

Elementary School Counselors' Experiences Engaging in Advocacy Action for Transgender Youth

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Abstract

Transgender youth, marginalized at much high rates than their cisgender peers, are present in elementary schools and in need of support. School counselors have an ethical responsibility to advocate for marginalized students, including transgender youth, yet very little is known of this phenomenon at the elementary school level. The study described within aims to understand the experiences of elementary school counselors engaging in advocacy action for transgender youth. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with seven participants to explore their experiences related to the phenomenon of engaging in advocacy action for transgender youth in elementary school. Hermeneutic analysis was utilized to analyze and interpret participants' described experiences. As a result, the five emergent themes of: (a) collaborative advocacy and balancing interests, (b) uncertainty and navigating the unknown, (c) resolving conflict and overcoming obstacles, (d) considering the advocacy context, and (e) beyond the job: "more than a nine-to-five" collectively answer the question: 'What are elementary school counselors' experiences engaging in advocacy action for transgender youth in elementary school?'. These themes interact to describe and illuminate the studied phenomenon, informing the future advocacy efforts of elementary school counselors (and counselor educators) for transgender youth.

Keywords: School Counselor, Elementary School, Transgender Youth, Advocacy Action

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Introduction

This paper reports on the qualitative study titled ‘Elementary School Counselors Engaging in Advocacy Action for Transgender Youth,’ which explores the experiences of elementary school counselors advocating for transgender youth in their schools. The findings provide valuable insights from participants’ experiences to inform future advocacy efforts for and with transgender youth in elementary school. For the purposes of this paper the term transgender broadly refers to individuals who are gender-nonconforming and whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth (Bockting, 2014; Fassinger & Arsenau, 2007).

Background of the Problem

Transgender youth experience harassment and discrimination at much higher rates than their cisgender peers (Kosciw et al., 2020). In fact, transgender youth experience the highest rates of discrimination and harassment among all groups within the LGBTQ+ community (Kosciw et al., 2020). These youth are much more likely to develop mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidality (Abreu et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2020; Kurt, 2017; National Alliance of Mental Illness [NAMI], n.d.; Simons & Cuadrado, 2019; Weir & Piquette, 2018).

Students begin to identify as transgender during their elementary school years, therefore support is needed at this early age (Bockting, 2014; Edwards-Leeper, 2017; Meyer et al., 2019). Despite this need for support, gender identity is often considered a taboo topic in elementary school and is generally avoided in discussion (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012; Goodhand & Brown, 2016; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019a, 2019b). Some adult stakeholders oppose gender identity conversations, arguing that this type of discussion is inappropriate in early childhood education and not developmentally relevant until adolescence. Gender identity development research has found evidence to the contrary, establishing that children become aware of their gender identity in early childhood. In fact, some children show signs of gender dysphoria as early as age two (Coleman et al., 2012; Kappus, 2015). Societal gender norms are often reinforced through heteronormative practices in elementary school that categorize students as boys and girls. It is important to consider how such practices impact the development of young gender diverse students (GLSEN, 2012; Goodhand & Brown, 2016; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019a, 2019b).

Elementary school counselors are ethically responsible for advocating for this marginalized population, yet very little is known about their experiences engaging in such advocacy action (ACA, 2014; ASCA, 2016a, 2016b, 2019). Existing literature has outlined a strong case for school counselor advocacy action for transgender youth, but a better understanding of the advocacy experience that follows is still necessary. The described study aims to provide a better understanding of this phenomenon and inform future advocacy efforts.

Methods

The qualitative study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. The primary question answered through the study was, ‘what are elementary school counselors’ experiences engaging in advocacy action for transgender youth in elementary school?’

Seven participants contributed descriptions of their relevant experiences to inform the study. Participants were located in six different states throughout the United States (Colorado,

Maryland, Oregon (2), Vermont, Texas, and Wisconsin). All seven participants identified themselves as cisgender females, six out of seven identified themselves as White, and six out of the seven identified themselves as straight or heterosexual (one identified as bi-sexual). Four participants were between the ages of 30-40 years old, two participants were between the ages of 40-50 years old, and one participant was between the ages of 50-60 years old. Regarding years of experience as a school counselor, two participants had 0-5 years of experience, two participants had 6-10 years of experience, one participant had between 16-20 years of experience, and two participants had between 20-25 years of experience. All seven participants served as elementary school counselors in a public-school setting.

