Interviewees were asked why it is important for school leaders to embrace sexually diverse students. One interviewee stated that they did not think it was important. That interviewee felt that there were more pressing issues that faced their school district and the issues that sexually diverse students face was not one of them.

Nine interviewees gave one example of why they believe it is important for school leaders to address this issue. Nine interviewees provided the researcher with more than one example of why they felt that it is important for leaders to embrace sexually diverse students. Those examples provided to the researcher focused on how school leaders set the tone for the building and that a school leader has the power to support teachers make bold moves in addressing the needs of sexually diverse students. In addition, it was stated that school leaders also have the power to bring these topics up in faculty meetings and other building level meetings, where they can address the needs of sexually diverse students.

Table 4.20

School Leader Impact			
	No Impact	**Impact**	**High Impact**
Do school leaders have an impact in this area?	1	2	16
School District One		1	6
School District Two	1		5
School District Three		1	5

One interviewee did not feel that school leaders had an impact on the engagement of sexually diverse students. Eighteen interviewees felt that school leaders had either an impact, meaning that they could help engage sexually diverse students, or have a high impact which meant that they set the tone that could help these students feel engaged. Many of the answers to this question were also addressed in Table 4.19.

Conclusion

Overwhelmingly, each interviewee stated that it is important for administrators to support the needs of sexually diverse students and all but one believe that school leaders have an impact in the area of sexually diverse students. Interviewees felt that the school leader is the person responsible for making changes at the district and building level. Many stated that without administrative support it is very difficult for teachers to address the needs of sexually diverse students because of the possible fallout from other colleagues, parents and community members.

Administrators are the individuals that can put a positive message out to parents and defend the school from criticism from the community. In addition, school leaders are the individuals with a direct line to the Board of Education. The Board of Education is the group that can safeguard students and create policies that protect sexually diverse students as well as protect teacher when they create sexually diverse curriculum that can be used in the classroom.

Chapter Five: Summary of Findings

Building leadership and district leadership know it is important how you deal with the seriousness with what's presented on a day to day basis. At the principal or assistant principal level, if someone comes and says, or has the courage to come and tell you, something about how they are being treated and you choose to ignore it or say buck up, then you've lost the opportunity and you've sent the message that we accept behaviors that are not conducive to learning (School Leader Interview, School District Two).

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover the extent to which, and in what specific ways, school leaders make a difference in the learning environment for sexual minority youth. Sexual minority students have been defined as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, trans-gendered (GLBT) youth. This qualitative study used interviews of school leaders and teachers in the Public School System.

Question 1: What school district actions have been used to ensure a safe and supportive learning environment for sexual minority students?

Question 2: What leadership practices are perceived to promote a safe and supportive environment for students of sexual diversity?

Implementing Safeguards for Sexually Diverse Students

Sixteen of nineteen people interviewed believed that, they as individual staff members in each school district addressed the needs of sexually diverse students. The individuals interviewed believed that they had involvement with sexually diverse students and that they addressed the needs of sexually diverse students. Overall, the individuals interviewed believed

they did a good job safeguarding students but the school district, as a whole, could do a better job. The reason for this belief is based on the idea that not all individuals working in a public school system believe that GLBT issues need to be addressed in school. Without the support from the whole school community, a school district is still not reaching its full potential with this marginalized student population. School leaders at the district and building level have the influence to make this a priority for staff, teachers and students.

Safeguarding Sexually Diverse Students

Sixteen of the nineteen individuals interviewed believed there is a need for safeguards for sexually diverse students. Three of the nineteen individuals did not believe the safeguards were necessary because their school system does not have an issue where sexually diverse students are concerned. This belief is based on the premise that their districts are open and accepting and therefore GLBT issues do not occur. Regardless of whether school leaders see issues involving harassment and discrimination of sexually diverse students, the problem still exists. Creating an awareness of the issues involving this minority student population is the first step to creating a greater level of acceptance for all students.

