

*Article 4*

**Sexual Minority Youth in the Schools:  
Issues and Desirable Counselor Responses**

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Sexual minority youth, as they progress through elementary, middle, and secondary schools in the United States, are confronted every day with taunts, epithets, and a host of other negative, insulting, and derogatory words from their peers designed to bring them into conformity with the dominant majority culture's view of "normal" sexuality (i.e., a heterosexual or opposite-sex sexual orientation; Chung & Katayama, 1998; Nichols, 1999; Pope, 2000; Pope, Bunch, Szymanski, & Rankins, 2003). The television programs and movies that they watch, the advertisements that they see, and their parents, teachers, school administrators, and others give them, at best, a mixed message, but more usually provide a negative view on who they are and how they will end up (Rotheram-Borus & Fernandez, 1995).

Living in such an environment takes a psychological toll on a young person who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, or simply questioning if they are different sexually and affectionally from many of their peers, because these statements are occurring at a time when sexual minority youth so desperately want and need to belong. The American Counseling Association and American School Counselor Association have begun to take strong, concerted action to address school violence (Sandhu & Aspy, 2000) and to protect our students, in general, and especially those categories of students who are most at risk of physical and emotional violence from this bullying behavior; this includes the sexual minority youth in the schools (American Counseling Association, 2000; American School Counselor Association, 2000; Coleman & Remafedi, 1989;

Just the Facts Coalition, 2000; Nichols, 1999; Pope, 2000; Pope et al., 2003).

The following paper provides important information and guidelines to aid the professional school counselor in helping these courageous young people.

### *Important definitions*

In this paper, the general term “sexual minority” will be used to include a variety of young people who are in various stages of their psychosocial, gender, sexual, and cultural identity development processes. The term “sexual minority” includes gays (males who identify with a same-sex sexual or affectional orientation), lesbians (females who identify with a same-sex sexual or affectional orientation), bisexuals (males or females who identify with both a same-sex and opposite sex sexual or affectional orientation), transgender (individuals who are physiologically one gender but who are psychologically the opposite gender), intersex (individuals who have biological characteristics of both males and females), queer (individuals who identify as “different” sexually than the majority culture), and questioning (individuals who are unsure of their sexual or affectional orientation or gender identity). This sometimes will be abbreviated as GLBTIQQ in this paper.

### *An at-risk group*

The problems that sexual minority youth face in our schools are overwhelming. D’Augelli, Pilkington, and Hershberger (2002) studied 350 lesbian, gay, or bisexual youths who were at least 21 years old. Over half reported verbal abuse in high school as a direct result of their sexual orientation. Eleven percent (11%) had been physically assaulted. Young people who were more open about their sexual orientation in high school and who had a history of more gender-atypical behavior were victimized more often. Males reported being targeted more often than females. Their current mental health symptoms, especially traumatic stress reactions, were directly associated with having experienced more verbal abuse in high school. D’Augelli (2002) also found in another study that young people who

had experienced more victimization and who had lost friends reported more mental health symptoms.

There also appears to be a direct relationship between being on the receiving end of at-school victimization and high-risk health behaviors. Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002), in a study of 9,188 high school students, found that the combined effect of sexual minority status and high levels of at-school victimization was associated with the highest levels of health risk behaviors, even higher than a similar sample of their heterosexual peers.

Sexual minority youth are an at-risk population and deserve the same kinds of support and assistance that other at-risk populations now routinely receive (Pope et al., 2003). Acts of violence, whether directed at people because they look and act different, or it is said about others who look and act differently, can no longer be tolerated in our schools. Professional school counselors, in particular, because of their role in the school, are very important in eradicating these incidents.

### **Professional school counselors responses**

It is a well-known and accepted fact that professional school counselors are confronted regularly with elementary, middle, and secondary school students who are sexual minorities, including those who are questioning their sexual orientation (Cooley, 1998). Fontaine (1998) surveyed school counselors and found that more than half (51%) of both middle and high school counselors had worked with at least one student who was questioning his/her sexual orientation and that 42% had worked with at least one self-identified lesbian or gay student. Twenty-one percent (21%) of elementary school counselors also reported that they were aware of students in their schools who were identifying as gay or lesbian, or were questioning their sexual orientation. Counselors desperately need to know what to do when that young person walks into the school counseling office and says, "I think I might be a lesbian."

