

ADVOCACY FOR AND WITH LGBT STUDENTS: AN EXAMINATION OF HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELOR EXPERIENCES

A paucity of empirical scholarship exists on school counselor advocacy in general and virtually none as it relates to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students specifically. Addressing this gap in the literature, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of high school counselors in the southeastern United States who have served as advocates for and with LGBT students, with a specific focus on race/ethnicity and social class. Four themes were identified within the data: (a) student advocacy, (b) education as advocacy, (c) systems advocacy, and (d) social/political advocacy. This article presents and explores the themes as they relate to the various manifestations of school counselor advocacy, and discusses study implications and limitations.

Scholarship has suggested that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students continue to experience a hostile school climate (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Dragowski, McCabe, & Rubinson, 2016), despite social and political efforts to foster safer and more inclusive schools (Black, Fedewa, & Gonzalez, 2012). According to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) most recent National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016) of more than 10,000 students, roughly 66% of respondents experienced discrimination at school related to their sexual orientation or gender expression. Findings also indicated that LGBT students are more likely to feel unsafe at school and often miss school as a result of safety concerns. Perhaps most significant, this data revealed that school personnel do not consistently intervene when anti-LGBT bullying or harassment occurs, which further isolates LGBT students. Such findings are in accordance with previous research that found that higher rates of anti-LGBT bullying and harassment are partly the result of school personnel "looking the other way" during such incidences (Singh, Orpinas, & Horne, 2010), often because they lack the training and skills to adequately address anti-LGBT bias (Dragowski et al., 2016).

Conversely, the GLSEN study (Kosciw et al., 2016) also found that school-based supports—including the existence of an LGBT-friendly club such as a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), LGBT-inclusive curriculum, and com-

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DOI: 10.5330/1096-2409-20.1a.38

prehensive anti-bullying and harassment policies contribute to a more positive school climate and safer learning environment, a finding consistent with previous research (Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, & Watson, 2009; Griffin & Ouellett, 2002; Kull, Greytak, Kosciw, & Villenas, 2016). Such findings demonstrate the need for school counselors and other educators to serve as advocates and agents for systemic change within their schools and larger communities. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of high school counselors who have advocated for and with LGBT students in the southeastern United States

School Counselor Advocacy and LGBT Students

The school counseling profession has embraced a more proactive, advocacy-focused approach over the past decade—one that calls upon school counselors to be social justice advocates and agents for systemic change (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; Gonzalez, 2016; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010). To that end, the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002) were designed for use within the counseling profession as a guideline for effective advocacy at the individual, school/community, and public arena levels both with and on behalf of students and clients. Specifically, the ACA Advocacy Competencies provide an outline for tackling broader systemic issues—including discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity—while addressing individual concerns and encouraging self-advocacy.

Despite the call for school counselor advocacy, few studies have explored the phenomenon of school counselor advocacy in general (Field, 2004; Holmberg-Abel, 2012; Singh, Urbano et al., 2010) and even fewer have investigated school counselor advocacy as it relates specifically to LGBT students (Gonzalez, 2016; McCabe, Rubinson, Dragowski, & Elizalde-

Utnick, 2013). Research on LGBT students is also limited, though this is changing as more scholars (Gonzalez, 2016; Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Goodrich, Harper, Luke, & Singh, 2013) emphasize the need for school counselor advocacy with LGBT students. To this end, the specific research question guiding this qualitative study was: What are the lived experiences of high school counselors in the southeastern U.S. who advocate for and with LGBT students?

METHOD

A phenomenological research tradition was used for this study. Phenomenological approaches seek to “describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2017, p. 57). Phenomenological inquiry is useful for exploratory studies, as it takes a nuanced approach to inquiry that allows the researcher to begin to develop a multifaceted and comprehensive understanding of phenomenon. A phenomenological design was best suited for exploring the phenomenon of school counselor advocacy with LGBT

domains and specific competency areas fall under each level of advocacy. The ACA Advocacy Competencies, guided by a social justice theoretical orientation, served as a rubric to frame how school counselors engage in advocacy for and with LGBT students.

