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# Are we prepared?: A quantitative study of elementary school counselors' knowledge, skills, and dispositions to working with LGBTQ youth

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# ARE WE PREPARED?: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS' KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND DISPOSITIONS TO WORKING WITH LGBTQ YOUTH

by

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to our LGBTQ youth.
You are heard.
You are seen.
You are more than enough.

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I would like to express my appreciation to my professors for pushing me to think critically and to question the systems that are in place. To my cohort; Nina Nagib, Madji Fall, Stephanie Lezotte, Sharada Krishnamurthy, Dan Tulino, Janelle Alexander, and Benita Klutz-Drye; thank you for the engaging class discussions and the diverse perspectives. I have grown so much from hearing your stories and the knowledge that you shared. The world is a better place because you are all in it. To my mentor and chair, Dr. Kara Ieva, thank you for always believing in me throughout the years. You saw something in me that I did not know was there. I am so grateful that you have guided me to this point and helped me remember to celebrate the small victories along the way. To my committee, Dr. Monica Kerrigan, Dr. Sarah Ferguson, and Dr. Kate Kedley, thank you for your guidance and support throughout this process. You have made me a better scholar.

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## Abstract

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ARE WE PREPARED?: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS' KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND DISPOSTITIONS TO WORKING WITH LGBTQ YOUTH
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It is estimated that there are over three million lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in the United States. Based on their perceived or real sexual orientation and gender identity, these youth face multiple accounts of bias and discrimination in schools. As a source of solace, many LGBTQ students seek out adult supports in school, namely the school counselor. While extensive research exists about the interactions and capabilities of secondary school counselors to work with LGBTQ youth, there is a limited research surrounding elementary school counselor's competencies with this population. The purpose of this quantitative research was to explore elementary PSCs knowledge, skills, and dispositions to working with LGBTQ youth and factors that may influence these competencies. The current study consisted of 111 elementary professional school counselors across the United States. The results of this study indicated a significant relationship between low multicultural competency and leadership ability with low LGBTQ counseling skills. Additionally, the analysis found multiple systemic barriers that impede elementary school counselors work with LGBTQ youth. This study did not find a significant difference between elementary school counselors work setting and their LGBTQ counseling competencies. The findings suggest a need for further examination of the impact the identified barriers cause in hindering elementary school counselors work with LGBTQ youth.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Professional school counselors (PSCs) are licensed/certified educators who focus on the development and growth of students. PSCs follow the directives set forth by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) which guides their actions, ethics, and legal obligations to students. ASCA has created the ASCA National Model to provide school counselors with a comprehensive counseling program (ASCA, 2012). The comprehensive school counseling program is designed to attend to student's social/ emotional, academic, and career development, and is comprised of four areas: define, deliver, manage, and assess (ASCA, 2019a). While each of these frameworks address how the program will be developed, maintained, executed, and evaluated and are crucial to a fully comprehensive, data-driven school counselor program, it is the delivery of the program which is at the core of the school counselor's role within the school. Although the ASCA (2012) notes that 80% or more of the school counselor's time should be spent on the delivery of the comprehensive school counseling program, this is not evident in most schools.

In addition to the ASCA National Model, PSCs are trained within their graduate program based off standards set forth by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). These standards address how graduate programs must provide counselors in training with the knowledge and skills to portray the professional counseling identity of excellence (CACREP, 2016). CACREP recognizes that PSCs are leaders within the education system for the mental health needs of their students. It advocates for the disruption of inequities and injustices the society or

the education system creates, and as such the barriers they create for marginalized populations (CACREP, 2016).

PSCs, as advocates and leaders for these marginalized populations, e.g. students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ), must address areas of need to enhance students' social/ emotional, academic, and career development (ASCA, 2019b; Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012). ASCA (2016b) promotes LGBTQ advocacy within the school counseling profession through actively supporting initiatives which create an inclusive, safe space for LGBTQ youth. This is evident through ASCA's position on PSCs promoting positive climates and educating diverse stakeholders on LGBTQ issues. By engaging in equitable work, PSC target anti-LGBTQ language, advocate for equitable policies and practices which do not discriminate against LGBTQ youth, and engage in affirmative counseling (ASCA, 2016b). It is necessary to note, however, that a PSC's equitable work would not be possible without first acknowledging the lived experiences and history of the LGBTQ community. The LGBTQ community is currently recognized in equitable practices and continues to challenge systemic practices which incite bias, but the journey to this point has been treacherous. The discrimination and categorization of the LGBTQ community has heavily contributed to the practice's PSCs take today when working with this marginalized population.

**LGBTQ History in Counseling**

Beginning in the mid-19th century, homosexuality was seen as a mental illness amongst the psychological field (Drescher, 2015). Over the course of the next century, homosexuality became pathologized and was eventually classified as a mental health disorder by the American Psychological Association (APA) in the first edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (Drescher, 2015).

Homosexuality remained pathologized until the 1970's when gay and lesbian organizations petitioned to eliminate the association of homosexuality with mental illness (Drescher, et. al., 2016). While homosexuality was removed from the DSM as a mental illness, other gender identities and sexualities continued to be pathologized (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). Today, gender and sexual identities have been separated in diagnosis and the current identification of Gender Dysphoria (GD), which distinguishes the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation (Boskey, 2013).

Despite sexual orientation no longer being pathologized and gender identity now being recognized by society, the LGBTQ community still faces immense push back from the dominant society. Discriminatory and bias practices towards the LGBTQ community has flooded society, and the education system is not immune to this injustice. From state and federal policies which dictate inclusive or discriminatory practices to acts of neglect in ensuring LGBTQ students' safety from harm, as seen in *Nabozny v. Podlesny* (Luggm 2019; Wardenski, 2005) and *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (Stone, 2003), the LGBTQ community continues through multiple decades to advocate for safe, inclusive learning environments. Additionally, the enactment of anti-bullying policies from the 50 U.S. states still fail to shelter LGBTQ youth from harassment. It is important to note that not all U.S. states are currently held to full compliance of the policy nor to enumerate gender identity or sexual orientation as a protected class (Anti-Bullying Laws and Policies, 2017; Nikolaou, 2017). Vulnerable populations remain at risk for continued harassment and discrimination within their educational institutions.

## LGBTQ Youth

It is predicted that there are approximately 3.2 million LGBTQ youth, ages 8-18, within the United States (Mallory, Sears, Hasenbush, & Susman, 2014). Based upon their real or perceived gender identity and/or sexual orientation, LGBTQ students face discrimination and harassment at high levels through forms of verbal and physical abuse, bullying, discrimination, and bias (Goodrich, 2017; McGabe & Rubinson, 2008). It is due to this harassment that a large majority of LGBTQ students report feeling unsafe at school, thereby cause a drop in their daily attendance (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). The high level of victimization often leads to negative social/emotional issues and internalized harm. LGBTQ youth who have experienced harassment and bullying are more likely to use illegal substances (Marshal, Friedman, Stall, King, Gold, … & Morse, 2008), contemplate or attempt suicide (Kann, et. al., 2016), or engage in social isolation (Beckerman, 2017).

Within the elementary setting, students report hearing anti-LGBTQ language and witnessing harassment of students who do not 'act' like their perceived gender identity (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network [GLSEN] & Harris Interactive, 2012). GLSEN and Harris Interactive (2012) conducted a study exploring the culture of elementary schools within the U.S. With a participant sample of 1,065 elementary students within grades 3rd through 6th, 8% of the participants indicated they do not conform to societal gender norms. This study demonstrates elementary aged students identify and are aware of diversity in sexual orientation and gender expression. Children learn and make meaning of diverse identities within sexual orientation and gender identity through their social exposure of these terms. As seen through messages children receive from social context, media, or actions from those around them (Campbell, et. al.,

2013; Healey, 2014; Kerr & Multon, 2015; Steensma, et. al., 2013), the dominant culture's view on what is socially acceptable in terms of gender roles, identities, and sexuality is pervasive. Children make meaning of these ideals, values, and norms as they navigate where they fit within societal expectations. Children may engage in concealing their authentic selves to better conform to society's influence until reaching a place of internal acceptance of their identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

Oftentimes adults do not like to discuss or entertain the notion that children, particularly those at the elementary age or younger, have already entered into their own sexual and gender development (Stone, Ingham, & Gibbons, 2013). This notion of "childhood innocence" and personal discomfort may delay communication between an adult and child who is already embarking on an identity development journey. Children as young as the age of three can identify their gender and may even engage in sexual play during their first months of life (Campbell, Mallappa, Wisniewski, & Silovsky, 2013). Elementary school is an ideal time to engage in student dialogue centered around being respectful of others and the importance of inclusive practices (GLSEN, 2019a). Within the elementary classrooms, students learn how to socially navigate a diverse world through developing relationships and peer interactions. It is through these positive interactions that students gain pro-social skills, such as empathy and inclusion, which better contribute to a healthy school climate (GLSEN, 2019a). School educators are in an optimal position to assist with children's interpersonal skills by creating opportunities for discussion, through curriculum, and by modeling this behavior. To best implement these practices, school staff should be cognizant of their school climate and aware of the interactions occurring within the school between students, staff, and the community.

School staff have witnessed these acts of bias and discrimination against LGBTQ students. Dragowski, McGabe, and Rubinson (2016) found that while a vast majority of staff have observed harassment towards LGBTQ youth, less than a third of these staff have actually intervened during the actual harassment. LGBTQ students are also cognizant of their teachers failing to recognize acts of discrimination. Kosciw, et. al. (2018) found over half of students felt that when they approached a staff member for support regarding an incident of harassment, the staff member did not adequately address their concerns. Students disclosed that periodically the staff member would direct the blame for the bias on the reporting student, claiming it was they who needed to alter behavior or appearance to end the harassment (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). By dismissing or blaming the victim, school staff further promotes the discriminatory actions against LGBTQ youth and, in essence, communicates, this behavior is not only tolerated, but acceptable. These injustices for LGBTQ students are often seen through a heteronormativity lens in school (Quinn & Meiners, 2013; Steck & Perry, 2018).

**Heteronormativity**

Heteronormativity is the society norming of sexuality as hetero and gender as binary, meaning either male or female (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; Goodrich, 2017; Steck & Perry, 2018). Schools are a microcosm of their students' larger social world and thus bring in the dominant ideals with it. Heteronormative practices are evident within every facet of the education system and impacts the culture and climate of the school, leaving LGBTQ vulnerable to discrimination and bias (Goodhand & Brown, 2016). Heteronormativity is weaved within the school policies, such as curriculum, code of conduct, and daily practices. These discriminatory policies place LGBTQ youth at a disadvantage for equitable treatment and cause disproportionate rates of disciplinary

action towards LGBTQ students (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). Even at the younger grade levels, elementary students face heteronormative practices which shape their image of society's ideas of gender and sexuality norms (Goodhand & Brown, 2016). For example, elementary classroom discussions may present ways in which the heteronormative agenda is pushed. When discussing families, either in conversation or through literature, many educators state that LGBTQ families or identities are often not included (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019a). Whether intentional or not, some elementary students may receive the message that they or their families' identities are not included nor accepted within their class (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019). This evidence of heteronormative in schools is fueled by the silencing of issues surrounding the LGBTQ community (Goodrich, 2017). In order to dismantle any perpetual discrimination, the systemic oppression in schools needs to be challenged. PSCs lead this charge through their work and advocacy with LGBTQ youth. By promoting visibility and uplifting student voice, PSC can aid in removing systemic barriers to create inclusive, equitable environments (Collins & Ehrenhalt, 2018; Goodrich, Harper, A.J., & Signh, 2013).

**Professional School Counselors Work with LGBTQ Youth**

School mental health professionals, such as PSC, are identified by LGBTQ students as the individuals in the school that they feel most comfortable approaching to discuss issues surrounding their gender identity and/or their sexual orientation (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). While PSCs can be the first connection within the school for students to discuss topics surrounding LGBTQ issues, a vast majority of school mental health professionals report a lack of participation in any LGBTQ professional development or graduate educational training (GSLEN, ASCA,

American Council for School Social Work [ACSSW], & School Social Work Association of America [SSWAA], 2019). GLSEN, et. al. (2019) found that about one third of PSCs in their study had never received formal training of any kind on issues surrounding LGBTQ youth. The lack of formal training, coupled with a deficiency of time, creates a hurdle for PSC who may feel ill-equipped to work with LGBTQ and thus struggle to implement initiatives to address inequities within the school system. PSCs are forced to identify ways to negotiate these obstacles placed upon them by diverse systemic systems.

**Barriers to working with LGBTQ youth.** Implementing advocacy and leadership initiatives to work with LGBTQ youth is no small task. Even with the support of ASCA and the call of action to remove inequities in the school (ASCA, 2016b), school mental health providers still face multiple barriers when engaging in work surrounding LGBTQ issues (Smith-Millman, Harrison, Pierce, & Flaspohler, 2019). These barriers arise at various systemic levels through the challenges of working with diverse stakeholders and the inability to meet the needs of the LGBTQ students due to lack of time, and available resources, as well as an insufficiency of knowledge and skill (GLSEN, et. al., 2019). Additionally, PSC's own personal beliefs and ideals may hinder their ability to ethically work with LGBTQ youth. Simons, Hutchison, and Bahr (2017) found that PSCs who held more favorable views of the LGB community were more likely to engage in advocacy efforts to support their LGB students. It is imperative that PSCs engage in reflective practices to be aware of how externally and internally motivated barriers impact their ability to advocate for their LGBTQ students (Owen-Pugh & Baines, 2014).

With the discrimination and silencing of LGBTQ youth through the implementation of heteronormative practices in schools, PSCs must have the knowledge

and skills to engage in critical conversations with students and the community at large to ensure equitable opportunities for LGBTQ youth (Byrd, & Hays, 2013). More research is needed to determine the awareness, motivation, and barriers, whether real or perceived, of PSCs' work with LGBTQ students. The proposed research seeks to gain further insight to the PSC field through investigation of elementary school counselors' knowledge, skills, and disposition while working with LGBTQ youth.

## Theoretical Framework

The current research examines elementary school counselors' competencies, willingness, and perceived/real barriers when working with LGBTQ youth. Through the examination of the heteronormativity in schools and the various systems which impact each other and the PSCs work with LGBTQ youth, this research frames itself around Queer Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. This section will explore each theory and how they frame the proposed research.

**Queer Theory.** Queer Theory is the theoretical stance of breaking down societal norms and ideals surrounding gender and sexual orientation, with the purpose of questioning their existence and creating new meanings (Meyers, 2007). Queer Theory itself contests the categorization of individuals and in turn chooses to remain free from particular labels or definitions (Leckey & Brooks, 2010). Furthermore, Queer Theory fights against the notion that sexuality and gender are fixed identities which only live in the context of the dominant ideals, or heteronormativity (Watson, 2005). Originally established by a feminist theorist as a rejection to the male dominated language placed onto women, Queer Theory has grown to include any gender or sexual identity which challenges the status quo and moves towards the normalization of all identities (Watson. 2005; Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010). The education system currently does not align with

the ideals of Queer Theory with its push for heteronormative practices. In the academic setting, incidents of institutional power exist which encourage students to adhere to the social ideals of gender and sexuality through subtle or overt messages. These are evident in curriculum development, school policies and practices, and dialogue within the classroom (Collins & Ehrenhalt, 2018; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2019b). Queer Theory employ educators to identify and disrupt heteronormative practices, thereby creating a school climate of inclusivity that redefines societal labels and what is considered 'normal' (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010).

**Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.** While PSCs may work towards disrupting heteronormative practices in school, PSCs engage in other systemic spaces as well. These diverse systemic levels can be seen through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was developed in 1979 by Urie Bronfenbrenner as a way to explore diverse systemic levels and their impact on one another, including the impact of these system levels on an individual's development over their lifetime (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Ecological Systems Theory is built upon the notion that the individual is surrounded by multiple systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem), and each system affects the individual as well as the other systems (Bluteau, Clouder, & Cureton, 2017; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; McLinden, 2017). For instance, the school counselor (the individual) is surrounded by the microsystem, which consists of direct settings in which they inhabit, such as their peer group, family, workplace, and the graduate program they attended. If the PSC's microsystem upholds the ideas of heteronormativity, this in turn will impact the PSC's ideas, perceptions, and attitudes toward the LGBTQ community. Moreover, the school counselor's willingness to

work with LGBTQ students or ability to dispel myths and advocate within the school on issues of inequities for the LGBTQ community may also be influenced (Abreu, et. al, 2018). When using Ecological Systems Theory to examine the current research, each system level models and shifts the other to produce variables which will ultimately impact the PSC's ability to either reproduce or disrupt the heteronormativity, as seen in Queer Theory.

**Integration of Queer Theory and Bronfenbrenner.** The fusion of Queer Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a comprehensive lens to the interworking's of heteronormative practices and barriers at various system levels. The grounding of a critical perspective is useful while challenging societal norms of gender identity and sexual orientation which infiltrate every aspect of social expectations. The proposed research examines the PSC as an individual who is engulfed by multiple system levels which play off one another and affect the PSC trajectory to work with LGBTQ youth (Watson, Varjas, Meyers, & Graybill, 2010). For instance, an elementary PSC's interaction with their LGBTQ students may be compromised due to their exosystem. This could be evident through the influence of diverse stakeholders such as administration or student's families, who may oppose or combat discussions or advocacy initiatives set forth by the elementary PSC (Clark, 2010; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019b; Payne & Smith, 2018; Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009; Smith-Millman, Harrison, Pierce, & Flaspohler, 2019). This direct resistance to challenging the heteronormative culture, which can occur during counseling sessions or classroom guidance lessons, may cause a level of unease for some elementary PSCs, which may justify their reason to not engage in this work. Queer Theory provides the critical language and scope needed to examine the interactions

of the diverse system levels as outlined through ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) on the elementary PSC's LGBTQ counseling competencies.

**Problem Statement**

If a student's victimization is combated at an early age, there is a chance that LGBTQ students will not have to endure trauma as they transition to new grade levels. Current research is limited in its knowledge of elementary PSCs competencies when working with LGBTQ students while previous research has primarily focused on PSCs work with secondary LGBTQ students and often excludes elementary PSCs (Gonzalez, 2017; Simons, Hutchison, & Bahr, 2017). Although research does acknowledge elementary students may identify within the LGBTQ community (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012), little is known about the proficiency of elementary school counselors to work with LGBTQ students. More specifically, limited research has been conducted assessing elementary school counselor's knowledge, skills, and dispositions when working with this marginalized population. Due to the age of elementary students and the heteronormative structures within the school setting, not much is understood about the unique barriers which face elementary school counselors working with LGBTQ students. To gain an understanding of the competencies of elementary school counselors who work with LGBTQ students, the desire of elementary school counselors to work with LGBTQ students, and the school counselor's self-assessment of their abilities to work with LGBTQ students, more extensive research is required.

**Purpose of the study**. Although previous research has investigated PSCs' work with LGBTQ youth, there is limited data specifically examining LGBTQ advocacy at the elementary level (Gonzalez, 2017; Simons, Hutchison, & Bahr, 2017). The purpose of this research is to explore elementary school counselors' self-perceived knowledge,

skills, and dispositions to working with LGBTQ youth in their schools, as well as potential factors that may impeded this work. More specifically, the current research intends to examine the impact of multicultural competencies and leadership abilities as they relate to elementary PSCs LGBTQ counseling competencies. The research also produces a space for elementary PSCs to indicate barriers which may hinder their ability to implement equitable practices for their LGBTQ students.

**Research Questions**

The specific research questions guiding the study are:

1. What is the relationship between school counselors' cultural competencies and leadership and their attitudes, skills, and knowledge towards LGBTQ youth?