In depth semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded as the primary data collection method. Each interview recording was manually transcribed and reflected upon to develop an interpretive summary. Initial categories of meaning were then identified and further analyzed for significant patterns or unique experiences among participants. Five themes emerged from the data and serve as a foundation of understanding of the studied phenomenon.

Results

The results of the study are organized and presented according to the five emergent themes.

Themes	N	%
Collaborative Advocacy and Balancing Interests	7	100%
Uncertainty and Navigating the Unknown	5	71%
Resolving Conflict and Overcoming Obstacles	7	100%
Considering the Advocacy Context	7	100%
Beyond the Job: "More Than a 'Nine-to-Five'"	7	100%

Table 1: Emergent Themes and Frequency

Collaborative Advocacy and Balancing Interests

Collaborative advocacy efforts such as collaboration and consultation with parents, staff, and administrators saturated the descriptions of school counselors' advocacy actions for transgender youth. Participants regularly worked with families of gender diverse students to provide guidance and support (or resources and referrals when appropriate). One participant described working with a family the evening before their child planned to come out as transgender at school by wearing a dress for the first time. In addition to parent consultation, participants also discussed collaborative work with their campus staff and administration. Participants facilitated and/or delivered staff trainings, collaborated with various staff members to increase the presence of gender inclusive books and curriculum on campus, and worked with teachers to create an inclusive classroom environment for transgender students. This included consultation on bathroom usage, student pronouns, and confidentiality of records that refer to transgender students by their birth assigned name (when different from their chosen name).

Existing literature exploring school counselor advocacy recommends a collaborative approach to advocacy efforts in schools, suggesting that school counselors serve as campus experts on gender identity issues, providing education and consultation on the topic to school stakeholders such as teachers and administrators (ASCA, 2016b; James et al., 2016; Kurt, 2017; Roe, 2017). According to previous related research, teachers are not prepared with the

knowledge and skills necessary to address sexual and gender identity issues in schools, therefore training organized or provided by an informed school counselor is critical (Goodrich et al., 2013; Gower et al., 2019; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019a). It is also recommended that school counselors collaborate with staff to emphasize the importance of pronouns and encourage the use of students' identified names and pronouns at school (ALGBTIC, 2010; ASCA, 2016b; Fassinger & Arsenau, 2007; GLAAD, 2016; Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Goodrich et al., 2013; Henry & Grubbs, 2016; Kurt, 2017; Weir & Piquette, 2018).

Much of the collaborative advocacy work participants described would be categorized as indirect and 'advocacy for' rather than 'advocacy with' transgender youth according to the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). Although school counselor advocacy 'for' transgender youth makes up an important portion of advocacy action for transgender youth, consideration should also be given to the value of advocacy 'with' transgender youth. Involving marginalized youth in the process of advocacy on their behalf can have empowering effects and teach youth valuable skills to advocate for themselves in the future. Advocacy 'with' transgender youth also takes into consideration the perspective of the population being impacted, avoiding white saviorism, or an approach to advocacy efforts that implies the marginalized population needs to be 'saved' and cannot help themselves (Sondel et al., 2019).

Challenges of balancing the interests and wishes of adults with student interests and needs was also a common thread throughout the participants' descriptions of their experiences. Although school counselors prioritize the rights and best interests of their student clients, it is also expected that school counselors respect the rights and wishes of their students' guardians. The ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2016a) state that school counselors must "recognize their primary ethical obligation for confidentiality is to the students but balance that obligation with an understanding of parents'/guardians' legal and inherent rights to be the guiding voice in their children's lives" (A.2.f). Participants' descriptions included navigation of this balancing act between protecting the privacy of students related to their gender identity without violating the legal rights of their guardians. This result was not surprising due to the nature of the school counselor role in elementary school. Ethical dilemmas related to balancing student privacy and guardian rights are common when working with clients of this young age (regardless of the counseling focus).