Site Selection and Participants. The settings for this study were 12 high schools across 10 school districts and three states in the southeastern U.S. The researcher used criterion sampling (Creswell, 2017) to identify and subsequently select participants; that is, the school counselors chosen for this study met the predetermined criterion of having served as advocates for and with LGBT students in some capacity at any or all levels outlined in the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2002). The principal tool for participant recruitment consisted of email notifications to statewide school counseling and education-related email lists in the southeastern U.S. The researcher also posted a description of the study on ASCA Scene, the school counselor networking site, and shared it with staff and volunteers at LGBT and education-related nonprofits. An internet search of high schools with GSAs assisted the researcher in iden-

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tifying school counselors who were involved in the clubs as advisors. The researcher also considered school setting (i.e., rural, urban, or suburban) in selecting participants in order to examine and compare the experiences of high school counselors. Due to difficulty in recruiting rural school counselors who both met the criteria for this study and were willing to participate, only two of the 12 participants were employed at a rural high school. Of the remaining 10 participants, six worked in suburban schools and four in urban schools. Outreach to school counselors of color also posed

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a challenge. Although the study lacked diversity among participants, the racial and ethnic demographics of schools at which participants were employed ranged from 82% White students to 94% students of color. Socioeconomic composition among the schools also yielded a diverse range, with between 5% and 86% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Among participants, years of experience as a school counselor ranged in length between 2 and 27 years. Seven of the participants identified as women and seven as men. Four of the participants—three of whom were men—identified as gay or lesbian; none identified as transgender or bisexual. The remaining seven participants identified as heterosexual. Participants ranged in age from 31 to 57.

SCHOOL COUNSELOR TASHA WORKED WITH 40 STUDENT LEADERS TO DEVELOP AN LGBT-INCLUSIVE ANTIBULLYING CURRICULUM FOR NINTH-GRADE STUDENTS.

Positionality. Collectively, the researcher’s conceptualizations of school counselor advocacy with LGBT students are anchored in theoretical understandings and applications of school counselor advocacy and SJE. Further, the author’s personal experiences as an advocate for and with LGBT students in various capacities in the southeastern U.S. have shaped the lens through which she views school counselor advocacy with LGBT students. As a scholar, school counselor, and activist operating within an SJE framework, the author also acknowledged the impact that her Latina, heterosexual, cisgender, and middle-class identities had in informing this research. She kept reflexive journals (Mruck & Breuer, 2003) throughout the research process to foster transparency about the ways in which her social identities, experiences, and positions influenced research decisions related to data collection and analysis.

Data Collection. After receiving institutional review board (IRB) ap-

proval, the researcher collected study data in two ways: (a) semistructured interviews and (b) a document review. Consistent with most qualitative research (Creswell, 2017), semistructured interviews were the primary source of data collection in this study and served as a means of better understanding the lived experiences of school counselor advocacy with LGBT students (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). An interview protocol informed by the research question was used to shape the open-ended questions and direct the interview (Merriam, 2009). Questions for the interview protocol were formulated and subsequently minimally amended following an earlier pilot study with three school counselors in two schools. The author used probes during interviews to gain

more detailed information and obtain clarification from participants (Creswell, 2017). While the exact order and precise wording of the questions was left open, the aim of the interview protocol was to learn more about school counselors’ experiences and motivations related to advocacy for and with LGBT students across racial/ethnic and social class lines. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. Prior to beginning the interviews, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire. All interviews were audio recorded; data from the recordings was then transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

In addition to semistructured interviews, the researcher conducted a document review that consisted of three components: (a) records outlining the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic student composition for the school at which each participant is employed; (b) information about LGBT student-related state, school, and district policies that were relevant to each par-

ticipant, specifically those associated with LGBT-inclusive antibullying and harassment and/or student nondiscrimination; and (c) participant copies of core curriculum and other personal school counseling artifacts addressing LGBT issues in schools. The latter provided further insight regarding each participant’s advocacy practices, while the former two components, accessed electronically through public records, offered additional information about the role of context in school counselor advocacy for and with LGBT students.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness. Data analysis of interview content was continuously examined throughout the study. After the researcher transcribed the 12 participant interviews, she reviewed each of the tapes with the transcript to ensure accurate transcription of interview content. Horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) was used during the initial phase of data analysis to inductively review transcripts line-by-line for quotes that were reflective of participants’ experiences. The research question, the conceptual framework, and previous scholarship helped shape the preliminary coding scheme. Initial codes included words, phrases, and overarching concepts.