*Research Hypothesis One:* Elementary School Counselors' cultural competencies (as measured by the *the Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale* [MSCBS], Greene, 2019) and leadership (as measured by the *School Counselor Leadership Survey* [SCLS]; Young & Bryan, 2015) will have a strong relationship with their disposition towards LGBTQ youth (as measured by *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Knowledge Subscale* [SOCCS-K]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Awareness Subscale* [SOCCS-A]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Skills Subscale* [SOCCS-S]; Bidell, 2005).

2. What is the magnitude of difference in elementary school counselors' disposition, knowledge, and skills based on their current school setting?

*Research Hypothesis Two:* Elementary school counselors' skills (as measured by *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Knowledge Subscale* [SOCCS-K]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Awareness Subscale*

[SOCCS-A]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Skills Subscale* [SOCCS-S]; Bidell, 2005) will have a strong relationship with region and community setting (as measured by the *General Demographics Survey*).

3. What barriers (as measured by the *General Demographics Survey*) do elementary school counselors identify to working with LGBTQ youth within the elementary school setting?

**Nature of the Study**

This study was conducted using a national survey distributed to elementary school counselors in the United States. Participants were recruited based on their current work as an elementary school counselor working with students in grades PreK- sixth. Participants were contacted through the national and state professional school counseling organizations, the Facebook group 'Elementary School Counselor Exchange', and through their connection with a member of the CESNET-L listserv. The survey was comprised of existing scales that measured counseling competencies on multiple levels. The following instruments utilized for this research were (a) a General Demographic Survey, (b) the Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale ([SOCCS], Biddell, 2015), (c) the School Counselor Leadership Survey ([SCLS], Young & Bryan, 2015) and (d) the Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale ([MSCBS], Greene, 2019). The survey ran for a total of nine weeks through the Qualtrics system and consisted of 101 survey items.

**Operational Definitions**

1. LGBTQ - An encompassing term referring to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (or queer depending on the individual

identifying within this community), and + allowing for the inclusivity of all gender and sexual identities (GLSEN, 2019b).

   a. Note: LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) may be used when discussing research or surveys which did not include or examine all identities within the LGBTQ community, such as gender identities.

2. Heteronormativity- the belief that heterosexuality is the norm and that gender is binary, or that gender can only be male or female (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; Goodrich, 2017; Steck & Perry, 2018).
3. Cisgender- An individual whose sex assigned at birth aligns with their with gender identity and expression (GLSEN, 2019b).
4. Gender expression- The way in which an individual communicates or displays their gender, such as through their behavior or dress (GLSEN, 2019b).
5. Gender identity- An individual's gender with which they associate themselves with (GLSEN, 2019b).
6. Sexual Orientation- Refers to the emotional and/ or physical attraction to another person with association to their gender identity (GLSEN, 2019b).
   a. Heterosexuality- An individual who is emotionally and/ or physically attracted to someone of a differing gender identity (GLSEN, 2019b).
   b. Homosexuality- An individual who is emotionally and/ or physically attracted to someone of the same gender identity (GLSEN, 2019b).
7. Gender non-binary or gender non-conforming- An individual whose gender identity does not fall within the social norms of gender based on their sex assigned at birth (GLSEN, 2019b).
8. Youth- any individual between the ages of 3-21 years old.

    a. Note: Youth and students will be used interchangeably

9. Professional School Counselor (PSC)- A certified/ licensed educator who assists in the development of students social/ emotional, academic, and career growth through the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2019a).

**Assumptions.** When conducting this research, the researcher assesses the self-reported competencies which elementary school counselors believe they possess, their interest in working with LGBTQ students, if they have conducted advocacy work for LGBTQ students, and what is the most needed area of intervention for elementary school counselors. The researcher presumes that elementary school counselors are knowledgeable and in alignment with the ASCA national model and adhere to the tasks of advocacy placed upon them. Furthermore, the researcher is assuming that elementary school counselors have some working knowledge of LGBTQ issues, engage in some level of leadership practices within the schools, and give thought to systemic barriers they may face when working with LGBTQ youth. While the assumption is the participants will have at least a general knowledge of issues surrounding the LGBTQ community, the researcher expects the participants to feel that due to the ages of their students, this is not an area that they need to address. The researchers' thoughts are shaped by previous collaboration and consultation the researcher has had with elementary school counselors. These conversations have alluded to the possibility that elementary school counselors would support a student who identifies as LGBTQ but have either not had that occur, do not know how to engage in the conversation, or worry about the repercussions of discussing this topic with young children.

**Limitations**. This study is exclusive to elementary school counselors who work with students in grades PreK-6. By narrowing the scope, data will be limited and only reflect the self-reported competencies and barriers of elementary school counselors. While this is an area of need, additional information regarding secondary school counselors' competencies and willingness to work with LGBTQ youth would allow for a comparison of collected data.

Additionally, the survey is being distributed electronically through email or social media platforms. Over the past few decades, the response rate to emailed surveys has declined (Shannon, Johnson, Searcy, & Lott, 2002). Potential participants may delete the email without reading it, feel a lack of safety due to confidentiality concerns, experience a lack of confidence when using technology, or worry an error may occur upon delivery due to incorrect information or spam detection. An alternative option to complete this survey, such as a paper-based survey, may alleviate some of these concerns.

Furthermore, this survey is being dispersed to members of ASCA, state school counselor associations, the "Elementary School Counselor Exchange", or in communication with a member of CESNET-L. By only utilizing these modalities, a large majority of the elementary school counseling populations may be missed due to a lack of awareness of professional school counseling organizations or networks, insufficient funds to become members of national and/ or state counseling associations, or a lack of interest to be involved with professional organizations within the school counseling field.

**Significance of the study.** This study has the potential to highlight barriers, limitations, and competencies of elementary school counselors who work with LGBTQ students. The identification of these obstacles could provide additional evidence for systemic change. For instance, the research may impact professional standards within

counselor accreditation programs. Substantial gains can be made through the integration of counselor proficiencies in LGBTQ issues in counselor preparation programs. The enhancement of professional standards would require programmatic changes with graduate programs to increase the awareness of LGBTQ youth. This can lend to the implementation of knowledge and skills to successfully work with LGBTQ students. Furthermore, this research may provide empirical support for the need of continued education, such as professional development, to assist PSCs in successfully creating equitable learning environments for LGBTQ students. An additional advantage to continuing the PSCs' education is the perpetual review of school policies which serves as a means to identity and dismantle heteronormative practices.

# Chapter 2

## Literature Review

In recent years, there has been an increase in research surrounding lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. This research has looked into the lived experiences of LGBTQ youth and issues surrounding the inequities they face. Within this research, information has been discovered about diverse traumas that LGBTQ youth experience as an oppressed population. These stressors can come from a multitude of modalities, including family background, social class, residential location, religious affiliation, and access to supportive sources (Diamond, 2013). This chapter explores (a) the brief history of the LGBTQ community, particularly within mental health, (b) federal and state policies dictating school districts responsibilities to their LGBTQ youth, (c) the heteronormative influence within schools, (d) the history and role of the professional school counselor, (e) the professional school counselor's role and work with LGBTQ youth, and (f) the theoretical framework that this current research aligns.

### Theoretical Framework

The proposed research is looking at an elementary PSCs knowledge, skills, and dispositions to working with LGBTQ youth and factors that may influence these competencies. In order to make sense of this work, a theoretical framework needs to be established. When considering the multiple factors impacting the school counselors' dispositions with students on issues based within surrounding the LGBTQ community, it was concluded that the best course of action would be to conduct the study through the lens of Queer Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Within this

study, a large emphasis is placed on the notion that school counselor competencies and willingness to work with LGBTQ students within the school setting is impacted by their personal views of gender and sexuality and their navigation of these views.

**Queer Theory.** Queer theory is a theoretical approach which dismantles the traditional norms and societal expectations of gender identity, sexual orientation, gender roles, and relationships through the existence of new understandings (Meyers, 2007). Queer Theory in itself resists the need for a clearly defined label (Leckey & Brooks, 2010). Originating from feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis who first coined the term 'queer' in 1991, Queer Theory was established in response to the rhetoric dictated by men as a source of power and inequity against women (Turner, 2000). Through the work of theorists, such as Teresa de Lauretis, Michael Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick, the conceptualization of Queer Theory began to emerge as a theoretical basis on which to call attention to the societal need for categorization and oppression based on sexuality and gender (Watson, 2005). Queer theory is a resistance to categorization of any kind and provides critical attention to gender and sexuality development through the disruption of the social norming of heterosexuality (Leckey & Brooks, 2010; Turner, 2000; Watson, 2005). Queer theorists challenge the idea that sexuality and gender are binary, and need to fall within the cultural, historical, and geographic location which denotes its worth and power within society (Watson, 2005). Queer theory:

> ...questions taken-for-granted assumptions about relationships, identity, gender, and sexual orientation. It [also] seeks to explode rigid normalizing categories into possibilities that exist beyond the binaries of man/ woman, masculine/ feminine, student/ teacher, and gay/ straight (Meyers, 2007, p.15).

In other words, Queer Theory seeks to critically examine the systemic belief system that the hegemonic society has deemed as 'normal' and provide a new lens through which one may see a vision of gender and sexuality with multiple possibilities. Queer Theory looks to challenge the societal notion that heterosexuality is the assumed norm and to move beyond such assumptions to a place where all identities are normalized (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010).

Queer theory elicits the active approach of being cognizant and intentional of the language and acts individuals present in the world which perpetuates the social ideal of 'normal' (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010). This normalization of heterosexuality and gender identity is heavily present within the school systems and the way in which educators interact with their students. Foucault (1977) describes institutional power and the idea of surveillance, the notion that our actions are consistently being watched by a powerful being who may provide repercussions for any actions outside of those deemed acceptable. The power of this surveillance remains intact due to our unconscious adherence to the control of social norms (Steinberg, 2009). It is through this idea of institutional power through surveillance, that schools push its heteronormative agenda through regularly implemented policies and practices. In an elementary setting, for instance, teachers may ask students to form two separate lines, one for boys and one for girls. Professional school counselors as well may form groups based on perceived gender identity. While both instances may appear as harmless, Queer Theory challenges educators to examine their views of gender as binary and reflect on the potential messages communicated when separating students into gender binary lines or by perceived gender identity groupings. Through this process, school staff inadvertently portray that male and female are the only recognized genders and that these gender

categories are what is to be expected. By creating gender separation, a hostile environment may form for students who do not fit into either of the heteronormative categories, such as gender non-conforming students. It may cause social and emotional harm to students who do not identify as their biological gender, thereby placing them in the position where either they feel forced to disclose their gender identity or hide their true selves and internalize their feelings of isolation. Queer Theory tasks educators to expose and dispose of practices which only serve to perpetuate categorizing students into society defined labels and to create a just, equitable learning environment for students (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010).

**Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.** In 1979 Urie Bronfenbrenner developed the Ecological Systems Theory which examines system structures and their impact on an individual's development over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Ecological Systems Theory is an overview of human development and its reliance on biological, social, and environmental factors which interplay at multiple systemic levels (Becker & Todd, 2018). The theory establishes five system layers (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) which nest within each other, with the individual in the theory's very core (Bluteau, Clouder, & Cureton, 2017; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; McLinden, 2017). Ecological Systems Theory is concerned with the evolving relationship between the developing individual and how this development is conditioned to the relation of the systems which surround the individual and the other systems as well (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The individual is not the main focus; rather, it is how the diverse systems interplay with one another and impact the life development of the individual. A change to one system level may cause a

chain reaction to the other system levels, ultimately altering the development of the individual (Becker & Todd, 2018).

As previously mentioned, there are five system layers (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) each of which impact the PSC in their awareness, knowledge, and skills to work with LGBTQ youth. The interplay of the systems amongst each other and with the individual can dictate the level of competence, personal values, legal parameters, and social desirability for the PSC to work and advocate with LGBTQ youth.

***Microsystem.*** Immediately surrounding the individual is the microsystem a group of networks and systems in which the individual is directly involved, including interpersonal relationships and roles the individual takes on (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Through the microsystem, PSC's attitudes, norms, and values may be influenced through their interactions with those closest to them. The societal and familial ideals a PSC received through their own development can impact their view of the LGBTQ community and their desire to work or advocate for LGBTQ students.

***Mesosystem.*** The mesosystem explores the relationships or links between two microsystems, such as the link between family and friends, or school and home (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). This begins to illuminate either the unity or in cohesion of an individual's microsystems through the exploration to informed values, ideals, and norms. If a PSC's religious beliefs provide ideals that homosexuality is a sin and not an acceptable identity while their profession upholds the values of equitable and inclusive practices, the PSC experiences disequilibrium and their ability to counsel successfully might be altered.

***Exosystem.*** Engulfing the mesosystem is the exosystem, which is the interaction between two or more settings, one of which the individual is not a part of but has a direct impact on them. For instance, an administrator may determine the professional development opportunities of the PSC without any consultation from the PSC. This unilateral decision directly affects the PSC as this limiting of development opportunities may hinder any further insight and knowledge on matters related to the role of the PSC.

***Macrosystem.*** Following the exosystem is the macrosystem, which produces high impact to the individual through cultural norms, beliefs, and ideals, and can have an emotional and ideological impact on the individual. The macrosystem is made up of the dominant social norms that dictate the structure of acceptable discourse and broader social context (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Heteronormativity can reside within the macrosystem as it is a socially accepted belief system of norming sexuality as heterosexual and gender as binary (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014; Goodrich, 2017; Steck & Perry, 2018). It is here where the PSC may unconsciously perpetuate the heteronormative agenda by not challenging the social categorization of individuals within the boxes dictated by the dominant culture.

***Chronosystem.*** Finally, the chronosystem is the largest system, which looks at the changes and stability of an individual's life over time and denotes the development of systems through historical and social contexts (Becker & Todd, 2018; Bluteau, Clouder, & Cureton, 2017; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; McLinden, 2017). The history and perception of the LGBTQ community, as discussed later in this chapter, have changed over the past century, impacting the development of individuals views and acknowledgement of the normalization of LGBTQ identities. Through the inception of inclusive laws and the elimination of homosexuality as a mental illness, great strides have

been made; however, the LGBTQ community continues to endure mass amounts of discrimination and bias at the hands of those who wish to silence their voices.

**The fusion of Queer Theory and Bronfenbrenner.** The integration of Queer Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory serves to highlight the heteronormative practices at play within diverse system levels. More specifically, the current study utilizes the blend of these theories to allow for an examination of how the elementary professional school counselor's (PSC) diverse systems create barriers which hinder or promote their work with LGBTQ students. This is displayed in Figure 1. Queer Theory provides the critical language and scope to identify the factors which influence various system approaches in supporting or disrupting heteronormativity. Queer Theory also reveals the impact of one systems' values onto another. The interactions of these systems on one another as described by Bronfenbrenner (2001; 2005) can have a direct impact on the LGBTQ work that is performed in schools (Watson, Varjas, Meyers, & Graybill, 2010).

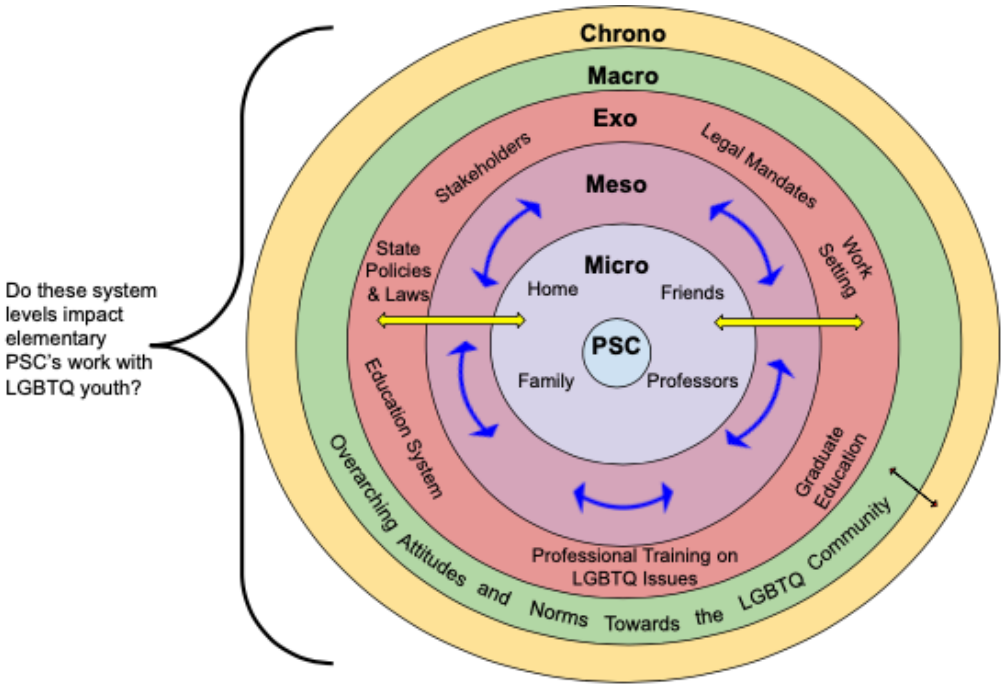


*Figure 1.* Integration of queer theory and ecological systems theory to determine systems impact on elementary PSCs LGBTQ counseling competencies. Adapted from *Ecology of Human Development- Experiments by Nature & Design, by. U. Bronfenbrenner, 1979, Harvard University Press. Copyright 1979 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.*

The barriers that are created by these diverse systemic levels, such as school location, individuals we interact with, and sociocultural factors, impact the level of LGBTQ advocacy and service a school can produce. Additionally, the individual moving in and out of the system levels, in this case the elementary PSC, creates a more dynamic impact as they exist in multiple system levels at once (Watson, et. al., 2010). With this, the system level and the individual are forever interacting and influencing on another (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). For instance, if state law prohibits the discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity outside of the heteronormative view, schools must then adopt this policy and push curriculum which does not include the LGBTQ community. Through the creation of this barrier, the exosystem is influencing the work of the

elementary PSC who may face resistance or discipline when engaging in work that promotes equitable practices surrounding the LGBTQ community. In the same vain, the interaction and influence of the elementary PSC on this system may elicit push back and an active stance to create social change where LGBTQ discussions are accepted within all school settings. By merging Queer Theory with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this research can utilize the language and critical lens needed to examine the influence of various systems' norms, ideals, and beliefs of gender identity and sexual orientation on elementary PSCs work with LGBTQ youth.

**LGBTQ History in Counseling**

Homosexuality was originally seen as a mental illness by psychoanalysts, such as Sigmund Freud and Sandor Rado, beginning in the mid-19th century (Drescher, 2015). These scholars pathologized homosexuality as a disorder which stemmed from issues beginning in utero and continuing during early childhood development (Barounis, 2017; Drescher, 2015; Haldeman, 2002; Morrow & Beckstead, 2004). Sigmund Freud hypothesized homosexuality was the result of atypical sexual development in childhood that carried over into adulthood and was irreversible (Drescher, 2015; Drescher, et. al., 2016). In contrast to Freud, Sandor Rado theorized that homosexuality was an adverse condition from poor parenting that caused an individual to avoid the opposite sex (Drescher, 2015). Rado also believed that homosexuality was not an authentic sexual identity and could be "cured" through the use of psychotherapy. This belief often led to those individuals whom identified as homosexual taking on a heterosexual identity. By the mid-20th century, these perspectives of homosexuality heavily influenced the psychiatric community who thus began to identify and pathologize any sexual identity outside of the dominant heterosexuality (Drescher, 2015). As a result, the American

Psychological Association (APA) included homosexuality as a mental health disorder in the first edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

**Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM).** The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) is utilized by health care professionals to diagnose mental health disorders (American Psychiatric Association, n.d). The DSM provides health care professionals a reliable, comprehensive diagnostic tool to identify criteria for mental health disorders through descriptions, symptoms, and other depicters (American Psychiatric Association, n.d; Daley & Mulé, 2014). The first addition of the DSM was developed in 1952 by the American Psychological Association (APA). The DSM-I categorized homosexuality as a sociopathic personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1952). In 1968, the DSM-II altered the classification of homosexuality as a sexual deviation (American Psychiatric Association, 1968).

