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Bullying of LGBTQ Youth

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Introduction

- This is one of the recent investigations that I have been working on with my colleagues and a team of school psychology and school counseling Ph.D. students

- This represents a multi-year effort to study and understand bullying of LGBTQ youth in the region of southwestern Pennsylvania

LGBTQ Kids Being Bullied

- Among those at greatest risk for being bullied by peers are youth whose non-gender-conformity or sexual orientation places them in the minority, which includes those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, (LGBT) and perhaps those questioning their sexual orientation as well, a group of adolescents who represent about 5% of American high school students (GLSEN, 2006)

2 Million Children

- As many as two million school-age children and adolescents may be bullied related to their sexual orientation, including verbal and physical harassment, threats, and intimidation (Browman, 2001)

- Such youngsters also tend to be subjected to derogatory comments, name-calling, and/or jokes pertaining to their actual or perceived sexual preference (Horowitz & Loehnig, 2005)

- In a study of 218 secondary school students and teachers in Pennsylvania, more than 80% of students reported that they heard various homophobic remarks at school (Grant, 2006)

Effects of Bullying

- Such treatment can have a variety of negative outcomes upon the development of sexual minority youth

  - Low self-esteem

  - Depression

  - Suicidal ideation or completion

  - Abuse of alcohol and other substances

  - Sexual acting out

  - Exposure to sexually transmitted diseases

  - Subjection to violence at rates higher than their heterosexual counterparts (Callahan, 2001; National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2004)

Problem Under the Radar

- Of particular concern to schools is that much victimization of students based on sexual orientation occurs at a low level, and as a result, often goes undetected by educators and other school-based professionals

- While LGBTQ students are frequently bullied and harassed by peers, many do not report the problem to school officials (Grant, 2006)

Why Don't They Help?

- When they are aware of the problem, educators may not address bullying behavior of sexually-diverse children and adolescents because of fear of discrimination, fear of job loss, their own prejudices, or failure to recognize bullying based on sexual orientation as a serious problem (Browman, 2001)

Policy

- Research conducted by Adams and colleagues (2004) indicates that few schools specifically address issues pertaining to sexual orientation in their anti-bullying policies.

Response

- Thus, in order to improve the educational experience of sexual minority students, it is vitally important that educators and other school staff develop an increased awareness of the issues faced by these students, and learn effective strategies for preventing and intervening in instances of bullying of LGBT children and adolescents.

Study

- The investigators developed a questionnaire that evaluated the perceptions of the incidence and negative effects of bullying upon the LGBTQ student population, and perceived school support for these students.

- The scale measured such domains as educators', students', and parents' perceptions of school support for LGBTQ students, exposure to the LGBTQ community, and perception of school policies regarding bullying, among others.

Student Sample

- 100% response rate of 63 LGBTQ students and their allies participating in a community-based outreach program
  - 32% Male
  - 56% Female
  - 8% Transgender
  - 5% Gender fluid/Gender neutral
- Ethnicity/Race
  - 63% Caucasian
  - 17% African American
  - 14% Biracial
  - 10% Hispanic
  - 5% Asian/Pacific Islander
  - 5% Native American
- Mean Age = 17 years
- Sexual Orientation
  - 31% Straight
  - 31% Homosexual
  - 25% Bisexual
  - 13% Questioning

Educator Sample

- 217 educators (6% response rate) from a county in southwestern Pennsylvania

Parent Sample

- Twenty parents out of a membership of 30 affiliated with the an advocacy organization in southwestern PA completed the survey, representing a 66% response rate.
    - 58% Female
    - 16% Male
    - 21% Transgender
    - 5% Self-Described their gender
- Ethnicity/Race
    - 89% Caucasian
    - 6% Hispanic
    - 6% Native American
- Sexual Orientation
    - 82% Straight
    - 2% Gay/Lesbian
    - 6% Questioning

Perception of Bullying of LGBTQ Students

- 50% of the students in the sample of this study believed that LGBTQ students were bullied at a higher frequency than their non-LGBTQ peers; 20% of these believed that LGBTQ students were much more likely to be bullied.

- 20% of teachers and 63.7% of parents participating in this study noted the frequency of LGBTQ students being victimized through bullying as being "more" or "much more" than the overall student population.

Types of Bullying Experienced by LGBTQ Students

- Relational aggression appears to be the most common form of bullying reported being experienced by LGBTQ students and their allies, with 42.8% of students, 35.3% of teachers, and 81.9% of parents reporting LGBTQ students at least "Sometimes" experiencing this form of victimization.