Following initial analysis, the researcher used the conceptual framework to analyze the data to determine whether and to what extent participants demonstrated advocacy for and with LGBT students and at what level (i.e., student, school, public arena). She also made notes regarding which of the advocacy competencies were being employed most frequently and by whom. After this initial analysis, she conducted a second analysis to establish “clusters of meaning” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 87) based on the initial codes and used those themes to establish a structural and textural description (Moustakas, 1994) of the phenomenon. A third and final analysis identified developing themes that may not have fit within the original conceptual framework, including advocacy behaviors not included in the ACA Advocacy Competencies. Throughout the process, the researcher remained

open to new codes and groups and frequently referred to research memos for additional guidance and clarity.

To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher used a variety of data collection techniques. In addition to semistructured interviews and the document review, she kept a self-reflexive journal during data collection and wrote research memos during data analysis (Mruck & Breuer, 2003). The document review provided additional details, while the journals and memos allowed the researcher to bracket assumptions and judgments about school counselor advocacy for and with LGBT students and keep track of her “presuppositions, choices, experiences, and actions during the research process” (Mruck & Breuer, 2003, p. 3). Use of triangulation techniques (Creswell, 2017) further strengthened the findings; these techniques allowed comparison of multiple sources of data, transcripts, and research memos. The researcher also consulted regularly with three external experts and with a competent peer debriefer (Creswell, 2017) to review proper application and evolution of methodology. Finally, participants were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts for accuracy, although none elected to do so.

FINDINGS

Study findings included four overarching thematic categories: (a) student advocacy, (b) education as advocacy, (c) systems advocacy, and (d) social/political advocacy. The first, student advocacy, refers to advocacy for and with students and includes subthemes on providing individual support, encouraging self-advocacy, advising an LGBT-friendly group or club, and connection to resources. Education as advocacy includes educating students, educating school personnel, educating at the macro level, and educating self. The third thematic category, systems advocacy, comprises subthemes on navigating structural barriers, using data to motivate change, and estab-

lishing safety. Social/political advocacy refers to advocacy at the community level and consists of community collaboration and legislative activism. The researcher used pseudonyms to protect participants’ anonymity.

Student Advocacy. School counselor participants reported engaging in advocacy both with and on behalf of LGBT students. Participants took action to facilitate positive growth among LGBT students by providing individual support, encouraging self-advocacy, advising an LGBT-friendly group or club, and providing access to resources. Participants noted additional considerations in supporting students of color and those from lower income families. In reference to LGBT students of color and those who are lower income, participant Barry said, “It can be a double whammy. Not only do they have to deal with their race or the color of their skin or where mom or dad was born but just their own personal struggle.” Vicky—a participant who also serves as the liaison to homeless students and families—revealed that for LGBT students who are lower income and sometimes homeless, “You worry first about eating and then about sexuality.”

PARTICIPANTS EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF ENSURING THAT TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS ADDRESSED LGBT ISSUES WITH SENSITIVITY AND UNDERSTANDING.

With regard to self-advocacy, all participants disclosed instances in which they assisted students in developing strategies to navigate barriers and overcome adversity. In particular, Keith talked about urging self-advocacy among LGBT students who had been targets of bullying and harassment, asking “How can I help empower the student...to say, ‘You know what? This is who I am. You can’t treat me that way.’” Describing an experience with a transgender student who was transitioning, Tasha said, “We worked on communication strategies and...things that he could do

if other students did say something.”