Board Policies and Codes of Conduct

School Districts One, Two and Three all have board policies that safeguard sexually diverse students. Board policies provide administrators the support they need to help safeguard sexually diverse students because it gives an administrator an established policy, voted on by a board of education, which states harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation will not be allowed. In addition, by having board policies, these three school districts set a tone of

acceptance for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation. As a guiding framework, board policies help direct administration when establishing procedures in their codes of conduct.

All three school districts in this research study have codes of conduct that safeguard sexually diverse students and protect them from harassment, discrimination and acts of violence. Each code of conduct focuses on positive behavior that all students should model but they also stipulate a punishment for discriminating, harassing and abusive behavior. In the areas highlighted in the codes of conduct, which include level of dress, harassment and student rights, sexually diverse students are mentioned as a group that is protected. School leaders reference codes of conduct and board policies when dealing with students and parents during disciplinary actions.

The codes of conduct are distributed to students and parents at the beginning of each school year and each school district has their code of conduct uploaded to their district website. This gives a sense of safety to students entering the school doors on a daily basis.

School Environment

All three school districts have seen changes in the building climate since creating GSA's and other safeguards for sexually diverse students. There was a belief during the interview process, that the safeguards protect all students, not just those in the GLBT community, which helps foster a community of respect and acceptance. However, by proving some focus to sexually diverse students through the establishment of a GSA, there is a feeling that they are an accepted part of the school community.

Many of the interviewees have seen changes in their building climate, and related those positive changes to a strong and supportive school leader as well as the establishment of Gay-Straight Alliances, all of which have been established for over seven years. The GSA's are allowed to plan numerous events during the school year and the school leaders support and attend those events. That form of role modeling is important for students and staff to see in their school community.

When a school leader attends an extra-curricular event, people notice and feel a sense of importance that the leader would take time to attend their event. The same can be said for when a school leader attends an event sponsored by a group such as a GSA. By attending an event, the school leader is giving support to that student group. All three school districts researched in this study have school leaders who attended GSA events as well as other events sponsored by GLBT students.

Gay-Straight Alliances

All three school districts have a GSA. School District Two has had its GSA for over twenty years which is one of the longest running GSA's in New York State. School District Three has the most visible GSA because they promote their organization through education brochures, posters hanging on the walls around the school and Public Service Announcements (PSA) done on the morning announcements. Overall all interviewees felt that the GSA is a very important part of the school culture and want to see the Gay-Straight Alliances continue to move forward with their work in educating students on GLBT issues.

Future Steps for School Districts

Only three individuals out of the nineteen staff and administrators interviewed believe that they already do a great job, and therefore, do not need to make changes. They believed that, although the issue of safeguarding sexually diverse students is important, there are other issues that have much more importance.

Overwhelmingly, each interviewee stated that it is important for administrators to support the needs of sexually diverse students. Many stated that without administrative support it is very difficult for teachers to address the needs of sexually diverse students because of the possible fallout from other colleagues, parents and community members.

Suggestions for Future Practice

Curriculum

Curriculum was an area of deficit in all of the school districts used in this research. Interviewees stated that there is not a formal curriculum that focused on sexually diverse issues. Twelve of the interviewees stated that the school had formal curriculum focusing on sexual diversity. The formal curriculum those interviewees referred to was health class which focused on the teaching of the AIDS epidemic. Sixteen out of nineteen interviewees stated that they would like to see a formal curriculum that focuses on diversity because the school district itself was not diverse and they feel that students needed a better understanding of diversity.

If schools are going to have an impact on the attitudes and behaviors of their sexually concerned and often active students, they must acknowledge in their curricula the importance of sexuality in our lives and in the lives of those who have gone before us (Lipkin, 1995, p. 32)

Examples of curriculum that could be used could begin with the use of literature in English classes that focus on gay issues or books that have openly gay character. The librarian in School District One is well-versed in the area of gay literature and acts as a great resource for getting books that focus on gay topics and other librarians could follow suit by making sure there was a section in the library that focused on sexual diversity. Using literature that focuses on controversial topics is a great way to open up debate among students which can lead to a better understanding of the issue. These debates can challenge conventional wisdom and lead students and staff to a better understanding of GLBT issues.