In an effort to abolish associations of homosexuality with mental illness, gay and lesbian rights organizations protested the 1970 APA's annual conference (Drescher, et. al., 2016). After thorough research, the APA board of trustees removed homosexuality as a diagnosis from the DSM-III in December 1973 (Drescher & Merlino, 2007). The repeal of homosexuality as a pathologized diagnosis from the DSM is a large victory for the LGBTQ community. With homosexuality no longer being identified as a mental health issue, the social stigma of homosexuality has been altered, allowing for a cultural shift in society's view of the LGBTQ community (Drescher, et. al., 2016).

Despite homosexuality not being classified as a mental health disorder in the DSM, other gender and sexual identities continue to be pathologized. In 1980, the DSM-III brought sexual disorder categories of Gender Identity Disorders (GIDs), which included transsexualism and Gender Identity Disorder of childhood (GIDC; American

Psychiatric Association, 1980). The DSM-IV and DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; 2000) dismantled the GIDC diagnosis to GID with diverse indicators for children versus adolescents/ adults (Zucker, 2009). In 2013, the DSM 5 altered the diagnostic label of GID to Gender Dysphoria (GD) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Boskey, 2013; Davy, 2015). This transition to GD provides acknowledgement to the transgender community and the emotional distress the community has endured due to their gender identity differing from their biological sex (Boskey, 2013; Davy, 2015). Furthermore, the GD diagnosis eliminates the association of gender identity with sexual orientation (Boskey, 2013).

**Conversion therapy.** Many attempts have been made to "reverse" homosexuality back to the socially accepted heterosexuality. One of the more widely used methods is conversion therapy. Conversation therapy origins date back before the 20th century as a means to alter or change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity to that of the dominant, heterosexual norm (Drescher, et. al., 2016; Haldeman, 2002; Jacob, 2015; Robert, 2019). Supporters of conversion therapy disapprove of homosexuality as a typical expression of sexuality and romantic partnership (Haldeman, 2002). These beliefs typically stem from societal norms or values learned from systemic experiences, such as religion or ideals bestowed upon them. Individuals in favor of conversion therapy believe that sexual orientation is a choice that an individual makes and is thusly able to be altered to the socially accepted heterosexual identity (Haldeman, 2002). Conversion therapy may be conducted through casual conversations or via intense physical harm, such as electric shocks administered to the hands and/or genitals when exposed to homoerotic images (Haldeman, 2002; Jacob, 2015; Price, 2012). Conversion therapy is sought by families, communities, and even LGBTQ individuals who wish to

assimilate with societal norms and values (Jacobs, 2015).

The Trevor Project is a leading advocacy for the LGBTQ community which provides crisis and suicide prevention resources. The Trevor Project (2019) recently conducted a national study to examine the mental health and lived experiences of LGBTQ youth. The survey collected responses from over 34,000 LGBTQ youth, ages 13-24, from all 50 US states. Of the respondents, 67% reported that someone had attempted to persuade them to change their sexual orientation or their gender identity (The Trevor Project, 2019). Of those individuals who experienced this persuasion, 23% reported that they attempted suicide. Additionally, 5% of respondents stated that they had undergone conversion therapy. Of those who underwent conversion therapy, 42% reported that they attempted suicide. More specifically, 57% of the youth who identified as transgender, non-binary, and received conversion therapy attempted suicide in the last year.

At the time of this dissertation, 18 states have banned the use of conversion therapy for minors (Conversion Therapy Laws, n.d.). These states include California, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maines, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, and Washington. Currently, North Carolina only prohibits the use of state funds for conversion therapy on minors (Conversion Therapy Laws, n.d.). In addition to state law, conversion therapy has been denounced by the American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Medical Association (AMA), as both identify these practices are ineffective and harmful to LGBTQ individuals (Haldeman, 2002; Hipp, Gore, Toumayan, Anderson, & Thurston, 2019; Jacob, 2015; Morrow & Beckstead, 2004). More specifically, the APA stated,

> "Be it further resolved that the American Psychological Association advises parents, guardians, young people, and their families to avoid sexual orientation change efforts that portray homosexuality as a mental illness or developmental disorder and to seek psychotherapy, social support, and educational services that provide accurate information on sexual orientation and sexuality, increase family and school support, and reduce rejection of sexual minority youth". (Anton, 2010, p. 31).

Despite the rejection of conversation therapy by state law and accredited organizations, some faith-based organizations still continue these practices (Hipp, et. al, 2019).

**Gender Identity & Sexual Orientation**

Gender identity and sexual orientation are often seen as large constructs whose complexities go beyond the understanding of children and youth, but in reality, these are concepts that children learn and make meaning of from a young age. Many children are able to identify their gender identity by the age of four and are aware of their sexual orientation by age 10 (Bryan, J., 2012; Campbell, Mallappa, Wisniewski, & Silovsky, 2013; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Drury & Bukowski, 2013). Furthermore, children and youth take in messages, consciously or unconsciously, about their gender identity and/or sexual orientation through the world around them (Healey, 2014). This imparting knowledge can come from family members, peers, teachers, or the media. Martin and Kayzak (2009) found that many children's movies depicted specific heterosexual norms and gender identities through the characters' love interests, the way in which the characters act based on their gender, or the characters' body formation. These messages, while not overtly demonstrating to children the social norms and portrayals of gender identity and sexual orientation, subconsciously provided children

this fairytale ideal of heterosexual love, and how males and females should act (Martin & Kayzak, 2009). Gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct characteristics which make up an individual's identity. As with other identities, individuals' transition through a development process while exploring and defining their authentic gender identity and sexual orientation.

**Gender identity development.** Gender is one of the first ways children learn to categorize the individuals around them (Drury & Bukowski, 2013). Gender identity refers to a complex internal sense of being either male, female, both, or neither (Healey, 2014). Children begin to develop their own gender identity before preschool age (Campbell, Mallappa, Wisniewski, & Silovsky, 2013; Drury & Bukowski, 2013). While toddlers often have a fluid sense of gender identity, they are able to identify their own gender by the age of three (Campbell, et. al., 2013; Healey, 2014; Steensma, Kreukels, de Vries, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2013). Children's understanding of gender is manifested through messages received from their social context to identify what it means to be male or female (Campbell, et. al., 2013; Healey, 2014; Kerr & Multon, 2015; Steensma, et. al., 2013). From early on, children receive messages about the characteristics, behaviors, expectations, and appearances for particular genders that are deemed socially acceptable (Campbell, et. al., 2013; Healey, 2014; Zucker, 2010). These gender norms are presented through media, family, community, schools, peers, religious affiliations, and heteronormative social constructs (Healey, 2014). As toddlers move into early adolescence, gender becomes more rigid and gender roles become enforced (Kerr & Multon, 2015). Children often are drawn to toys or play activities aligned with the social norms of their assigned sex (i.e. girls playing with dolls and boys playing with trucks). The period between 10 to 13 years of age can be a crucial time for a child's gender

identity development, particularly for those identified as GD. Steensma, et. al. (2011) found three potential factors that can have an influence on a child's gender identity: a) puberty; b) environmental factors and how the child is addressed based on their biological sex; and c) emergence of sexuality. It is through the exploration of these stages that adolescents are able to move from the malleable space of childhood and solidify their self-perception and gender identity (Steensma, et. al., 2013).

**Sexual orientation development.** Sexual orientation is categorized as the physical, emotional, and/ or romantic attraction towards another individual (Healey, 2014). Multiple models exist in identifying individual's sexual orientation development. The foundational model of sexual identity was developed by Cass in 1979 (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Cass's model and those that followed hold similar stage progressions as individuals become aware, resistant, and ideally accepting of their sexual orientation, or the coming out process (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Each model begins with resistance to or denial of one's attraction to and/ or feelings towards same-sex individuals (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). If the individual is able to acknowledge or accept their sexual identity, a period of experimentation is typical as the individual moves to a place of normality. Each model inherits a sense of fluidity as individuals move between developmental stages as they work towards complete internal identification of their sexual identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

**Social exposure to gender identity and sexual orientation.** Children are being provided with information about sexuality regardless of adults' hesitation or resistance to discussing with them sexual identity and development. Sexual socialization and education are how knowledge, attitudes, and values about sexuality are acquired and are in part the result of social influences a child is exposed to (Drury & Bukowski, 2013;

Stone, et. al., 2013). Messages about sexuality are often communicated to children by adults, whether intentional or not. This can occur through communication which affirms or disapproves of a child's actions, whether either direct or indirect, verbal or nonverbal (Stone, et. al., 2013).

Gansen (2017) observed preschool classrooms and found that the teachers often discussed social relationships amongst the children in the school. These discussions occurred when same gender or opposite gender students interact with one another during the school day. Children of the opposite gender were referred to as "boyfriend and girlfriend," and public displays of affection, such as hand holding and kissing, were not contested but at times encouraged. This was observed through the staff's verbal comments which indicated their views of this student interaction as endearing and acceptable behavior. When same sex children engaged in similar behavior, such as two female student's holding hands, staff categorized this display of peer interaction as friendship. While same gender and opposite gender students engaged in similar social interactions, the staff imposed their heteronormative values. The discrepancy of the adult's reactions to the student's physical interactions portrayed the heteronormative ideals of heterosexual relationships.

Despite research indicating that young children are being met with verbal reinforcement of socially accepted gender roles and heterosexuality, gender identity and sexual orientation remain taboo in most western cultures. Stone, Ingham, and Gibbins (2013) found that parents of young children did not address sexuality with their children for multiple reasons. Parents expressed that they felt personal discomfort discussing sexuality with their children and a sense of fear of judgement or criticism by other adults. This fear was extended for parents whose child was born with *differences of sexual*

*development* (Dragowski, Adamek, & Malouf, 2015). Differences in sexual development is the term used for individuals who are born with genitalia that does not conform to the medical and social norms of typical male or female sexual anatomy. These families felt a sense of shame having to discuss or disclose their child's difference in sexual development for concerns of stigmatization. Additionally, parents believed they had to consider the timing of the conversation and age of their children, as they felt they were protecting childhood innocence by not discussing sexuality (Stone, et. al., 2013). This notion of childhood innocence in regard to sexuality awareness, however, is a socially designed construct and is often contested by adult's actions.

**Laws and Policies Impacting the LGBTQ Community**

While identified as unconstitutional, many states and school districts employ laws or policies which negatively impact LGBTQ youth. The language of these laws and policies either directly or indirectly refer to homosexuality and the LGBTQ community (Barrett & Bound, 2015). Direct policy language specifically names homosexuality as a criminal or unethical act. Indirect policy language does not overtly name homosexuality as a criminality but directs moral and appropriate acts as heterosexual and as such portrays homosexuality as deviant (Barrett & Bound, 2015). These policies are typically enforced at a higher rate against LGB individuals when compared to their heterosexual peers, such as the enforcement of sodomy laws (Rosky, 2017). Over the past century, diverse laws and policies have developed that either perpetuate discriminatory practices against the LGBTQ community or act to provide shelter to those who identify as LGBTQ from harassment and bias. The following section will denote some of the critical laws and rulings that have assisted in removing the silencing, alienation, and discriminatory practices of the LGBTQ community. These rulings, either through case law, state law, or

federal policies, will illuminate the injustices faced by the LGBTQ community and the legal steps taken to create a more equitable climate.

**Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972.** Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 enforces that any institution that receives federal funding or financial assistance is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of gender (Stone, 2003). At this time and up until 1998, Title IX was not interpreted in include LGBTQ individuals on the basis of sexual harassment or discrimination. However, in 1998 a case out of Arkansas involving Willi Wagner, a gay male student, created a significant change (Stone, 2003). After enduring multiple years of harassment and physical abuse by his peers, Willi's case was heard by the U.S. Department of Education as a violation under Title IX. This case was historic as it was the first time that Title IX had been used to protect an individual based off of their sexual orientation. This opened the doors for future LGBTQ youth to find protection under Title IX based on discrimination of the non-conforming gender identity and sexual orientation.

**Equal Access Act.** In addition to Title IX, the Equal Access Act has been utilized to advocate for equal protection of LGBTQ youth in the education setting. The Equal Access Act was passed in 1984 to ensure that federally funded secondary education institutes provide equal opportunities for students to participate in extracurricular clubs. This act states that any secondary educational institute which receives federal funding and has existing after school extracurricular activities, cannot deny students the ability to meet on particular topic areas, which include political, philosophical, or other content of speech. This includes if the meeting is voluntary, is not government sponsored, nor promotes or engages in unlawful acts (Equal Access Act, 1984). Most notably, this act eliminates the possibility for schools to discriminate or

prevent student groups from forming which contain speech or topical areas that may be against the socially acceptable stance of the community.

The Equal Access Act has been utilized to support the presence of Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSA), formerly known as the Gay-Straight Alliance, in many public schools. GSA's are student support groups typically held within schools to create a safe space for LGBTQ students and allies (Bidell, 2011; American Civil Liberties Union, 2015). Beginning in the 1990's, GSA's experienced legal efforts to extract, silence, or restrict the presence of GSA's within the schools (Bidell, 2011). Local, state, and national stakeholders denounced GSA's organizations, criticizing them as threats to the heteronormative ideal of family and traps to enlist students who were struggling with their gender identity or sexual orientation. These groups were often comprised of individuals with conservative ideals which may be enforced through religious belief (Bidell, 2011). The first lawsuit, *E. High Gay/Straight Alliance v. Bd. of Educ. of Salt Lake City Sch. Dist.*, was filed in 1998 (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015). The Salt Lake City School District had banned all non-curricular clubs from meeting, although the school district continued to allow one non-curricular club to meet on campus. A group of students associated with the GSA sued the school for violation of the Equal Access Act (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015). The school was found to be in violation and agreed to reinstate the GSA along with all other noncurricular clubs. Since *E. High Gay/Straight Alliance v. Bd. of Educ. of Salt Lake City Sch. Dist.*, multiple court cases have claimed violation of the Equal Access Act. Many of these cases include school districts delaying the initiation of a GSA on their campus, such as in *Carver Middle Sch. Gay Straight Alliance v. School Bd. of Lake Cnty. Fla.*, unequal treatment of the GSA from other non-curricular clubs, as seen in *Straights & Gays for Equality v. Osseo Area*

*Sch. Dist.*, and the complete denial of allowing students to form a GSA, evident through *Gonzalez Through Gonzalez v. Sch. Bd. of Okeechobee County* (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015).

**Abstinence until "marriage".** States have the ability to lobby for anti-gay curriculum within educational institutions, which enforces the maintenance of traditional family values and serves as a public health initiative (Eskridge, 2000; Hoshall, 2013). This is seen through abstinence-only sexual education and the forbiddance of promoting or advocating for the LGBTQ community. Abstinence-only curriculum began in 1981 with the Adolescent Family Life Act as an attempt to resolve teen pregnancy (Hoefer & Hoefer, 2017). Later in 1996, U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich included Title V of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which provided federal funding to schools which used abstinence-only sex education programs (Hoefer & Hoefer, 2017).

Abstinence-only sex education programs focuses on educating students that engaging in sexual or physical acts before marriage is prohibited and is the expected standard. These curriculums often have misleading or non-factual information and can be detrimental to students, particularly marginalized populations such as LGBTQ youth (Fields, 2008). LGBTQ youth are often demeaned in course materials, if mentioned at all (Hoefer & Hoefer, 2017). Furthermore, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas all instruct that when discussing homosexuality, if at all, students must be taught that engaging in homosexual activities is the most prevalent way to contract HIV, AIDS, or other sexually transmitted diseases (Oklahoma Statute Annotated title § 11-103.3(D)(1), 2013; Oklahoma Statute Annotated title § 11-103.3(D)(2), 2013; South Carolina Code § 59-32-30(A)(5), 2013; Texas Health & Safety Code Annotated § 85.007 (b)(1), 2013).

The creation of a homophobic climate produces an unsafe learning environment for LGBTQ youth. The slanderous remarks or lack of acknowledgment of LGBTQ individuals in sexual education curriculum is detrimental to LGBTQ youth's personal safety and development. By excluding LGBTQ youth within the sex education curriculum, these students are at a disadvantage of being knowledgeable about entering safe, healthy relationships. Additionally, abstinence-only curriculums, with its sexist and homophobic rhetoric, create a hostile environment for LGBTQ youth as they feel unsafe to share their sexual and gender identity (Hoefer & Hoefer, 2017).

"**No promo homo".** The No Promotion of Homosexuality, commonly referred to as "no promo homo," is a coined phrase within public education looking to take a neutral stance, in addition to eliminating or penalizing educators who speak in favor of or positively about the LGBTQ community (Barrett & Bound, 2015; Hoshall, 2013; Rosky, 2017). "No promo homo" policies began their inception during the 1960's with the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement incited legislation which introduced protections for marinized populations and identities, including sexual orientation, from discrimination (Hunter, 1993).

In the late 1970's the first instance of "no promo homo" specifically targeted the public schools (Rosky, 2017). In a campaign driven by Anita Bryant, a Florida School District was requested to enforce that any gay employee not be allowed to discuss their sexual orientation openly (Barrett & Bound, 2015). The campaign, known as the Save Our Children campaign, sought to ensure the education system upheld a moral code of traditional family values (Eskridge, 2000). The second example was seen in 1978 through a proposed legislative called the Briggs Initiative (Barrett & Bound, 2015; Rosky, 2017). The Briggs Initiative was a proposed ballot in California which sought to remove public

school teachers from their roles if they promoted, advocated for, or gave any positive affirmation of the LGBTQ community or activities. More recently, “no promo homo” is seen to have expanded to the education setting through anti-gay curriculum (Eskridge, 2000; Rodriques, 2013; Rosky, 2017).

Currently, legislation exists in six states, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas, which mandates any curriculum that discusses the LGBTQ community, if at all, must be in a negative portrayal (GLSEN, 2018). This display of anti-gay curriculum is most evident within the sex education and health education laws (Barrett & Bound, 2015; Hoshall, 2013; Rosky, 2017). For instance, Alabama, South Carolina, and Texas state law insists that alternative lifestyles outside of a heterosexual relationship are to be presented as socially unacceptable (Alabama Code §16-40A-2(c)(8), 2013; South Carolina Code § 59-32-30(A)(5); Texas Health & Safety Code Annotated § 85.007 (b)(2), 2013).

This negative portrayal or lack of representation is extremely detrimental to youth who identify within the LGBTQ community (Barrett & Bound, 2015; GLSEN, 2018). Beyond the negative portrayals, state law and school policies force teachers to provide misleading information to students, which includes inaccurate or incomplete information about sexually transmitted diseases. As a result, LGBTQ students are stigmatized and left to feel that they are less than their fellow heterosexual and cisgender peers. Additionally, it prevents LGBTQ youth from learning about LGBTQ history and crucial health information (GLSEN, 2018). The theory that homosexuality is a “lifestyle” suggests to LGBTQ youth that their sexual orientation is a choice instead of their authentic identity (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation [GLAAD], 2016).

Furthermore, “no promo homo” provides a disservice to heterosexual and

cisgender students who are given misinformation about their LGBTQ peers. These students may be conditioned to believe that their LGBTQ peers are living an "alternative lifestyle" that is condemning and may act on these false characterizations. GLSEN (2018) found that in states that held "no promo homo" laws, only 39.4% of LGBTQ students could identify accepting peers as compared to 51.1% of LGBTQ students from other states. Additionally, these students were more likely to hear derogatory LGBTQ language (75.9% vs. 65.9%) and were more likely to experience verbal and physical harassment based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (35.1% vs 26%). With the enforcement of "no promo homo," school systems are perpetuating heteronormative ideals which impact the perceptions of all students. "No promo homo" policies create a bias lens for staff and students and detracts from any attempts to create an inclusive school environment for LGBTQ youth.

