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The Impact of Attendance at a LGBTQIA Conference on School Counselors' and Other Educators' Beliefs and Behaviors

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Abstract

Historically, LGBTQIA issues have been both controversial and sensitive topics of conversation in educational settings. School counselors and other educators have a professional responsibility to advocate for LGBTQIA youth, yet many lack the attitudes, knowledge, and skills to do so. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of the 2012 Center for Excellence in School Counseling and Leadership (CESCaL) LGBTQIA and Educators Conference. The conference provided attendees with the knowledge of laws and rights of LGBTQIA students, provided extensive educator resources, and encouraged attendees to take personal responsibility to be advocates for LGBTQIA youth and to create safe spaces in schools. Through the use of an anonymous pre-conference and post-conference survey, the perceptions of adult attendees at the conference were investigated to gauge the impact of the conference. Results indicate participants' perceptions of knowledge, attitudes, and skills regarding advocacy for LGBTQIA youth increased as a result of participating in CESCAL's LGBTQIA 2012 conference.

Keywords: LGBTQIA, educators, CESCAL, conference, advocacy, change agents, "Supporting Students, Saving Lives"

Literature Review

Historically, LGBT issues have been both controversial and sensitive topics of conversation in educational settings. A generation ago, gay and lesbian students reported they were far more likely than their non-gay peers to run away from home, to experience academic problems, and to struggle with substance abuse, low self-esteem, and depression. Schools were not safe, healthy, or productive places for gay and lesbian students to learn (Remafedi, 1987). Nearly one-third (28%) reported they were likely to drop out of school because of feelings of discomfort (caused by verbal and physical abuse) in the school environment. This was more than three times the national average when compared to heterosexual students who are bullied (Bart, 1998).

The educational outcomes of youth are impacted by their feelings of safety, connectedness, and belonging at school. Students who have a greater sense of self and belonging in their schools are more likely to have a higher rate of success in academic achievement (Farrington et al., 2012). Since 1999, Gay Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has administered a biennial National School Climate Survey (NSCS). In 2007, nearly nine out of 10 LGBT students (86.2%) reported experiencing some form of harassment at school. Three out of five students (60.8%) reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 32.7% of students skipped a day of school because they did not feel safe (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008).

Raising awareness about the responsibility for educators to protect and support LGBT students remains a challenge at the local level. Few states require professional development or have comprehensive safety laws in place that protect students from bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2014). When schools fail to protect students from harm, future generations are impacted. Youth who are harassed for their sexual orientation receive lower grades and report they are less likely to pursue postsecondary education (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). LGBT students who experience physical harassment are twice as likely, when compared to the general population, to report they will not pursue postsecondary education (Greytak, 2008).

GLSEN's 2011 NSCS found that increasing LGBT school resources and supports contributed to a decrease in negative indicators in school climate (Kosciw et al., 2012). LGBT students reported the presence of supportive educators had a positive impact on the school experiences and psychological well-being (Kosciw et al., 2012). The report recommends providing training for all educators to increase the number of supportive staff available to student (Kosciw et al., 2012).

CESCaL SSSL Conference

The mission of the Center for Excellence in School Counseling and Leadership (CESCaL) is to promote excellence in the field of school counseling and to assist school counselors and site administrators as they design, implement, and evaluate school counseling programs to best meet student needs. In 2010, CESCaL invited school counselors from across the country to join together in San Diego for the first national conference titled *Empowering School Counselors & All Educators to Support our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and Ally (LGBTQIA) Youth*. CESCaL chose this topic because of the lack of attention it receives at state and

national school counseling events. This conference was especially unique in that it was the first ever conference of its kind on a national level for K-12 school counselors focused entirely around these issues of LGBT awareness. More than 150 people were in attendance for the 3-day event, helping to make the first annual conference a huge success. Following the accomplishments of the conference, CESCAL was charged by Stuart Milk (nephew of Harvey Milk) to make this an annual event. CESCAL accepted this challenge and broadened the audience to include all educators and retitled the event: *Supporting Students Saving Lives* (SSSL).