There is yet another problem. Professional school counselors overwhelmingly want to provide counseling services to sexual

minority students but are being prevented. Sawyer, Lehman, Anderson, and Porter (2002) conducted a random survey of 335 counselors who were members of the American Counseling Association or American School Counselor Association. They found that, although 90% of the sample agreed that school counselors should provide counseling to students to help them cope with harassment from their peers, only 75% actually provided such services—a performance gap of 15%. The problem may lie with school boards, administrators, teachers, school nurses, school psychologists, school social workers, or even the school counselors, one or all of whom may be fearful of repercussions when such services are provided or may have religious values against supporting sexual minority youth.

### *How did I get this way*

There are a number of well-written articles and books on the etiology of sexual orientation (LeVay, 1991, 1999; LeVay & Valente, 2002). The topic of sexual orientation can be expected to be complex, evocative, and confusing. To date, it remains unclear exactly how sexual orientation is determined. Moreover, because conservative religious and political groups tend to view homosexuality as a moral issue, while others see it as a civil rights issue, it cannot be separated easily from either context. Thus, a person's sexual orientation has both political and religious implications. Finally, given the lack of definitive answers from scientific research, both confusion and uncertainty tend to underlie the often intense discussions about the sexual behavior and mental health needs of sexual minorities in our society (Barret & Logan, 2001; Barret & Robinson, 2000; Pope & Barret, 2002a).

As to queries regarding whether sexual orientation is open to change, Money (1990) stated:

The concept of voluntary choice is as much in error (as applied to sexual orientation) as in its application to handedness or to native language. You do not choose your native language as a preference, even though you are born without it. You assimilate it into a brain pre-

naturally made ready to receive a native language from those who constitute your primate troop and who speak that language to you and listen to you when you speak it. Once assimilated through the ears into the brain, a native language becomes securely locked in—as securely as if it has been phylogenetically preordained to be locked in pre-natally by a process of genetic pre-determinism or by the determinism of fetal hormonal or other brain chemistries. So also with sexual status or orientation, which, whatever its genesis, also may become assimilated and locked into the brain as mono sexually homosexual or heterosexual or as bisexually a mixture of both. (pp. 43–44)

Furthermore, according to Coleman (1982):

It is unethical and morally questionable to offer a “cure” to homosexuals who request a change in their sexual orientation. While there have been reports that changes in behavior have occurred for individuals seeking treatment, it is questionable whether it is beneficial to change their behavior to something that is incongruent with their sexual orientation. (p. 87)

Research conducted by Nicolosi (1991) described an approach called “reparative therapy” (RT) that claims to change sexual orientation (always from gay to straight, rather than the opposite). RT parallels another “treatment,” “conversion therapy” (CT), hailed by conservative Christian groups as proof that prayer and meditation can “drive the sin out” and bring the “sick homosexual” back to health. Both RT and CT have received abundant attention, and both have been soundly condemned by the American Counseling Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, the National Association of School Psychologists, the American School Health Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the National

Education Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Mental health workers are warned that research indicates both of these “treatments” are more likely to be harmful than helpful. Many believe it is unethical for mental health professionals to practice CT or RT (Barret, 1999; Just the Facts Coalition, 2000).

Rarely does anyone agree on anything, yet it appears that there is a growing research consensus about the roots of sexual orientation, that is..., there is a strong biological component (genetic and/or hormonal) for many who have a sexual minority identity. It is imperative that this type of information be readily available to both parents and students. This paper makes the assumption that the causes of sexual orientation are not known definitively but that sexual orientation is not mutable.

### **Attitudes toward sexual minorities**

Social attitudes toward homosexuality have also undergone many changes. From the acceptance and integration of same-sex unions into the native American tribes of North America (Roscoe, 1989), to the acceptance of same-sex unions by the Christian church in the middle ages (Boswell, 1980, 1995), to the persecution of homosexually oriented persons under the Victorians (Rowse, 1977), to the enlightened approaches of pre-Nazi Germany (Hirschfeld, 1935), pre-Stalinist Russia (Thorstad, 1974), and imperial China (Ruan, 1991), and finally to the removal of homosexuality from the psychiatric manual of mental disorders (Bayer, 1981), history has seen an ebb and flow in the social acceptance of same-sex orientations (Pope & Barret, 2002a).