In addition, all three schools could focus on sexual diversity in Health class, other than the teaching of AIDS curriculum. The topic of abstinence and safe sex is a part of the health curriculum because many teens are actively engaged in sexual behaviors. Health curriculum should focus on sexually diverse students as well because many students in the GLBT community are sexually active and need to learn how to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases.

Social Studies curriculum is another area where GLBT issues can be addressed. Students can debate "Don't ask, don't tell," gay marriage and Supreme Court Decisions that affect the GLBT community. These issues often spark great debates among students which will help lead to a better understanding of society.

Another curriculum-related area is drama. All of the high schools in all three school districts put on dramatic or comedic plays every year. The drama club could focus on a gay-themed play such as the Laramie Project. Although drama class is an elective taken by a small number of students, a play can be seen by the whole school community as well as parents in the

community. Just like gay characters seen in mainstream media, a school play that has gay

characters can act as a great educational tool for those that attend a play.

Extra-curricular activities, other than GSA meetings, are another important resource for

GLBT students. Schools often have dances, and more importantly a prom. Allowing same sex

couples to attend these dances and the prom together can help create a climate of acceptance.

Professional Development

In all three school districts, sixteen out of nineteen interviews stated that they would like

to see more professional development for staff because staff does not always know how to

handle situations involving sexually diverse students. The staff interviewed believes that

professional development opportunities would give them insight into ways of dealing with

GLBT issues and help them become more sensitive to the needs of sexually diverse students.

In two of the three school districts there is a mechanism for addressing the need of

professional development. Many of the interviewees in those two school districts did not see the

correlation between what their school districts already offer in the area of professional

development, and what they can be doing using those already established mechanisms. For

example, School District Three has an established relationship with a non-profit organization that

focuses on GLBT issues and staff can do their required professional development hours with that

organization. Many of the interviewees in School District Three did not realize that was a

possibility.

Although fourteen of the nineteen interviewees stated the school system offered

professional development that focused on sexual diversity, they could not remember the exact

year that the professional development was offered. Five of the interviewees stated that their

school district never offered professional development in the area of sexually diverse students

even though they were in the district where other interviewees stated there was professional

development offered focusing on GLBT issues. This lack of cohesion shows that there is a

discrepancy in the area of professional development and staff understanding of what is available.

However, the staff needs to take ownership over their own learning. The school leaders in all

three districts that were investigated are supportive of professional development that focuses on

GLBT issues and the staff should approach those school leaders if they find professional

development that is of interest to them.

School District One

Four or five years ago, depending on which staff person the researcher spoke to, School

District One sponsored an individual who went to the school district to talk with staff about

acceptance. The speaker did not only address homosexuality but also focused on all diversity

and the importance of accepting students who are diverse. Many of the interviewees were

impressed with the speaker and spoke about how they wished that the school district would do

that more often.

The principal from School District One received an award from the Gay and Lesbian

Community Center in her community for her work with sexually diverse students, so it would be

possible for School District One to contact the Gay and Lesbian Community Center for resources

on how to address the needs of sexually diverse students in their school system. The school

district has an active GSA and perhaps the GSA could work with the community center on

events that would highlight the needs of sexually diverse students.

School District Two

Besides the GSA, the student advocate in School District Two has developed professional development for students and staff with the use of the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) which teaches students and adults about respecting diversity and building a caring school environment. This very powerful group brings together students and adults to share their experiences of being harassed and discriminated against. The students advocate leads the NCBI and it brings together two large suburban school districts in upstate New York. Over fifty staff members in School District Two have been trained in NCBI and twenty-five of those staff members take an active role in the process. It would be beneficial for the school district to continue using NCBI in the future and try to involve more staff members. NCBI is clearly beneficial for students. During the interview it was discovered that the student advocate is retiring at the end of the school year, so it is important for another individual to take on the role.