Of the 12 school counselor participants, 10 had experience cosponsoring or being involved in a GSA and/or facilitating a counseling group for LGBT students. Because GSAs are meant to be student-initiated and student-led (Griffin & Ouellett, 2002), participants adopted more of an advisory role. As Vicky explained, “This is their club and this is what they need to do.” Working in an area she described as “extremely conservative,” Jessica underscored the importance of allowing students to lead and assessing their comfort level prior to engaging in school-wide GSA activities. “When an issue became greater than a group of kids could deal with, they brought it to us and we helped when we could,” she added. Four of the 10 participants who served as GSA cosponsors explicitly noted that very few or no students of color were involved in the club, and those who did attend meetings seldom actively contributed. School counselor participants further expressed that issues of class were never addressed at meetings. Only one participant recalled specific conversations related to Black students’ negotiations of their racial and sexual identities.

All participants kept a variety of LGBT-related resources and referrals for students to access. Brad explained, “I do have a referral list. I...have other resources and hotlines...to get information and I have printed materials from the Human Rights Campaign and Lambda Legal.” Tasha also mentioned having, “a lot of materials from GLSEN and just different handouts.”

Education as Advocacy. Education as advocacy describes education as a tool for creating awareness about LGBT people or issues. School counselor participants demonstrated this form of advocacy by educating

students about LGBT issues, educating school personnel, educating at the macro level, and/or educating themselves through various professional development opportunities to enhance their own knowledge of and competence with LGBT youth. For example, Tasha worked with 40 student leaders to develop an LGBT-inclusive antibullying curriculum for ninth-grade students. Keith talked about “infusing in natural conversations LGBTQ students when we talk about relationships, bullying, dating, all these things.” A review of Amanda’s curriculum demonstrated a lesson exploring various manifestations of privilege and oppression, including heterosexism, racism, and classism.

ALLIANCES WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS WERE ESPECIALLY BENEFICIAL FOR PROVIDING LOW-INCOME LGBT STUDENTS WITH ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH AND OTHER RESOURCES.

In addition to educating students, school counselor participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that teachers and administrators addressed LGBT issues with sensitivity and understanding. Vicky expressed the need to educate, “the faculty, the school community as a whole, you know, from the custodian all the way to the principal.” Likewise, Keith said that he “got materials on supporting LGBTQ students and...gave a copy of it to just the administrators and the school counselors.” Daniel, Keith, Brad, and Melissa spoke specifically about providing professional development beyond the school level. For example, documents related to Daniel’s professional development presentations for district employees covered topics such as supporting LGBT students and families in the areas of academics and socioemotional health.

All participants sought opportunities to further their own understanding and competence about LGBT students and issues. Tasha and Sara

specifically mentioned conferences as a means to increase their professional knowledge. Tasha discussed becoming “certified at a statewide school counseling association conference...as a [LGBT] Safe Zone certified trainer.” Keith also “pushed” himself to learn more and to “grow” as an advocate. For him, education involved introspection and an examination of his privileged social identities. Speaking about working with LGBT students of color, Keith said, “There are so many things we have in common, but I still don’t have that person’s perspective and family and there’s so much I don’t know. [I need to be] willing to realize I don’t know and to ask.”

Systems Advocacy. School counselor participants engaged in advocacy at the school level, both with and on behalf of LGBT students and often in collaboration with others. For instance, Keith worked in collaboration with a transgender student’s parents to “navigate the bureaucracy of the school” in order to change the student’s name in the computer system, even before his legal name change was made official.

Ten of the participants provided data—both their own and existing—to create an urgency for school climate change. Daniel described using data “to design a training we ran.” Tasha, Keith, and Amanda developed and implemented their own surveys and research to collect data related to school climate, diversity, and LGBT students. After collecting data on LGBT-inclusive antibullying curriculum, Tasha worked with colleagues to create “an antibullying committee made up of parents, community members, counselors, administration.” Further, Keith

presented data from a school climate survey to students as part of a core curriculum lesson and said, “Here’s the raw data; tell us what you notice’...and we have conversations.”