In the past, sexual minorities had to cope with active anger, religious hatred, psychiatric labels, and occupational discrimination. For today’s sexual minority youth, there are many positive sexual minority role models available. Today, GLBTIQ individuals appear in virtually every aspect of daily life. They are more “out” to their families and coworkers, visible in their neighborhoods, assertive in demanding equal rights, and have moved beyond the fear and shame that used to keep most of them invisible. This change can be seen in

all aspects of the media, gay-positive-statements from national and local political candidates, and in the debates within virtually all Christian denominations about the role of gay men and lesbians within the Church (Barret & Logan, 2001; Boswell, 1980, 1995).

### **“Coming out” or the developmental aspects of sexual identity development**

“Coming out to self,” or accepting one’s own same-sex feelings, attraction, and orientation, is an important and necessary developmental task for anyone who is a gay man or lesbian woman, but is especially important for the gay or lesbian adolescent because of the developmental ramifications of delaying this acknowledgment and acceptance (Pope, 1995). Males tend to define themselves as gay in the context of same-sex erotic contact, but females experience lesbian feelings in situations of romantic love and emotional attachment (Troiden, 1979). A large study of Minnesota junior and senior high school students found that about 11% reported that they were still unsure about their sexual orientation (Remafedi, Resnick, Blum, & Harris, 1992). Twenty percent of self-identified gay and bisexual men surveyed on college campuses knew about their sexual orientation in high school, and another 17% knew as far back as grade school that they were gay. The figures are 6% and 11%, respectively, for lesbians (Elliott & Brantley, 1997).

Chung and Katayama (1998) reported that the formation of sexual identity is a developmental process with these stages: awareness of same-sex feelings, feeling confused because one’s assumed sexual orientation differs from one’s perceived orientation, tolerance and acceptance of a lesbian or gay identity, and integration of a sexual identity with other aspects of one’s life.

Gay men and lesbian women often reported feeling different from others during childhood. Many of these differences are in gender nonconformity; that is, play and sport interests are more congruent with the other gender (Mondimore, 1996). Boys may find they are quieter, less active, and more sensitive than other boys, while girls may find that they are more physically active, assertive, and more

“tom-boyish” than their peers. Omizo, Omizo, and Okamoto (1998) found that common sentiments among young sexual minority persons included confusion, fear of not being understood, fear of negative or violent reactions from others, concerns about what kind of a future they might have, poor self-esteem, and internalized feelings of self-hatred. Within especially conservative cultures or families, such as those of some Asian American youth, there are few if any positive role models with whom sexual minority youth may identify (Chung & Katayama, 1998). For such youth, it is likely that feelings of isolation and confusion are magnified.

Some gay youth cope with their confusion by concretizing their gay identity very quickly. This is sometimes initiated by puberty, where feeling different now takes on a clearer, more precise feeling of sexual attraction. Herdt and Boxer (1996), in a study of 200 ethnically diverse lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, found that awareness of same-sex attraction occurred between ages 11 and 12, on average. Other gay teens try to deny their same-sex feelings and become super-heterosexual in an effort to retrain themselves, and still others become bewildered, guilt ridden, and lonely, escaping into substance abuse, depression, and suicidal ideation.

Not all gay and lesbian teenagers accept themselves, and this is understandable given the constant battering they receive from some cultures and religions, as well as from their peers, family, and society (Mannino, 1999). Eventually, however, the majority of gay youth who do accept their sexuality begin to feel a need to disclose their sexual orientation to others. There are many strategies to such disclosure, but close friends are usually told first, with parents being told later. The fear of rejection and isolation, along with parental sanctions tend to be ever present; therefore, some sexual minority youth decide to not disclose at all, especially if they are still in high school or living with their parents or other family members (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). Guidelines for someone who is coming out to parents can be found at <http://www.umsl.edu/~pope>.

## **Extent of the problems that sexual minority youth face in the schools and society**

Sexual minority youth face stigmatization and a significant number of stressors in the school environment, including ostracism, physical violence, and verbal harassment (Allport, 1958; Benvenuti, 1986; Gustavsson & MacEachron, 1998; Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1997; Pope, 2000). The search for one's sexual identity (male or female) is an important part of adolescence (SIECUS, 1995); but when that search is intertwined with a minority status, that is, either race or sexual orientation or ethnicity, it is even more complex (Chung & Katayama, 1998; Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999; Herring, 1998; Sanchez, 1995).

