Identifying the Needs of GLBTQ Youth in Western New York

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BACKGROUND

Youth identifying as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, or Questioning (GLBTQ) have historically experienced greater risk with their psychosocial development, social relationships, and safety when compared to their non-GLBTQ peers (Russell & Fish, 2016). While there appears to be a growing acceptance of gender variance and sexual minority-identifying individuals in the nation, overall, it is unclear whether GLBTQ youth are benefiting from this change.

Gay & Lesbian Youth Services (GLYS) is a local health and human service organization committed to providing an accepting environment to enhance the personal growth of GLBTQ youth. The organization is conducting a needs assessment, in collaboration with Daemen College, to identify the critical issues faced by this population.

This presentation identifies key themes gleaned from focus groups with GLBTQ youth in Western New York.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Adolescence can be a difficult time for any young person as they experience physical (e.g., growth of body hair, secondary sex characteristics, and increased hormones); psychological (e.g., formation and testing of new identities); and social changes (e.g., changes in their relationships as they place greater importance on the opinions of peers and move toward independence).

The struggles associated with adolescence are typically amplified for GLBTQ youth as they come to terms with their sexuality, gender identity, and/or expression. They navigate the "coming out" process in relation to friends, peers, and family members; face stigma, discrimination, and other potentially negative responses at home, at school, and in the community.

These stressors, in addition to those typically experienced in adolescence, contribute to the higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality, substance abuse, and homelessness found among the GLBTQ youth population (Newton, 2014, DeAngelis, 2002).

In an effort to address these stressors, many schools have formed Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) or clubs that promote a safe environment for individuals identifying as GLBTQ and their allies (Fetner & Elifors, 2015). GSAs may function as a social group, a support group, an advocacy group, or any combination thereof.

GSAs offer critical opportunities for members to engage with like-minded individuals; discuss GLBTQ-related issues; connect to a larger community, and build greater self-confidence and awareness as well as interpersonal and advocacy skills.

METHODOLOGY

A needs assessment is an applied research technique used to identify the gap between available and needed resources for a given population. The needs assessment undertaken by GLYS was designed to identify the critical needs of GLBTQ-identifying youth in Western New York.

Working Hypotheses

H1: GLBTQ youth experience a variety of stressors at school.
H2: GLBTQ youth see GSA as primary source of support.
H3: GLBTQ youth are aware of resources in their community.

Methods

A total of seventeen (17) focus groups were conducted with GSA participants focusing on the experiences of GLBTQ-identifying youth. Respondents were asked about their involvement in their GSA, experiences within their school environment; and experiences in the larger community, as well as how to best communicate with GLBTQ youth and their families. Seven (7) key informant interviews were also conducted with local health and human service professionals.

The data collected was qualitative in nature based on the following open-ended questions:

Experience within GSA

- What types of activities and/or events does your GSA participant in?
- What are the greatest strengths of the GSA? Areas for development?

Experience in the School Environment

- What is it like for GLBTQ youth in your school? Is bullying, prejudice, or discrimination an issue?
- How do you describe a safe space?
- What suggestions do you have for school staff and administrators related to GLBTQ youth and their experiences?

Experience in the Larger Community

- Based on your experience, do you consider Western New York to be a safe and welcoming community for people identifying as GLBTQ?
- What are some challenges faced by GLBTQ youth in the community?
- Where are resources available to support GLBTQ youth in the community? Needed?

Ethical Considerations

Over 120 youth participated in focus groups sessions. Focus groups were confidential in nature and only the research team had access to the data gathered. Information was organized into themes without using direct quotes or identifying information.

RESULTS

H1: GLBTQ youth experience a variety of stressors at school.

• Presentation of self and management of “coming out” process
• Peer use of gay slurs seemingly without consequence

H2: GLBTQ youth see GSA as primary source of support.

• Vast majority of youth agreed that GSA was their primary source of support
• GSA enables youth to socialize with GLBTQ peers and allies; educate themselves about GLBTQ history, language, and experiences; provides opportunities to explore GLBTQ-related concerns; and connects youth to the larger GLBTQ community (primarily through GLYS Conference; Pride Parade; and Diversity Prom)

H3: GLBTQ youth are aware of resources in their community.

• Youth were largely disconnected from the larger GLBTQ-community and lacked awareness of available resources (including shelters, service providers, and support groups).
• Youth were unable and/or unwilling to access community resources due to transportation barriers, lack of awareness, concern about being “outed,” and fear of judgment

CONCLUSIONS

Key recommendations for GLYS include:

1. Support greater education for middle- and high-school students about GLBTQ issues (including a campaign to end use of anti-gay slurs)
2. Provide training for school staff/administrators surrounding issues identified by GLBTQ students
3. Create partnerships with community organizations to increase awareness and encourage collaborative resource sharing
4. Develop a platform that allows for more effective communication between GSAs in the GLYS network to increase support for GLBTQ-identifying students

GLYS will use the information gathered through this needs assessment to plan and implement services to support the creation of a safe and accepting environment for GLBTQ youth.

REFERENCES