Uncertainty and Navigating the Unknown

A sense of uncertainty or difficulty navigating the unknown was described at some point throughout each participants' experiences. Six of the participants described a lack of information and support established for elementary school counselors regarding advocacy for transgender students. The emergence of the theme 'uncertainty and navigating the unknown' illuminates the previously unexplored aspects of the phenomenon being studied. Although guidelines for supporting transgender students may be established for school counselors at the secondary level, very few guidelines exist at the elementary level (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012; Goodhand & Brown, 2016; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019a, 2019b). While some degree of uncertainty currently exists for all school counselors advocating for transgender youth, this experience is most relevant to elementary school counselors who often engage in advocacy action without a previous model to guide them. Not only is less relevant information or guidance available for elementary school counselors, information and procedures previously utilized at secondary levels are not usually transferable to the

elementary school setting and age group. Several participants described experiencing this lack of information or guidance as a barrier impeding their ability to effectively advocate for their transgender students. Although the prevalence of trainings on counseling LGBTQ+ youth has improved, participants still described the lack of trainings applicable to elementary aged students specifically. Participants who sought training to bridge their gap in knowledge found that most available trainings were focused on children and teens approximately 12-years and up.

Resolving Conflict and Overcoming Obstacles

Encountering conflict throughout advocacy action experiences was a common thread among participants. These experiences included conflicts among staff, administrators, and the school community. This finding was not surprising in light of the conflicting views of society regarding gender identity, especially in young children. Existing literature consistently finds that advocacy for transgender youth is met with considerable resistance at the elementary school level (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012; Goodhand & Brown, 2016; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019a, 2019b). What was unexpected was the response of the school counselors when faced with such resistance. The resilience demonstrated by the school counselors in their continued advocacy efforts, despite facing resistance within their school community, was overwhelming. Participants created various ways to work around the roadblocks they faced and continue to advocate for marginalized students according to the ethical codes of the profession.

While opposition to advocacy efforts for transgender youth is commonly encountered by school counselors and frequently discussed in existing professional literature, participants encountered more support than resistance to their advocacy efforts overall. This finding diverged from existing counselor advocacy literature and may be an area worth exploring in future research. Support and encouragement of advocacy efforts for transgender youth was received from parents, teachers, administrators, and the student body. The most significant aspect of this finding was the overwhelming support of transgender students by their peers. All participants unanimously described supportive student bodies that accepted their transgender peers with little to no resistance. This finding conflicts with the results of GLSEN's bi-annual surveys of school climate (Kosciw et al., 2016, 2018, 2020), as discrimination and harassment of LGBTQ+ youth by their peers is consistently reported in secondary schools. Since this data does not include elementary aged students and schools this new development in findings based on age group may be an area to consider in future research.

Considering the Advocacy Context

All seven participants described aspects of their experiences that were influenced by their context. Differences in participants' experiences were observed in relation to the context of the advocacy action taking place. Although the contexts of advocacy action varied for all participants, the fact that all participants described the influence of their specific contexts was a commonality. Influential contextual factors included the socio-political climate, rural location, and the cultural makeup of the families within their school community. One participant described the challenges created by a small-town atmosphere that makes confidentiality and privacy difficult when providing referrals for outside counseling. Another participant described the influences of the socio-political climate within their community (and the country at large). The United States presidential election of 2020 and the political

tension that has recently grown among citizens was discussed. One participant's descriptions of her experiences were heavily saturated with discussion of racial dynamics, specifically regarding the intersectionality of gender and racial identity and its relevance within her school community. She described how her students of marginalized racial groups more often struggled with diverse gender expressions.

The elementary school setting, the context of the current study, greatly impacted participants' advocacy experiences for transgender youth in similar ways. Participants experienced an increased level of uncertainty due to the less established advocacy practices at the elementary school level, were met with greater resistance from adults due to the young age of their students, and observed overwhelming support of transgender students by their elementary school peers. Most of these shared experiences confirm previous findings related to school counselor advocacy action in elementary school. Literature consistently describes elementary school settings as less accepting of gender diversity compared to secondary schools (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012; Goodhand & Brown, 2016; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019a, 2019b; Meyer et al., 2019). Elementary schools are especially likely to engage in heteronormative practices that further marginalize gender diverse students, such as binary gender grouping that divides students by 'boys' and 'girls.' School counselors should be mindful of heteronormative practices that may isolate gender diverse students and encourage discontinuation of these practices among staff members on their campus (Gansen, 2017; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019a).

