

# Content-Specific Strategies to Advocate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: An Exploratory Study

Emily C. Graybill, Kris Varjas, Joel Meyers, and Laurel B. Watson  
*Georgia State University*

*Abstract.* Researchers suggest that supportive school personnel may decrease some of the challenges encountered by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth in schools (Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001); however, little is known about the approaches used by school-based advocates for LGBT youth. This exploratory study investigated the strategies used by gay–straight alliance advisers when advocating for LGBT youth in schools. The qualitative data were analyzed using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The findings suggested that advisers implemented a range of advocacy strategies, which differed depending upon the content of the LGBT-related comments and/or situations. Results are discussed in relation to prior literature and implications for school psychologists.

Students who either identify as or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) experience a negative school climate (e.g., bullying, harassment, sexual harassment, discrimination, teasing) more often than their heterosexual peers (Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005; Harris Interactive & the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2005). *School climate* is a multidimensional term, but is generally thought to include the quality of interactions between professionals in the school community and students' feelings of safety (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Emerging research suggests that supportive school personnel counteract some of the negative experiences of LGBT youth in schools (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001), thereby creat-

ing a more positive school climate. However, there is limited knowledge regarding the specific actions and strategies implemented by supportive personnel or school-based advocates. The strategies these adults use when advocating for LGBT youth may have implications for school psychologists to create a more positive school climate for LGBT youth. The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify strategies that adult advocates implement to help improve school climate for LGBT youth.

## School-Based Advocacy

School-based advocates promote “effective learning environments for the academic/social-emotional success of all children” (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d. ). In the LGBT school climate literature,

---

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Kris Varjas, Department of Counseling and Psychological Services, Georgia State University, P. O. Box 3980, Atlanta, GA 30302-2980; E-mail: kvarjas@gsu.edu

Copyright 2009 by the National Association of School Psychologists, ISSN 0279-6015

there are five common strategies recommended for school-based advocacy (Jeltova & Fish, 2005; McFarland, 2001; Peters, 2003). First, educators should include LGBT issues in the curriculum to increase the visibility and accomplishments of the population. Second, advocates should provide staff development related to LGBT issues. Third, advocates should support the organization of a gay-straight alliance (GSA), or an after school student club, to provide a safe space for LGBT students and their heterosexual allies. Fourth, sexual orientation should be included in existing antidiscrimination policies. Fifth, the visibility of LGBT populations should be increased by displaying supportive posters and resource fliers around school, in addition to including LGBT-related media in school libraries.

Some researchers suggest that school personnel are increasingly implementing advocacy strategies for LGBT youth (Bauman & Sachs-Kapp, 1998; Peters, 2003); however, little is known about the nature or the frequency of those strategies. Likewise, research findings suggest that some school personnel are educated about LGBT issues in schools (Mahan et al., 2006; Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2007; Varjas et al., 2007) and advocate for these youth (Bauman & Sachs-Kapp, 1998; Peters, 2003); however, the sample sizes in these studies were small, leaving concern that these school personnel may be uncommon. The results of larger studies exploring school personnel's self-reported competency when dealing with LGBT issues in schools have been discouraging (Fontaine, 1998; Price & Telljohan, 1991; Savage, Prout, & Chard, 2004). School personnel, including school counselors and school psychologists, reported low-to-moderate levels of competency related to LGBT issues (Fontaine; Price & Telljohan; Savage, Prout, & Chard). In addition to feelings of incompetency, Mudrey and Medina-Adams (2006) reported that 74% of preservice teachers surveyed on a measure of homophobia scored in the homophobic range, suggesting that these teachers-in-training hold negative views about LGBT individuals. In sum, although some studies have re-

ported that school personnel are well aware of LGBT issues in schools, other studies have reported that many are lacking in knowledge, are undertrained, are incompetent, or are potentially unwilling to address LGBT issues pertaining to school climate.

The current study is particularly relevant to school psychologists for several reasons. In general, school psychologists have reported positive feelings toward LGBT individuals (Choi, Thul, Berenhaut, Suerken, & Norris, 2005); however, some survey data indicate that school psychologists in general may have limited knowledge about and training in LGBT issues (McCabe & Rubinson, 2008; Savage et al., 2004). Without a basic knowledge of LGBT issues, school psychologists may find it difficult to advocate for these youth. An underrepresentation of LGBT issues in school psychology-related textbooks, journals, and other publications may contribute to school psychologists' limited training and knowledge related to this area. A search on PsychInfo of five school psychology journals (*Journal of Applied School Psychology*, *Journal of School Psychology*, *Psychology in the Schools*, *School Psychology Quarterly*, *School Psychology Review*) from 1963 to 2008 identified 34 articles of >6,000 (<0.05%) that addressed LGBT issues. This included 7 articles from a recent special series in *School Psychology Review* focused on homophobia and bullying (Swearer & Espelage, 2008). In addition, of the 141 chapters in the most recent edition of *Best Practices in School Psychology* (Thomas & Grimes, 2008), not one chapter specifically addressed LGBT issues in schools. School personnel, including school psychologists, are ethically obligated to provide a school environment that is conducive to learning for all students regardless of sexual orientation (American School Counselor Association, 2004; National Association of School Psychologists, 2000; National Education Association, 1975; School Social Work Association of America, 2001). Historically, psychology as a profession has denounced discrimination based on sexual orientation (Conger, 1975) and most recently has advocated for providing supportive, safe spaces for LGBT

individuals (DeLeon, 1993; National Association of School Psychologists, 2006). In addition to this ethical obligation, school mental health professionals, specifically school psychologists, are in a unique role to advocate for LGBT youth in schools (National Association of School Psychologists, 2003). School psychologists' training in mental health, consultation, and the development, implementation, and evaluation of interventions provides school psychologists with the skills necessary to promote change on individual and systemic levels (Nastasi, Moore, & Varjas, 2004). The current study provides information about specific strategies and resources that school psychologists may use when advocating for or consulting with those who are advocating for LGBT youth.