Gay and lesbian high school students face greater prejudice in school than African American students do according to a CBS News poll that surveyed the attitudes of the high school senior class of the year 2000. The findings included the following: 1) One-third of students know that gay or lesbian students were made fun of, verbally or physically abused, and threatened; 2) 28% of students polled have made anti-gay remarks themselves; 3) nearly a third of those polled have a family member or close friend who is gay or lesbian; 4) among those making anti-gay remarks, boys are more than twice as likely than girls to have done so; and 5) those who report their parents make anti-gay remarks are more than twice as likely to do so themselves (CBS News Poll, 1999).

A survey conducted in 14 American cities found over 46% of gay youth who disclosed their same-sex sexual orientation ("came out") to friends lost at least one of them as a friend (Ryan & Futterman, 1997). Marsiglio (1993) in a national survey of young people who were 15 to 19 years of age found only 12% would feel "comfortable" having a lesbian or gay male friend. Male youth in particular were more likely to hold negative stereotypes regarding lesbian and gay youth as 89% of the male adolescents in this study reported that they felt sex between two men was "disgusting." Malinsky (1997), in a study of 27 self-identified lesbians and bisexual girls between the ages of 15–21, found that 25 (93%) of the study participants reported

direct, first-hand knowledge of harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation. It is important to note that such harassment, reported here, was sometimes directed at those who simply associated with these young lesbian or bisexual women.

The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) rated 42 of the nation's largest public school districts on their policies and programs designed to serve sexual minority students and school workers. Only four districts got an "A"—Los Angeles, San Diego, Philadelphia, and Dade County, Florida. Twenty major school districts received a grade of "D" (Herscher, 1998, p. A20).

These negative feelings toward sexual minority youth are being reinforced by the indifference of school workers to these issues. Derogatory remarks by fellow students directed toward sexual minority students often go unchallenged by teachers, administrators, or school counselors, whereas a similar racist statement would more likely prompt a reprimand (Krivascka, Savin-Williams, & Slater, 1992; O'Connor, 1994; Pope, 2000). Fontaine (1998) found that those who were the perpetrators of harassment and intimidation of sexual minority students were aided by the indifference of school workers.

Concerned Students of Des Moines reported that the average high school student hears approximately 25 anti-gay remarks in a typical school day (The Advocate, 1997).

### **Effects of negative attitudes and violence toward these youth**

Adolescents who are different face a variety of barriers to healthy psychological development, most created and delivered by their peers, family, culture, and society (Pope, 2000). Besner and Spungin (1995) reported a variety of consequences for the lesbian and gay adolescent, such as a high incidence of acting out in school; rebelling against authority; abusing alcohol and other substances; feeling depressed, isolated, and confused; engaging in prostitution; and attempting suicide, many times succeeding. Jordan et al. (1997), in a study of 34 lesbian and gay high school students, reported a clear relationship between derogatory language directed against sexual minority students by their peers and adults in the school setting and self-harmful

behavior, such as suicidal ideation, attempted suicide, running away, poor academic performance, and truancy. Considering the stress of adolescence and the additional “cultural minority stress” of being a sexual minority youth, it is particularly disheartening to discover that a survey found that fewer than one in five lesbian and gay adolescent students could identify someone who was very supportive of them (Telljohann & Price, 1993).

#### *The suicide debate*

Remafedi (1987) found through a series of studies of self-identified gay male adolescents that they were at high risk for physical and psychosocial dysfunction as a result of experiencing strong negative attitudes from parents and peers. In a follow-up to those studies, Remafedi, Farrow, and Deisher (1991), in a study of 137 gay and bisexual male youths, found that 30% had attempted suicide once and 13% had made multiple attempts. The mean age of those attempting suicide was 15.5 years. Three quarters (75%) of first attempts came after the teenagers had labeled themselves as bisexual or gay. Risk factors that increase the potential for suicide in sexual minority youth are posted at [www.umsl.edu/~pope](http://www.umsl.edu/~pope).

According to Gibson (1989), suicide is the leading cause of death among gay youth. They are from three to five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Bailey & Pharis, 1996; Brown, 1991; Gibson, 1989; Hafen & Frandsen, 1986; Mondimore, 1996). Gibson (1989) also found that gay male adolescents are six times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts.

