

LGBTQ+ Identity Development and Euphoria Curriculum for Groupwork within a High School Setting

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Abstract

As the United States has become increasingly more accepting of LGBTQ+ individuals in the past decade, the percentage of the population that is identifying this way is rapidly on the rise. The recently popularized Gallup poll data published in January 2021 showed a significant increase in the amount of LGBTQ+ individuals in the United States, with nearly 16% of members of Generation Z self-identifying as LGBT, a nearly 7% increase from Millennials (Jones, 2021). With this latest data continuing an upward trajectory of LGBTQ+ identification, it can only be assumed that newer generations will also continue to increasingly identify with sexual and gender preferences that are more expansive than simply being heterosexual and cisgender. With this increase in LGBTQ+ individuals within younger populations, and the fact that members of Generation Z already identify with the community during their adolescence, there is a great need for support around queer identity formation in adolescents' lives. However, despite the growing need for LGBTQ+ support, curricula around how to develop groups focused specifically on LGBTQ+ identity and identity formation within younger clients is lacking. Looking into previous research around LGBTQ Responsive Counseling popularized by Goodrich and Luke and history of group work with transgender clients, a pilot group program for LGBTQ+ individuals was developed in a large high school in the suburbs of a Midwest city.

The poster describes the process and research done to craft the curriculum for the group, which includes trauma informed practices and the importance of engaging via technology at the present moment. Through this poster, participants will be able to (1) learn about a curriculum that can be used when working with LGBTQ+ individuals, (2) identify common themes and concerns that LGBTQ+ adolescents may bring up, and (3) gain greater competences about working with this growing population.

Why LGBTQ+ Support and Community Building for Youth is a Necessity

LGBTQ+ youth are at a much higher risk of mental health disorder than their heterosexual peers, due to the pervasive stigma around LGBTQ+ identity, despite progress that has been made. A report published by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) of a 2019 survey of schools throughout the United States found that nearly 60% of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe at their school due harassment and anti-LGBTQ+ language. 68.7% of LGBTQ+ students reported verbal harassment based on sexual orientation and 56.9% based on gender expression. The fact that schools can be extremely hostile environments towards these youth can have tremendous impacts on both their mental health and their school performance. Queer youth who experience discrimination in their schools are nearly three times more likely to miss classes and have lower GPAs than those who did not (Kosciw et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also complicated the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. While school settings can be hostile and there may be a hope that being at home would decrease feelings of stress for LGBTQ+ youth, there is also commonly held fear around familial rejection due to identity. When queer individuals come out to their family, they often risk being displaced from their homes because of parental disapproval. This may happen because the family explicitly forbids the youth to continue living in the home, or the youth may be pushed out due to invalidation of their identity and the psychological stress that experience can cause. Between 8% and 33% of homeless queer youth cite parental disapproval of their identity as the cause for their homelessness (Ecker, 2016). Knowing that many queer youth who are completing their schooling from home may also be experiencing misgendering or other disapproval in the house means that schooling from home may not decrease the stress levels that these students are facing, and, in fact, raise it.

With both of these environments having the potential to be extremely stressful for queer youth, it is no wonder that these individuals experience mental health challenges at higher rates than their heterosexual peers. With the knowledge that “thirty percent of LGBT adolescents have experienced clinically significant mental health disorders, such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and nearly 32% of LGBTQ adolescents will attempt suicide”, creating protective factors such as community supports like a Gay-Straight Alliance and safe adults to talk to in the school is essential to attempt to mitigate some of the harm queer youth face (Davies, 2010; Goodrich & Luke, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2020; McDonald, 2018, p. 16).

Model

In order to address the stressors that LGBTQ+ high school students may face, the presenter developed an 8-week multimodal group curriculum for LGBTQ+ high school students. The group would meet for 50 minutes weekly, and consist of 4-7 members. Ideally, the group would be led by an LGBTQ+ faculty or social worker at the school. If there is no available queer faculty, it is important for that dynamic to be recognized within the context of the group and discuss any hesitations participants may have about it, so that the members still feel like they have a sense of queer agency in the space (Dickey & Loewy, 2010). Additionally, that facilitator should make sure to have specific understandings of LGBTQ+ issues, and be willing to undergo additional supervision while running the group to be able to provide the best environment for group members (Luke & Goodrich, 2012). The group would be closed after an initial period of time where students could elect to participate in the group.