### **Rationale**

The sample for this study consisted of school personnel who served in the role of GSA advisers in high schools. GSAs are school-based clubs for LGBT youth and their heterosexual allies (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004). Typically, each GSA is required to have a faculty adviser who provides varying levels of support to the group. In many schools, all school personnel, including school psychologists, have the opportunity to serve as the GSA adviser. The rationale for choosing GSA advisers as participants was three-fold. First, by definition, GSA advisers have demonstrated their willingness to serve as the staff advisers and to advocate through an extracurricular organization that focuses on LGBT issues in school. Second, although recruitment of GSA advisers presented challenges, these individuals may be easier to identify than other school-based advocates who do not function in an official advocacy role. Finally, GSA advisers potentially have important knowledge and expertise to share with all school personnel about advocating for LGBT youth in schools.

The current study sought to answer the following research question: What strategies do supportive school personnel, specifically GSA advisers, use to advocate for LGBT

youth in schools? Qualitative research methodology was chosen because of the limited information about advocacy strategies for LGBT youth in the literature and the exploratory nature of the study. The researchers intended to gather in-depth information about the advocacy tools used by school personnel in an attempt to highlight the advocates' voices and experiences.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Criteria for inclusion in the study included being employed at a high school and serving in the role as a GSA adviser. A research team consisting of four members used three recruitment strategies: convenience, targeted, and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling involves locating participants based on the accessibility of the researchers and is often used with populations that are difficult to obtain (Schensul, LeCompte, Nastasi, & Borgatti, 1999). Using this strategy, personal and professional contacts provided the researchers with the names and contact information of GSA advisers. In addition, one interviewee who was a school psychologist introduced herself and indicated her role as an adviser at a national conference after meeting one of the researchers at an LGBT-related presentation.

We also used targeted sampling whereby researchers identify a specific group of focus and recruit participants from that group (Schensul et al., 1999). A national LGBT-related educational organization that serves as a resource to GSAs and GSA advisers posted a call for GSA advisers for this study on their listserve (GSA Network, 2007), which resulted in the identification of two interviewees. Nine participants were identified through the list of registered GSAs on the GLSEN Web site (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2007a). Through snowball sampling, participants were asked to assist in recruiting other participants whom they may know (Schensul et al., 1999). One adviser was obtained through this approach (LeCompte, 1999). The process of recruiting GSA

advisers for this study using the three recruitment strategies occurred over 11 months.

The participant sample ( $N = 22$ ) included 10 GSA advisers who worked in Georgia and 12 who worked in one of the following states: Alaska, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Utah. The demographic form completed by the participants was fill-in-the-blank; therefore, the categories reported were self-generated. The age range was 26–55 ( $M = 39$ ;  $SD = 9$ ) and years of experience in the advisers' current fields ranged from 4.5–17 ( $M = 7$ ;  $SD = 3$ ) years. Most participants had obtained their master's degrees ( $n = 16$ ), although 4 had a bachelor's degree and 2 reported graduate training but not a graduate degree. The participant sample lacked racial and ethnic diversity: Caucasian ( $n = 20$ ), Jewish ( $n = 1$ ), and Latino ( $n = 1$ ). The breakdown of the sexual orientation of the participants was as follows: Straight ( $n = 11$ ); Lesbian ( $n = 4$ ); Gay ( $n = 4$  [including 1 female who identified as gay]); Bisexual ( $n = 2$ ); and Queer Straight ( $n = 1$ ).

## Procedure

A semistructured interview format was used because of the exploratory nature of this study (LeCompte, 1999). The semistructured format allowed the interviewers the latitude to probe the interviewees when necessary. The questions were developed based on an analysis of the current literature (e.g., What is the school climate like for LGBT students at your school? What is your school's policy addressing discrimination towards LGBT students?). Additional interview questions asked about the nature of and reaction to LGBT-related comments and situations in schools (e.g., How do you hear your colleagues/students/administrators discussing LGBT issues in schools? How do you respond? Have you witnessed orientation-based harassment in your school? If so, how do you respond? What suggestions would you give to adults who wanted to advocate for LGBT youth in their schools but who did not know how?). Participants completed a demographic survey and consent form

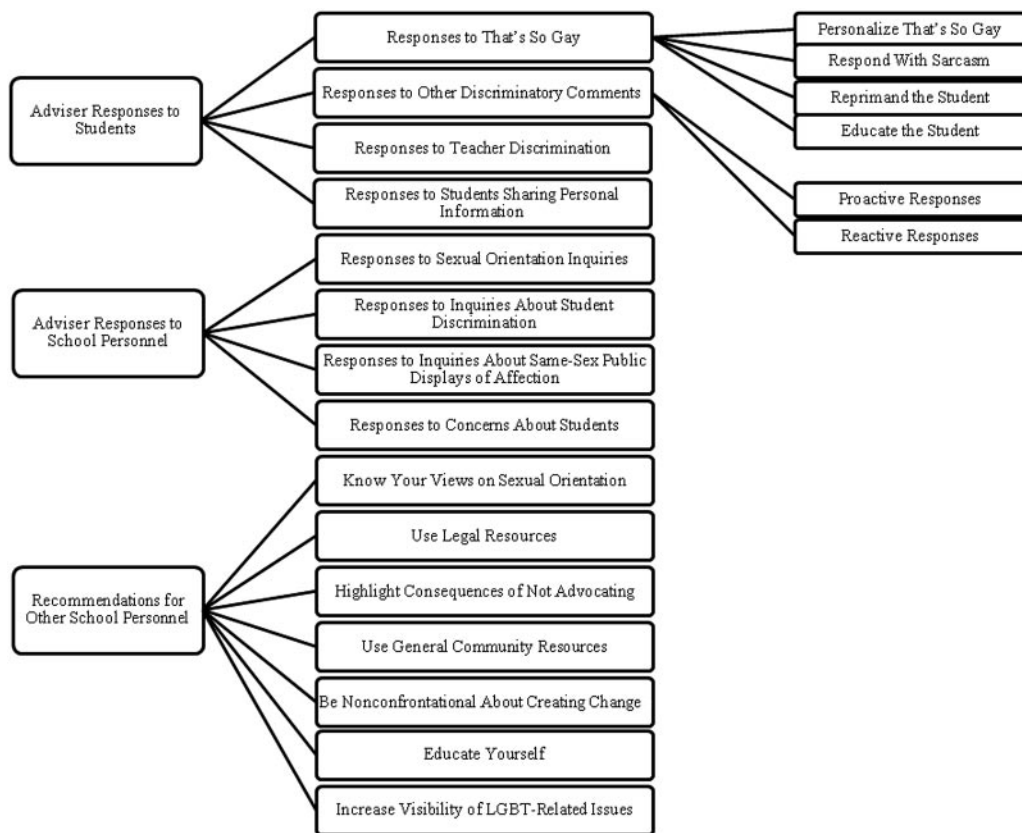
prior to the start of the interviews; interviews lasted approximately 1 hr. The majority ( $n = 16$ ) of the interviews were conducted over the phone using a conversation-recording device; the remainder of the interviews ( $n = 6$ ) occurred in person. The use of phone interviews allowed the researchers to obtain a national sample from a population that was difficult to access.

