

Project: Conduct research investigating MN GLBT Rural Youth’s access to Supportive Adults and organizations.

Methods:

- Research books and studies
- Conduct 10 personal interviews of gay men who grew up in rural MN.
- Present initial findings at What’s Working for Young People conference in Dublin, Ireland. (paper below)
- Conduct 90 minute Diversity and Inclusion Workshop at 4-H Annual Staff Conference.

Research Abstract

Relationships, Role Models and rural GLBT youth in Minnesota

GLBT young people living in rural areas of the US, including Minnesota, have few adult GLBT role models, thus making more difficult their journey through sexual identification and "coming out" to family, friends, and community. One consequence of this is that few “come-out” while living at home and in their home communities; while some do so within their local areas, others come-out when they leave home. There is nothing new about this, as studies have shown. Likely new, however, are the incidence and severity of self-destructive behaviours, secondary to the absence of available, safe, comfortable, and meaningful ways to live one's sexual orientation locally with family, friends and positive role-models. Suicide, self-mutilation, hazardous driving, binge drinking, sexual promiscuity and drug abuse are some acts/behaviours typical of GLBT youth who are exploring their identities. Often the consequences of such behavior are school suspension, drop out, sexually transmitted disease, drug overdose, homelessness and countless others. By illustrating the effects of a trusting relationship with a caring, supportive GLBT role-model on rural GLBT youth and their sexual identification through interviews of GLBT adults and youth work practitioners, i.e. lowering the risk of self-destructive behaviours, lightening the burden of the “coming out” process, we will highlight our findings and their possible relevance for rural GLBT youth elsewhere in the U.S., Ireland, and around the world.

Presentation Paper of Initial Findings

Historically, the definition of rural has been based on population density and geographic location. For this examination, however, we will engage the topic of rural gay youth through the lens of connectedness. For rural gay youth especially, connections to positive gay role models and ideas about being gay, language with which to communicate about the subject, relationships that support youth struggling with identity, and safe spaces in which to interact are not readily available. These solutions can be useful not only in rural Minnesota and the US, but also in Ireland. Even though Former Irish Prime Minister Ahern and US President Obama both have expressed support for the LGBTQ population, there is still a long road ahead in the evolution of acceptance and support.

The Will and Grace Affect: Gay Role-Models and Gay Language

Where do youth develop their ideas of what it means to be “gay?” Historically it has been difficult because of access to supportive programs, lack of other “out” gay people, and un-acceptance and intolerance. With present technology, youth have access to apps on their phones they utilize to chat with friends and other virtual ways of defining “gay.” This has also changed the definition of rural with regard to identifying our sexual identities. While systems may not exist locally, they may exist virtually. Rural youth are able to connect with other youth experiencing the same issues as themselves. They have access to videos, memes, vines, photos, etc. that are both supportive and derogatory with regard to homosexuality. These images have lasting impressions on young people, and have a direct impact on how they cope with coming out.

For those of us who are a bit older, many of us found our ideas of what it meant to be gay through portrayals on television and movies, before present day technology was available. Nine of the ten men I interviewed referenced Will and Grace as being very influential in their lives if for no other reason than they finally didn’t feel like they were the only gay person in the world and it finally felt like maybe the tide was turning with regard to society’s values and ideals.

Even further back in history, it was only through the news, magazines, and underground hidden support through networks of other gays. Of the oldest men I interviewed, “gay” wasn’t something they even recognized. They only knew of their own sexual desires for other men, but had no language with which to define it. These men often had more real life experiences and experimented more in order to help define what it meant to be homosexual.

Few gay role models exist for youth to model their own lives after. Most of the men interviewed indicated that Ellen Degeneres was the closest thing to a famous, public role model for them or gay youth. Recently, professional athletes have begun to come out, and while their reception has been relatively positive by the media, we have yet to see what impact this will have on national professional sports organizations, and those individual payers’ careers. While the men interviewed could all identify role-models in their local communities, none could identify one who was gay.

Language can be another large barrier for rural communities, especially youth. Without words to express feelings, talk about themselves and define issues, rural communities and youth are left to their own devices. Many of the images portrayed in the media include bias either for or against homosexuality which influences the connotation of different words used. Additionally, youth are constantly bombarded with language that is anti-gay in school.