**Anti-bullying laws.** A large bullying prevention initiative in schools first came to light in 1999 after the tragic shooting at Columbine High School, where two student shooters attacked their school after enduring years of bullying (Garrett, 2010; Hall & Chapman, 2018). Bullying is an act of harassment causing verbal, physical, or emotional harm towards an individual based on that individual's real or perceived characteristic (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.a). Bullying can be experienced through direct acts of harassment or intimidation, such as face to face, or through indirect means, such as the spreading of rumors or through electronic communication (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.a).

Within the high school setting, about one in every five high school students have experienced bullying on school property within the last 12 months (Center for Disease

Control [CDC], 2017). Almost two-thirds of staff and students witness bullying within their schools (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). Students who identify with or are perceived as a protected class such as LGBTQ youth, have a greater chance of enduring bullying within schools (O'Malley Olsen, Kann, Vivolo-Kantor, Kinchen, & Mcmanus, 2014). Students who experience bullying are at a greater risk of experiencing negative impacts towards their overall mental health, their academic performance, and feeling unsafe at school (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.b).

At the elementary level, two-thirds of student's report witnessing bullying at least sometimes regularly (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Of this bullying, almost a quarter of elementary students report that students are bullied or called names for not acting as their perceived gender (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). This can be seen when boys or girls appear, either physically or through their actions, too similar to their opposite gender. Elementary students who do not conform to their perceived gender identity are more likely to experience name-calling, enduring rumors, and are less likely to report feeling safe at school (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Therefore, LGBTQ youth are more likely than their heterosexual and cisgender peers to skip school due to experiences of discrimination and harassment (Kosciw, et. al., 2018; Seelman & Walker, 2018).

In an effort to combat acts of bullying, states have implemented anti-bullying laws and policies. On the surface, these laws and policies encompass a definition of bullying, identification of protected classes, a plan to educate and train school stakeholders, and a plan for how the policy will be enacted (Anti-bullying laws and policies, 2017). In the United States, all 50 states have active anti-bullying laws in effect (Nikolaou 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2015). At the

time of this dissertation, however, only 18 states have anti-bullying laws which specifically state sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes (Policy Maps, n.d.). These 18 states; Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington; have strict anti-bullying laws which specifically identify sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes (Policy Maps, n.d.). Additionally, at the time of this dissertation 13 states; California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington, as well as the District of Columbia; enforce non-discrimination laws to prevent discriminatory acts towards students based on their gender and sexual identity (Policy Maps, n.d.). Inconsistencies have emerged in how states are defining and implementing anti-bullying laws. For instance, requirements vary across states in regards to the training of school staff in instances of bullying, compliance of following anti-bullying policies, the reporting of bullying, the exact definition of bullying and who is protected under its guidelines, and the enforcement or regulation of discipline or remedial actions towards youth who bully (Anti-Bullying Laws and Policies, 2017; Nikolaou, 2017). This lack of clear implementation of anti-bullying policies can lead to issues of bullying not being addressed or handled correctly. Without a clear scope, the implementation of an anti-bullying policy will be inconsistent and ineffective (Sabia & Bass, 2017). In fact, Sabia and Bass (2017) found that simply having an anti-bullying policy made a minimal impact on school safety and incidents of school bullying.

Schools who had comprehensive anti-bullying policies with detailed expectations and roles for investigating allegations of bullying and outlined disciplinary consequences notably saw significant improvement in their school safety and fewer instances of

bullying (Sabia & Bass, 2017). LGBTQ students who attend a school with an anti-bullying policy which specifically names sexual orientation as a distinguishing characteristic report experiencing less victimization than students who do not have an inclusive policy (Kosciw, et. al., 2018; Seelman & Walker, 2018). In order to increase efforts for school districts to implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies, states must mandate full participation and compliance with anti-bullying efforts. To accomplish this, state agencies and state government officials can monitor the enforcement of anti-bullying policies, require school districts to report anti-bullying data to the state, and continue to provide education to school stakeholders on issues regarding the harassment of protected classes (Anti-Bullying Laws and Policies, 2017).

**Nabozny v. Podlesny.** The case of *Nabozny v. Podlesny* occurred in 1996 in Ashland, Wisconsin. Jamie Nabozny, a student within the Ashland public schools, endured multiple accounts of verbal and physical abuse from his peers in middle and high school due to his sexual orientation (Logue & Buckel, 1997; Lugg, 2019; Wardenski, 2005). Several attempts were made by Jamie and his family to alert the administration of the assaults, but the administration at the middle and high schools did not stop the bullying. In fact, it was reported that the school district allegedly blamed Jamie, insinuating that his openness about his sexuality can elicit this type of response (Lugg, 2019). Jamie sued the Ashland School District and several administrators for failing to protect him under the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause, and increased risk of harm which violated his due process rights. The district courts initially dismissed the case; on appeal, however, the Seventh Circuit Court ruled that the school district did violate Jamie's rights to equal protection (Lugg, 2019; Wardenski, 2005). This case was groundbreaking for several reasons. It was the first US federal court case about a school

district's role and liability in protecting LGB students from anti-gay harassment and assault due to their sexual orientation (Lugg, 2019; Miller, 1999). Furthermore, this case also identified LGB individuals, including LGB youth, as a protected class that may experience discrimination based on their sexual orientation (Wardenski, 2005). A protected class is based on a specific characteristic of an individual which legally protects them from discrimination and harassment as a direct result of that characteristic (Hall & Chapman, 2018). The specific characteristic can be based on race, gender, ethnicity, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, or any other distinguishing characteristic, real or perceived, that may contribute acts discrimination or harassment. Through the court's acknowledgement of sexual orientation being categorized as a protected class, there became legal support recognizing and validating that youth can encounter oppression based off of their sexual orientation. This is important in that youth are being afforded a level of protection within the schools, and there is recognition that minors do have sexual orientation identities.

**Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education.** In 1999, the *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* case involved a 5th grade female student who endured multiple accounts of sexual harassment by a male student (Stone, 2003). Despite reports of the continuous harassment, the school district failed to act. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the female student. The *Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* case was the first to identify that schools can be held responsible to pay for damages when they fail to prevent student-on-student sexual harassment (Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education, 1999). This case, similar to *Nabozny v. Podlesny*, enforces that school districts are responsible for protecting their students, including LGBTQ youth, from harassment and creating a safe learning environment to receive the same

educational opportunities as their heterosexual and cisgender peers (Stone, 2003).

**Lawrence v. Texas.** In 2003, the *Lawrence v. Texas* case challenged the use of sodomy law within the state of Texas. Sodomy laws are legal mandates which prohibit particular nonreproductive sexual acts (Tiemeyer, 2013). Sodomy laws, while in most states were applicable to all US citizens, are less enforced with heterosexual individuals, leaving these laws to be inherently anti-LGBTQ (Rosky, 2017). In Texas, however, the Texas Homosexual Conduct Law only criminalized sodomy amongst same sex couples (Wardenski, 2005). The United States Supreme Court ruled that sodomy laws were unconstitutional and that sexual acts between consenting adults were private matters (Cahill & Cianciotto, 2004; Tiemeyer, 2013; McGovern, 2012). This case was groundbreaking in that homosexuality was no longer affiliated with criminalization (Tiemeyer, 2013). By decategorizing homosexuality as a criminal act, LGB relationships and sexual engagement were being acknowledged as normal practices alongside heterosexuality.

**Heteronormativity in Schools**

The goal of public education is to prepare young people to become successful adults and contribute as productive members of society (Hoefer & Hoefer, 2017). Public education is theoretically designed to be accessible for *all* students, yet children from marginalized populations receive inequitable opportunities (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019a). Schools operate as a small subset of society that reinforce the social ideals and expectations of the dominant, hegemonic culture (Goodhand & Brown, 2016) often through the enforcement of heteronormativity. "Heteronormativity structures social life so that heterosexuality is always assumed, expected, ordinary, and privileged" (Martin & Kayzak, 2009, p.316). Heteronormativity is the idea that heterosexuality is the norm and

that gender is solely binary, meaning one's gender is either male or female (Steck & Perry, 2018). These mainstream ideals dictate one's gender identity, gender, expression, sexuality, and relationships based on their sex assigned at birth, as outlined in Figure 2. Schools utilization of heteronormativity as a fixed ideal of one's identity instills a pressure of conformity that can be detrimental for students who do not fit the conventional norms of society, such as LGBTQ youth.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Male | **Sex Assignment at Birth** | Female |
| Man | **Gender Identity** | Woman |
| Masculine | **Gender Expression** | Feminine |
| Physical & Emotional Attraction to Women | **Sexuality** | Physical & Emotional Attraction to Men |
| Marriage with One Woman | **Relationships** | Marriage with One Man |

*Figure 2.* Heteronormative alignment by sex assigned at birth.

Schools as microcosms of heteronormativity and cisnormativity build in the assertion that children, and those within the LGBTQ community, are 'atypical'. This invites the presence of oppression and discrimination (Toomey, McGuire & Russell, 2012). It is within school that students identify, learn, and model gender and sexuality

identities that encourage conforming to societal ideals, and remove the opportunity for teasing, harassment, and isolation from peers (Drazenovich, 2015). Heteronormative practices in education are oppressive to LGBTQ youth as it discounts their identity, causing a hostile learning environment through feelings of invalidation, silencing, and exclusion. Additionally, heteronormativity can seep into the daily function of the school which may impact the culture and climate where anti-LGBTQ speech and actions are met with hesitation to correct, ambivalence, or complicit approval. This allows the opportunity for LGBTQ youth to be victimized due to their misalignment to social norms promoted by the school (Goodhand & Brown, 2016). Heteronormativity persists in schools as the LGBTQ community issues are being silenced (Goodrich, 2017). This is evident through academic curriculum, school policies, code of conduct, and underlying norms or beliefs held by the school systems.

**Heteronormative school policies.** Examining a school's policies and practices is a representation of their ideals and what they place emphasis on, particularly when discovering the items school districts chose to include and exclude (Collins & Ehrenhalt, 2018). School districts policies and practices can be discriminatory against LGBTQ students in ways that their cisgender, heterosexual peers do not experience. Discriminatory policies place LGBTQ students in more vulnerable situations to experience disciplinary actions (Koswic, et. al., 2018). In the 2017 National School Climate Survey conducted by Kosciw, et. al. (2018), 62.2% of students surveyed stated that they have experienced LGBTQ-discriminatory school policies or practices. For instance, LGBTQ youth reported being denied the ability to wear clothing that matched their gender identity, were not allowed to discuss issues surrounding LGBTQ topics, and were blocked from attending school sponsored events with someone of the same gender

(Kosciw, et. al., 2018). These discriminatory policies and practices are reflective of heteronormative ideals which impact student's self-expression, involvement in extracurricular activities, and the curriculum they are taught.

School curriculums are enforced through school policy and endorsement. Only a small percentage of LGBTQ youth (19.8%) were provided with positive representations of LGBTQ within their curriculum. Moreover, only 6.7% of LGBTQ students stated being taught a LGBTQ-inclusive sex education course in high school (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). The lack of discussion and instruction involving the LGBTQ community in the classroom is a disservice to all students, since 21st century children need the skills to navigate and understand diverse spaces from their own (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2019b). The lack of exposure to LGBTQ history and culture is often times due to educator's ignorance of LGBTQ topics, accessibility or awareness of LGBTQ curriculum resources, and the receptiveness of the staff and community to engage in these discussions (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2019b).

**Heteronormativity and student expression.** LGBTQ youth have experienced bias when engaging in behaviors that do not conform to gender norms or explicitly show support for the LGBTQ community (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). LGBTQ students report that they have received disciplinary action for discussing and/ or promoting issues and awareness surrounding the LGBTQ community. Furthermore, LGBTQ students experience additional disciplinary actions that their cisgender, heterosexual peers do not. For instance, LGBTQ youth are prevented from attending school functions, such as dances, with someone of the same gender, using preferred pronouns or name, and engaging in public displays of affection (Kosciw, et. al., 2018).

School based heteronormative practices also hinder student identity expression in ways that are not explicitly evident. School based activities in secondary education, such as homecoming and prom, typically include students identifying a “king” and “queen” (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). This practice places emphasis on the idea of gender as binary and that heterosexuality is the norm. Additionally, graduation practices and expectations have shown to discriminate against students who are transgender or gender nonconforming. Students have reported that their school required graduation robes and photograph attire to align to heteronormative ideals of male and female, 31.1% and 28.3% respectively (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). These practices can also be seen within the primary grade levels. Students are often divided into lines, paired, or grouped by biological gender.

**Heteronormativity and extracurricular activities.** Within many schools’ students are provided opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities which take place outside of the classroom instruction. While these opportunities are available to all students, many school policies and practices actively hinder or exclude LGBTQ youth from participating alongside with their cisgender, heterosexual peers. School districts have taken steps to restrict students from organizing clubs that would allow for promotion, advocacy, or discussions surrounding the LGBTQ community, such as Gender and Sexuality Alliances ([GSA], Kosciw, et. al., 2018). As discussed previously in this chapter, obstructing or preventing the formation of a GSA is a violation of Title IX and the Equal Access Act (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015; Stone, 2003).

LGBTQ students face discriminatory practice when participating in school athletic programs. LGBTQ youth have experienced staff deterring or prohibiting them from joining and playing on school sports teams (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). When LGBTQ students do engage in school athletic teams, discriminatory practices may be evident in

gender-segregated sports. Gender-segregated sports specify if particular sports are limited to one gender, or if teams arranged through identification of the players biological sex. These practices are inherently bias as they rely on the heteronormative approach of gender. Identifying player eligibility through these heteronormative practices illustrates that biological sex is equivalent to gender identity and that gender is binary. Through these practices, LGBTQ youth, particularly transgender and gender nonconforming youth, have experienced a resistance to participate in a sport or team that aligns to their gender identity (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). Furthermore, LGBTQ students have met resistance when attempting to engage in typical practices that align with being on an athletic team. For instance, LGBTQ student athletes have been denied access to locker rooms which align with their gender identity (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). These discriminatory practices often contribute to LGBTQ youth being half as likely as their cisgender, heterosexual peers to participate in school athletic programs (Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016).

**Heteronormativity within elementary school.** Elementary school, also known as primary school, can be a student's first exposure to an educational setting. For children in elementary school, these years are crucial as this is the time period where the most development occurs for their social and academic growth (Greenberg, 2003). Students are not only introduced to the structure of the school environment, but to the underlying current of social norms and expectations. Elementary schools can largely contribute to students understanding of gender roles and the prevalence of heteronormative ideals (Goodhand & Brown, 2016). These expected behaviors, actions, and norms are introduced and maintained within the elementary school building. Children are

consistently exposed to the silencing of sexuality and gender identity or expression which challenges the dominant ideals.

Discussions surrounding family structures are common topics of conversation within the elementary classroom, however, many elementary teachers state that these conversations often do not include LGBTQ families or identities (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Lessons or stories that include characters who have two moms or two dads, characters who are identify as or express themselves as gender nonconforming, or characters who identify as transgender or LGBQ, are often absence in elementary classrooms. Furthermore, LGBTQ students may themselves be left out of the conversation. GLSEN and Harris Interactive (2012) found that a vast majority elementary teacher reported that they would not feel comfortable answering questions posed by their students about the LGBTQ community. Many elementary educators struggle with the appropriateness of discussing issues and topics surrounding LGBTQ with their students (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019a). By either intentionally or unintentionally excluding the LGBTQ from the curriculum and classroom discussions, elementary students are receiving the message that their identity or families may not be accepted or recognized within their school (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019a).

Many elementary educators acknowledged that it is their role to create a safe, inclusive space for their LGBTQ youth and their families (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012), yet one contributing factor to the creation and pervasion of heteronormativity in schools is the educator's lack of recognition of heteronormative practices within the classroom (Goodhand & Brown, 2016). Students may have open or private conversations which focus on, or unknowingly enforce the heteronormative agency. For instance, Ryan (2016) observed an elementary classroom in which students were engaging in

conversations and actions outside of the structured lesson. During this time, students were pretending to create romantic relationships between their opposite-sex peers. When a student would entertain the notion of a same-sex peer relationship, the student was met with disdain and discontent (Ryan, 2016). Through these peer interactions students at a young age were policing one another into following the heteronormative ideal (Goodhand & Brown, 2016; Ryan, 2016). Children are receiving messages from their peers, either verbally or nonverbally, that the school setting is not an inclusive space for students or their families that do not resemble societies ideals of sexuality and/or gender identity. In efforts to combat this, elementary educators may disrupt heteronormative practices by acknowledging and valuing diverse identities. By modeling respect and inclusivity, elementary staff can demonstrate equitable practices that address biased language and discriminatory practices (GLSEN, 2019b).

**LGBTQ Youth in School**

It is estimated that there are 3.2 million LGBTQ youth, ages 8-18, within the United States (Mallory, Sears, Hasenbush, & Susman, 2014). This estimation may be conservative as it only takes into account students who openly self-identify. LGBTQ youth are a marginalized population within the schools due to their sexuality and/ or gender identity. LGBTQ youth are at a high rate of victimization and face multiple forms of discrimination, harassment, and bullying by their peers (Goodrich, 2017; McGabe & Rubinson, 2008). This victimization can encompass verbal and physical abuse, exclusion, bullying, sexual harassment, and/or school policies which limit or prevent their self-expression.

The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) conducted a climate survey in 2017 to understand the lived experiences of LGBTQ students between the ages

of 13-21 (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). The National School Climate Survey began in 1999 and is conducted biannually. This survey is prevalent within LGBTQ research as it is the only survey that includes the lived experiences of LGBTQ youth in schools (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). The 2017 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, et. al., 2018) consisted of 23,001 participants from across the United States, the District of Columbia, and the five major U.S. territories. Within this study, 57.6% of LGBTQ youth reported that they felt unsafe at school due to their sexual orientation, and 43.3% felt unsafe due to their gender expression. As a result, 31.8% of LGBTQ students missed at least one day of school in a month, and 10% reported missing four or more days of school in a month. The loss of academic instruction hinders LGBTQ student's ability to cultivate knowledge and prepare themselves for post-secondary education and future career opportunities. Furthermore, acts of harassment and discrimination impacted LGBTQ student's post-secondary plans. Students who experienced high levels of victimization for their sexual orientation or their gender identity were nearly twice as likely as those who experienced low levels of victimization to not continue their education past high school. In addition to feeling unsafe at school, the victimization felt by LGBTQ students can lead to social and emotional issues as they are ill-equipped with healthy coping skills. LGBTQ youth are three times more likely to contemplate suicide and almost five times more likely to have attempted suicide than compared to their heterosexual peers (Kann, et. al., 2016). Additionally, LGB youth on average had a 190% higher chance of engaging in illegal substance use than compared to their heterosexual peers (Marshal, Friedman, Stall, King, Gold, … & Morse, 2008). When enduring this level of harassment, many LGBTQ youth become hypervigilant and engage in social isolation (Beckerman, 2017). As a result, LGBTQ youth are wary of

harm, and when given the opportunity will seek segregation to ensure safety. In an effort to combat the negative impacts of harassment experienced by LGBTQ youth, educators can make themselves visible as allies. Allies are individuals who identify within the dominant group and advocate for the equitable treatment of those within marginalized populations (GLSEN, 2019b). As an ally, educators can support their LGBTQ students through extended efforts to create safe, inclusive spaces.