CESCAL's 2011 conference drew more than 350 participants and national organizations from across the country. In 2012, more than 500 conference goers attended. SSSL sought to promote awareness of LGBTQIA issues in schools and provide school counselors and other educators with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to support LGBTQIA youth. Specifically, the conference goals were to teach and empower educators with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to become agents of change in their districts. Over 40 workshops and conference sessions were provided on topics such as teaching the laws and rights of LGBTQIA students and providing tools and resources for school counselors, students and families. A list of the workshops are found in Appendix A. Attendees were also encouraged and empowered to take personal responsibility to be advocates for LGBTQIA youth and to promote social justice for all. Attendees were provided opportunities to gain skills to access and utilize community resources and to create safe spaces in schools for LGBTQIA youth. Attendees of the conference were then charged to take back the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they learned, share it with others, and to become change agents within their own schools, districts, and states.

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which the 2012 CESCAL LGBTQIA SSSL Conference attendees met the goals and objectives:

- a) Gain *knowledge* of laws and rights of LGBTQIA students and resources available to students and families;
- b) Shift *attitudes* to take personal responsibility as advocates for LGBTQIA youth;
- c) Acquire *skills* to access resources and to create safe, welcoming and inclusive schools for all LGBTQIA youth;
- d) Take *action* within their own schools, districts, and states.

Methods

The instrument used to gauge the effectiveness of the conference was written to align with the goals and objectives above and piloted during the 2011 conference. After reviewing the results, minor adjustments were made to the survey used to assess the impact of the 2012 conference. Through the use of an anonymous pre-conference and post-conference survey, the perceptions of adult attendees at the conference were investigated. Specifically, this study endeavored to gauge the impact of the conference on attendees' knowledge, attitudes, and skills and self-report of advocacy behaviors for LGBTQIA youth. Additionally, differences in between-group characteristics were analyzed in relation to the conference impact.

Participants

The targeted participants of this study were the adult attendees of the 2012 LGBTQIA Conference conducted by The Center for Excellence in School Counseling and Leadership (CESCaL) at San Diego State University. More than 500 participants come from a broad range of organizations and positions, including: school counselors, K-12 teachers, coaches, psychologists, administrators, therapists, nurses, and social workers from elementary schools, secondary schools, and community-based organizations. Professors, administrators, and students from high schools, colleges, and universities were also participants.

Sampling

Utilizing a sample of convenience, all adult participants were asked to voluntarily complete a pre-conference paper and pencil survey. Following the conference, conference goers were invited to participate in a post-conference Web-based survey.

Measures and Covariates

The instrument gathered data on three types of variables: demographic, experiential, and attitudinal. Four questions were related to demographic characteristics and included questions on prior year conference attendance, type of organization associated with, position at that organization, and sexual/gender identity. Five questions were related to experiences of the participants and were centered on openness of sexual identity with co-workers, students, and family members and experiences with harassment or discrimination at work.

Standards-based education encourages educators to measure knowledge, attitudes, and skills when assessing the impact of education (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Six questions (two for each of the objectives) were specifically designed to gauge the impact of the conference by measuring the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of the attendees prior to and following the conference. These were Likert-type statements that participants would signify their agreement through the use of a 5-point rating (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). These statements were:

- I am knowledgeable of the laws and rights of LGBTQIA students.
- I am knowledgeable of the resources available to LGBTQIA students and families in my school/district.
- I feel empowered to take personal responsibility for LGBTQIA students.
- I feel empowered to advocate for LGBTQIA students and families.
- I possess the skills to access resources to create safe, welcoming, and inclusive schools for LGBTQIA students.
- I utilize skills to create safe, welcoming, and inclusive schools for LGBTQIA students.

Two additional statements were presented using the same scale:

- I am a strong ally to LGBTQIA students.
- I am a visible ally to LGBTQIA students.

Additionally, participants were asked to respond to questions regarding whether or not they had created visible safe spaces and whether or not their school had a Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA).

Research Design

Three months after the conference, participants were e-mailed instructions on how to complete the post-conference survey administered online through *Qualtrics*. This instrument included the same six goal statements, two ally statements, and two statements about visible spaces and GSAs. Both the pre-conference survey and the post-conference survey employed the use of anonymous unique identification questions so that pre-conference and post-conference surveys could be matched.

Results

Pre-Conference

A total of 262 individuals participated in the pre-conference survey. The majority of participants (83%) had not attended either of the two previous conferences. Of the participants, 3% reported attending the 2010 Conference, 10% reported attending the 2011 Conference, and 5% reported attending the conference in both 2010 and 2011.

In terms of the organizations represented by survey respondents, secondary schools were largest (38%), followed by colleges or universities (18%), and elementary schools (8%). It should be noted that 22% of participants identified as being associated with more than one type of organization. In terms of educator positions represented at the conference, teachers were the most represented at 24%. School counselors followed this at 17%.