Currently, there is much discussion among researchers about these statistics based on the skewed demographics of the populations sampled (Muerher, 1995; Saulnier, 1998). The results of many of these studies have been criticized for the retrospective nature of the reports, the involvement of many of the youths in social service systems, and the recruitment of study participants from bars, which might inflate the actual numbers. It is quite difficult to gather generalizable data on this population because of the difficulty of operationalizing sexual orientation and the previously cited issues.

Savin-Williams (2001) questioned the findings and interpretation

regarding the suicide data collected by Remafedi and similar researchers for two distinct reasons: The methods used to classify a subject as “sexual minority” and the operational definition of suicide “attempt” were both flawed. He reported data from two studies that indicated that sexual-minority youths, more broadly defined in terms of sexual behavior, were only slightly more likely than heterosexual youths to report a suicide attempt. Then, using a more sophisticated method of assessment of suicide attempts, Savin-Williams was able to distinguish true from false attempts. This method eliminated over half of the suicide attempt reports among sexual minorities because these attempts were reclassified as false attempts (i.e., as ideation rather than a concrete act to end life). Furthermore, many of the true attempts were also not life threatening, suggesting that these suicide reports were attempts to communicate the hardships of their lives, a proverbial “cry for help.” Savin-Williams and the more current writings (McDaniel, Purcell, & D’Augelli, 2001) are now beginning to discuss issues of psychological resilience in sexual minority youth.

### **Ethical and legal issues in dealing with sexual minority youth in the schools**

The question of what is the ethical and legal role of the professional school counselor when counseling sexual minority students is an important practical one for school counselors (McFarland & Dupuis, 2001; Strong & Callahan, 2001). Ethically, the role is clear. School counselors are there to assist students in discovering who they truly and honestly are and to help them develop a strong and positive personal and cultural identity (American Counseling Association, 2000; American School Counselor Association, 2000).

Legally, the role of the professional school counselor is limited by school district policies as well as by state laws and regulations that govern the credentialing of school counselors in their state (McFarland & Dupuis, 2001). Also, if the school counselor is licensed as a professional counselor or other mental health professional, the person must operate within the bounds of confidentiality as outlined

in the state laws and judicial cases that govern the specialty. Some school districts may require parental disclosure and consent; others may not. School counselors, therefore, must be knowledgeable of the specific policies, laws, and regulations that govern their conduct. It is, however, of the utmost importance to sexual minority students that counselors be seen as their ally and their protector in the school.

Clearly, the shift toward the protection of sexual minority students in the schools is gaining momentum. In 1993, Massachusetts became the first state to ban anti-gay discrimination in its schools and create a statewide “safe schools” program. The U.S. Department of Education issued guidelines in March of 1997 stating that gay and lesbian students are covered by federal prohibitions against sexual harassment. Court decisions in this area have consistently come down on the side of the right of sexual minority youth to attend school free from harassment and the responsibility of the school to protect these youth. In the *Nabozny* case, the court wrote: “We are unable to garner any rational basis for permitting one student to assault another based on the victim’s sexual orientation.”

### **Role of parents and school workers**

Both parents and school workers often teach homophobic attitudes in quite subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways (Besner & Spungin, 1995; Fontaine, 1997). Some adults do this very consciously because they believe that this is the best way to eliminate such behavior in young people, that it will somehow persuade the child — through their disapproval—to not be gay or lesbian (Pope, 1992). For other adults, it is not a conscious process, only one that is ingrained and reinforced through others in their environment. Many never contemplate that they are, in fact, emotionally victimizing the sexual minority student.

When students disclose their sexual minority status (“come out”) to school personnel, this is a major event in their life and deserves to be treated in a sensitive and caring way by the school worker. Some guidelines to help school personnel respond to students when they

disclose their sexual minority status are posted at [www.umsl.edu/~pope](http://www.umsl.edu/~pope).

### **Separation or culture change**

Responses to these issues varied considerably among schools. In the New York City schools, the Harvey Milk School was established in 1985 for gay and lesbian students who were not succeeding. In Dallas, Texas, a private school for lesbian and gay youth opened in 1997 (Williams, 1997). In the Los Angeles Unified School District, Dr. Virginia Uribe established Project 10, a dropout prevention program offering emotional support, information, and resources to young people who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual or who wish to obtain information about sexual orientation (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). The San Francisco Unified School District, under the leadership of Kevin Gogin, began a similar program called Project 21 shortly thereafter (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 1998). Most other school districts have established programs like Project 10 and have not chosen to go with the separate school that isolates sexual minority students from the mainstream.