All participants took various steps to foster a positive school environment and to make explicit among students, parents, and school personnel their willingness to serve as advocates for and with LGBT students. One way school counselor participants established safety among LGBT students was through visible displays of support in their office. Vicky insisted that, “Advocacy is not just a sign on the door; there’s a whole climate that you need to help create in order for things to really work the way they should.” Nevertheless, she admitted the important role of visible displays in creating a welcoming and supportive climate, specifically with regard to her counseling group for LGBT students. Similarly, Melissa spoke about the impact of visible displays: “I had my rainbow things and all the things that shouted GLBTQ-friendly [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer] person and I waited... and finally they started coming one by one.” Stewart talked about the importance of “maintaining visibility as much as we can,” not only through visible displays but also with regard to his sexual orientation as a gay man by “keeping a picture of me and my partner on my desk.” Further, Bonnie, Jessica, and Amanda spoke specifically about their intentions to display LGBT-affirming materials in their respective schools in order to engender a culture of safety and respect.

Social/Political Advocacy. Social/political advocacy occurred when participants worked to create change for and with LGBT students beyond the school level through community collaboration and legislative activism. School counselor participants who engaged in community collaboration used their knowledge of “specific difficulties in the environment” (Lewis et al., 2002, p. 2) to work in partnership with organizations as a means to create change. Ten of the 12 participants

interviewed explicitly mentioned community engagement and collaboration when describing their advocacy efforts. Documents provided by Melissa demonstrated that she had established collaborative partnerships with local and state LGBT and social justice-related organizations. According to Vicky, her alliances with community organizations were especially beneficial for providing low-income LGBT students with access to mental health and other resources. Vicky, Sara, Melissa, and Keith talked about involving students in collaborative efforts in the community. Five of the participants spoke about their membership in local, statewide, and national LGBT-friendly groups and organizations.

Six participants reached out to community organizations as a means of seeking guidance and resources, primarily with regard to the GSA club. However, not all participants were within close proximity to LGBT-friendly community organizations. As a school counselor working in a rural area, Amanda noted, “there are very limited resources here.” She added, “There’s a part of me that needs to be connected to something to keep me going sometimes, because I just don’t have it, and it’s like at what point do you just feel like nothing is ever going to change.”

Daniel expressed, “I think we have a role to advocate within a larger scale...for situations or areas where we see policy or practice that harms students or is not benefitting all of our students.” He also talked about the need for school counselors to leverage their “political savvy” to advocate for students. While all participants discussed the importance of inclusive policies and practices with regard to LGBT students, only three engaged in legislative activism. For example, after board members expressed opposition to the GSA, Amanda took steps to help board members recognize the important role of a GSA by asking club members to write about why “this was important to them.”

DISCUSSION

School counselor participants engaged in advocacy at various levels and to varying degrees both with and on behalf of LGBT students. Unique to this study was the use of social justice education to explore, analyze, and more thoroughly understand the phenomenon of school counselor advocacy for and with LGBT students and at various levels through the framework of the ACA Advocacy Competencies. Participants provided students with individual support, encouraged self-advocacy, and the majority advised an LGBT-friendly group or club. They also used education as a tool to create awareness about LGBT issues with students, colleagues, and the public. Consistent with the ACA Advocacy Competencies and SJE framework, participants engaged in education as advocacy at the micro, meso, and macro levels and did so both with and on behalf of students. At the micro level, participants spoke individually with students—most often in response to an anti-LGBT epithet—and with faculty members, generally to provide resources or information about LGBT issues. At the meso level, participants facilitated core curriculum and other programming either individually or in collaboration with others. They engaged in education as advocacy at the macro level by leading district, state, and national trainings and workshops.

activism to challenge district norms, and pushed for LGBT-inclusive policy reform. On an individual level, participants encouraged students to develop self-advocacy skills by teaching them to identify and navigate barriers that could inhibit their academic and emotional well-being. Participants also provided students opportunities to lead and collaborated with them on systemic change efforts, the latter of which is encouraged in the conceptual literature (Lewis et al., 2002; Ratts et al., 2007) but seldom translated to actual practice by school counselors (Field, 2004; Holmberg-Abel, 2012).