LGBTQ youth who can identify many (11 or more) support staff members are 35.8% less likely to feel unsafe at school (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). As a result, these students are 28.7% less likely to miss school because they felt unsafe as compared to their LGBTQ peers with no supportive school staff. Furthermore, LGBTQ students who have a supportive school environment report having positive mental health, experience less victimization, and feel safe at school (Singh & Kosciw, 2017). For this reason, it is crucial that LGBTQ youth have support in their life to assist them through their distress. School staff need to be prepared to support LGBTQ students social, emotional, while on a larger scale, the academic needs to reduce the likelihood of negative academic and emotional outcomes caused by harmful interactions with their peers or school climate.

Despite the high demand for educators to be active respondents to harassment and bias of LGBTQ youth, school staff may not be communicating or demonstrating an environment of acceptance or advocacy. The lack of representation of adult allies within the school may cause barriers to students' willingness to seek aid from school staff. This is apparent through the negative experiences of harassment and discrimination at school as reported by LGBTQ youth. Many LGBTQ youth are not comfortable reporting discrimination for fear of embarrassment, blame or ridicule for reporting, or assumptions and/ or awareness of staff homophobia or transphobia (Kosciw, et. al., 2018).

Additionally, LGBTQ youth may be unaware that their school policy prohibits discrimination or bullying based on a student's real or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Hall and Chapman, 2018). If a report is made, 21.4% of LGBTQ youth report that staff members instructed the reporting student alter their behavior or appearance as a means to resolve their experienced harassment (Kosciw, et. al, 2018). Staff participation in or dismissal of harassment and discrimination of LGBTQ youth is unacceptable and creates a hostile school environment for sexual and gender minority youth. By engaging in this behavior, school staff are portraying to students that these actions are not only tolerated but acceptable (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). The acceptance of anti-LGBTQ language and discriminatory actions creates a hostile learning environment for all members of the school community (GLSEN, 2019b).

Furthermore, if LGBTQ youth did report an incident of victimization, a large proportion of these students (60.4%) reported that the staff member did not address the students' concerns and gave the student the directive to ignore the harassment (Kosciw, et. al, 2018). This inaction creates an unsafe educational environment for LGBTQ for multiple reasons. First, it communicates to the reporting student that their concerns or safety are not a priority or cause for concern by the adults who are supposed to be a support system at the school. Next, the noninterference of staff members responding to LGBTQ students' distress in school contributes negatively to the school's climate and culture. This negative impact resonates beyond the presented situation and relays to students that staff members are not the allies to which LGBTQ can turn in moments of anguish. When an oppressive school environment has been created and sustained, LGBTQ students are reluctant to seek assistance from a staff member in a future incidence of discrimination and bias (Kosciw, et. al, 2018). This destruction of student

and staff rapport can transcend beyond reporting or seeking help for incidents of assault. LGBTQ students may feel uncomfortable approaching staff for educational concerns, such as academic support, or engaging in school sponsored events, such as extra-curricular activities, school dances, or class trips. In order to address this mistrust in staff members, efforts need to focus on the recruitment of allies within the school environment. As members of the school community, educators can engage in ally practices which challenge anti-LGBTQ language and model inclusive practices (GLSEN, 2019b). The presence of allies within the school communicates to students and other staff members the importance of supporting LGBTQ youth.

**LGBTQ issues in elementary school.** While not always part of the conversation, elementary students are not exempt from issues experienced by older LGBTQ youth. Elementary students, who typically range from Kindergarten through sixth grade, are often seen as too young to begin the discussion of sexuality due to their perceived innocence (Stone, Ingham, & Gibbins, 2013). GLSEN conducted a study in 2010 which examined the climate of elementary schools in the United States. One aspect of the survey examined students who do not conform to traditional gender norms (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Within the study of 1,065 elementary students ranging from grades 3rd- 6th, 8% stated that they do not conform to societal gender ideals. Within this subgroup, 56% stated that they had endured name calling and bullying. Additionally, 61% of these students did not feel very safe at school, and 35% stated that they sometimes do not want to go to school because they feel unsafe. Of all the students and staff who participated in the survey, over 40% reported that they sometimes heard students say “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay” while 26% stated they heard students use words like “fag” and “lesbo” at least occasionally (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012).

Unlike middle and high school students, elementary students are more likely to report incidents of harassment and seek support from staff members (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012).

Dragowski, McGabe, and Rubinson (2016) conducted a study investigating school staff's rate of observing and intervening when witnessing harassment towards LGBTQ youth. The researchers found that 90% of school staff observed harassment towards LGBTQ youth, but only 30% of school staff regularly intervened. Furthermore, a staggering 84% of elementary educators witnessed LGBTQ bias and discrimination within their school. Of this, 13% of participants within the elementary setting witnessed staff-based LGBTQ bias and harassed, and 38% reported that LGBTQ bias and harassment was staff-generated. This is an alarming statistic as LGBTQ students report school staff are a main source of support when facing discrimination at school, making, it even more imperative that elementary staff are aware of their attitudes towards the LGBTQ community and how their actions are being interpreted by their peers and students. Even PSC may be unaware of the presents of and hardships faced by their LGBTQ students. Elementary PSCs have reported seeing the lowest number of LGB students, with a vast majority reporting that they have never worked with a student who identified as LGB (Farmer, Welfare, & Burge, 2013). The lack of work or recognition of LGB students within the elementary may be a dismissal of the LGB-affiliated issues or the heteronormative practices that take place within the elementary setting. It also negates the existence of LGB parents and family members who exist within the school community and make up the systemic structures of their student's lives (Farmer, Welfare, & Burge, 2013).

Despite the notion that the LGBTQ community remains invisible in the

elementary setting, elementary school teachers (25%) are aware when a parent of their student identifies as LGBT while some teachers (10%) know of a student in their school who identifies as LGBTQ (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). With this awareness of the LGBTQ population in their school, elementary staff should be ready to support their students and families as areas of concern become identified within their schools. New teachers, those who have less than five years of teaching experience, are more likely to report and identify issues of bias and anti-LGBTQ language than teachers who have more than five years of teaching experience (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Novice teachers, equipped with this awareness, are able to conceptualize that their LGBTQ students may not feel comfortable within their schools and be able to identify why. This may provide a positive outlook to the future incorporation of equitable practices or acknowledgement of the presence of LGBTQ students at the elementary level.

A large majority of the knowledge that we have surrounding LGBTQ youth in schools exists within the middle and high school levels, as previously presented. While this provides us with an understanding of older LGBTQ student's experiences with harassment and discrimination, it leaves out pertinent information about what is occurring the at younger grade levels. Limited research on LGBTQ issues has been conducted at the elementary level due to the taboo nature of this work with young students (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2019a). The limited research at the elementary level provides a disproportionate view of what the elementary school setting is like for LGBTQ children. The research that has been conducted, however, does provide a glimpse of the lived experience of these students and the prevalence of sexual and gender identity development at these young ages (Bryan, J., 2012; Campbell, Mallappa, Wisniewski, & Silovsky, 2013; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Drury & Bukowski, 2013;

GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). LGBTQ elementary students need to have a safe space within the schools to explore these identity developments where they will not be met with judgement or discrimination. Further research is need to identify the inequities that are occurring in the elementary setting and how we can counteract this from perpetuating further so they do not endure the same levels of harassment and discrimination as their more senior counterparts.

**The Professional School Counselor**

The professional school counselor (PSC) has been an integral part of the education system since the early 1900's. Jesse B. Davis and Frank Parsons are credited with being the first to introduce guidance within the public-school systems (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012). These two individuals initiated the role of "vocational guidance" lessons becoming embedded within the curriculum to assist students in learning and linking their core subject matter with vocational opportunities. Frank Parsons further developed the vocational guidance program to include aptitude tests for various vocations, students' academic performance tracking, and parent involvement when students were failing (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012). Within a few years, the National Vocational Guidance Association was founded (Erford, 2011; Norris, 1954). School counselors were primarily utilized to enhance career and vocational exploration and job placement during this time, but that would soon change.

A large shift within the school counseling profession occurred in the mid 1900's with the emergence of psychology within the schools. Carl Rogers and John Dewey's writings, which included a more substantial student-centered approach and holistic view of individual relationships, caused many educators to re-examine the role school counselors took within the schools (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012). Another major shift in

the school counseling field occurred due to the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (NDEA), which saw the United States government attempt to increase American youth's education and training in the science field as a means of competing with Russia's advancement into space., (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012; National Defense Education Act of 1958, 2001). The *NDEA Title V: Guidance, Counseling, and Testing; Identification, and Encouragement of Able Students* as well provided a large push for school counseling programs and roles within the public schools. NDEA Title V Part A provided funding for schools to administer aptitude tests and deliver educational and career counseling in public secondary educational settings (Flattau, Bracken, Van Atta, Bandeh-Ahmadi, de la Cruz, & Sullivan, 2007). Part A required the foundation of guidance counselor training programs as a way to educate counselors to provide academic and career guidance for students to pursue post-secondary education. NDEA Title V Part B additionally stated that any state requesting funding under Title V must complete an outline detailing the intended plan for delivering student assessments and the implementation of a counseling program (Flattau, 2007).

With the shift in role identity and federal legislation, PSCs were tasked with incorporating mental health services within the school while still integrating vocational readiness to prepare students to be leaders within our country (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012; Paisley & Borders, 1995). This culminated in the emergence of the PSC as a fixture in the emotional and career development within the secondary education setting. These initiatives, however, were limited to the secondary education setting until the late 1960's, following the implementation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The ESEA *Title V, Part D, Subset 2: Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Programs* provided extra funds to create or expand PSC programs in primary

and secondary educational settings (American Counseling Association, 2011). This subset also states that the funds were to be utilized in the primary education setting before delegating funds to secondary education. The inclusion of primary schools assisted in establishing the need for qualified PSCs at the elementary level to enrich student's academic success and mental health.

**American School Counselor Association**. During this time, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), which represented and united the school counseling profession, was formed (Erford, 2011). Through multiple writings, discussions, and deliberations, ASCA put forth actions to restructure and model the professional school counseling program as we know it today (Paisley & Borders, 1995). Over the past decades, ASCA has refocused the direction of the school counseling profession to provide services beyond vocational counseling (Erford, 2011). This shift charges school counselors to support students in three domains; career, academic, and social/emotional development (American School Counselor Association, 2012). These domains concentrate on the counselor's role in supporting students' career and college readiness, addressing issues or concerns within academics such as study skills or organization, and assisting to promote a positive self-identity and social interactions. In an effort to support PSCs in their role and being able to attend to these three domains, ASCA has developed the ASCA National model, a framework for delivery of a comprehensive school counseling program.

***ASCA national model.*** The ASCA National Model, now in its fourth edition, is a framework which structures the counseling professions mission to enhance student's personal/ social and academic achievement to prepare them for college and career readiness (ASCA, 2017; ASCA, 2019a). Through the ASCA National Model, the role of

the PSC is thoroughly defined and aligned to be able to deliver a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2012). The comprehensive school counseling program is data-driven and addresses student achievement and success through systemic interventions that impact all students. The ASCA National Model is comprised of four areas; define, deliver, manage, and assess (ASCA, 2019a).

*Define.* This area of the ASCA National Model details the role of the PSC through particular standards (ASCA, 2019a). These standards comprise of student and professional standards. Student standards are detailed through ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors, which are detailed later in this chapter. Professional Standards, as delineated by the ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies, ensure that school counselors are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be effective advocates and attend to the roles set forth by ASCA.

*Manage.* In the ASCA National Model, school counselors need to manage their comprehensive program through a program of plan and focus (ASCA, 2019a). Planning the comprehensive school counseling program entails evaluating school data, identifying the students who will benefit from the program, and creating lesson plans and a program development schedule.

*Deliver.* This area of the ASCA National Model assists in executing the comprehensive school counseling program through direct and indirect services (ASCA, 2019a). Direct services refer to PSC's work with students through classroom lessons, individual and group counseling. Indirect services are any other activity school counselors engage in that benefits their students' needs. This can be seen through consultation and collaboration with diverse stakeholders and coordinating referrals for students and families outside of school counseling.

*Assess.* Assessing the comprehensive school counseling program is an essential final step. PSCs are tasked with evaluating and implementing a comprehensive school counseling program to determine any modifications that could improve the overall success of their students (ASCA, 2019a). These evaluations are measured through program assessments, data analysis on student growth and achievement, and artifacts that signify the PSC has met each core standard.

***School counselor professional standards and competencies.*** ASCA has established school counselor professional standards and competencies (American School Counselor Association, 2019b). These professional standards and competencies outline the expectations that ASCA endorses for school counselors to be able to establish, implement, and foster their comprehensive school counseling program. The expectations are broken down into two parts: mindsets and behaviors.

*Mindsets.* A school counselor's mindsets are their ideals and attitudes towards students' achievement and success (American School Counselor Association, 2019b). These mindsets are observable through PSC's actions and their engagement within their role through their comprehensive school counseling program. Within mindsets, ASCA is identifying PSC's beliefs that (a) all students have the potential to succeed in an academic setting, (b) all students should have equitable access to engage in rigorous educational opportunities, (c) all students will be able to receive a degree of completion from their secondary education setting and be prepared to enter a post-secondary institution, (d) a comprehensive school counseling should exist for all students to benefit from, (e) PSC need to coordinate and collaborate with all stakeholders involved in assisting students in their social/emotional, academic, and college/career readiness, (f) PSC need to be leaders across diverse systemic levels, and (g) PSC ensure that a comprehensive school

counseling program support students social/emotional, academic, and college/career readiness (American School Counselor Association, 2019b).

*Behaviors.* Behaviors are noted as PSC's actions taken when implementing a comprehensive school counseling program. These behaviors are evident through (a) PSC skills to implement a comprehensive school counseling program, (b) their work, both direct and indirect, with students and diverse stakeholders to enhance a student's overall success, (c) and their abilities to create, maintain, and evaluate the school counseling program overall (American School Counselor Association, 2019b). Each of these standards are broken down further to specific, measurable competencies to help further evaluate the effectiveness of the PSC to impact student success in social/emotional, academic, and college/career readiness.

**Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs.** The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) is an accreditation board which sets strict guidelines for graduate level counseling programs to ensure a comprehensive and ethical program is implemented (CACREP, 2016). Through their implementation, these national standards assist in the production of knowledgeable and skilled professional counselors that embody the professional counseling identity of excellence. Additionally, these standards aided in the shift of professional identity, foundational knowledge, and clinical expectations to further the development of master's graduate preparation programs as compared to bachelor's level initiatives. The CACREP standards are divided into six sections: (a) the learning environment, (b) professional counseling identity, (c) professional practice, (d) evaluation in the program, (e) entry-level specialty areas (which are further subdivided into diverse counseling fields, including school counseling), and (f) doctoral standards for counselor

education and supervision (CACREP, 2016). The following five sections that relate to school counseling preparation programs will be further detailed.

***Learning environment.*** This section details the standards set forth for the education setting of the counseling program which includes (a) the institution, (b) the academic unit, and (c) the department faculty/ staff (CACREP, 2016). These standards endorse that these three areas are in support of the overall mission of the counseling program and fostering the development of the graduate students.

***Professional counseling identity.*** This section denotes standards for (a) the foundation of the counseling program and (b) the established counseling curriculum. The curriculum emphasizes eight common core principles by which all professional counselors are assessed. These common core standards represent the fundamental awareness and dispositions of all professional counselors and must be included within graduate programs curriculum (CACREP, 2016). The eight common core principles are: (1) professional orientation/ ethical practice, (2) social/cultural diversity, (3) human growth/ development, (4) career development, (5) counseling/ helping relationships, (6) group counseling, (7) assessment/ testing, and (8) research and program evaluation (CACREP, 2016).

***Professional practice.*** This section states the standards for counseling practice, which include (a) professional practice, (b) practicum requirements, (c) internship requirements, (d) Supervision, and (e) Practicum/ internship class (CACREP, 2016). These standards assist in preparing the graduate student through the continuous growth of counseling skills and implementation of theory under direct supervision.

***Evaluation in the program.*** These standards are for evaluating the counseling program, students, faculty, and site supervisors. The evaluation process allows counselor educators to reflect, measure, and assess the fundamental elements of the program, student growth and achievement, and professional ethics of the faculty (CACREP, 2016).

***School counseling.*** In addition to overall competency standards for the counseling profession, CACREP designates specific standards for school counseling programs. These standards state that PSCs need to emulate the professional knowledge and skills needed to effectively implement a comprehensive school counseling program (CACREP, 2016). More specifically, CACREP denotes these competencies into areas of foundational knowledge, the role and competencies within counseling, and the implementation of this knowledge and skillset. CACREP asserts that PSCs are leaders and advocates within the educational system through their work with stakeholders, use of interventions to eliminate barriers for marginalized populations, promote the appropriate role of the PSC, and champion for equitable opportunities for all students (CACREP, 2016).

## The Role of the Professional School Counselor

ASCA (2019a) states that *advocacy* and *leadership* are integral parts of the ASCA National Model in assisting to implement a comprehensive school counseling program. The recognition of systemic barriers' impact on an individual's wellbeing has employed professional counselors as advocates for their marginalized clients (Fouad, Gerstein, & Toporek, 2006). Additionally, active engagement in leadership practices assists PSCs in developing a comprehensive school counseling program that can meet the diverse needs of their students (Dollarhide, Gibson & Saginak, 2008; Shillingford & Lambie, 2010).

**Advocacy.** Advocacy is the active engagement of an individual to identify, dialogue, and champion for justice and equity for a particular cause or group that may not have a voice or platform to engage in this process (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012). Advocacy involves combating injustices through individual or collective actions that lead toward improving conditions for the benefit of both individuals and groups are necessary (Bemak & Chung, 2005). ASCA (2019b), as noted previously in this chapter, denotes specific professional standards and competencies to assist PSC in maintaining and delivering a comprehensive school counseling program which focuses on improving students social/ emotional, academic, and career development. Within these standards, ASCA states the importance for PSC to advocate for the school counseling profession and the collaborative efforts to advocate for equitable opportunities in school (ASCA, 2019b). These collective efforts can be seen through PSCs work with various stakeholders, including administration, families, community partners, local policy makers, staff, and students.

As advocates, professional counselors need to ensure that they are working with, and not solely for, marginalized populations (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003). PSCs empower student voice in an effort to encourage youth to join advocacy efforts that either impact them or that they have a passion for. In order to accomplish this, PSC can model the steps to successfully advocate and communicate with diverse stakeholders to effect change across diverse systemic levels.

Trusty and Brown (2005) found that there are three main competency areas counselors need to be aware of in order to be an affect advocate: dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Dispositions examines the PSC's ability to identify with their role as an advocate and engage ethically with various stakeholders to breakdown any systemic

barriers that hinder the student and the student's families from equitable access to educational opportunities. Dispositions most closely resemble the true ideals or values of the counselor and do not change unwillingly (Trusty & Brown, 2005). If a counselor's disposition development is not there, then skills and knowledge cannot be gained (Trusty & Brown, 2005). The competency area of knowledge relies on PSC's awareness of resources to assist students and their families. Establishing appropriate resources for students and their families involves working within advocacy models and understanding how diverse systems interact to sustain oppression (Trusty & Brown, 2005). Additionally, PSC's knowledge is essential when navigating potential disputes that may arise when pushing against hegemonic and heteronormative social structures and being able to resolve them peacefully. Finally, skills examine a PSC's ability to build relationships and effectively communicate with various stakeholders to enact change and work through problem-solving, while remaining highly organized in their efforts to meet their students' needs. To be able to arrive at the conclusion of one's proficiency to advocate for social justice issues, professional counselors need to engage in a level of self-reflection and actively seek professional development opportunities (Ratts & Ford, 2010).