The sexual/gender identities represented at the conference are reported in Table 1. Survey respondents identifying as Straight composed the largest part of the participants at 49%. Those identifying as Gay and Lesbian composed 16% and 15% of the participants, respectively.

Table 1

Responses to How do you identify?

	Frequency	Percent
Lesbian	38	14.5
Gay	41	15.6
Bisexual	13	5.0
Transgender	4	1.5
Transsexual	1	.4
Queer	5	1.9
Intergender	1	.4
Straight Ally	127	48.5
Genderqueer/Gender Fluid/Gender Variant	1	.4
Prefer to not identify	1	.4
Other	14	5.3
Multiple	16	6.1

Post-Conference

There were 83 participants in the post-conference survey. This equates to a response rate of approximately 32% of the pre-conference survey participants. This is considered an acceptable participation rate because of the anonymous nature of the survey and the size of the sample (Sheehan, 2001).

Summaries of the responses to the attitudinal statements in the pre-conference and post-conference surveys are presented in Table 2. The average response rating increased from the pre-conference survey to the post-conference survey, indicating an increase in agreement with the statements from before the conference to after the conference. As a reminder, a 5-point rating (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) rating was used.

The largest increases were seen in Goal 1, relating to the knowledge of the laws and rights of LGBTQIA students and the resources available to students and families. Specifically, the average response to the statement regarding ‘Laws & Rights’ increased

Table 2

Comparison of Pre-Conference and Post-Conference Responses to Objective Statements

	<u>Pre-Conference</u>			<u>Post-Conference</u>			Change	% Change
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>		
I am knowledgeable of the laws and rights of LGBTQIA students.	3.61	1.16	254	4.00	1.01	70	0.39	11%
I am knowledgeable of the resources available to LGBTQIA students and families in my school/district.	3.27	1.34	253	3.80	1.28	70	0.53	16%
I feel empowered to take personal responsibility for LGBTQIA students	4.01	1.29	253	4.46	1.06	70	0.45	11%
I feel empowered to advocate for LGBTQIA students and families.	4.24	1.06	251	4.49	1.09	70	0.25	6%
I possess the skills to access resources to create safe, welcoming, and inclusive schools for LGBTQIA students.	3.91	1.15	252	4.23	1.13	70	0.32	8%
I utilize skills to create safe, welcoming, and inclusive schools for LGBTQIA students.	3.91	1.33	247	4.23	1.18	70	0.32	8%
I am a strong ally to LGBTQIA students.	4.34	1.10	251	4.76	0.46	70	0.42	10%
I am a visible ally to LGBTQIA students.	3.79	1.44	250	4.24	1.31	70	0.45	12%

by 11%, while the average response to the statement regarding ‘Resources’ increased by 16%. Similar increases were seen in ‘Responsibility’ (11%), ‘Advocacy’ (6%), ‘Possession’ (8%) and ‘Utilization’ (8%).

Of the 83 participants in the post-conference survey, 44 respondents were matched by the anonymous identifiers. While the pre-post instrument has not as yet been tested in terms of reliability and validity, it is informative when creating a total from the six attitudinal statements that measure the three objectives of the conference. The highest possible total score a respondent could attain on these statements was 30. The mean total score on the pre-conference survey was 23.7 ($SD = 5.10$, $n = 43$) and the mean total score on the post-conference survey was 25.5 ($SD = 5.25$, $n = 43$). This is a mean increase of 1.7 ($SD = 5.23$). The results of a paired samples t-test indicates a statistically significant difference in the mean of the two groups ($t(42) = 2.19$, $p = .034$).

Mixed Design ANOVA-Pre/Post-Conference Scores and Sexual Identity

Employing an ANOVA model with repeated measures (pre-conference total score on objective questions and post-conference total score on objective questions) and between-subjects factor of a queer binary (LGBTQI v. Straight), there was a significant main effect of the difference between pre-conference and post-conference scores ($F(1, 41) = 4.677$, $p = .036$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$). This indicates there was not a significant effect of the between-subject factor (sexual identity), $F(1, 41) = .006$, $p = .937$. This indicated no significant difference between the pre/post scores of the LGBTQI participants and Straight participants. The pre/post scores were, in general, the same.