- The next most common forms of victimization, measured as occurring at least "Sometimes" by the LGBTQ students and their allies (S), teachers (T), and parents of LGBTQ youth (P) included:

    - Verbal aggression (S - 37.5%; T – 29.5%; P - 63.7%)

    - Cyberbullying (S - 25%; T – 29.3%; P – 45.5%)

    - Sexual harassment (S - 16%; T – 11.8%; P – 11.8%)

    - Physical bullying (S - 10.7%; T – 7.5%; P – 54.6%, respectively).

Frequency with which Students are Exposed to Queer Slurs

- Nearly all of the students (98.2%), teachers (95%), and most parents (72.8%) reported hearing or being made aware of other students using such terms as "gay," "fag," "homo," or "queer" in a derogatory manner, and 66.1% of students and 25.4% of teachers reported hearing these terms on at least a "frequent" basis.

- Perhaps more alarming, nearly half of the student respondents (48.2%), over half of the teacher respondents (65.4%), and nearly half of the parent respondents (45.5%) reported hearing or being made aware of school personnel using such terms in a derogatory manner.

Degree to Which LGBTQ Students Feel Supported by Others at School

- 19.6% of LGBTQ students and their allies, 22.8% of teachers, and 18.2% of parents reported that LGBTQ students were insufficiently protected by their schools from bullying by peers.

- These findings suggest that approximately a fifth of all samples surveyed believed that school systems are not adequately responding to bullying of LGBTQ youth in the educational setting.

Conclusion #1 – Different Perceptions of Bullying of LGBTQ Students

- Parents and LGBTQ students and allies reported observing/experiencing similar rates of bullying of LGBTQ students, while teachers indicated witnessing significantly less.

- This is an interesting finding, and contrary to a previous study in which teachers were significantly more likely than students to report observing bullying among middle school students (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004).

- It may be that parents of LGBTQ youth are more sensitive to the type and rate of bullying of LGBTQ youth than are the educators who work with these students.

- LGBTQ students and their parents may also not be reporting incidents of bullying to school staff because of a lack of specificity of particular children who may be particularly at risk for bullying at school.

Conclusion #2 – Relational Aggression is the Most Frequent Type of Bullying of LGBTQ Youth

- Relational aggression is an overarching term that includes both social aggression and relational aggression.

    - Social aggression occurs when the aggressor attempts to affect the victim's social standing by involving other people in the victim's peer group (Richardson & Green, 2006).

    - The perpetrators' intention is to hurt the target's social status while maintaining the perpetrators' self-esteem and control over their own social standing (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Crothers, Schreiber, Field, & Kolbert, 2009; Underwood, 2003)

    - In relational aggression, the aggressor uses her own relationship with the victim as the method for gaining compliance (Archer & Coyne, 2005).

    - Aggressors use relational aggression as a way to gain control, upset social ties or companionships, or pursue specific objectives of manipulating relationships (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Crothers et al., 2009).

    - Relational aggression does not have to be completed covertly and face to face statements such as "we will not be friends anymore unless…" are common for relationally aggressive individuals (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006).

Conclusion #3 - Frequent Use of Queer Slurs

- At least approximately half or more of the student, teacher, and parent respondents reported hearing or being made aware of queer slurs used by school personnel in a derogatory manner.

- This must be considered a serious area of need that requires immediate intervention in creating a safe place that schools should be for LGBTQ youth.

- There can be no tolerance for the degradation of another human being in our school systems, and schools need to identify the types of verbal utterances that would be contributory to the development of those feelings of abasement by these students.

Conclusion #4 – Perceptions of School Support for LGBTQ Students

- Teachers perceived their schools to be generally supportive of LGBTQ students, whereas a sizeable minority of LGBTQ students and their allies claimed that teachers "rarely" or "never" supported LGBTQ victims of bullying, few LGBTQ students perceived their school to be effectively addressing bullying of LGBTQ students, and most LGBTQ students believed their peers to be more supportive than teachers.

- This finding is consistent with that of Crothers and Kolbert (2004) in which teachers were found to be more likely than middle school students to perceive educational personnel as supportive of victims.

- One implication is that teachers need to have a clearer perception of LGBTQ students perceptions' of the lack of school support, and that teachers should be more vocal and active in indicating their support of LGBTQ students.

Future Research

- Better understanding needs to be achieved regarding the conditions that permit bullying of LGBTQ students to flourish

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