One of the primary means or strategies participants used to advocate for and with LGBT students was through involvement in a GSA. Of the 10 participants who served as GSA sponsors, four expressed that none or few students of color were members of the club, which is reflective of studies that have found scarce participation among LGBT students of color in LGBT-related school activities (McCready, 2001). Both in terms of race and socioeconomic status, results indicated that LGBT students who are navigating multiple marginalized identities face additional challenges, a finding consistent with existing research (Diaz & Kosciw, 2009; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). Findings also revealed that other social identities, including race/ethnicity and social class, may be more salient for LGBT students of color and LGBT lower income students

SCHOOL COUNSELOR AMANDA TOOK STEPS TO HELP BOARD MEMBERS RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF A GSA BY ASKING CLUB MEMBERS TO WRITE ABOUT WHY “THIS WAS IMPORTANT TO THEM.”

Further, school counselor participants took steps to cultivate a safe and affirming culture for LGBT students and used data to motivate systemic change. Several also developed strategic alliances with community organizations, engaged in legislative

than sexual orientation or gender identity (McCready, 2001).

Research in other fields has examined training school personnel as a means of advocating for LGBT students (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Graybill et al., 2009; Kosciw

et al., 2016), but less is known about involving students in initiatives to raise awareness about LGBT issues. School counselor participants who worked with students on education-based advocacy efforts emphasized the positive impact of such initiatives on both the students and the school community. Although participants' educational initiatives were typically well received, they noted that school personnel had little competence with and significant resistance to issues of gender identity and expression. In addition to educating others, participants sought out opportunities for professional development to enhance their knowledge of LGBT student-related issues. Participants noted that their attendance at most workshops and trainings was voluntary and, most often, individually initiated. The voluntary nature of such trainings could explain why so many school counselors lack the skills to advocate effectively for and with LGBT students (Beck, Rausch, & Wood, 2014), especially at the systems level (Dragowski et al., 2016; Graybill et al., 2009; Goodrich et al., 2013).

MOST OF THE PARTICIPANTS INCORPORATED MATTERS OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY INTO THEIR CORE CURRICULUM LESSONS OR SMALL GROUP COUNSELING.

One method school counselor participants used to educate students about issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity was through an LGBT-inclusive curriculum. Although research has demonstrated the positive benefits of an LGBT-inclusive curriculum on school climate (Kosciw et al., 2016), it remains a seldom employed pedagogical practice (Griffin & Ouellett, 2002; Kosciw et al., 2016). Nevertheless, most of the participants incorporated matters of sexual orientation and gender identity into their core curriculum lessons or small group counseling, especially when discussing diversity. In such instances, partici-

pants included sexual orientation and gender among issues related to race, disability, religion, and other social identities.

Existing studies in the school counseling literature have found that school counselors seldom engage in advocacy beyond the student level (Field, 2004; Holmberg-Abel, 2012). School counselor participants took various school-wide measures to foster a culture of support and affirmation for and with LGBT students. All participants used a variety of methods to make visible their support and affirmation of LGBT students. Establishing themselves as a safe person among students and school personnel meant that they were usually the point of contact for students, parents, and faculty members. Ten of the 12 participants advocated for and with LGBT students in collaboration with community organizations. Specifically, participants developed intentional alliances within the community and underscored the importance of working with supportive school personnel and community members in creating systemic change. Participants

partnered with community groups and organizations on school-level initiatives and community events, often directly involving LGBT youth. Several of the participants were also active members of local, state, and national LGBT-related groups and organizations. School counselor participants also wielded their political savvy when necessary to advocate for policy change and challenge district norms and practices. Indeed, the advocacy methods employed by participants are reflective of the more wide-reaching social/political and systems-based advocacy practices encouraged by recent school counseling reform models

(ASCA, 2012; Education Trust, 1997), the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2002), and social justice education pedagogy (Adams, 2007).