The counselor's context, or positionality, is also a relevant contextual factor in participants' advocacy experiences for transgender youth. Each of the seven participants described varying aspects of their own personal context or positionality that impacted their advocacy experiences with transgender youth. Some participants described facets of their own upbringing that were influential on their counselor advocate identity. Others described their own personal positionality or personal connection to individuals who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community and cited this personal context as influential on their advocacy efforts. Although all school counselors are expected to competently advocate for marginalized populations such as transgender youth (ASCA 2016a, 2016b), existing literature suggests that counselors' personal values and belief system can interfere with this responsibility (GLSEN, 2019a, 2019b). It is imperative that school counselors develop a strong understanding of gender identity issues and development, including the marginalization that transgender students are likely to face at school (Byrd & Hays, 2012; Edwards-Leeper, 2017; Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Goodrich et al., 2013; Henry & Grubbs, 2016). Byrd and Hays (2012) suggest that engagement in self-directed learning and exploration of professional literature related to gender identity and development can help to dispel any false beliefs or misconceptions causing biases towards the transgender population.

Beyond the Job Description: "More Than a 'Nine-to-Five'"

The participants' accounts of their advocacy experiences were peppered with evidence of their compassion for marginalized students and their dedication to the professional responsibility to advocate for them. Participants described their concerns for their transgender students' well-being and cited these concerns as a strong influential factor in their advocacy actions. One participant explained that they insist on starting and continuing conversations surrounding transgender youth to increase awareness and positive change for these students. Another participant described their concerns for the mental and physical well-being of their

transgender students. They recalled the story of a transgender teen who was brutally murdered and cited this story as influencing their engagement in advocacy action.

Participants' concerns for their transgender students did not come as a surprise due to the overwhelming amount of existing data confirming their reason to be concerned for this marginalized group of students (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012; Greytak et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2020; NAMI, n.d.; SAMSHA, 2015). Transgender youth experience marginalization at higher rates than any other sub-group under the LGBTQ+ umbrella (Kosciw et al., 2020; Weir & Piquette, 2018). Transgender students are also at higher risk for developing a mental health condition, substance abuse problem, or suicidal ideation compared to their cisgender peers (NAMI, n.d.).

In addition to expressing great concern for transgender students facing marginalization, participants also described their concern for transgender students who do not have access to a school counselor that will advocate for them. School counselors who do not possess levels of advocacy competency or awareness that meet the counseling profession's ethical and professional standards could further marginalize already marginalized student groups such as transgender youth. This can be especially problematic for transgender youth at the elementary school level where there is often only one counselor assigned to a campus. Participants described the importance of counselor advocacy competency and awareness and the narratives of all participants included evidence of their own well-developed counselor advocate identities. They described their experiences advocating for advocacy action among school counselors to promote the well-being of marginalized students, including transgender youth.

The ethical and professional codes of school counseling's governing bodies clearly emphasize school counselors' responsibility to advocate for marginalized groups of students (ACA, 2014; ASCA, 2016a, 2016b; CACREP, 2016). These participants took this ethical responsibility to advocate a step further by advocating for school counselor advocacy action among school counselors to promote the well-being of transgender youth. These individuals' dedication to their students, especially marginalized groups of students such as transgender youth, goes far beyond their job description. As one participant explained, "It's a lot more than a 'nine-to-five.'"

Implications

The findings from the described study inform future advocacy efforts by school counselors and school counselor educators alike. They provide insight that will assist school counselors, school counselors in training, and school counselor educators to better prepare for future advocacy efforts for transgender youth in elementary school.

Much of the advocacy efforts participants described were engaged in collaboratively with other school stakeholders such as teachers. This work is especially important at the elementary school level where students are generally assigned to one classroom teacher all day for the entire school year. Elementary counselors should plan to work with teachers to ensure they are adequately trained on gender identity rights and concerns, proper pronoun use, and harmful heteronormative practices to avoid in the classroom. School counselors are able to make a significant positive impact on the daily lives of transgender students by providing teachers with education and consultation on gender inclusive practices. Elementary school counselors should keep this important aspect of advocacy action for transgender youth

in mind each year, while school counselor educators should ensure that counselors in training are prepared to effectively engage in this type of advocacy action upon completion of their counselor preparation program.