Taking steps toward student and systemic advocacy can have positive effects for marginalized populations, particularly LGBTQ students. Being an advocate can have positive implications for LGBTQ youth; however, not engaging in this work may have the opposite effect. By not participating in this work, or remaining silent, these individuals are the harassment and discrimination of LGBTQ youth (Miller, 1999). This silent omission is a subtle indication to those committing the offense that their actions are allowable, communicating to bystanders that not disrupting this behavior is acceptable, and further alienating and affirming to the students who identify as LGBTQ that staff in

the school are not safe resources for them. As advocates for change, school counselors need to be the individuals in the building to facilitate and create a safe environment by speaking up or taking action that leads toward environmental changes on behalf of clients (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Byrd & Hayes, 2013). By doing so, LGBTQ students will experience less victimization, feel safer at school, and have an increase in positive mental health (Singh & Kosciw, 2017).

**Leadership.** School counselors are tasked with taking a leadership role within the school building to address concerns that impact their student's success (Dollarhide, 2003). Leadership within the school can make many forms through formal or informal power structures (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012). Formal power structures typically exist within the confines of delegated positions, such as administration or board of education members, which impose the hierarchical system within schools. Informal power structures are based more on interpersonal relationships where individuals respect and value the expertise and knowledge of the leader, while being able to relate and share within their vision (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012; Mason & McMahon, 2009). Power structures within school systems may hinder PSC's ability to be active leaders within their school (Mason and McMahon, 2009). This is evident as PSCs experience within the counseling field and their age can influence a PSC engagement in and deployment of leadership initiatives. For instance, schools may dismiss or devalue the work of novice PSC and support experienced school counselors in their identity as a leader (Mason and McMahon, 2009). However, Lowe, Gibson, and Carlson (2017) found that the PSC's age did not make an impact on their ability to lead rather it was their years of experience which had the negative correlation on their transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is the ability to excite and engage followers and create a passion where both

parties want to accomplish a common goal (Lowe, Gibson, & Carlson, 2017; Miller, Marchel, & Gladding, 2010). Through the above-mentioned research, it becomes clear that while PSC with extensive experience in the field may be more highly regarded as leaders, they are less likely to motivate others to engage in leadership practices (Lowe, Gibson, & Carlson, 2017; Mason & McMahon, 2009).

Building an identity as a leader within the school takes time and is influenced by internal and external factors. PSC can show leadership through the establishment and participation in committees, promotion of the development of a comprehensive school counseling program, education of diverse stakeholders, creation of sustainable services to address student's needs, and identification of inequities within the school system (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012; Young & Bryan, 2015). Additionally, Strear, Van Velsor, DeCino, and Peters (2018) found that in order to be effective leaders, PSCs need to be supported by their administration. School staff may be more inclined to view PSCs as leaders in the school if currently established leaders, such as principals, collaborate with PSCs in ways that promote the PSC leadership position (Wingfield, Reese, & West-Olatunji, 2010). Once this leadership role is recognized, PSCs have a clearer path to assessing, advising, and implementing change that address systemic concerns and increases their student's success (Wingfield, Riess, & West-Olatunji, 2010).

In addition to others needing to view the PSC as a leader, the PSC needs to view themselves as a leader. Professional efficacy and the counselor's ability to be confident in their leadership abilities is a component to the PSC's overall leadership abilities (Young & Bryan, 2015). While some PSC may doubt their abilities to successfully address student barriers, most PSCs perform leadership roles everyday (Young, 2013). Through recognizing student needs, collaborating with diverse stakeholders, referencing school

data, and advocating for marginalized populations, PSCs are enacting their identities as a leader.

Furthermore, PSCs can serve as leaders when addressing inequitable school policies and practices that discriminate against marginalized populations, such as LGBTQ youth, by reducing the silence of the heteronormative issues within schools (Goodrich, 2017). PSC can make creating a safe space for LGBTQ youth a priority as a leader within the school building. Counseling professionals can review, address, and assist in the development of school policies, evaluate the resources available to students within the school and community, and identifying allies within the school building (Cowan & Klotz, 2012). Additionally, PSC can take an active role in helping form the conversations with diverse stakeholders. It is important to have discussions with students and staff surrounding issues of bullying and discrimination within the school and creating an environment that renounces anti-LGBTQ rhetoric (Cowen & Klotz, 2012).

**School Counselor and Social Justice**

Professional school counselors (PSC) are trained and tasked to work with students from diverse populations. Through their advocacy work, PSCs support the unique needs of their students by identifying systemic injustices that may hinder their student's ability to succeed. When PSCs are addressing issues of inequity and systemic oppression, PSC must possess the competencies to recognize, speak to, and address these injustices. These competencies must resolve issues of inequity when combating barriers that exist within the educational setting as well as those within the larger community. In order to do this effectively, PSC must have a level of multicultural counseling competencies.

Multicultural counseling competencies are viewed as counselor's awareness, knowledge, and skills when working with diverse populations. Awareness is the counselor's ability to recognize and comprehend their beliefs, norms, and values, where these attitudes came from, and the impact they may have when working with populations different from themselves (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Elementary PSC largely identify themselves as being culturally competent, specifically in areas of multicultural terminology and awareness (Holcomb-McCoy, 2001). Research has shown the counseling relationship can be strengthened when there is a perceived similarity to the PSC and their student's attitude, beliefs, and background (Esters & Ledoux, 2001). Knowledge relates the counselor's aptitude of diverse populations, communities, and identities and their impact on an individual's perceptions and values. Finally, the skills of the counselor are related to their ability to work with diverse clients or students to provide effective, ethical counseling (Sue, et. al., 1992). A counselor's skills within multicultural counseling competencies are often identified as an area that needs further development. This is particularly seen in areas of racial identity development and comfort in working with populations that do not share similar identities, such as race or gender (Holcomb-McCoy, 2001; Rayle, 2005; Thorn & Contreras, 2005).

To increase a PSC's awareness of these personal values and attitudes and still have the ability to attend to their students, ASCA created the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors. (ASCA, 2016a). This document lends to the continued effort for PSC to maintain professionalism in ethical decision making and provide competent counseling services to all stakeholders. Moreover, the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors notes that students are entitled to:

> Be respected, be treated with dignity and have access to a comprehensive school counseling program that advocates for and affirms all students from diverse populations including but not limited to: ethnic/racial identity, nationality, age, social class, economic status, abilities/disabilities, language, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity/expression, family type, religious/spiritual identity, emancipated minors, wards of the state, homeless youth and incarcerated youth. School counselors as social-justice advocates support students from all backgrounds and circumstances and consult when their competence level requires additional support (ASCA, 2016a, Preamble Section ¶ 3).

In other words, all students, regardless of identity, have access to a comprehensive school counseling program. It is essential, therefore, that PSC are aware of their own biases or prejudices which may interfere with a PSC's ability to advocate with and for a student whose identity or background may differ from the PSC's. Through professional self-reflection, supervision, and self-awareness, a PSC must be aware of their own values as to not impose these attitudes and beliefs onto the students they work with (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012).

**Professional School Counselors Work with LGBTQ Youth**

Within schools, LGBTQ youth identify mental health professionals as the individual they would feel most comfortable discussing issues surrounding the LGBTQ community (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). The counseling profession has the opportunity to create a space of acceptance and allyship in advocating for the needs of the LGBTQ community and provide multiculturally competent services (Troutman & Packer-William, 2014). Students recognize these efforts of PSC allies through their actions,

whether verbal or nonverbal. Often, the PSC is seen as accepting through their ability to listen and openness to discuss anything (Roe, 2013). Additionally, students often share their experiences with the PSC to their peers. Through these experiences, students may recommend to their peers whether the PSC is viewed as a trusted adult within the school (Roe, 2013). Professional counselors need to have pertinent knowledge, self-awareness of attitudes, and skills to work with LGBTQ individuals in an affirming way (Morrow & Beckstead, 2004).

When PSCs are working with populations that are at higher risk of mental health issues, such as LGBTQ youth, parameters need to be established to ensure counselors foremost do no harm. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2016b) has provided directives for how school counselors may provide comprehensive counseling services specifically to LGBTQ youth. These directives task school counselors to assist LGBTQ youth with all areas related to academics, social/ emotional development, and identity development.

ASCA (2016b) set forth specific standards for school counselors in their role to advocate for LGBTQ youth. While these standards are heavily aligned with the expectations for school counselors to advocate for all oppressed populations, these roles are more specific to address issues arising within the LGBTQ populations. ASCA challenges school counselors to work with diverse stakeholders to remove barriers that inhibit LGBTQ youth from the same developmental growth as their non-LGBTQ peers. School counselors must ensure safe spaces for LGBTQ youth, advocate for equitable opportunities in education, create and foster an inclusive school environment, educate staff and addresses issues of bias or discrimination, and provide appropriate resources to youth and families (ASCA, 2016b). These skills are essential, particularly for elementary

students, as they obtain skills and protective factors to assist them through potential biases, bullying, and harassment that are prevalent elementary and other school levels (Farmer, Welfare, & Burge, 2013). Additionally, ASCA (2016b) notes that school counselors must provide affirmation for LGBTQ students and provide effective counseling to employ positive regard to all students without harm or intention to alter one's identity.

**Evidence-based practices for LGBTQ youth in schools.** For many LGBTQ youth, the feeling of safety and inclusion within their schools is not a concept that they are used to experiencing (Collins & Ehrenhalt, 2018). In order to accomplish this goal, students need to feel heard and included in a school environment which values their identity. Ways in which PSC can accomplish this is through evidence-based practices which promote the visibility and voice of LGBTQ students and actively engage in professional development to continue to create and maintain an equitable environment (Collins & Ehrenhalt, 2018; Goodrich, Harper, A.J., & Signh, 2013). This can be done through the development of inclusive clubs and curriculums (e.g. Gender and Sexuality Alliance and the Ready, Set, Respect! program), and through the implementation of professional and affirming practices.

***Professional discourse.*** In order to uphold the responsibilities of the profession, PSCs need to engage in professional codes of ethics. Ethical codes of conduct refer to the PSC's competencies in counseling and the maintenance of strong moral principles of professionalism (ASCA, 2016a; CACREP, 2016). PSC can advocate for professional development regarding LGBTQ issues to ensure best practices are being delivered within counseling and at the school level (Goodrich, Harper, A.J., & Signh, 2013). Professional development can also ensure the PSC are aware of current policies and laws impacting

their LGBTQ students (Collins & Ehrenhalt, 2018; Stone, 2003). Through the awareness of laws and policies, PSCs can advocate for inclusive policies within their schools for LGBTQ youth, which can lead to implementation of clubs, an inclusive curriculum, and the alteration of school practices that have historically been discriminatory, such as bathroom policies.

A part of the PSC's professional discourse is through their collaboration with various stakeholders who impact the lived experiences of their LGBTQ students. These collaborative efforts with families, administrators, and teachers can serve to providing education and engaging in critical conversations surrounding of LGBTQ issues (Collins & Ehrenhalt, 2018; Goodrich, Harper, A.J., & Signh, 2013). Mallon (2001) depicts particular steps that PSCs can take to create systemic changes within the school with collaboration with administration. PSC can assist within the hiring process to ensure educators coming into the school are advocates for equitable opportunities for marginalized populations. PSCs can create school committees who evaluate, address, and implement effective strategies to create an equitable school environment that supports inclusive language and practices. Through these vast efforts, PSC may become recognized in their school as allies to the LGBTQ community.

***Building rapport.*** Within counseling, rapport building is an essential tool when working with students or parents, particularly minority or low-income students and families who may already feel not welcomed or hesitant of the school system (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Walker, Shenker, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). Rapport building is the core of counseling and incorporates the process in which school counselors construct a trusting, secure relationship or bond with their students (Joe, Simpson, Dansereau, & Rowan-Szal, 2001). When rapport has been effectively established, students feel

comfortable discussing concerns or issues that they may be experiencing within their life. It is critical that school counselors maintain this rapport in order to effectively assist and advocate for students, especially in order to affect positive change within disadvantaged groups (Joe, Simpson, Dansereau, & Rowan-Szal, 2001).With the rapport between students and school counselors being essential to a counseling relationship, it is important that measures are taken to ensure this relationship is not altered or broken.

One way to maintain rapport with students is upholding confidentiality. Confidentiality is the process of keeping private the information shared between a counselor and their student, unless the information provided indicates a level of harm and concern for safety (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012). Upholding confidentiality when working with LGBTQ youth is a large contributing factor to student safety, rapport building, and creating a safe space. LGBTQ youth may not report discrimination and harassment for fear that their sexual orientation or gender identity will be exposed (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). Due to a PSC ability to remain confidential and the sensitive nature of discussing student's sexual and gender identity, the school counselor is an ideal staff member within the schools to support LGBTQ youth.

***Engaging community stakeholders.*** LGBTQ youth who feel supported within their school environment identify a sense of belongingness and safety (Dahl & Galiher, 2012; Kosciw, et. al., 2018). Creating this inclusive learning environment where students feel accepted is a mission that the PSC is uniquely qualified to do. The PSC has the ability to utilize their advocacy and leadership skills to work with diverse stakeholders in efforts to create multilevel systemic change to best support LGBTQ youth (Gonzalez, 2017; Goodrich & Luke, 2009; Singh & Kosciw, 2017). A multisystem approach can provide the PSC with opportunities to implement advocacy work at the individual level

with students, through curriculum and policy design, and by engaging families to support the overall well-being of the student and disrupt heteronormative practices (DePaul, Walsh, & Dam, 2009; GLSEN, 2019b; Goodrich & Luke, 2009; Singh & Burnes, 2009; Stear, 2017)., PSCs can provide preventative measures by educating diverse stakeholders on issues surrounding the LGBTQ community, such as providing training during in-service days or addressing issues of discrimination in the moment (GLSEN, 2019b; Goodrich & Luke, 2009).

***Gender and sexuality alliance (GSA).*** The Gender and Sexuality Alliance, formerly known as the Gay-Straight Alliance, are student support groups for LGBTQ youth and their allies (Biddel, 2011; Fetner & Elafros, 2015). GSA's are typically within the high school setting but are becoming more present at the middle school level (Fetner & Elafros, 2015). GSA's are foundational supported through two national organizations, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and the Gay-Straight Alliance Network (Biddel, 2011). Both organizations support the advocacy work of creating safe, inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth.

GSA's have a positive effect for LGBTQ students, their peers, and the overall school climate as a way to make schools more inclusive spaces that integrate the celebration of diversity and bring about spaces of inclusion (Fertner & Elafros, 2015; Quasha, McCabe, & Ortiz, 2014). Students who attend schools which have GSA's experience multiple advantages versus their peers who do not have a GSA within their schools (Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Kosciw, et. al., 2018). Students who attended a school with a GSA felt safer in school, held better school attendance (Kosciw, et. al., 2018), and had supportive administration and staff while establishing positive friendships and connections (Fetner & Elafros, 2015). While GSA's have been shown to be a positive

inclusion within the school system for both LGBTQ students and their allies, few PSC are engaging within this work. GLSEN, et. al. (2019) found that only a quarter of PSC were advising or running a support group for LGBTQ youth, such as a GSA. With this, PSCs can utilize GSA's within their social justice advocacy to support inclusive, equitable opportunities for LGBTQ students (Bidell, 2011; GLSEN, 2019b). PSCs can also utilize this as an opportunity to demonstrate and display themselves as a safe adult within the schools for LGBTQ students (GLSEN, 2019b; Roe, 2013).

***Ready, set, respect!*** Created by GLSEN (2012), the *Ready, Set, Respect!* toolkit was developed for elementary schools as a way to assist teachers in providing an inclusive curriculum which centers around respect for diverse identities. The toolkit lends itself as a platform in which educators can learn to engage in open dialogue which identifies biases, gender roles, and various family systems that are inclusive of all students. This allows for students to feel represented within their classroom and ready to address areas of respectful behaviors and attitudes towards others (GLSEN 2012). *The Ready, Set, Respect!* toolkit allows the educator to address their biases and life experiences so they are prepared to integrate the lessons inclusion, bullying, family diversity, and gender diversity for their students. The toolkit also includes a multitude of resources on various media platforms.

**Systemic Barriers to Working with LGBTQ Youth**

Engaging in work with LGBTQ youth is not without its challenges. Smith-Millman, Harrison, Pierce, and Flaspohler (2019) found that school mental health providers faced particular challenges surrounding their work with LGBTQ students. These barriers impacting the PSC's advocacy for LGBTQ youth and active work to disrupt the heteronormative culture in schools can be seen within each systemic level.

The perceived barriers identified by school mental health providers, including PSCs, included concerns at the student level, the parent level, the school level, and a lack of support by various school stakeholders. Additionally, PSC identified that time, job responsibilities, available resources, and lack of training were major barriers to working with LGBTQ youth (GLSEN, et. al., 2019). With this, the following section examines these identified perceived barriers to working with LGBTQ youth.

**Families.** Many LGBTQ youths face challenging relationships with their families due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Mallory, Sears, Hasenbush, & Susman, 2014). LGBTQ youth are at a greater risk than their cisgender, heterosexual peers to be mistreated or alienated by their family or faith-based community (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005; Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010). The Human Rights Campaign (HRC, 2012) surveyed over 10,000 self-identified LGBT youth between the ages of 13-17 to examine their daily lives and interactions with peers, family members, and staff at their school. LGBT youth indicated the most prevalent problem they were currently encountering was non-accepting families (26%) followed by school/ bullying problems (21%). A third (33%) of LGBT youth stated their family is not accepting of the LGBT community and nearly half (46%) identified their family as one of the main sources of discriminatory and negative connotations (HRC, 2012). Furthermore, over half (55.3%) do not report victimization at school to their family (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). This may be due to students not being open with their families about their sexual orientation and/ or gender identity, their family's disapproval of their sexual orientation and/ or gender identity, or the student's concerns of outcomes if their parent becomes involved.

When students do have a supportive home environment, however, they are more likely to seek out aid when experiencing harassment at school and families over half the time (54.1%) address these concerns with school staff (Kosciw, et. al, 2018). Recent research has shown that family support of their child's sexual orientation and gender identity has a positive impact on the student's mental and emotional health (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). LGBTQ youth who have supportive parents report higher self-esteem and a greater sense of belonging within their schools, plus experience lower rates of depression and suicide ideation (Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011). When parents are willing to engage in advocacy for equitable educational opportunities for their LGBTQ student, students' overall wellbeing is improved (Kosciw, et. al, 2018).

Therefore, it is imperative that educators are actively partnering with LGBTQ parents to assist in navigating advocacy opportunities (Kosciw, et. al, 2018). PSCs can assist by providing parents access to support services, resources, and educating them to local, state, and federal policies and laws, as identified previously in this chapter. An important factor in engaging parents as advocates in their LGBTQ student's educational success and overall well-being is ensuring parents are aware, knowledgeable, and in support of their child's sexual orientation and/ or gender identity. PSCs can assist in supporting students who are revealing their authentic selves to their families (Abreu, McEachern, Hall & Kenny, 2018). For instance, PSC can engage the student in role playing, identifying protective factors, or bringing the family into the school to support the student if they are choosing to disclose their gender identity and/or sexual orientation to their family.

**School community.** Schools can vary in a myriad of ways. Schools can comprise of diverse individuals with varying identities and experiences, span multiple grade levels, and be situated in a variety of settings and locations. Each of these factors can have an impact on student's experiences, particularly when examining the lived experiences of marginalized populations such as the LGBTQ community. Almost half of LGBT youth (47%) feel that they do not belong within their community, while 42% of LGBT youth describe their community as intolerant of the LGBT community (HRC, 2012). The PSC must be aware so they can better understand the context of their students lived experiences outside of the school and how the community influences the students lived experience inside the school.