Finally, the difficulty in recruiting school counselors from rural settings who had served as advocates for and with LGBT students is worth noting. Specifically, 80 direct emails were sent to rural school counselors and only two—those who participated—responded to the request and subsequently accepted the invitation. At the time of the study, neither of the rural participants worked at schools with active GSAs.

Study Limitations

Although this study yields significant contributions to both school counseling and SJE literature, it is not without limitations. Contextual factors such as geographical location, caseload, and school climate theoretically affect the degree to which high school counselors can serve as advocates for and with LGBT students; as such, the phenomenon may manifest differently depending on the situation or environment. In this study, school counselor participants were employed in different schools and school districts located in urban, rural, or suburban settings and had differing perspectives and experiences of school counselor advocacy in general and with LGBT students. Further, criterion sampling (Creswell, 2017), while effective in recruiting participants who met the predetermined criterion of having served as advocates for and with LGBT students, limited the study's findings by excluding the experiences of school counselors who had not acted as advocates for and with LGBT students. The moderately small and homogenous sample also restricted the generalizability of findings (Merriam, 2009). Specifically, of the 12 participants, only one identified as a person of color and none were transgender or bisexual, and only two school counselors from rural settings participated. Further, although this study examined differences in school settings across the southeastern U.S., high school coun-

selors who have served as advocates for and with LGBT students in regions outside the Southeast might have different experiences than those described here. As such, the results are likely most transferable to school counselors who have advocated for and with LGBT students in the southeastern U.S. Finally, the researcher's own biases were a limitation.

Implications for Future Research

The focus of this study centered on the experiences of high school counselors in the southeastern U.S. across rural, urban, and suburban settings. This research needs to be expanded to include the experiences of school counselors in all regions of the country—particularly in rural areas where such research is scarce—as well as those who do not self-identify as advocates for LGBT students and/or who have no experience advocating for and with this population. Further, the southeastern U.S. is a region of the country in which LGBT students are more likely to experience a more hostile school environment than LGBT students in other areas of the country (Diaz & Kosciw, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2016). Future studies on school counselor advocacy with LGBT students should, therefore, include regions outside the southeastern U.S. to assess the impact of geographical location in determining religious-based resistance to LGBT student advocacy in schools.

Because the vast majority of research on LGBT students is conducted at the high school level, studies of school counselors' advocacy experiences with LGBT students in elementary and middle school settings would assist in generating developmentally appropriate and effective advocacy interventions for LGBT students across grade levels. Furthermore, researchers should examine the experiences of LGBT students' interactions with their school counselors and their perceptions of advocacy to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of school counselor advocacy with LGBT

students. A student-generated definition of school counselor advocacy, anchored in their lived experiences, may better inform how school counselors and other educators can most effectively advocate for and with them.

While not considered by the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2002), school setting appears to have played a role in determining how and to what extent participants engaged in advocacy. Results from this study suggest that contextual factors, such as school setting, may impact the extent to which school counselors advocate for and with students in general and LGBT students in particular. Additional research is needed to determine the effect of school setting on both the lived experiences of LGBT students and the school counselors who advocate for and with them.

Findings from this study indicated that LGBT students of color and those who are lower income face additional challenges and may experience their sexual orientation or gender identity as less salient than their race and/or class identities. Rather than universalize the experiences of LGBT students—as much of the existing scholarship related to LGBT students has done (Diaz & Kosciw, 2009)—future research needs to explore the complex experiences of LGBT students across identity groups while taking into account within-group variability. For instance, research aimed at examining the unique experiences of specific identity groups under the umbrella term “LGBT students of color” may provide a more nuanced understanding regarding the individual and collective experiences of this population. Further research related to the experiences of LGBT students of color and lower income students may aid school counselors and other educators in more adequately serving this population. To this end, researchers can apply an SJE framework to more comprehensively understand the impact of students' multiple marginalized identities (Adams, 2007). ■

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