Still another approach has been recommended by Nichols (1999). That author proposed that schools develop a diversity room and staff it with a diversity room specialist, not only to meet the unique needs of sexual minority adolescents but also to encourage a safe, accepting climate for all students.

Changing the school culture is imperative in this process of stopping school violence against sexual minority youth (Pope, 2000). Each stakeholder in the school system has a vital role in solving this problem, including school board members, administrators, teachers, professional school counselors, school nurses, school social workers, school psychologists, and cafeteria, maintenance, and transportation workers. School stakeholders need tools and training to combat this violence, which will enable them to at least promote an environment of tolerance and ideally to foster the creation of an environment in which sexual minority youth, like all other youth, are appreciated and valued.

A “Teaching Respect for All” workshop has been created by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) and Parents, Family, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and is an important resource in combating violence against sexual minority students and transforming the school culture that tolerates such violence. Bauman and Sachs-Kapp (1998) outlined another approach—a “Hate Hurts” campaign—to raise awareness of sexual minority youth issues among school stakeholders. As Principal Franklin McCallie of Kirkwood (MO) High School, said, “You do not have to accept homosexuality as equal to heterosexuality, but you do have to accept that everyone should be safe in the schools” (Schremp, 1999, p. B4).

*Professional school counselors must be in the forefront of such programs*

Finally, professional school counselors can participate in specialized training on developing and providing counseling services for sexual minority students offered by the Healthy Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students Project (Anderson & Porter, 2002). This project is a joint effort of the American Counseling Association, American Psychological Association, American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Nurses, National Association of School Psychologists, National Association of Social Workers, and the School Social Work Association of America. It was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Project can be contacted at their website — <http://www.apa.org/ed/hlgb.html>.

*Deliberate psycho-affective education.*

What connects the recent shootings in the schools with anti-gay violence is reported in the May 3, 1999, article and cover story in *U.S. News and World Report*: “Why? There Were Plenty of Warnings” “Surely it is a rare and complicated convergence of factors. Still, experts see some common threads in the spate of shootings: These adolescent boys can’t manage their emotions. They feel rejected, enraged, jealous” (p. 19). They were boys who never learned how to identify, accept, and cope with their feelings (Pollack, 1998; Pope &

Englar-Carlson, 2001).

Professional school counselors are important to the total care and education of our students, from elementary school through high school (Pope, 1998, 2000). The following three types of school counselor activities are examples of deliberate psycho-affective education in the school: school counselors providing mental health counseling, career counseling, and providing a safe place to openly discuss sex (Morrow, 1997; Pope & Barret, 2002b; Pope, Prince, & Mitchell, 2000). The more that homosexuality, and sexuality in general, is treated as a taboo subject and not discussed openly, the greater the risk of homophobia and misinformation and the greater the risk of violence to sexual minority youth. Many of these issues are addressed in the Personal/Social domain of the American School Counselor Association's new standards for school counseling ([www.schoolcounselor.org](http://www.schoolcounselor.org)).

### *Valuing differences*

Respect, appreciation, and valuing of differences are essential to stopping the violence against sexual minority students (Pope, 2000). "Teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents need to be more outspoken in their desire to teach their children about developing positive self-esteem and greater acceptance of differences. Although most individuals would agree with this on a case-by-case basis, everyone seems to have his or her area of difficulty in the acceptance of diversity" (Besner & Spungin, 1995, p. 36).

As a result of such difficulty, inclusive diversity training workshops have been developed. "Inclusive" is used here to mean that "diversity" is inclusive of ethnic and racial minorities as well as sexual minorities (Pope, 1995). An excellent tool in teaching individuals to appreciate and value human differences is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a Jungian personality inventory.

Other tools are available for teaching multicultural and diversity lessons, including GLSEN's "Teaching Respect for All" and Besner and Spungin's (1995) model workshop for educators on homophobia in their Appendix B (pp. 133–153). The National Coalition Building Institute, B'nai B'rith, and the American Friends Service Committee

all offer excellent workshops on these topics and more (Owens, 1998; Pope, 2000).