## Data Analysis

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Interviews were then imported into Atlas/Ti 5.1, a coding software package for managing qualitative data. Two members of the research team analyzed the interviews according to the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to grounded theory, the goal is not to prove an existing theory but to inductively develop a theory from the data. The sample size of 20–30 aligned with the recommended sample size for studies using grounded theory (Creswell, 1998). The constant comparative method of data analysis was used as part of grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This involved *open coding*, *axial coding*, and *selective coding* (Strauss & Corbin).

In the current study, we first became familiar with the literature on LGBT issues in school. Using this knowledge and the process of *open coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we identified a subset of interviews, independently segmented the interview data by complete responses or sentences, examined it, and assigned a theme to each piece of the data. We met regularly to compare the generated themes and began to develop a coding manual that was used to document the different names and levels of codes (Strauss & Corbin).

After reading the interviews, we reached a consensus about the codes through *axial coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and began grouping codes into primary (i.e., Level 1) and secondary (i.e., Level 2) codes (see Figure 1). At each coding meeting, we modified the coding manual as needed. Finally, through *selective coding* (Strauss & Corbin), the concepts about school-based advocacy were integrated



**Figure 1. Level 1, 2, and 3 codes that emerged from interviews with gay-straight alliance advisers.**

by refining the different codes and subcodes identified through *open* and *axial coding*. While completing the *open*, *axial*, and *selective coding* processes using the subset of interviews, an *audit trail* was maintained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An *audit trail* involves maintaining raw records of all data collection and data analysis documents. This included raw data such as interview tapes and transcriptions, data analysis products such as field notes and the eight modifications of the coding manual, and process notes on the credibility and dependability of the methodology. The audit trail allowed us to evaluate the *dependability* or the reliability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba) and this documentation that occurred will allow for replication of this study in the future.

After developing the final version of the coding manual, data were coded for interrater reliability (IRR), based on complete responses or sentences (Schensul et al., 1999). After independently reading through each interview, we compared each code and calculated IRR in an attempt to reach the recommended 90% IRR (Bakeman & Gottman, 1986), which was obtained after 5 interviews. We independently coded the remaining 17 interviews, and one of the researchers compared the codes written on each of the interviews by the researchers to prevent coder drift, which occurs when coders begin to change their definitions or perceptions of the codes (LeCompte, 1999). To prevent coder drift, IRR was calculated for 10% of each of the remaining 17 interviews and an average of 96% IRR was maintained. Differ-

ent sections of the remaining 17 interviews were coded to avoid calculating IRR on responses to the same one or two interview questions. We continued to code each interview until 100% agreement was obtained.

## Results

Three Level 1 codes emerged from the data to describe the advocacy strategies that advisers reported implementing or recommending for other school personnel when advocating for LGBT youth in schools (Adviser Responses to Students, Adviser Responses to School Personnel, and Recommendations for Other School Personnel). Level 2 codes emerged under each Level 1 code (see Figure 1) and these are presented in the following sections with detailed definitions of the codes. Level 3 codes emerged under the Level 2 codes discussed more in-depth by the advisers. Quotes will be used to exemplify the codes.

### Adviser Responses to Students

The Level 1 code of Adviser Responses to Students described situations in which the adviser heard LGBT-related comments made by students and intervened. The advisers reported hearing several different types of LGBT-related comments made by students, and they responded differently based on the nature of the comments. The Level 2 subcodes described the advisers' responses to different types of student comments (Responses to That's So Gay, Responses to Other Discriminatory Comments, Responses to Teacher Discrimination, Responses to Students Sharing Personal Information). Level 3 subcodes emerged under Responses to That's So Gay and Responses to Other Discriminatory Comments; these Level 3 subcodes provided examples of themes that emerged when advisers responded to these two types of comments.

The Level 2 subcode of Responses to That's So Gay was defined as the GSA advisers' response when students used the phrase "that's so gay" in a devaluing or pejorative manner. Advisers reported that the phrase "that's so gay" was used by students to indicate that an event, person, or thing was unim-

portant or of little value. The advisers did not report the phrase being used literally in reference to a person who was perceived as gay or to a gay-related event. Several different strategies were reported by the advisers to address "that's so gay." The Level 3 code of Personalize That's So Gay describes situations in which the adviser explained how the use of the phrase was personally offensive to them either because they identified as a member of the LGBT population or their friends identified as LGBT. One adviser said, "I have a lot of friends that are gay and lesbian and I see how those comments hurt them. And so . . . they're offensive for me in that way."

Some advisers chose to Respond With Sarcasm (Level 3) when students said "that's so gay." One adviser responded by saying "really, then how do you make it straight?" Another strategy used by advisers was to Reprimand the Student (Level 3) who said "that's so gay." When advisers reprimanded students, they would inform the students that the use of "that's so gay" was inappropriate and typically end the discussion there. A few advisers indicated that they would discipline a student who repeatedly used "that's so gay."

The Level 3 code that emerged most frequently under Responses to That's So Gay was to Educate the Students. Some advisers explained the literal meaning of the word *gay* to the student. Others encouraged the student to explore other phrases to use in place of "that's so gay." Sometimes, advisers would "make them look up the word gay in the dictionary," and ask, "OK, what does it mean?" Others engaged the students in conversations about what they meant by the term "that's so gay" in an attempt to get them to think for themselves about why they used that term. Some advisers tried to equate using the term "that's so gay" to using racist slurs: "Gay does not mean that, you are looking for the word stupid. We are not going to say that. It is the equivalent of saying the 'n' word. It is discriminatory."

The Level 2 subcode of Responses to Other Discriminatory Comments included anti-LGBT comments other than "that's so gay" made by students. A wide range of anti-

LGBT comments were reported, such as sounds indicating disgust in response to LGBT-related issues in the curriculum, the use of the terms *fag*, *faggot*, or *dyke*, or general negative statements about LGBT individuals (e.g., [homosexuality] is a sin). When responding to these discriminatory comments, the advisers discussed a wide range of response options that are organized under the Level 3 codes of Reactive Responses and Proactive Responses.

Reactive Responses, or those responses that occurred after the student made a discriminatory comment, were more frequently reported than Proactive Responses. Examples of Reactive Responses included “Oh automatic referral, they are in detention and not only that, I will talk to them for about a half an hour about why it is not okay to use those words.” As indicated by the preceding quote, many, but not all of the advisers’ Reactive Responses to discriminatory comments included some sort of disciplinary action against the offending student.

Proactive Responses to discriminatory language included those strategies that advisers would implement prior to hearing any discriminatory comments. The Proactive Responses were implemented in an attempt to discourage students from making discriminatory comments.

You know, just tell them I won’t accept . . . any hate speech. You know, when I go through my syllabus at the beginning I put that in . . . that everyone has to be polite with each other, show respect . . . that means no racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.

As previously mentioned, Proactive Responses were reported less often. Specifically, only 2 advisers reported Proactive Responses; however, questions about Proactive Responses to student comments were not included in the interview protocol, which may have contributed to the small number of Proactive Responses.

The Level 2 subcode of Responses to Teacher Discrimination describes the responses to situations in which students would approach advisers about teachers who had made discriminatory comments about LGBT

individuals. In these situations, the advisers did not actually witness the discrimination—rather, students reported the discriminatory comments to the adviser. No Level 3 subcodes emerged under this Level 2 subcode. Few advisers reported being approached by students who had encountered discrimination from teachers. Therefore, the example presented below may be an outlier with regard to the typical experience of a GSA adviser. This adviser chose not to address the teacher’s comments for fear that the discrimination by the teacher would increase. “I never addressed it with that teacher, but instead I made sure that the kids were OK . . . I knew that confronting this teacher about it would not be helpful. It would just make it worse for the kids.”

The Level 2 subcode of Responses to Students Sharing Personal Information included situations in which students approached the advisers about the students’ own personal issues. Examples of personal issues discussed by students included conflicts with parents, attraction to peers, depression, questioning of their sexual identity, and thoughts of suicide. When advisers were approached by students to address personal issues, some advisers chose to process the issue with the student, some chose not to discuss the students’ issues, and some chose to refer the student to another member of the school staff. Those advisers who chose not to discuss the students’ issues or to refer the student did so for a range of reasons (e.g., discomfort related to discussing the issues, situation more appropriate for school mental health professional). One adviser, who identified as a lesbian, cited discomfort when her students approached her to talk about their sexual identity. The adviser noted the following:

I think it’s fear of professional repercussions because we accept that our larger community is basically homophobic . . . . Our advisement or our offering a listening ear to a student who comes to us to discuss sexuality is in some ways intrinsically deviant . . . You know rarely, rarely will a straight male go to a male teacher who takes the position of being an adviser to discuss his girlfriend. It’s weird to have a discussion with a 15-year-old

girl about her sexual interest in another 15- or 16- or 17- or 18-year-old girl.

An additional source of discomfort reported by the adviser was discussing information that students had not shared with her parents.

I usually probe and find out where the kid has other options to receive support. If they're talking about things that I know that their parents don't know about, I'll be really up-front about that, and I'll say "there's a certain point in this conversation where if your parents don't know about it, I don't know how appropriate it is for me to know about it." So I'll tend to put stoppers on how much they tell me.

When students mentioned suicidal ideation, advisers referred them to the school mental health professionals. Finally, some advisers reported attempting to comfort students who approached them with personal issues. The most common personal issue that the advisers were approached with was concern among students about their sexual identity. When approached by students who were questioning their sexual identity, one adviser indicated that he would "just generally walk through their feelings. I absolutely validate that it's okay that they're, it's okay whatever they're questioning if they're questioning. If I feel that they are really questioning, I'll mention support groups for them to go to."

### **Adviser Responses to School Personnel**

The Level 1 code, Adviser Responses to School Personnel, described situations in which school personnel approached the advisers to discuss LGBT-related issues. Contrary to the comments made by students, which were mostly discriminatory in nature, most of the LGBT-related comments made by school personnel were comments of concern about an individual student's well-being. Therefore, this code describes the different types of LGBT-related concerns raised by school personnel and describes the strategies the advisers used in response to the concerns. This Level 1 code included four Level 2 subcodes: Responses to Sexual Orientation Inquiries, Responses to Inquiries About Student Discrimi-

nation, Responses to Inquiries About Same-Sex Public Displays of Affection, and Responses to Concerns About Students (see Figure 1).

The Level 2 subcode, Responses to Sexual Orientation Inquiries, included situations when other school personnel would approach advisers with questions about the sexual orientation of particular students. Most of the time, the advisers reported that they perceived the motivation behind the other school personnel's inquiries to be gossip; therefore, the advisers reported they would not engage in those conversations: "I do say that is completely inappropriate, that is nobody's business and even if I knew for sure either way I am not telling you." No examples were provided of the adviser disclosing a student's sexual orientation to a colleague.

The Level 2 code, Responses to Inquiries About Student Discrimination, involved other school personnel asking the advisers how to respond when the school personnel witnessed students discriminating against other students because of actual or perceived sexual orientation. Most often, advisers recommended that school personnel treat the discrimination as a typical disciplinary offense, report the offenders to the administration, or inform the school mental health staff that the student being harassed may need assistance.

The Level 2 subcode, Responses to Inquiries About Same-Sex Public Displays of Affection, involved teachers asking advisers how to discipline same-sex students engaging in public displays of affection in the school setting. The advisers' typical response was to recommend addressing all examples of public displays of affection in a similar manner, regardless of the gender of the two students involved. "I just let them know two lesbians kissing are no different from two guys kissing and no different from a guy and a girl kissing, and that it is inappropriate behavior in public, in a public high school."

The Level 2 subcode, Responses to Concerns About Students, included situations in which school personnel approached advisers with concerns about the mental health of students questioning their sexual orientation. In

addition, this subcode involved school personnel inquiring about how to address the safety of students who were in an unsafe situation because of their perceived or identified sexual orientation. Advisers responded by consistently recommending that the school personnel consult with the school's health professionals (e.g., school psychologist, counselor, nurse, social worker) if they were concerned about a student's mental health or physical safety. One adviser noted, "If they feel like the kid needs some extra help we can . . . get 'em hooked up with the school psychologist."

Other advisers responded to concerns about students by talking with the teacher and making themselves available as a resource to that teacher.

And I told her that . . . if there was anything that she felt she didn't know how to handle, then she could ask me again and I could kind of, we could brainstorm together as a, you know, as a nonexpert, too. But I feel often times that these teachers just kind of want to talk. Just, like, they want to feel secure in what they're doing.

### **Recommendations for Other School Personnel**

The Level 1 code, Recommendations for Other School Personnel, included advocacy strategies recommended by the advisers for other school personnel who wished to advocate in their schools. Advisers provided several strategies: some they had implemented and other strategies they had been unable to implement because of time constraints or lack of opportunity. This Level 1 code included the following seven Level 2 subcodes: Know Your Views on Sexual Orientation; Use Legal Resources; Highlight Consequences of Not Advocating; Use General Community Resources; Be Nonconfrontational About Creating Change; Educate Yourself; and Increase Visibility of LGBT-Related Issues (see Figure 1).

Within the Level 2 code, Know Your Views on Sexual Orientation, advisers recommended that school personnel increase the awareness of their own personal boundaries, biases, thoughts, and feelings about sexual

orientation. One adviser recommended increasing awareness of their personal comfort level related to LGBT issues.

I think the biggest thing I would tell people is know your own boundaries. I think, if you are not comfortable talking about this, then don't, because sometimes when people attempt to talk about something that they are uncomfortable about, especially LGBT issues, it totally backfires, and they come off so totally wrong.

The Level 2 subcode, Use Legal Resources, included knowing one's legal rights, with regard to federal and state legislation and school policy. Knowledge of legal rights was discussed in two ways. First, advisers spoke to the importance of using legal resources when encountering resistance. For example, one adviser responded, "I think being, knowing what the state and local laws and work policies are, and how they support you or how you're going to have to work around them is really important." Second, the importance of being cautious not to practice outside of what is allowed by legislation or policy was noted, as seen in the following comment: "Yeah, just knowing the rights and school policy and being well-versed in that. Kind of knowing how to walk that fine line between doing the most you can and not stepping over and doing more than you're technically allowed to."

Through the Level 2 subcode, Highlight Consequences of Not Advocating, advisers recommended presenting statistics on the effect of a negative school climate on LGBT youth. This strategy highlighted why the educators should advocate and the consequences of not advocating for these youth.

I would say any time you try to advance the argument, always put it in terms of youth at risk, because in so many statistical areas gay youth are at so much greater risk than straight kids. And that's a fact, and it's also the most persuasive argument that we have.

Furthermore, in this era of No Child Left Behind (2001), administrators and school personnel may be more motivated to implement a program or policy if they identify a direct connection between providing a positive school climate for LGBT students and meeting the goals of No Child Left Behind. "You can

put it in terms of achievement. I mean everybody is worried about No Child Left Behind, well, if a kid's more likely to drop out of school because he's getting called the "F" word on the bus, you know, that has to be listened to."

The Level 2 subcode, Use General Community Resources, involved using one or more of the national and local LGBT-related resources, such as GLSEN or Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). The use of these organizations for both resources and networking purposes was encouraged. For example, school-based advocates could access the GLSEN Web site for guidance with forming a GSA, or they could refer parents and allies of LGBT youth to PFLAG for education and advocacy opportunities.

An additional Level 2 subcode was to Be Nonconfrontational About Creating Change. This subcode included remaining nonconfrontational when attempting to enact change within schools. For example, advisers noted that the person advocating for LGBT individuals becomes the unofficial representative of that population, meaning their actions are generalized to the actions of an entire population. Because of this responsibility, many advisers recommended that school personnel make a conscious effort to educate their colleagues and students rather than confront or argue when discussing LGBT issues.

The Level 2 subcode, Educate Yourself, included the recommendation that school personnel who would like to advocate for LGBT students should educate themselves about LGBT issues in school, in the greater community, and related legal matters. When advocates increased their knowledge of LGBT issues, they perceived an increase in their credibility among those who may be resistant to promoting a positive school climate for LGBT youth.

Within the final Level 2 subcode, Increase the Visibility of LGBT-Related Issues, advisers discussed the importance of increasing the visibility of the LGBT population. The majority of the advisers reported incorporating the following visibility strategies into their jobs: displaying LGBT-related items such as

rainbow flags or pictures of same-sex partners in their classrooms; incorporating LGBT issues into their curriculum in many subjects including literature, history, biology, and health; and leading staff trainings on topics such as how to address LGBT-related epithets or legal issues for their colleagues.

## Discussion

This study makes several important contributions to the school psychology literature on school-based advocacy for LGBT youth. First, although examples of school-based advocacy efforts for LGBT youth exist in the literature (Peters, 2003), advisers in this study provided insight into the different LGBT-related content that they believed warranted advocating; this resulted in diverse advocacy strategies. Relatedly, advisers considered several situational variables (e.g., personalities, their own sexual identity) prior to determining how to advocate for LGBT youth, suggesting that decision making or problem solving may be an important part of the advocacy process. Advisers also reported that they were used as LGBT resources in their schools (Rivers & Noret, 2008); however, there were differences in how they were used by students versus colleagues. Finally, advisers provided recommendations for advocating for LGBT youth in schools that currently do not appear to be in the literature. Each of these discussion points are described in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

Knowledge of the different LGBT-related content that arises in schools may provide school psychologists with insight into the different LGBT-related topics (e.g., sexual identity, harassment, relationships) that students are discussing in schools, thus informing them about how to intervene. Furthermore, knowledge of this content will guide school psychologists who are involved with measuring overall school climate and designing and implementing programs to promote a more positive school climate (Lehr & Christenson, 2002). Finally, a focus on these topics will allow school psychologists to gain content-specific knowledge and to develop strategies

that they would be comfortable implementing prior to encountering the situation in school.

Although the advisers' responses varied based on different content and situational variables, the majority of their responses to all LGBT-related situations were reactive rather than proactive. Researchers have suggested that reactive strategies are less effective at reducing problem behaviors than proactive strategies (e.g., Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008; Netzel & Eber, 2003). This may have occurred because most of the interview questions prompted the advisers to describe their reactions to LGBT-related comments and situations (e.g., How do you hear your colleagues/students/administrators discussing LGBT issues in schools? How do you respond? Have you witnessed orientation-based harassment in your school? If so, how do you respond?) rather than to discuss proactive strategies. Therefore, their responses may be an artifact of the interview questions. A few advisers reported using preventative approaches to school-based advocacy for LGBT youth by implementing proactive strategies; these advisers incorporated antidiscrimination policies in their syllabi and informed the students about the policies at the beginning of the semester. Future research may explore the proactive strategies that advisers use and/or examine if and why reactive strategies may be more commonly implemented. These findings suggest that the consulting school psychologist may benefit from learning about the potential effectiveness of different responses (i.e., reactive vs. proactive) prior to making recommendations within a consulting relationship (National Association of School Psychologists, 2004).

Most of the LGBT-related situations that involved the advisers' colleagues differed from the situations that involved students. More specifically, the majority of interactions between the students and the advisers were characterized by the students' use of discriminatory language and the advisers' disciplinary responses to that language. Conversely, the interactions between the advisers and other school personnel were more collegial. The advisers in the current study reported being used as a resource on LGBT issues by their colleagues. School personnel's use of the adviser

as an LGBT resource has the potential to increase those individuals' knowledge and competency related to LGBT issues (Fontaine, 1998; Price & Telljohan, 1991; Savage et al., 2004), which may increase their advocacy for LGBT youth and lead to more positive school experiences for these youth (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2007b; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Russell et al., 2001). If these advisers did not serve in this role, it is possible that school personnel might lack an LGBT-related resource. One integral role of school psychologists is to serve as a school-based resource for students and teachers (National Association of School Psychologists, 2003). Based on the use of GSA advisers as school-based resources, school psychologists who are trained in LGBT issues may be similarly used as an LGBT-related advocate and resource as evidenced by the use of school psychologists as a resource by a few GSA advisers in the current research study.

Finally, the GSA advisers provided several recommendations for educators who desire to advocate for LGBT students in schools but who may feel they lack the knowledge or skills; some recommendations were consistent with recommendations in the literature (Buckel, 2000; Jeltova & Fish, 2005; McFarland, 2001), whereas others were suggested that extend the current literature. For example, advisers recommended framing advocacy in terms of the consequences that failing to advocate may have on the academic and emotional functioning of LGBT youth. One specific suggestion was for advocates to provide their colleagues with statistics demonstrating the connection between a negative school climate and the academic and social, emotional, and behavioral functioning of LGBT youth (Harris Interactive & Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2005). Similarly, when advocating for LGBT youth, advisers encouraged others to educate rather than confront or argue with students or colleagues who may have differing opinions on the topic. Advisers also recommended that educators develop their own multicultural competency related to LGBT issues. For example, educators should examine their biases about LGBT in-

dividuals in addition to increasing their general knowledge about the population. This suggestion is consistent with the multicultural competency literature suggesting that both education and self-reflection are important skills necessary for enhancing multicultural competency (Scott & Mumford, 2007).

### Limitations and Future Research

The data collected through this study have limitations. The sampling methodologies used did not result in a random sample. However, this study was one of the first on this topic and its exploratory nature, along with the sample size of 22, allowed for an initial investigation of adults who serve as advocates for LGBT youth in schools. Participant recruitment took approximately 11 months. The researchers often encountered resistance when calling schools and asking to speak with the GSA advisers; however, these encounters were not systematically documented. Future studies should systematically document the barriers to contacting this difficult-to-reach population and the relationships of these barriers to school climate. To measure the *credibility*, or the internal validity of qualitative data, researchers typically employ *member checking* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking involves providing the participants with an opportunity to review the findings and confirm the validity of the researchers' interpretation of the data. Although researchers did present these data at national and regional conferences for feedback and at a local training for GSA advisers, the study participants were not given the opportunity to validate these findings. Future studies should be designed to include member checks.

The findings from this study provided an overview of the content of the strategies used and recommended by advisers; however, they did not provide information related to the frequency or efficacy of the strategies implemented. This information is lacking in the literature (e.g., Peters, 2003), and future research is needed regarding these aspects of school-based advocacy for LGBT students.

Through the analysis of the data, fewer quotes emerged related to LGBT comments made by adults than by students. Reasons for this difference may be related to the proportion of time the advisers spent with students versus adults. Most of the advisers in this sample were teachers, so the majority of their time was spent in the classroom with students rather than in other settings with adults. Future research may examine the content of additional advocacy-related strategies that are used in adult interactions. It also may be important to ask whether other school personnel, such as school psychologists or administrators, who may spend more time with adults than with students, encounter more LGBT-related situations with their colleagues. If so, data are needed to clarify how they address these issues with colleagues.

Because of the possibility that LGBT students and those questioning their sexual identity may not initially disclose their sexual identity to their parents or guardians, educators may be the first adults to discuss these issues with students. There are ethical factors that may affect school personnel's willingness to discuss personal issues with LGBT students. For example, most high school students are minors, which limits the confidentiality of their conversations with school personnel (Jacob & Hartshorne, 2003; Varjas et al., 2008). Future research should explore other potential barriers and facilitators to advocating for LGBT youth in schools.

### Conclusion

The findings of this exploratory study suggest that school-based advocates for LGBT students implement different strategies depending on different content-level variables. The information gathered on the types of situations and incidents commonly reported by students (e.g., sexual identity, harassment) and school personnel (e.g., sexual identity of students, same-sex public displays of affection) and about situational variables (e.g., the personalities of the teachers and/or students involved, school policies) should be useful to school psychologists as they build their

knowledge base about LGBT issues in schools. Knowledge of these factors, in addition to the decision-making process executed by school-based advocates, may assist all school personnel who wish to advocate for LGBT youth in schools. School psychologists, in particular, are in a unique position to integrate this information into their skill set as school-based consultants (Meyers, Meyers & Grogg, 2004; Meyers, Meyers, Proctor & Graybill, 2009). By developing an understanding of the different content and situational variables that may affect how educators advocate for LGBT students, school psychologists may help improve school climate for LGBT youth through advocacy and consultation.

## References

- American School Counselor Association. (2004). *Ethical standards for school counselors*. Retrieved May 14, 2008, from <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=173>
- Bakeman, R., & Gottman, J. M. (1986). *Observing interactions: An introduction to sequential analysis*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bauman, S., & Sachs-Kapp, P. (1998). A school takes a stand: Promotion of sexual orientation workshops by counselors. *Professional School Counseling, 1*, 42–45.
- Buckel, D. S. (2000). Legal perspective on ensuring a safe and nondiscriminatory school environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered students. *Education and Urban Society, 32*, 390–398.
- Choi, H., Thul, C. A., Berenhaut, K. S., Suerken, C. K., & Norris, J. L. (2005). Survey of school psychologists' attitudes, feelings, and exposure to gay and lesbian parents and their children. *Journal of Applied School Psychology, 22*, 87–107.
- Clunies-Ross, P., Little, E., & Kienhuis, M. (2008). Self-reported and actual use of proactive and reactive classroom management strategies and their relationship with teacher stress and student behaviour. *Educational Psychology, 28*, 693–710.
- Cohen, J., McCabe, E. M., Michelli, N. M., & Pickeral, T. (2009). School climate: Research, policy, practice, and teacher education. *Teachers College Record, 111*, 180–213.
- Conger, J. J. (1975). Proceedings of the American Psychological Association, Incorporated, for the year 1974: Minutes of the annual meeting of the Council of Representatives. *American Psychologist, 30*, 620–651.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DeLeon, P. H. (1993). Proceedings of the American Psychological Association, Incorporated, for the year 1992; Minutes of the annual meeting of the Council of Representatives August 13 and 16, 1992, and February 26–28, 1993, Washington, D.C. *American Psychologist, 48*, 745–788.
- Fontaine, J. H. (1998). Evidencing a need: School counselors' experiences with gay and lesbian students. *Professional School Counseling, 1*, 8–16.
- Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network. (2007a). *Find a GSA in your state*. Retrieved July 16, 2007, from <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/student/student/index.html>
- Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network. (2007b). *The 2007 national school climate survey*. Retrieved November 18, 2008, from <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/news/record/2340.html>
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Goodenow, C., Szalacha, L., & Westheimer, K. (2006). School support groups, other school factors, and the safety of sexual minority adolescents. *Psychology in the Schools, 43*, 573–589.
- Griffin, P., Lee, C., Waugh, J., & Beyer, C. (2004). Describing roles that gay-straight alliances play in schools: From individual support to school change. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education, 1*, 7–22.
- GSA Network. (2007). Retrieved July 15, 2007, from [www.gsanetwork.org](http://www.gsanetwork.org)
- Harris Interactive & Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network. (2005). *From teasing to torment: School climate in America, A survey of students and teachers*. New York: Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network.
- Jacob, S., & Hartshorne, T. S. (2003). *Ethics and law for school psychologists*. (4th ed.) Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Jeltova, I., & Fish, M. C. (2005). Creating school environments responsive to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender families: Traditional and systemic approaches for consultation. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 16*, 17–33.
- LeCompte, M. D. (1999). *Ethnographers' toolkit, Book 3, Analyzing and interpreting ethnographic data*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Lehr, C. A., & Christenson, S. L. (2002). Best practices in promoting positive school climate. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology IV* (pp. 929–947). Bethesda, MD: National Associations of School Psychologists.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mahan, W., Varjas, K., Dew, B., Meyers, J., Singh, A., Marshall, M., et al. (2006). Adult providers' perspectives on bullying toward GLBTQI youth. *Journal of GLBT Issues in Counseling, 1*, 45–66.
- McCabe, P. C., & Rubinson, F. (2008). Committing to social justice: The behavioral intention of school psychology and education trainees to advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth. *School Psychology Review, 37*, 469–486.
- McFarland, W. P. (2001). The legal duty to protect gay and lesbian students from violence in school. *Professional School Counseling, 4*, 171–178.
- Meyers, J., Meyers, A. B., & Grogg, K. (2004). Prevention through consultation: A model to guide future developments in the field of school psychology. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 15*, 257–276.

- Meyers, J., Meyers, A. B., Proctor, S. L., & Graybill, E. C. (2009). Organizational consultation and systems intervention. In T. B. Gutkin & C. R. Reynolds (Eds.), *The handbook of school psychology* (4th ed.; chap. 43, pp. 821–940). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Mishna, F., Newman, P. A., Daley, A., & Solomon, S. (2007). Bullying of lesbian and gay youth: A qualitative investigation. *The British Journal of Social Work*, pp. 1–17.
- Mudrey, R., & Medina-Adams, A. (2006). Attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge of pre-service teachers regarding the educational isolation of sexual minority youth. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *51*, 63–90.
- Murdock, T. B., & Bolch, M. B. (2005). Risk and protective factors for poor school adjustment in lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) high school youth: Variable and person-centered analyses. *Psychology in the Schools*, *42*, 159–172.
- Nastasi, B. K., Moore, R. B., & Varjas, K. (2004). *School-based mental health service: Creating comprehensive and culturally specific programs*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- National Association of School Psychologists. (n.d.). *NASP government and professional relations (GPR) committee framework for advocacy*. Retrieved January 3, 2009, from <http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/legagenda.aspx>
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2000). *Professional conduct manual*. Bethesda, MD: Author.
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2003). *Who are school psychologists?* Retrieved May 14, 2008, from [http://nasponline.org/about\\_sp/whatis.aspx](http://nasponline.org/about_sp/whatis.aspx)
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2004). *Culturally competent consultation in schools: Information for school psychologists and school personnel*. Retrieved December 15, 2008, from [http://nasponline.org/resources/culturalcompetence/cc\\_consultation.aspx](http://nasponline.org/resources/culturalcompetence/cc_consultation.aspx)
- National Association of School Psychologists. (2006). *Position statement on gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) youth (formerly sexual minority youth)*. Retrieved January 15, 2008, from [http://www.nasponline.org/about\\_nasp/pospaper\\_glb.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/pospaper_glb.aspx)
- National Education Association. (1975). *Code of ethics of the education profession*. Retrieved May 14, 2008, from <https://sites.nea.org/aboutnea/code.html>
- Netzel, D. M., & Eber, L. (2003). Shifting from reactive to proactive discipline in an urban school district: A change of focus through PBIS implementation. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, *5*, 71–79.
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107–110, § 115, Stat. 1425 (2002).
- Peters, A. J. (2003). Isolation or inclusion: Creating safe spaces for lesbian and gay youth. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, *84*, 331–337.
- Price, J. H., & Telljohan, S. K. (1991). School counselors' perceptions of adolescent homosexuals. *Journal of School Health*, *61*, 433–438.
- Rivers, I., & Noret, N. (2008). Well-being among same-sex- and opposite-sex-attracted youth at school. *School Psychology Review*, *37*, 174–187.
- Russell, S. T., Seif, H., & Truong, N. L. (2001). School outcomes of sexual minority youth in the United States: Evidence from a national study. *Journal of Adolescence*, *24*, 111–127.
- Savage, T. A., Prout, H. T., & Chard, K. M. (2004). School psychology and issues of sexual orientation: Attitudes, beliefs and knowledge. *Psychology in the Schools*, *41*, 201–210.
- Schensul, J. J., LeCompte, M. D., Nastasi, B. K., & Borgatti, S. P. (1999). *Ethnographers' toolkit, Book 3, Enhanced ethnographic methods*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- School Social Work Association of America. (2001). *Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning youth*. Retrieved May 14, 2008, from <http://www.sswaa.org/members/resolutions/glb.html>
- Scott, K. A., & Mumford, V. E. (2007). Critical thoughts: Reexamining teacher training, cultural awareness, and school reform. *Multicultural Perspectives*, *9*(4), 54–58.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Swearer, S. M., & Espelage, D. L. (2008). Homophobia and bullying: Addressing research gaps [Special issue]. *School Psychology Review*, *37*(2).
- Thomas, A., & Grimes, J. (2008) *Best practices in school psychology V*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychology.
- Williams, T., Connolly, J., Pepler, D., & Craig, W. (2005). Peer victimization, social support, and psychosocial adjustment of sexual minority adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *34*, 471–482.
- Varjas, K., Dew, B., Marshall, M., Graybill, E., Singh, A., & Meyers, J. (2008). Bullying in schools towards sexual minority youth. *Journal of School Violence*, *7*, 59–86.
- Varjas, K., Graybill, E., Mahan, W., Meyers, J., Dew, B., Marshall, M., et al. (2007). Urban service providers' perspectives on school responses to gay, lesbian, and questioning students: An exploratory study. *Professional School Counseling*, *11*, 113–119.

Emily Graybill received her master's and specialist degrees in school psychology from Georgia State University, where she currently is pursuing her doctoral degree in school psychology. She works as a preschool school psychologist in a Metro Atlanta school system. Her research interests include social justice advocacy in schools, consultation, and autism assessment and intervention.

Kris Varjas obtained her PsyD from the University at Albany, State University of New York, and serves as Associate Professor in School Psychology at Georgia State University. Her research interests include participatory culture-specific interventions in schools, school-based mental health services, and school-based advocacy.

Joel Meyers obtained his PhD from the University of Texas, Austin, and has served as a faculty member in school psychology at Temple University, the University at Albany and Georgia State University, where he is Regents Professor and Director of the Center for Research on School Safety, School Climate and Classroom Management. He is a member of the National Association of School Psychologists, Fellow of the American Psychological Association (APA), Past President of APA's Division of School Psychology, and Past Editor of the *Journal of School Psychology*; in addition, he has received the Distinguished Service Award from APA's Division of School Psychology. His research interests include the primary prevention of bullying and school violence, school-based teacher consultation, as well as organizational consultation and school change.

Laurel Watson received a master's degree in professional counseling from Georgia State University. She currently is a doctoral student in counseling psychology at Georgia State University. Her research interests include gender; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or questioning (LGBTQIQ) issues; and trauma-related concerns.

Date Received: January 12, 2009  
Date Accepted: September 4, 2009  
Action Editor: George Bear ■