***School level.*** School districts within the United States can range in grades from Kindergarten through twelfth grade. These grade levels are often broken down into three separate levels: elementary/ primary, middle/ junior high, and high/ secondary school. Elementary school typically includes grades Kindergarten through fifth grade. Middle school typically includes grades six through eighth, and high school typically includes grades ninth through twelfth. While higher levels of LGBTQ bias and discrimination are reported in the middle and high school levels, elementary students and teachers have also indicated incidents of bullying and harassment towards LGBTQ youth (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Students in middle school reported higher levels of anti-LGBTQ discussion, harassment, and discriminatory practices (Kosciw, et. al., 2018).

***School location.*** School location can be categorized by a number of variables. Broadly, a school's location can be identified by which region of the U.S. the school is situated; Northeast, South, Midwest, and West; as well as the community the school resides; urban, rural, and suburban. A school's location provides valuable information

about the cultural values and ideals and how these may impact LGBTQ youth. LGBTQ students who live in the South or the Midwest held more negative school experiences, including high reports of prejudice remarks and anti-LGBTQ policies and practices within their schools (Koswic, et. al., 2018). Similarly, LGBTQ students who lived in small/ rural towns reported discrimination and bias within their schools at much higher rates than students who attended school in an urban or suburban setting (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). Both students who resided in rural settings and those who resided in the South were least likely to have LGBTQ-related resources available to them at school. Furthermore, elementary teachers in rural settings are less likely to believe that LGB students would feel comfortable in their school (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). PSCs and advocates in areas where the cultural climate is more hostile towards the LGBTQ community, such as the South, Midwest, and rural areas, need to be vigilant in addressing issues of discrimination and creating inclusive spaces for their students to feel safe at school (Kosciw, et. al., 2018).

***School type.*** Students within the United States can be enrolled in a variety of school types, such as public, religious, and private non-religious. Each of these schools have varying levels of standards and protocols that need to be followed and is often based on the source of funding in which the school receives (Choy, 1997). Public schools are supported through state and federal funds. In receiving these funds, public schools are required to utilize particular curriculums, implement state approved testing measurements, and follow state or federal enforced policies (Choy, 1997). These policies can have a large impact on the encouragement or censorship of multiple topics school staff are allowed to engage in or silence, which have been discussed and will continue to be discussed in this chapter.

Religious schools are private institutions that do not typically receive financial assistance from state or federal funding. Religious schools are based off of the tenants of the spiritual sect in which they are affiliated. Private non-religious schools do not receive federal funds and such are not subject to follow the same degree of policies as public schools (Choy, 1997).

Within these settings, public school LGBTQ students were more likely to experience victimization and anti-LGBTQ language but were less likely to hear bias remarks about gender expression when compared to their peers in religious and private non-religious schools (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012; Koswic, et. al., 2018). Furthermore, students in private non-religious schools had the most access to LGBTQ resources and supports, while students who attended religious schools had the least access to these resources (Koswic, et. al., 2018).

**Administration.** PSC are more likely to advocate for their students' needs when they are within a supportive school climate (McCabe, Rubinson, Dragowski, & Elizalde-Utnick, 2013). PSCs needed support of their administration to advocate and lead the fight for change for equitable opportunities for LGBTQ youth (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014). Support, whether general or specific, is important for the school counselor's role within the building and through supporting the work of LGBTQ advocacy. PSCs must have the support of their administration in order to carry out their roles within the school and assist to make effective changes for these students (Graham, Desmond, & Zinsser, 2011). When PSCs' time and responsibilities are honored, and they have the support of their administration, great work can be achieved.

The role of the PSC is thoroughly defined by ASCA from the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019a). This model delineates the appropriate tasks performed by PSCs

that support the three domains of school counseling; career, academic, and social/emotional development (American School Counselor Association, n.d.b). While these roles are detailed by ASCA, as previously discussed in this chapter, they are often times discounted or not recognized by administrators or the structural system of the school (Chata & Loesch, 2007; Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, 2009). Many times, a PSC's roles are reflective of the unique needs of each school and the PSC is utilized to fill in gaps where needed. Often times these role gaps are responsibilities that are inappropriate or non-counseling related tasks. In fact, PSCs have identified time restraints and job responsibilities to be a significant impact on their ability to support LGBTQ youth (GLSEN, et. al., 2019). Principals expectations of the school counselor can determine to what extent the school counselor is able to carry out their appropriate responsibilities in advocating for student's needs (Paisley & Borders, 1995), particularly underrepresented students such as LGBTQ youth.

PSCs and administrators, such as principals, have distinctive roles and expertise in the school that can truly transform a school culture and climate into one of inclusion for all students, including LGBTQ youth (Beck, 2016). When working collaboratively, principals and PSCs have the ability to create effective change through consultation on policies that may be discriminatory or bias towards marginalized populations and developing educational opportunities for staff to learn how to create and maintain an inclusive school climate (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Goodrich & Luke, 2009). When principals and PSCs have a shared goal and belief system, they are able to work more harmoniously which created opportunities to confront issues and obstacles due to their mutual support and vision. (Becker, 2018).

Yet, when these collaborative or shared goals are not recognized, administrators can be a barrier to addressing issues of heteronormativity and inclusivity within the schools. Payne and Smith (2018) found that school administrators may be hesitant or resistant to efforts of addressing issues surrounding the LGBTQ community. This was due to a lack of recognition of the prevalence of the issue within their school, the disapproval of the school community and board of education, and an assumption that staff lacks interest in engaging in professional development about supporting their LGBTQ students. This lack of advocacy for LGBTQ proficiency may be due to the fact administrators are unaware of the anti-LGBTQ language and discrimination within their schools and the educational impact inclusive curriculums can have on student success (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Payne & Smith, 2008). PSCs can take the steps to provide their administrator with evidence-based research that supports the importance of addressing issues surrounding heteronormative policies and actions in school and how these efforts will lead to overall better school performance and climate. While this is possible, it may take an extended period of time to arrive at a place of administrative approval or even acknowledgment. Taking the time to create this shared vision is beneficial, as PSC-principal partnerships work best when there is mutual collaboration and commitment to a common goal of creating an inclusive learning environment for LGBTQ youth (Beck, 2018).

**Professional school counseling training & education.** While professional development is considered an evidence-based practice, it can also serve as a barrier. In order to provide effective and inclusive practices for LGBTQ youth, PSCs need to be provided with ethical, competent education. Research has shown that PSC are more likely to engage in work surrounding LGBTQ youth if they were exposed to training and

information (Kull, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2017). Unfortunately, PSC reported an insufficient amount of training, whether in their graduate training or from professional development, when working with LGBT clients, particularly in discussions of sex and sexuality (Kull, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2017; Owen-Pugh & Baines, 2014; Sawyer, Porter, Lehman, Anderson, & Anderson, 2006). This was often seen as an intentional or unintentional avoidance to discussing sex and sexuality either by the professor, the student, or both. By avoiding the topic, glancing over the material in courses, or the lack of acknowledgement causes harm for the counselor and the students. Without specific knowledge or training, PSCs can be doing more harm than good (Stone, 2003). Even with accrediting bodies, such as CACREP, providing some guidance on the mandates for counseling training programs, there are still gaps in educating and training PSC to work with LGBTQ youth (Dragowski, McCabe, & Rubinson, 2016; Owen-Pugh, & Baines, 2014; Quasha, McCabe, & Ortiz, 2014; Ratts, Kaloper, McReady, Tighe, Butler, Dempsey, & McCullough, 2013).

As discussed previously, CACREP is the accrediting body for all counselors in training programs. CACREP (2016) sets forth detailed competencies and standards for universities to follow in order to produce ethically capable professional counselors. Through these standards, CACREP (2016) indicates the need for graduate students to receive course information related to professional counseling identity, which includes knowledge of ethical practice and social/ cultural diversity awareness. This is crucial as counselors are working with vulnerable populations and need to be aware of not only their role within the societal context, but the diverse barriers their clients and students face as members of marginalized populations. CACREP (2016) goes further to set standards for students who are entering diverse settings, such as schools. School

counselors are additionally tasked with taking on the role as leaders within the school, advocating for student's needs, and working on combating barriers and oppression within the schools.

While there are guidelines to engage counselors in training to work with minority clients, these initiatives may not always provide emerging counselors with the tools they need to be effective counselors for the LGBTQ community. Current CACREP standards denote that professional counselors must adhere to "... multicultural and pluralistic characteristics within and among diverse groups nationally and internationally…", "... theories and models of multicultural counseling, cultural identity development, and social justice and advocacy…", and "... multicultural counseling competencies…" (CACREP, 2016, II.F.2, p. 11). These standards, however, are not fully inclusive. When examining CACREP's glossary term of multicultural, it defines multicultural as: "... term denoting the diversity of racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage; socioeconomic status; age; gender; sexual orientation; and religious and spiritual beliefs, as well as physical, emotional, and mental abilities..." (CACREP, 2016, Glossary, p. 46). This definition, while it does include sexual orientation, is non-inclusive of gender identity/ expression (Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014). The exclusion of individuals who are transgender, gender fluid, gender non-binary, and gender non-conforming can be detrimental for those students who identify as such and for those counselors whose ideals and beliefs dismiss these student's identity.

In Ward v. Wilbanks, a graduate counseling student refused to provide clinical counseling services to a client based on the client's self-disclosure of their sexual orientation. Ward asserted she was unable to provide services to her client due to her devout spiritual beliefs and renouncement of homosexuality as an acceptable identity

(Ward v. Wilbanks, 2009). Citing the ACA Code of Ethics, the university in which Ms. Ward attended ultimately dismissed her from the program, due to her unwillingness to work with a client based on personal values and ideals (Kaplan, 2004). While the courts were able to utilize the ACA Code of Ethics to sustain a dismissal for Ms. Ward from the counseling graduate program, it is unacceptable that at that time CACREP could not be utilized (Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014). CACREP did not categorize sexual orientation under their multicultural competencies, but that has since changed. With the new CACREP standards, however, gender identity/ expression is still not included within the CACREP standards for counselors. The lack of recognition or inclusion leaves open the potential for future incidents of refusal of treatment for individuals who do not adhere to societies heteronormative gender standards. Without clear standards, graduate counselor programs may not be placing enough emphasis on providing their students with the most effective tools to successful work with the LGBTQ community (Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014).

**State law.** As previously mentioned, all 50 U.S. states have an anti-bullying policy. Not all anti-bullying policies, however, specifically identify sexual orientation or gender identity as a protected class (Nikolaou, 2017). In an effort to support LGBTQ students, states have moved to enact laws which protect the rights of LGBTQ students and help to establish a safe school environment (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). For instances, at the time of this dissertation, eighteen states; Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington; have strict anti-bullying laws which name sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes (Policy Maps, n.d.). At the time of this dissertation, thirteen states; California, Colorado,

Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington, as well as the District of Columbia; have nondiscrimination laws in place to prevent against discrimination of students based on their gender and sexual identity (Policy Maps, n.d.). While these laws create equity for the students residing in these states, this emphasizes that over half of the states in the U.S. do not have such laws in place to protect their LGBTQ youth from harassment and discrimination. What is in place, however, is not always well defined or comprehensive. As discussed earlier in this chapter, many state mandated anti-bullying laws are not heavily enforced in regards to the way in which bullying is defined, how school staff are required to report or intervene in situations of bullying, and what are seen as appropriate consequences for students who are identified as engaging in bullying. While all 50 U.S. states have an anti-bullying policy (Nikolaou, 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015), only 18 states enforce anti-bullying policies specifically identify sexual orientation or gender identity as a protected class (Policy Map, n.d.). Furthermore, some states and school districts are not held to a particular standard for staff education and training on bullying policies. This can cause staff to be unaware of their role and responsibilities in handling bullying situations or knowing who is identified as a protected class under their bullying policies, such as students who identify as LGBTQ (Hall & Chapman, 2018).

In addition to implementation of state laws protection, states have an influence on what takes place during the school day. State and local departments of education have the ability to provide schools directive on what to include or prohibit during classroom discussion or lesson implementation. These directives can include issues surrounding oppressed populations, such as issues and views on the LGBTQ community. At the time

of this dissertation, the United States currently has seven states; Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas; engaging in what has been coined "No promo homo" (Lamda Legal, n.d.). This term incites that discussion of LGBTQ issues within the classroom, particularly the health and sexual education classroom, will promote LGBTQ awareness and a positive portrayal of sexuality and gender identity outside of the heteronormative view (GLSEN, 2018; Lamba Legal, n.d.). "No Promo Homo" states are restricted to engage in anti-LGBTQ dialogue, prohibiting LGBTQ discussions within the classroom or requiring that any discussion surrounding LGBTQ information must not promote positivity. Currently, only three states, California, New Jersey, and Illinois require schools to include LGBTQ history within their curriculum (Adley, 2019; Jackson, 2019).

**Personal values.** While many counselors hold their professional identity in high regard and are committed to upholding the standards set forth by diverse professional and accrediting bodies, PSC are not immune to their own set of personally held beliefs, ideals, and values. The ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors denotes specific duties that PSC must uphold to ensure they are advocating for an equitable educational environment for all of their students, regardless of personal identity or background (ASCA, 2016a). Within these responsibilities to supporting student development, school counselors must:

> Respect students' and families' values, beliefs, sexual orientation, gender identification/expression and cultural background and exercise great care to avoid imposing personal beliefs or values rooted in one's religion, culture or ethnicity (ASCA, 2016a, A.1.f)

In other words, PSC must be highly aware of any personal beliefs, ideals, or attitudes that they may hold can hinder or negatively impact a student whose self or family identity is not congruent with the PSC values. This misalignment of PSC values and beliefs with their students personal or family identity can have a large impact on the PSC willingness to work with or advocate for these students.

Simons, Hutchison, and Bahr (2017) conducted research investigating school counselor advocacy and work with LGB students. One large finding from the study stated that school counselors who held a more favorable view of LGB students were more likely to advocate for their student's needs. This may be due in part to an alignment between professional counselors commitment to their religious beliefs and its impact on professional counselors preparedness and attitudes towards their LGBTQ clients (Patterson, Perepiczka, Patton, & Peoples, 2018). PSC's attitudes towards the LGBTQ community can also come from two areas referred to as experiential attitudes and expressive attitudes (Clark, 2010). Experiential attitudes are based on one's personal interactions with the LGBTQ community and how they make meaning and process these associations. Knowing or interacting with someone who identifies as LGBTQ may increase an individual's motivation to working with LGBTQ youth through breaking down biases (GLSEN, et. al., 2019). Alternatively, expressive attitudes are not influenced by personal interactions but are focused on the individual portraying a certain identity or image. Individuals may either disrupt or perpetuate the heteronormative agenda to gain social affirmation or avoid social anxiety (Clark, 2010). Here social desirability contributes to an individual's willingness to support or intervene during anti-LGBTQ language and harassment. PSCs must be reflective of their own biases and aware of the

heteronormative oppression that is placed on the LGBTQ community (Owen-Pugh & Baines, 2014).

## Conclusion

While research exists on the role of the PSC to work with LGBTQ youth at the secondary level, limited research has been conducted around the role of advocacy within elementary school counseling (Simons, Hutchison, & Bahr, 2017). This is particularly evident when examining elementary school counseling advocacy within marginalized populations, such as LGBTQ youth and how PSCs are engaging in counseling services with these youth (Byrd & Hays, 2013; Gonzalez, 2014). It is important to understand the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of elementary school counselors working with LGBTQ students to ensure that students are receiving appropriate and ethical support. To determine fully the additional barriers or competencies that may inhibit school counselors from successfully advocating for the LGB students, further research needs to be conducted and examined.

# Chapter 3

## Methodology

The following chapter depicts the research design, methodology, and the nature of the study. The purpose of the research study was to examine elementary professional school counselor's (PSC) knowledge, skills, and dispositions to working with LGBTQ youth and factors that may influence these competencies. More specifically, this chapter explores: (a) participant data, (b) methodology, (c) instruments utilized for data collection, (d) research design, (e) procedures for data analysis, (f) ethical considerations, and (g) assumptions and limitations to the study.

### Research Design

In the current study, a quantitative research design was utilized to explore elementary PSC's competencies and willingness to work with LGBTQ youth. A descriptive correlational design was implemented to explore the proposed research questions. Descriptive correlational design aids in reporting relationships between variables without looking for causation (Lappe, 2000). Descriptive correlational research brings forward the attributes of participants and situations without interference or manipulation of the independent variables (Fraenkel, et. al., 2012; Walker, 2005). A cross-sectional survey was employed to collect the data needed to answer the presented research questions. A cross-sectional survey is a survey that seeks to procure data from at one time from a specific population (Fraenkel, et. al., 2012).

### Research Questions and Hypotheses

The purpose of the research study was to examine elementary professional school counselor's (PSC) competencies, advocacy, and leadership to work with LGBTQ students. As discussed in chapter two, there is limited research on the knowledge, skills,

and dispositions of elementary school counselor's engagement with LGBTQ youth and factors which may impact their advocacy work (Byrd & Hays, 2013; Gonzalez, 2014; Simons, Hutchison, & Bahr, 2017). The primary research questions are:

1. What is the relationship between school counselors' cultural competencies and leadership and their attitudes, skills, and knowledge towards LGBTQ youth?
   *Research Hypothesis One:* Elementary School Counselors' cultural competencies (as measured by the *the Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale* [MSCBS], Greene, 2019) and leadership (as measured by the *School Counselor Leadership Survey* [SCLS]; Young & Bryan, 2015) will have a strong relationship with their disposition towards LGBTQ youth (as measured by *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Knowledge Subscale* [SOCCS-K]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Awareness Subscale* [SOCCS-A]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Skills Subscale* [SOCCS-S]; Bidell, 2005).
2. What is the magnitude of difference in elementary school counselors' disposition, knowledge, and skills based on their current school setting?
   *Research Hypothesis Two:* Elementary school counselors' skills (as measured by *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Knowledge Subscale* [SOCCS-K]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Awareness Subscale* [SOCCS-A]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Skills Subscale* [SOCCS-S]; Bidell, 2005) will have a strong relationship with region and community setting (as measured by the *General Demographics Survey*).

3. What barriers (as measured by the *General Demographics Survey*) do elementary school counselors identify to working with LGBTQ youth within the elementary school setting?

   There is limited current knowledge of barriers for elementary school counselors working with LGBTQ youth, thus, a hypothesis was not developed.

These research questions utilized Queer Theory for terminology and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) to examine how diverse systemic levels interact the elementary PSCs work with LGBTQ youth, as shown in Figure 3. More specifically, the research questions explore if different system levels create barriers to implement LGBTQ services or impact LGBTQ counseling competencies.