In terms of the school curriculum, it is important to integrate and infuse gay and lesbian examples into all courses where appropriate (Pope, 1995, 2002). For example, when discussing U. S. history and the role of Native Americans, it would be appropriate to mention the revered position of “winktes” and “berdaches” (Native American terms for sexual minority persons) in the spiritual life of American Indians as the shaman or medicine person of the tribe as well as the many examples of female warriors (Katz, 1976). After reading “The Picnic,” a short story by James Baldwin, a world famous African American author, teachers can discuss Baldwin’s gay orientation and the results of having a double oppression (gay and African American).

Finally, school workers who are sexual minorities themselves should be encouraged to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity and be offered support and employment protection. One openly gay or lesbian teacher can affect the atmosphere of the entire school in a positive way. The importance of sexual minority role models cannot be overstressed, and open sexual minority school workers challenge the myths and stereotypes for all students, not just the GLBTIQQ ones (Owens, 1998).

### **The power of subtle signs**

There are also many ways of letting sexual minority students know that professional school counselors, teachers, administrators, and other school workers are supportive of their struggle. If, because of your school district, you are unable to be as overtly supportive as you would like to be, there remain a number of other ways in which you can still relay to sexual minority students a message of your support. Here are a few of the more obvious ones:

- 1) Have a “safe zone” sticker at the entrance to your office or classroom (available from the Bridges Project of the National Youth Advocacy Coalition or at [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org));

- 2) Have available in your school guidance office and library literature on sexual minority youth concerns (see [www.umsl.edu/~pope](http://www.umsl.edu/~pope) for a bibliography);
- 3) Post online resources for sexual minority students such as International Lesbian and Gay Youth Association ([www.ilgya.org](http://www.ilgya.org)); Parents, Family, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays ([www.pflag](http://www.pflag)); Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators Network ([www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)); Gay and Lesbian Teen Pen Pals ([www.chanton.com/gayteens.html](http://www.chanton.com/gayteens.html)); National Resources for GLBT Youth ([www.yale.edu/glb/youth.html](http://www.yale.edu/glb/youth.html)); Oasis (teen magazine)([www.oasismag.com](http://www.oasismag.com)); Outright([www.outright.com](http://www.outright.com)); Out Proud, National Coalition for GLBT Youth ([www.cybrespaces.com/outproud](http://www.cybrespaces.com/outproud)); The Cool Page for Queer Teens ([www.pe.net/~bidstrup/cool.html](http://www.pe.net/~bidstrup/cool.html)); and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force ([www.nglft.org](http://www.nglft.org));
- 4) Offer free family counseling services on campus to deal with the issues of homosexuality;
- 5) Use gay and lesbian positive examples in your teaching or counseling;
- 6) Use inclusive, stigma-free language in the classroom and in all communication, such as “partners” instead of “husbands and wives”; and
- 7) Post pictures of famous sexual minority people (see list at [www.umsl.edu/~pope](http://www.umsl.edu/~pope)).

By demonstrating an accepting attitude, school workers can send a strong message to students and create a tolerant environment within the entire school. The issues of tolerance, acceptance, and value can all be explored under the umbrella of diversity.

## **Conclusions**

The role of the professional school counselor in working with sexual minority students is clear. School counselors are there to assist students in discovering who they truly and honestly are and then to

help them develop a strong and positive personal and cultural identity so that they can live happy, successful, and productive lives in our society.

Furthermore, the professional school counselor is expected to take a leadership role in protecting and advocating for sexual minority students as well as developing and implementing school policies that eliminate the verbal and physical harassment of all students, including sexual minority students. This is especially important because research indicates that sexual minority students are more likely to disclose their sexual minority status to their school counselors than to any other school worker (Harris & Bliss, 1997). Professional school counselors must, therefore, be prepared for their sexual minority students when they do present themselves for counseling (Brown, 1991; Pope, 2000).

Furthermore, the relationship is clear between derogatory language/harassment directed against sexual minority students by their peers and adults in the school setting and self-harmful behavior, such as attempted suicide, suicidal ideation, running away, poor academic performance, and truancy (Jordan et al., 1997). Professional school counselors must not allow such language or physical harassment for any student.

Clearly the momentum is turning toward the protection of sexual minority students in the schools. In 1993, Massachusetts became the first state to ban anti-gay discrimination in its schools and create a statewide "safe schools" program. The U.S. Department of Education issued guidelines in March, 1997, stating explicitly that lesbian and gay students are covered by federal prohibitions against sexual harassment.