School District Three

School District Three has a relationship with a local non-profit that specifically focuses on sexually diversity and does community outreach. However, many staff members could not remember the last time they did professional development using a member of this non-profit group which either shows a lack of consistency in this relationship or a lack of communication that this organization is readily available for teachers and staff to use for professional development. The teachers and staff in the school district have to fulfill a mandatory requirement of sixteen to twenty inservice hours on a yearly basis and this non-profit is one of the organizations on the list of accepted organizations. Perhaps it would be beneficial for the strong GSA in the school system to plan an event with the non-profit organization. The GSA in

School District Three plans many creative events and a shared event between the two organizations could be beneficial for staff.

Out of the three school districts, School District Three interviewees used a common language of gay, lesbian and transgendered, which was uniquely different from the other two school districts. Hearing common language made the researcher feel as though School District Three works hard to make sure this student population is considered important in the school community. In education, it is important to use common language in subjects such as English-language arts, math, and other subject areas. Common language with diverse groups is an important way to show sensitivity, and can help show a level of acceptance.

School District One and School District Two interviewees did not all use a common language. They could incorporate some of the ideas from above that are used by School District Three which would enhance their involvement in the school community.

Recommendations for Further Study

There are many areas of study in the GLBT community where research needs to be explored. Some of the areas of study recommended were found through the interviews completed for this study on safeguarding sexually diverse students. Through the conversations there were areas of deficit that could be addressed through other research. The following are some of those areas of deficit.

Parent Outreach

An interesting recommendation evolved out of an interview in School District Three, which was establishing a parent outreach program. Coming to terms with having a gay child can

be a difficult process for parents. It would be beneficial for researchers to investigate the importance of parent outreach for those parents struggling with having a gay child. Although it is difficult for a school to venture into this type of relationship with parents, there is a need for it and further research would be helpful. Many students are coming out while they are in school and through the use of resources such as school counselors and the GSA, perhaps they can plan some small intimate events for parents who are dealing with the issue of a child who is coming out.

The Importance of Gay-Straight Alliances

Not all schools in New York State have Gay-Straight Alliances and that should be an area investigated and researched. All three school districts investigated for this study have a GSA and they are an important part of the school culture. It is important to note that it is impressive that these three school districts have each had a GSA for over seven years, with School District Two's GSA existing for the longest period of time. All three GSA's play an important role in the lives of sexually diverse students and are active in the school community.

Violence and Disruptive Incident Reports

VADIR data is a very useful tool for school systems to keep records of the number of incidents that take place in their school system each year. The New York State Education Department uses the information to monitor school safety and for the purposes of defining a school as safe or unsafe. Although VADIR data was helpful to this study because it provided the researcher with the number of harassment incidents that took place in each school year over a

three year period, it did not disaggregate the types of harassment based on race, gender and sexual orientation.

It would be helpful to researchers, parents and school officials if the New York State Education Department disaggregated the types of harassment and violent incidents that take place in a school by race, gender and sexual orientation. When researchers, parents and school officials understand the type of harassment and violence incidents they can better help solve the issue.

Obstacles and Hindrances

There are always obstacles to topics that make people uncomfortable and the topic of sexual diversity makes many people uncomfortable. Through this research it became clear that the topic is important but many schools would prefer a "don't ask, don't tell" policy where sexual orientation is concerned. Getting teachers to address harassment issues; focus on diversity and use a common language in their daily instruction does not happen as often as it should. Many of the interviewees in this research discussed the fact that there is still name calling and that not all teachers want to address these situations. However, they also stated that all students should be accepted because students who feel accepted will be more engaged in their learning environment.