Although the findings suggest that advocacy action at the school community level is extremely important, elementary school counselors should also consider engaging in systemic advocacy action that reaches beyond the context of their own school. This type of advocacy action was not prominent throughout the participants' experiences, yet findings suggest that broader systemic advocacy action is needed to establish clear and consistent guidelines for elementary school counselors navigating transgender student rights. Additional training and preparation for systemic level advocacy action may be necessary throughout counselor preparation programs and should be considered for inclusion by counselor educators.

The study's findings stand out from previous literature due to the elementary school context of the advocacy actions for transgender youth being considered. Although school counselors at all levels may face challenges when advocating for transgender students, the challenges that elementary school counselors encounter (and overcome) are unique to their specific context. Elementary school counselors can expect to experience greater uncertainty due to the less established guidelines regarding implementation of gender inclusive practices. Secondary school practices may need to be adapted considerably before implementation at the elementary school level is possible. Additional training and consultation for parents and staff may be necessary, as it is a common misconception that students do not develop gender identity until adolescence, therefore many individuals are unprepared to address the needs of transgender students in elementary school. School counselors can address concerns regarding the acknowledgement of gender identity in elementary school by providing clear and concise information that maintains privacy and respect for the transgender individual(s) concerned (Rodela & Tobin, 2017; Slesaransky-Poe et al., 2013). Responses to opposition should be based on the professional standards and ethical codes of the counseling profession (Goodrich et al., 2013). Ample resources are publicly available to assist school counselors and guide these challenging conversations (ALGBTIC, 2010, 2013; GLAAD, 2016; GLSEN, 2012, 2019a, 2019b, GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012; GLSEN & National Center for Transgender Equality, 2015; HRC, 2013). While advocate organizations publicly provide these resources for all counselors, counselor educators might consider including them within counselor education curriculum to ensure counselors in training are adequately prepared to utilize these resources in practice upon completion of their program.

School counselor resilience was also a unique finding that emerged from the described study. Although barriers to advocacy action for transgender youth were expected, the resilient response to those barriers by elementary school counselor participants was not anticipated. Participants found unique ways to overcome or work around barriers they encountered when advocating for transgender youth. This finding provides insight for school counselors and school counselor educators, as it demonstrates how to overcome barriers to advocacy and protect the wellbeing of marginalized students. Counselor educators might consider preparing school counselors in training to anticipate conflict or barriers to advocacy and develop skills to address these concerns in a professional manner. Previous research related to school counselor training and advocacy competency development has found that there is a need for improved training in this area (Byrd & Hays, 2012; Couture, 2017; Simons, 2018; Simons & Cuadrado, 2019; Simons et al., 2017).

Limitations

Transferability of the findings to private school settings may not be possible due to the described study's focus on the public-school setting. Future consideration of the student perspective, as opposed to the school counselor perspective, could also provide valuable insight for future advocacy efforts for transgender youth. Intersectionality and the impact of other cultural identities have not yet been fully examined in relation to transgender youth (Abreu & Kenny, 2018; Edwards-Leeper, 2017). More information is needed regarding the experiences of transgender youth with consideration to their race or ethnicity, socio-economic status, religious identity, and body type (Abreu & Kenny, 2018). The study's findings are also limited to the context of the United States, therefore transferability to the contexts of other countries may not be possible.

Conclusion

According to the ethical standards and guiding principles of the counseling profession, counselors must take action (beyond awareness) to create change and benefit marginalized groups of students (ACA, 2014; ASCA, 2016a; Ratts et al., 2016). The results of the described study provide valuable insight for elementary school counselors and counselor educators preparing to take action and engage in advocacy efforts for transgender students. Through consideration of the presented findings, members of the counseling and counselor education profession are better equipped to effectively engage in advocacy action for transgender youth in elementary school and positively impact this group of marginalized students.

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