Mixed Design ANOVA-Pre/Post-Conference Scores and Organization Type

Employing an ANOVA model with repeated measures (pre-conference total score on objective questions and post-conference total score on objective questions) and between-subjects factor of binary organization type (organizations primarily dealing with youth v. organizations primarily dealing with adults), there was a significant main effect in the difference between pre-conference and post-conference scores ($F(1, 41) = 4.671$, $p = .037$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$). There was not a significant effect of the between-subject factor (organization type), $F(1, 41) = 1.19$, $p = .281$. This indicates the type of organization the respondent represented had little effect on pre/post-conference scores.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which attending the 2012 CESCAL LGBTQIA conference contributed to participants gaining the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to advocate for LGBTQIA youth. This is important because putting on a national conference is a costly endeavor both financially and in terms of human time and talent. If there is no measurable impact on attendee knowledge, attitudes, skills, or behaviors, there may be no difference in the lives of the students they teach or counsel, and other ways to support LGBT youth may need to be considered. Results of this study, however, indicated that participant knowledge, attitudes, and skills regarding advocacy for LGBTQIA youth increased after participating in CESCAL’s LGBTQIA 2012 conference. These findings served to validate the benefits of holding this conference as one means of supporting and protecting LGBTQIA youth in schools. Results also

indicated the participant's sexual/gender identity and organizational affiliation had little to no effect on the participants reported outcomes as a result of attending the conference. These finding supported the positive impact of attracting both LGBT and Straight Allies.

Respondents also provided rich positive feedback on the post-conference survey regarding their experience attending the conference:

- *"In my 20 years as a counselor, I have attended at least 70 conferences - this conference was the most informative and empowering."*
- *"The conference was amazing. I'm looking forward to this year's conference. All the presenters were amazing and approachable. I was amazed by the amount of resources available that I wouldn't have learned about without attending the conference."*
- *"This conference is one of the best I have ever attended. The caliber of the presenters and workshops is unmatched for the topic."*

Respondents also shared the changes and improvements they made in their schools and districts as a result of the conference:

- *"Attending this conference gave me the tools and the voice to take ideas back to my colleagues. We are now starting a GSA and have created visible safe spaces for our students. We also had over 75% of our staff recognize the Day of Silence this year! I had more allies than I knew, but this conference gave me the confidence to seek them out."*
- *"I was able to do a presentation to my faculty and staff based on the information I gathered at the conference."*
- *"I am a more visible and vocal ally and have engaged in several conversations to promote safe spaces for all students."*
- *"As a result of the conference and getting staff support, a particular student got the counseling she needed and the bullying surrounding her has stopped almost completely. She is more empowered and the staff and students are more understanding and tolerant than ever before."*
- *"I was able to present to our district administrators and it was interesting to see the light dawn on their face when I described some of the subtle ways that discrimination of LGBTQIA students creeps into our culture. I believe that it had a positive impact on all who attended and they carried the information back to their school sites."*

Limitations

One of the limitations of the study was the discrepancy between the number of participants in the post-conference survey as compared to the pre-conference survey. This is attributed to the time lapse between the conference and the way in which the survey was administered. The pre-conference survey was provided at the conference registration desk with confidential spaces nearby for immediate and private completion. The post-conference survey was e-mailed as an electronic survey, which may have discouraged

participants who are either unfamiliar with, less trusting of, or less likely to answer online surveys of this nature (e.g., answering questions on LGBT harassment in the workplace on a workplace computer). The discrepancy between the number of post-conference surveys attempted and the number of post-conference surveys matched to pre-conference surveys is attributed to the nature of the anonymous identifiers employed in the survey. Participants may not have understood the need for the identifying questions or felt they made the survey non-anonymous. Although the participation rate is still considered acceptable due to both the anonymous nature of the survey and the size of the sample (Sheehan, 2001), efforts to improve the participation rate are encouraged in future surveys of this nature.

Secondly, because the survey came out 3 months after the date of conference attendance, the conference (as the intervention) may not be the only LGBTQIA awareness or instructional event the participant participated in during that 3-month time period. However, administering the post-test three months later allowed conference attendees to provide comments on the impact of the conference on their change agent behaviors once back at their school sites.