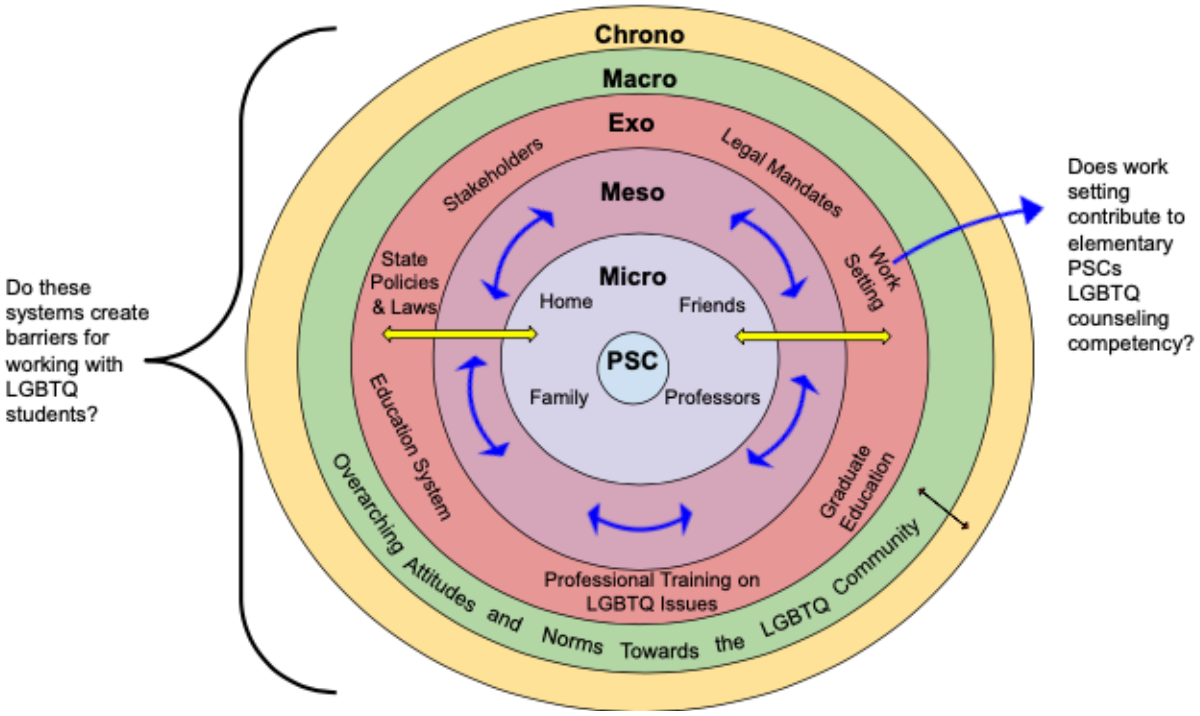


*Figure 3.* Systems impact on research question development. Adapted from *Ecology of Human Development- Experiments by Nature & Design, by. U. Bronfenbrenner, 1979, Harvard University Press. Copyright 1979 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.*

**Positionality**

As a Caucasian, cisgender, heterosexual female, I recognize my ideals, norms, and values and how they impact the current research. I grew up in a family that taught me to respect the uniqueness of everyone and celebrate their individuality. I was told to always stand up for what I believe and defend those I felt were being treated unjustly. I also acknowledge the privilege that comes with my identities and how my privileges have formulated my approach and viewpoint when conducting this research. My identities most align with the dominant group bringing with them the privilege of never being "othered". In my adolescence I did not have the language for this unearned privilege, but I identified that there were particular advantages that I had over others. Outside of my female identity, I did not feel ostracized, targeted, or threatened for who I was or how the world viewed me to be. I did, however, feel that society placed expectations on me as a female and the role I was to play. I made attempts to rebel against this idealist view of femininity or who I needed to be, which now only resembles a whisper of revolt. I had ideas of the unorthodox path my life could take only to sheepishly fall in line with the plan so nicely laid out in front of me. While I am very happy with how my life has turned out and the amazing gifts life has provided me, I still look for ways in which I can push myself to self-actualization. This drive to deliver myself to a space of fulfillment has spilled into a desire to help others achieve this same goal. I welcome moments where I can assist others in finding their authentic selves and develop the self-advocacy skills they need to push against barriers in their path. This passion for helping others find themselves and develop the tools they need to overcome obstacles and create a world in which they can be who they want is what drove me to the school counseling profession. I believe this is also what drives me to advocate for the LGBTQ community. I believe that

individuals should have the right to live life as their authentic selves and be celebrated, not silenced or condemned, for who they are and who they love. I want to support my LGBTQ and ally students to create a world and an education system which validates the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals and constructs a safe space for students to explore their vast identities.

Throughout my time as a professional school counselor (PSC), I have had the privilege of working with diverse populations of students and stakeholders across the P-20 continuum. I have spent the majority of my professional career within a K-8 building providing individual and group counseling focused on enhancing students' social/emotional, academic, and career development. As a professional school counselor, I fully understand the importance of developing and maintaining rapport while expanding networks of relationships to create a community which embraces authenticity and exudes unconditional support of our students. I consistently strive to advocate for equitable opportunities for all of my students. My role has granted me the opportunity to listen to and uplift student voices to provide them brave spaces to express their authentic selves. Throughout my time in public education, I observed multiple systemic barriers that have been reinforced by diverse stakeholders. I have had countless conversations regarding LGBTQ issues and the appropriateness of discussing these issues within schools. LGBTQ advocacy is prevalent in my counseling work. I also feel that my own experience of working with LGBTQ students within the school setting will both assist and hinder my research. As a PSC and LGBTQ ally, I am actively advocating for the needs of my LGBTQ students. I have participated in training, collaborated with stakeholders to eliminate barriers for my LGBTQ students, and I have experience of creating a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) at my school. These experiences help me understand some

potential obstacles that school counselors may face when working with LGBTQ students in younger grade levels. I am passionate about serving as an advocate for LGBTQ youth and helping to ensure equitable opportunities for our marginalized students. I believe strongly in assisting youth to learn how to advocate for their needs and the importance of educating diverse stakeholders in the issues surrounding LGBTQ youth. Developing initiatives to uplift LGBTQ student's voices is key in creating a future where our students are not only heard but seen.

In my research, this may allow me to better formulate research and survey questions as well as examine barriers that researchers outside of the field may overlook. These ideals and experiences, however, may jade my vision of school counselors and the barriers they can or may experience. As a professional school counselor, I am aware of the responsibilities and roles school counselors need to play in a school setting. Through student advocacy and social justice inclusive practices, school counselors need to be actively working to break down barriers for their students to equitable opportunities within schools. This awareness and knowledge may induce bias in relation to the language of my research questions or my preconceived notions of the outcome from my research. My experiences as a school counselor and a GSA advisor may also impact my view on systemic barriers that could impact school counselors' work and advocacy with their LGBTQ students. I am aware of the barriers I have faced when conducting this work and the obstacles some of my colleagues have faced, but this may not be the lived experience of all school counselors.

I am drawn to the epistemological framework of constructivism. I believe that knowledge and truth are constructs that hold various meanings within society. Individual's views of the world are representative of their life experiences and social

groups in which they immerse themselves. I believe that there are multiple realities in which we live and conduct our lives and these realities exist amongst each other. I feel an individual's truth and knowledge is highly influenced by their lived experiences and the societal groups in which they identify with. These societal groups can be chosen by the individual or ones in which they belong involuntarily, such as through family, geographic location, or ethnicity. Within counseling, I take a person-centered approach with my students, which brings in unconditional positive regard to the client and a space free of judgement or bias. I believe that counselors need to embrace their clients for who they are and work within their client's reality. Counselors must be culturally sensitive, not impose their own beliefs, advocate for client needs, and ensure they are following the guidelines set forth by their accrediting association.

Through these beliefs, a level of critical realism is asserted in this research study. Critical realism, first developed by Roy Bhasker, was created as an alternative option to positivism and interpretivism (Hoddy, 2019). Critical realism allows for a middle ground between these two epistemologies. It acknowledges the notion of one true reality from positivism while honoring the idea that people have different interpretations of this "real" reality from interpretivism (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010). This stance resonated with this study as there are fixed ideas of what constitutes comprehensive LGBTQ counseling competencies, but elementary PSCs may perceive their role within this differently. Within my research, I am looking to examine the LGBTQ competencies held by elementary school counselors. I believe that there are competencies and appropriate roles that school counselors must possess in order to be effective advocates for underrepresented populations, such as LGBTQ youth. School counselors must have a knowledge and skill base to successfully work with minority populations and have the

capability to utilize these skills effectively. These competencies are not varied truths, but standards identified by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2012). Critical realism allows the current research to question how elementary PSCs engage with their designated roles with their LGBTQ students and navigate the diverse systems which may have differing interpretations of how these responsibilities are to be carried out.

**Population and Sample**

Participants invited to be a part of the present study were located within the United States and currently work within an elementary school setting as a PSC. As discussed in chapter two, elementary school will be defined as students within grades Kindergarten through sixth grade (Graham, Mckeown, Kiuhara, & Harris, 2012; Hurlburt & Tunks, 2016). Participants were invited to participate based on their current career working within the school counseling field. The target sample for this study was 131 participants. This was based off of the a priori power analysis with a medium effect size ($p = .6$) and a one-tailed alpha of .50 and a power = .95. The power analysis determined that the study required 87 participants to be adequately powered. In order to control for participants who may not complete the full survey or for missing data, the researcher based the target population on 1.5 times the indicated amount by the power analysis. According to a survey completed by the National Center for Education Statistics, there are 54,050 elementary school counselors, grades K through sixth, within the United States (Cox, Parmer, Strizek, & Thomas, 2016). With this, the maximum sample will be 1% of the U.S. elementary school counselors, which is 540 participants.

The current research study made attempts to invite all 54,050 elementary PSCs to participate in this study. Participants were invited to participate in the study through the

CESNET-L listserv, the social media group “Elementary School Counselor Exchange”, ASCA, and through state level professional school counselor associations. Of the total elementary PSC population invited to participate, 111 participants completed the survey and an additional 32 participants began the survey but did not complete the survey in its entirety, resulting in a response rate of .002% overall.

Participant demographics were collected within the General Demographics Survey. The General Demographics Survey was created by the researcher and comprised of nine demographic questions. The demographic information collected included self-identified gender identity, sexual orientation, racial identity, school community setting, school type, years of experience as a PSC, the state that they currently work in, caseload, and professional affiliation were collected. The participants responded to the demographic questions with predetermined response options, which are detailed later in this chapter. Participant demographics were collected to gain a better understanding of the subset of elementary PSC who participated in the study. Additionally, the demographic data was utilized to ensure a well-represented sample was acquired matching that of the current PSC population

All participants were invited to take part in the present study by means of electronic communication. Research involving PSC typically only recruits’ participants through professional counseling organizations, such as ASCA (Young & Bryan, 2016) In an effort to include potential participants who may or may not be affiliated with a professional school counseling organization, participants were contacted through four different platforms. Participants were contacted through the listserv platform group CESNET-L, on the social media group “Elementary School Counselor Exchange”,

through the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), and through state level professional school counseling associations.

CESNET-L is a subset of a larger online listserv created through Kent State University. This listserv connects professionals of similar disciplines and like-minded individuals to public archived discussions and posts. CESNET-L specifically connects individuals around issues concerning counselor education and supervision. This listserv is currently comprised of 4,568 subscribers consisting of counselor educators, supervisors, professional counselors, and graduate students within the counseling discipline. These posts can be viewed two different ways. First, posts or discussions can be viewed through accessing the listserv directly. CESNET-L homepage archives all posts or discussions beginning October 2014 to the present day. All archives are arranged by month, year, and week within the month that the original post or discussion was created. Additionally, CESNET-L subscribers can receive discussions or posts through their designated email. CESNET-L is an unmonitored archived group, which allows its subscribers to post, distribute, and communicate information or personal opinion on a variety of topics without observation or supervision of the disseminated material. The researcher is aware that it is unlikely that elementary school counselors will have direct access to or knowledge of the CESNET-L listserv. It is the researcher's hope that counselor educators and supervisors will take the initiative to disperse the current survey to elementary school counselors within their own network. This network may consist of alumni from their graduate school counseling programs, professional partnerships with elementary school counselors, professional involvement in school counselor organizations, or any other professional or personal interaction with school counselors who meet the survey criteria.

The Elementary School Counselor Exchange is a closed group on the social media platform FaceBook. This group was created as a space for self-identified elementary school counselors to share resources or create discussions surrounding issues in elementary and the school counseling profession. As a closed group, individuals must request to join by ensuring their status as an elementary school counselor and their intent of use for the group. Administrators of the Elementary School Counselor Exchange review requests to join to provide a level of assurance that members are accurately portraying their profession and authentic willingness to engage professionally within the group. At the time of this dissertation, the Elementary School Counselor Exchange had 23,014 members.

Prior to distributing the current survey, the researcher contacted the administrators of the Elementary School Counselor Exchange. The researcher provided an introduction of themselves; the current research, the intended use of the data, and a brief overview of the survey being distributed. Upon review of the information, the researcher was granted permission to post the survey publicly on the Elementary School Counselor Exchange's social media page. Throughout the duration of time that the survey was open, the researcher inspected the post for any comments or questions that may have been published by members of the Elementary School Counselor Exchange.

As discussed in previous chapters, ASCA is an international professional school counseling organization which ensures the development and implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs across all grade levels Pk-16 (ASCA, 2012). These comprehensive school counseling programs serve to promote social/emotional wellbeing as well as college and career readiness through professionalism and ethical practice. ASCA offers membership to current PSCs, retired PSCs, graduate students, and

counselor educators. Currently, ASCA has approximately 36,000 members spanning 52 state and U.S. territory associations (ASCA, n.d.a).

As a member of ASCA, PSCs have access to the ASCA SCENE. The SCENE is an online forum where PSCs can collaborate on issues surrounding the school counseling field and elicit feedback on professional practices. In efforts to support research involving the school counseling field, ASCA has placed specific guidelines for inviting their members to participate in active research studies. ASCA denotes that all research requests must be posted on the SCENE's open forum or with request to be added to the ASCA Aspects e-newsletter (Hickman, 2020).

Finally, this survey will be provided to state level professional school counseling associations. ASCA has provided permission for all 50 U.S. states to hold their own professional school counseling association, referred to as division charters. These 50 U.S. state organizations can provide their state resident school counselors additional professional development and support in the process of creating and maintaining a comprehensive school counseling program. Each of the 50 U.S. state PSC association presidents were contacted individually introducing the researcher, the current study, the demographic criteria for participating in the current study, and permission to distribute the survey to their current members. Out of the 50 PSC state associations, eight state presidents/ chairs responded to the request with six agreeing to distribute the survey to their membership.

The survey ran for a total of nine weeks. Once the survey was opened, invitations to prospective participants were sent out twice. The initial invitation was sent the day the survey began with a reminder email occurring at week five, halfway through the survey

duration. Each participate invitation email introduced the research agenda, participant criteria, brief description of the survey, and a direct link to the electronic survey.

All participants were given the option to partake in an incentive drawing for completing the present research. Participants were notified before taking the survey that they could enter to win one of six $25 Amazon gift cards at the completion of the survey. Once the survey was completed, participants were provided the option to exit the survey or continue on to enter to win the presented incentive. Participants who chose to continue on to enter for the drawing were made aware that in order to participate in the incentive participants would have to provide their name and email address. Further information was provided that participant's identifiable information would only be used to contact the prize winners after the survey had closed at the completion of nine weeks. After drawing has occurred and winners have been successfully contacted, all collected names and email addresses will be expunged to make a continuous effort uphold participant confidentiality.

**Data Collection**

Prior to data collections, the researcher gained approval from Rowan University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. The research also received permission from the authors of the surveys utilized in this study; the Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale ([SOCCS], Biddell, 2015), the School Counselor Leadership Survey ([SCLS], Young & Bryan, 2015) and the Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale ([MSCBS], Greene, 2019). Data collection occurred during the Spring of 2020. Participants had the option to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions.

The present study utilized quantitative research through a self-administered electronic survey to explore elementary school counselor's competencies, advocacy, and leadership with LGBTQ youth. In quantitative research, surveys are one way of acquiring information to provide knowledge about a specific topic or population. Surveys are used to enhance knowledge within professional fields through research questions and the test of hypotheses (Alreck & Settle, 2004). Electronic surveys can be easy to distribute, inexpensive, provide more precise information, and a faster way to collect data (Jansen, Corley, & Jansen, 2006). Data can come from two different types of categorization: primary data and secondary data (Alreck & Settle, 2004). Primary data is when information is collected by researchers to explore or examine identified populations, events, or another measurable phenomenon. The present research was based upon primary data as the researcher collected data that identified the beliefs and actions of a specific population. Furthermore, a survey allows researchers to gather information from a sample of a larger population and compare responses to evaluate trends (Bulmer, 2004; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). For this study, a survey permitted for the ability to obtain data on a subset of the professional elementary school counselors' population in a shorter period of time. Additionally, a survey provides the opportunity to gain an understanding of counseling skills across diverse populations, in regard to work settings, varying experience, and diverse beliefs. This can allow for multiple comparisons, exploration of variable relationships, and potential generalization to the professional field. Obtaining data from a large sample may provide undiscovered information that can lead to future research that may enhance the school counseling profession.

Survey participant duration can also vary amongst research. Surveys can be conducted collecting data from a specific population at one time, known as a cross-

sectional survey, or engaging in research with the same participants more than once over a prolonged period of time, known as a longitudinal study (Fraenkel, et. al., 2012; Payne & Payne, 2004). This research is designed as a cross-sectional study as it targets a specific population, elementary school counselors, and the research only collects data at one specific moment in time.

**Instrumentation**

The following instruments utilized for this research were (a) a General Demographic Survey, (b) the Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale ([SOCCS], Biddell, 2015), (c) the School Counselor Leadership Survey ([SCLS], Young & Bryan, 2015) and (d) the Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale ([MSCBS], Greene, 2019). Prior to research implementation, the researcher received permission for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Rowan University to conduct the present study. Additionally, the researcher gained consent from the authors of the Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale ([SOCCS], Biddell, 2015), the School Counselor Leadership Survey ([SCLS], Young & Bryan, 2015) and the Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale ([MSCBS], Greene, 2019). Participants completed the survey online using the Qualtrics system. The present survey consisted of four sections with a total of 101 questions, taking 25-30 minutes to complete.

**General demographic survey.** The researcher created a general demographic survey, which consisted of two parts. First, the participants were asked nine questions that inquired about their personal and professional selves. The following demographic information was collected with predetermined responses. For the demographic questions pertaining to gender identity, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, participants were given the option to select “prefer to self-describe:”. The selection of “prefer to self-describe:”

would allow individuals to provide their own response outside of the pre-established responses. This is important as a participant's identity may not be represented in the selection and it is essential that all identities feel represented (Human Rights Campaign, 2016). Furthermore, the pre-established responses were drawn from the 2017 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, 2018). This provided guidance on the need for inclusivity of diverse identity options for participants to choose from.

Additionally, participants were given the option to select "I do not wish to respond " for each demographic inquiry. Asking for participants to disclose personal information may be a cause for concern for some participants. This may be due to the information being of a sensitive or private nature or the participants may feel some level of threat if the information is exposed (Alreck & Settle, 2004; Human Rights Campaign, 2016; Stonewall, 2016). For instance, an individual may feel uncomfortable or vulnerable about providing their gender identity and/or sexual orientation to researchers for fear that this disclosure could negatively impact their personal and professional life. Furthermore, participants in this study, as discussed in chapter two, may be working within states or districts that restrict or ban their ability to discuss, advocate for, or educate on issues surrounding the LGBTQ community (Hoshall, 2013; Rosky, 2017). Any information provided in this study that these participants are engaging in work that their school or state has deemed unacceptable may compromise their professional standing as a PSC. This can be captured through identification of the state they work in, identified barriers to working with or advocating for LGBTQ youth, or their responses to the SOCCS portion of this survey.

Furthermore, participants were also asked to identify their current student caseload, the number of years of experience they held as a school counselor, the region

within the United States in which they currently are a practicing school counselor, their school's community setting, the type of school they currently work at, and any professional organization affiliations. For each demographic question participants were given pre-established responses to choose from. The wording of the demographic questions and responses was replicated from the SCLS (Young & Bryan, 2015). All demographic questions and responses can be seen in Appendix A.

Next, the researcher created a section of the survey to identify potential barriers elementary PSC may encounter when working with LGBTQ youth. This section consisted of two questions developed by the researcher. These questions were fielded by an expert panel of Counselor Educators and professional school counselors. The panel provided feedback on the wording of each question and pre-established response, categorization of choices, and ability to identify barriers outside of those listed. The first question asked, "Please identify up to three barriers that have or may have impacted your ability to work with or engage in issues surrounding LGBTQ youth". