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## Personal Research Agenda

The strongest research interests that I hold at the moment relate to the school success and connectedness of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth and, more broadly, disengaged youth. I am interested in school-wide and targeted interventions and supports that benefit LGBT youth, and also in Allies who befriend or stand up for students who identify as LGBT. Disengaged youth who are at risk for high school dropout (including LGBT youth) interest me as well. Specifically, I would like to continue to examine the ways in which personal connections with adults and peers can help to promote engagement for these youth.

Previous scholarly efforts in this area include a critical research review (Hansen, 2007) as well as an overview of one school-based support program that serves LGBT students, staff, and parents in an urban school district in the Midwest (Horowitz & Hansen, 2008). In addition, my dissertation research focused on achievement, connectedness and perceptions of school climate for LGBT students, allies and a comparison group in the same urban district referenced above. In the area of disengaged youth, my previous experience includes participation in an interdisciplinary task force to examine transitions to college for at-risk youth, a publication of a literature review of data-based interventions to prevent dropout (Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair & Christenson, 2003) and presentations at the annual meeting of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP).

My research agenda is driven by several questions, some of which I will highlight here. Related to LGBT issues, I would like to investigate the following questions:

1. What do LGBT youth identify as the most important components to their success and well-being in schools? Methods to answer this question include qualitative research (interviews) asking questions such about what helps the student succeed in school, what things make it hard to stay on track in school, what factors in school are important to his/her safety and happiness, and what she/he believes is important to other LGBT

students in schools. Students' responses will be used in the method of dialogic retrospection, whereby the critical issues defined by LGBT youth will be used to develop questions about the state of those issues in the schools and what components specifically have facilitated success or failure in terms of achievement, psychological well-being and safety. This part of the study requires additional, quantitative, data collection.

2. What school-based supports are most important to facilitating success and well-being of LGBT students
  - a. What are the critical components of each mechanism? For example, if Gay-Straight Alliance is considered important, what makes it important? How important is the connection with other students vs. the opportunity to talk openly, or access to a LGB or allied adult.
3. How are LGBT school programs being framed across the nation? For example, is the mission of the program to spread the good that LGBT people can do, or to protect LGBT people from the dangers of mainstream society? What are the outcomes of risk- vs. resilience-focused programs?
4. Can contact and relationships with LGBT people lead others to intervene when homophobic language is used in schools? Can "ally training" improve school climate?
5. What variables influence a drop in LGBT students' grades?

These research questions will provide information to inform the practice of psychology in the schools in terms of intervening when LGBT students demonstrate risk factors, promoting system-wide practices that contribute to a healthy school climate for LGBT students and others, and for program development within schools. In understanding how to increase bystander intervention in instances of homophobic speech or harassment and how to best support students who are disengaged or otherwise harmed by this type of victimization, school psychologists can act as a consultant to administrators and teachers who wish to promote a sense of connection and safety for all students.

## References

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## Vision of a Collaborative Multi-site Research Program

### Abstract

This study combines individual-level and systems-level interventions in attempt to improve school climate and engagement for LGB students in urban and suburban schools. Data collected will measure change in school connectedness, engagement and achievement for LGB youth who participate in a mentoring program. In addition, student groups in each school will be trained to stand up for others and intervene when students use homophobic or other oppressive language in the school environment. Observational data will document any change in frequency of intervention when these words are used, and interviews with self-identified LGB youth will be conducted in order to measure perceived changes in school climate.

## Vision of a Collaborative Multi-site Research Program

This study is designed to investigate the effects of individual and systems-level interventions on school connectedness, achievement, and engagement for LGB youth in urban and suburban high schools. The research question to be answered is whether individual and systems-level interventions change school achievement, connectedness, perception of school climate and engagement for LGBT youth. In addition, the study seeks to determine if the actual frequency of student intervention in incidents of homophobic or oppressive language increases after training. A related question is whether this type of training improves LGB student perception of school climate.

The individual intervention would consist of matching a self-selected LGB student with an adult mentor in the school or district. This intervention attempts to alleviate the difficulty that many LGB youth have, in that, unlike other minorities, sexual minority youth often lack adult role models who can offer advice and who may have shared similar experiences. The systems-level intervention will consist of training students and staff in a building to intervene when homophobic or generally oppressive language is used in the school. This intervention attempts to improve school climate through bystander intervention. Opportunities will be provided for mentor/mentee pairs to meet pairs from other participating schools within their metro area during group activities. In addition, a group training in each metro area for the “stand up for others” campaign will offer a chance for students from multiple schools to interact with one another around a common goal.

*Data collection.* A weakness of previous research with LGBT youth is a lack of longitudinal data that can be used to track change in dependent variables in relation to the implementation of interventions. In this study, I will collect data on school achievement (GPA, attendance, and credits earned) as well as school connectedness (possibly using Goodenow’s *Psychological Sense of School Membership* scale) and engagement (Appleton, Christenson, Kim & Reschly’s *Student Engagement Instrument*) prior to initiation of ally training or mentor pairing. Self-identified LGB students would also be interviewed in order to

gain qualitative information about their school experiences and perception of school climate.

Observational data collected in school hallways and classrooms would document an initial frequency of homophobic and other oppressive language used in common areas. Follow-up data will be collected immediately after training and again after a lag period. LGB students will be asked to complete additional measures of connectedness after three months in the mentoring relationship and again at the end of the school year. A comparison group of self-identified LGB students who are not paired with a mentor (wait-list control groups in half of the identified schools) will also be asked to complete these scales.

*Participants.* One challenge of this study is the need for relatively large numbers of self-identified LGB students. Schools that have active Gay-Straight Alliances will be considered for participation in order to recruit participants. A total of twelve schools (six urban, six suburban) will be recruited, with mentoring programs implemented in three in each setting (the other six total remaining as wait-list controls). At least two pairs of urban/suburban schools will be sought from each metro area included in this study. One pair will host a mentoring program, the other will implement the bystander intervention piece alone. A target of at least ten LGB students in each building will be identified (total n = 120). Bystander intervention (or “stand up for others”) training will be implemented in every school. Ideally, student leaders will be identified for participation in this training, with additional participants recruited through promotion such as posters and announcements within the school. A staff leader, such as the school psychologist, social worker, or a teacher, will be identified to aid in recruitment. Twenty to thirty students per school will be recruited for this training.

*Cost.* Costs will be limited to training and data collection, as well as incentives and resources for mentor/mentee pairs and students involved in the ally training program. Data collection and training could be completed by a hired graduate research assistant, at a cost of nearly \$20,000 per semester. Alternatively, the data could be collected by the principal investigator with the assistance of graduate students completing masters or doctoral theses in this field. In this case, a budget of approximately \$2500

in order to provide incentives for each participating school would be required. Costs of group training events, the mentor/mentee outings, and possible travel between sites may require additional funds.

*Relative advantages and challenges of a collaborative multi-site research program:* Schools vary widely in their climates for LGB youth. LGB students in one urban school district may have outcomes similar to the general student body, while LGB students in a different district and in a different political climate may be struggling considerably. One benefit of a multi-site research program is to examine the effectiveness of interventions in different contexts. Because LGB students often appear to be in low numbers and may struggle to find social support and adult role models in their community, the collaborative nature of this project also may provide an added benefit. To be paired with an adult mentor is expected to be beneficial alone, but broadening social networks and experiencing community through shared events seems likely to add additional benefit. One challenge of this type of research is the required investment of resources in order to implement the interventions and collect data across sites. In addition, gaining school cooperation across sites for participation in this project may prove difficult, particularly in the very schools where it is needed most.