Interviewees in all three school districts stated that over the years the parents have been less of an obstacle than in years past. Fewer parents object to the teaching of sexual diversity, which could be due to the fact that there is not a great deal of curriculum. Parents may be more objective if the issue of sexual diversity surfaced more often. If a school district expands their

curriculum to involve GLBT issues, they should also be prepared for parent push-back and plan how to address parent concerns. As of right now, it seems as though sexually diverse students are a minority group that does not have an overwhelming presence in the school systems. Furthering their involvement in the school community could bring out some negative consequences but it is important that these very brave groups continue to do the work they are doing.

Research Questions

The school district actions that have been used in ensuring a safe and supportive learning environment for sexual minority students are the implementation of polices that protect sexually diverse students, as well as the strong GSA's that have been active in each high school for over seven years. In addition, the high schools all have codes of conduct that protect sexually diverse students from harassment, discrimination and acts of violence.

School Districts One, Two and Three had many leadership practices that have promoted a safe and supportive environment for students of sexual diversity. Administration was highly supportive of the creation of GSA's in each school. Each administrator was supportive of teachers who wanted to create a section of the library devoted to books focusing on sexual diversity. There were administrators who wrote letters of support for teachers who wanted to participate in the Day of Silence and National Coming Out Day. Those letters were written in reaction to parents who disapproved that schools would sponsor those events.

In School District One, the high school administrator wrote a powerful letter to a parent who was upset that students were allowed to participate in the Day of Silence. She wrote to the

parents to say that all students should be supported, regardless of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation. That level of support is important for teachers who want to see sexually diverse curriculum evolve.

In School District Two, the school leader at the district level wants to see safeguards progress even further because she believes that if even one student feels threatened then they have more work to do. This tireless support by an administrator sets an important tone for staff and teachers.

In School District Three specifically the school leader supported the use of PSA's on the morning announcements and she also let the GSA advisor hang posters that focused on sexual diversity around the school building. Same sex couples have been allowed to go to the prom and other dances together for the past seven years which shows all students, regardless of sexual orientation, that there is a high level of acceptance in the school district.

Administrative support for sexually diverse students is the first step in the process of allowing teachers to find more ways to include this at-risk student population. Through the support of the school leader, parents, students, teachers and staff are allowed to show a high level of acceptance for all students, and it sends a message that discrimination in the public school system will not be tolerated.

Conclusion

Interviewing individuals for research can be very powerful because the one-to-one conversation can offer the researcher important details that can be missed if you just look at numbers. At times interviews can be very sterile because interviewees might provide answers

they believe the researcher wants to hear. This happens often when interviewees understand the basis of the research. Interviews can also be insightful because interviewees may open up and provide the researcher with a rich and deep understanding of what is going on in each school district.

Each school district, in its own way, sets a climate of openness and acceptance. They have strengths, such as a protective school administrator who wants to safeguard all students, or a strong GSA that actively promotes what their club does. Through the nineteen interviews the researcher constantly heard the importance of school leader support because it then gives the teacher or student the strength to enter uncharted territories. Much of the research on sexually diverse students shows that there is still a great deal of uncharted territory left to uncover. Many of the interviewees stated that the topic of sexually diverse students should be a non-issue, not because it's not important, but because those students should be accepted for who they are so they have an opportunity to make an impact on the world like all other students. However, that is not the case in the real world and therefore districts should ensure and promote their acceptance of this minority student group.

The superintendents, principals, assistant principals and staff were accommodating and from the data collected and information garnered from the interviews, the districts clearly safeguard sexually diverse students very well and provide them with a safe place to learn and grow. All three school districts are models for what all schools should be doing where sexually diverse students are concerned. However, as well as these schools do in their role in the lives of this minority group, most of the staff who were interviewed in these school districts believes they can improve in their inclusion of sexually diverse students.

School District One, Two and Three all have safeguards in place for sexually diverse students and all three school districts are models for what all schools should be doing where sexually diverse students are concerned. Each school district is unique in its development of safeguards for sexually diverse students and they have best practices that other school districts should replicate.

The most important element to come out of the research is how valuable it is for faculty and staff to have school administrator support when working with sexually diverse students. The support provided by administrators is important because teachers need to know that they will have support if they receive complaints by parents or community members.

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