Findings from the GLSEN 2011 National School Climate Survey demonstrate that Minnesota schools were not safe for most lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) secondary school students. In addition, many LGBT students in Minnesota did not have access to

important school resources, such as having a curriculum that is inclusive of LGBT people, history, or events, and were not protected by comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment school policies. The study also found that almost all students heard “gay” used in a negative way (e.g., “that’s so gay”) and 8 in 10 heard other homophobic remarks (e.g., “fag” or “dyke”) regularly at school. These findings are very similar to those nationally in the US.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey conducted in 2012 seems to indicate that acceptance for LGBTQ persons is increasing. However in some instances there is more work to be done and more conversations to be had. For example, 36% of those surveyed still disapprove or strongly disapprove with two gay men adopting children.

All of the men interviewed indicated that the word “gay” wasn’t used in their communities, and when it came up in conversation amongst people who were deemed safe, it was used only when absolutely necessary, and often was said very quietly and under their breath. If members of rural communities don’t even feel safe enough to say the word “gay,” how will those communities engage in other discussions vital to gay youth, i.e AIDS/HIV, other STD’s, or even those that theoretically would be simple, i.e. dating, romantic relationships, and sex?

Relationships

Relationships are a crucial part of youth development, helping youth to feel valued and empowered. This is no different when it comes to LGBTQ youth. Of the men I interviewed, all could identify a person they connected with and with whom they were comfortable sharing their thoughts about their own sexual identities. All indicated that because of the safety created through platonic intimacy they were able to “come out.”

With the creation of virtual spaces and support systems, relationships can look very different. Furthermore, youth are often more inclined to share very intimate information with people they only know on a superficial level or don’t know well at all. The ability to divulge information might initially provide satisfaction and the weight being lifted, but where’s the follow through? There has been no real investment in the relationship, so there is no support.

If relationships are created with local adults and mentors, support exists long after youth initially come out. When the youth face challenges and opportunities, especially with regard to their sexuality, they have someone to rely on because of their investment in a relationship.

Spaces

Once we have language with which we can define “gay”, and supportive role-models and relationships that help us cope and develop, safe spaces in which we can engage in supportive dialogue must be identified and more often, created. Schools seem like the logical place for these discussions to happen since it is here that most youth spend the majority of their time. Both the GLSEN study and a study from Finn Reygan at University

College in Dublin, found similar occurrences of homophobic messages in schools, and a lack of positive or supportive messages.

One option is Gay Straight Alliances in schools. GSA's are a safe space for students can come together and discuss what they are going through with other students. The GLSEN report on GSA's showed that the existence of these groups in the learning environment helps mitigate homophobic language and bullying of LGBTQ students. It also indicates that these groups can help student's identify faculty and staff that will be supportive, and whom they can report when incidents of victimization occur. Both of these can enhance the educational experience of LGBTQ students as well as aspirations and achievements. Is this doing more harm than good? One may argue that it is beneficial for those youth to be able to connect with someone else who they can relate to. However, what happens in the local culture when that youth begins to present their developing self, using language they are comfortable with and engaging in conversations they are comfortable with, but that presentation is met with resistance from the community simply because they aren't equipped with language to use, strategies for conversation, or supportive environments in which to engage in those conversations? Individuals cope better individually but not socially in their local communities. This often leads to polarization of attitudes regarding gay people; support for and against tolerance increases, language becomes stronger, conversations escalate often with negative consequences. Youth can find themselves feeling more isolated than ever.

What would happen if these safe spaces, language, and strategies were co-created by youth and supportive adults within communities rather than them being created by adults intending to be supportive and then implemented?

Resources

Studies

Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Bartkiewicz, M. J., Boesen, M. J., & Palmer, N. A. (2012). *The 2011 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN.

Books

Gray, M. L. (2009). *Out in the country: youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America*. New York: New York University Press.

Herring, S. (2010). *Another country: queer anti-urbanism*. New York: New York University Press.

Johnson, C. R. (2013). *Just queer folks: gender and sexuality in rural America*.

Lacey, Brian. (2008) *Terrible Queer Creatures: A History of Homosexuality in Ireland*. Ireland: Wordwell.

Mandell, J., & Wolf, J. L. (2003). *Acting, learning and change: creating original plays with adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.