Conclusion

Although the academic and safety needs of LGBT youth have received increased attention, schools nationwide remain hostile places for LGBT youth (Kosciw, et. al, 2012). Research reveals that 82% of LGBT students still report being verbally harassed; 60% of those harassed state they did not report it to authorities because they believed it would make no difference; and of those that did report, 37% stated that school staff did not respond (Kosciw et al., 2012). Training school staff to recognize, respond, and deter hostile behaviors in schools will require education about the laws and rights of students. Increasing the number of supportive educators remains an urgent need as findings indicate that when LGBT students have supportive staff at schools, they are more likely to feel safe, attend school, earn better grades, and make plans to attend college (Kosciw et al., 2012).

The 2012 *Supporting Students Saving Lives Conference* was the third of four conferences held from 2010-2013. These national conferences focusing first on school counselors and then on teaching all educators were the first of their kind. Many more conferences and trainings are needed, as thousands of students lack the support they so desperately need in schools. Educating pre-service professionals to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to become agents of change prior to entering schools may help to improve students' experiences and is also strongly recommended. Future research is needed to assess the impact of pre-service training and efforts by organizations seeking to replicate this conference or hold similar events intended to improve support for LGBT youth in schools.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm

Appendix A

CESCaL 2012 Supporting Students Saving Lives Conference Workshop Titles

1. Nothing to Fear: How the Law Empowers Schools to Support and Protect Transgender and Gender-Variant Students
2. Game Plan for Respect: A Workshop for K-12 Coaches and Physical Education Teachers
3. Building Safer Schools for Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Elementary School Students
4. Somewhere Over the Rainbow: Research and Data to Provide a Safe Climate for LGBTQIA
5. Beyond the Closet Door: Empowering and Supporting LGBTQ Students in Their Coming Out Process
6. Facilitating Conversations about LGBTQIA Issues in the Classroom
7. The Health Impact of Homophobic School Environment and Bullying on LGBT Youth
8. HOME work: Exploring the Unique Challenges Faced by LGBTQ Students that are Homeless or In Out-of-Home Care
9. Harassment in Schools: How Title IX Protects Students
10. Game Plan for Respect: A Workshop for K-12 Coaches and Physical Education Teachers
11. Building Safe Schools: Gay Straight Alliances, Days of Action and Campaigns
12. Curriculum Connections: Integrating Social Justice Themes into the K-12 Curriculum
13. No More LGBT Suicides: Discussing Bullying and Suicide Risk
14. Bullied: A Student, A School, and a Case that Made History
15. Understanding Transgender Students: The Results of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey
16. LGBT inclusion in Elementary Schools
17. Making the Case for Safe Schools
18. Transgender Students Participating in Physical Education and Athletics: Educational and Legal Best Practices
19. Continuing the Conversation from: "What do you know? Children ages 6-12 Talk about Gays and Lesbians"
20. Acceptance is Mission Critical: Setting Expectations for Future LGBT Service Members in a Post-Don't Ask Don't Tell Military
21. Strategies for Advocacy to Protect Students from LGBT Harassment
22. Integrative Understanding of Race/Ethnicity & Sexual Orientation among LGBTQ Youth of Color
23. Intersex 101: Disorders of Sex Development in a Nutshell
24. Rural Communities
25. FAIR Education with GLBTQ Studies
26. Creating Safe and Inclusive Classrooms for Elementary School Students
27. Scholarships, Mentoring, Leadership & Hope for LGBT Students
28. Walking the Talk: Classroom Strategies for Addressing GLBT Bias

29. Safe Space Kit Workshop
30. Spirituality to Cultural Identity: Personal to Social Transformation
31. Teach Your Children Well: A Documentary Film About Homophobia and School Violence
32. Understanding the Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth of Color
33. Not In Our Town: Screening and Discussion
34. Lifeguard Workshop-YOUTH SESSION
35. Empowering LBGT-headed families in K-8 schools
36. Powerful Partnerships: Community Engagement Strategies to Foster Safe School Climates for LGBTQ Students
37. Celebrating Diversities: A New Strategy for Teaching LGBT Acceptance in Middle School
38. Finding a Gay Friendly College Campus
39. Project TIC Talk: Bringing Trauma Informed Care to Trauma-Exposed Youth
40. Supporting Youth Empowerment and Leadership Through GSA-YOUTH SESSION
41. Taking A Stand: Creating Safe Schools for GLBT Students
42. Critical Roles of Families in Reducing Risk and Promoting Well-Being in LGBT Youth
43. FAIR Act & Seth's Law
44. Understanding Through Education K-12 Program
45. The Youth & Gender Media Project: Using Short Films to Educate About Gender
46. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: Breaking the Silence 101