Indeed, changes are occurring for sexual minority students. Sam Hansen, a 16-year-old high school student in Newtown, Massachusetts, has spoken on national television of assaults at the hands of his classmates: "A lot of people called me faggot and spat on me and did a lot of annoying things," said Hansen. Massachusetts, however, was the first state to pass a law making harassment of lesbian and gay students a crime. As a result of this, Sam has been empowered and has taken on a role of leadership. He runs a hotline for lesbian,

gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth and speaks publicly about sexual minority youth issues. “I think that seeing diversity starts the whole process of being comfortable and acceptance of different people” (CBS Morning News, 1999).

Attitudes on sexuality and sexual orientation are indeed changing, and this should bode well for sexual minority students. Although the message is not as strong as many of us would like, it is becoming clear that people can have their own private hatreds; however, when this becomes public as physical or verbal harassment or written into policy, it will not be allowed. The harassment of sexual minority students and teachers should not be tolerated in America or in any society.

Heterosexism, which according to Audre Lorde (1984) is defined as a “belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance” (p. 45), and homophobia, which is the fear of being gay and hatred of gays and lesbians (Herr, 1997), must be exposed just as racism and sexism have been.

The Massachusetts Governor’s Commission on Lesbian and Gay Youth issued a report in 1993 that summarized succinctly a blueprint for ending violence in the schools against gay and lesbian youth. The recommendations included 1) promulgating school policies that protect gay and lesbian students through a) anti-discrimination policies that explicitly includes sexual orientation for students and teachers, including teacher contracts; b) policies that guarantee equal access to education and school activities; c) anti-harassment policies and guidelines that deal with handling incidents of anti-gay language, harassment, or violence; and d) multicultural and diversity policies which are inclusive of lesbian and gay culture (Pope, 1995, 2002); 2) training teachers in multicultural issues (that are inclusive of lesbian and gay culture) and suicide and violence prevention as well as changing teacher certification requirements and school accreditation to include this training (Pope, 1995, 2002); 3) school-based support groups for gay and straight students; 4) curriculum that includes gay and lesbian issues; and 5) information in school libraries for gay and lesbian adolescents.

As a consequence of this report, the Massachusetts Board of

Education unanimously adopted the nation's first state educational policy prohibiting discrimination against lesbian and gay elementary and secondary students and teachers (Besner & Spungin, 1995). Other states have now followed and many cities in the USA have adopted similar policies in their schools.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

This paper addresses the issues that are important for professional school counselors who are counseling sexual minority students, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and questioning youth. The issues that are addressed include developing a context in which to discuss these issues; “coming out,” or the developmental aspects of sexual identity development; the extent of the problems that sexual minority youth face in the schools and society; the effects of negative attitudes and violence toward these youth; and ethical and legal issues in dealing with sexual minority youth in the schools. In addition, school-based interventions were discussed that focus on the role of the parents and schools, separation (e.g., separate schools for sexual minority youth) or culture change, deliberate psycho-affective education, valuing differences, and the power of subtle symbols.

As is readily apparent from the information presented here, many of the problems that sexual minority youth face are the direct result of the abdication of adults who are supposed to love and protect our young and help them develop into healthy and productive citizens, who have been entrusted with the care of all of our young people, but instead are turning a deaf ear to the violence that is being perpetrated against one group of our young — our sexual minority youth. Failing to create a safe environment for all children is criminal and unethical behavior, whether it comes from a school board member, a principal, a teacher, or especially a school counselor. Dr. Kathleen Boggess, a school counselor in the Bloomington, Indiana, public schools and past-president of the Indiana Counseling Association said it best when she said “At our school, the school counselors are the first people the lesbian, gay, or questioning students come to because they know that

we are on their side, that we will do everything possible to help them. That is what a school counselor is supposed to do” (Personal communication, June 21, 2002).

The lives of sexual minority students in the schools are getting better and the sad picture painted by many may not apply to all sexual minority youth. It is important, however, not to minimize the detrimental effects of verbal and physical violence and harassment on sexual minority students’ lives, including their academic performance and social development. What professional school counselors must focus on are the recommendations in this paper for improving the school environment and the quality of life for sexual minority students. It is an important message for all students.

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