The beginning stage of the group would be devoted to understanding how LGBTQ+ identity can vary from individual to individual, and what that identity looks like for the participants in the group. This session would employ visual aids such as the ‘Genderbread Person’ or ‘Gender Unicorn’ to help conceptualize ideas about gender identity, gender expression, and differences between sexual and romantic attraction (Killermann, 2017; Pan & Moore, 2015). The exercise also gives the facilitator a greater understand of how questions throughout the group can be tailored to group experience, such as an emphasis on asexual identity, trans expression, or helping the group understand the different between sexual and romantic attraction. The next two weeks of the group would be dedicated to the experience of being queer at school. These sessions would begin with structured presentations of resources available to the students and then proceed into open discussion and processing of group member’s experiences.

The bulk of the group sessions will be focused on building resiliency. The focus will not be on the increased possibility of trauma that queer students face, but on ways that the members have successfully coped with stressors in the past, and how those responses can be applied to future stressors. Members will be asked to identify a current stressor in their life and list supports and resources they have to help them manage it in the 4th session. The following sessions will be used to check in about the stressor, as well as discuss different modes of coping, such as grounding, community support, self-soothing, and forming a crisis plan.

As the group draws to a close, the focus shifts toward identity acceptance and pride as a mean of combatting the negative effects that stress around LGBTQ+ identity can have. Using art and communal activities, the group members will be reminded of the learning that they did throughout the group, and be provided with school resources.

The primary goals of this group are to: understand nuances present with LGBTQ+ identities, understand motivation for school refusal seen in queer youth, develop community and coping skills, and building resiliency.

Current limitations of this model must be considered because of the virtual schooling that is still occurring for many individuals. Because fear of coming out to parents is a common experience, there is a chance that group members may not be openly queer in their homes and reluctant to participate or even sign up for a group focused on LGBTQ+ identity. Better engagement with this sort of group may occur if it is held in a physical space where students know they have greater control over who may know that they are attending an LGBTQ+ focused group.

Benefits of Group Therapy for LGBTQ+ Youth

Social Connectedness: Finding social support for LGBTQ+ youth can significantly predict better psychological well-being for queer youth. Especially for youth who do not have support around their identity from their parents or guardians, peer social support and connectedness can help moderate some of the effects that a negative family relationship can have (Detrie & Lease, 2007; Parra et al., 2018).

Increased Self-Esteem: Participation in groups where LGBTQ+ members have a say in group topics and discussions can help members learn to own their voice and their experience. Additionally, groups that also incorporate social- and skills-based treatments that allow interactions to foster social support can coincide with increases in self-esteem (Craig et al., 2014; McDonald, 2018).

Developing Resiliency: By focusing on strengths-based practices and skills, youth can gain a better understand of how they are already prepared to deal with stressors that they might face. Additionally, they can learn to have a better understand of how to utilize self-advocacy when they are able to trust the group process and see it as a location where those conversations can be had (Craig, 2013; Goodrich & Luke, 2009).

Instillation of Hope: Especially in groups where members may be at different levels of comfort with their identity, having a space where LGBTQ+ youth who are just beginning to explore their identity be able to interact with those who are open and proud can help them see beyond where they currently are to where they can be. Pairing these dialogues with concrete examples of supports that students can utilize helps members see tangible ways in which they can take action in their lives (Ali & Lambie, 2019; Yalom & Leszcz, 2008).

Measures of the Effectiveness for LGBTQ+ Identity Development and Euphoria Curriculum

The following measures have been proposed as potential ways to evaluate the effectiveness of the group curriculum when it is implemented in a school setting:

School Refusal Rates: As school refusal has been reported to be higher amongst LGBTQ+ individuals, seeing a decrease in school refusal rates, specifically for LGBTQ+ students who had higher rates of absences prior to attending the group, would be an indicator that the coping skills learned in the group may be helpful in managing fears or anxieties that were prompting school refusal.

Use of LGBTQ+ School-Specific Services: Ideally, the group will highlight some school resources that may not have been as well known to the students, or encourage them to take advantage of resources they might have been hesitant about before. Increase in usage of these LGBTQ+ resource in the school can be measures pre and post the implementation of the group to determine if there was any impact.

Achievement of Therapeutic Goals: At the end of the 8-week session, participants would fill out a questionnaire to help assess if the goals of the group were achieved. The responses would help provide quantitative data as to if the group members feel as if they have developed new and effective coping skills, have a better sense of support within the school, and a greater understanding of LGBTQ+ identity for themselves and others.

Engagement with the Group: Student engagement and low youth dropout rates seem to be correlated with group members perceiving a group to be beneficial (Craig et al., 2014).

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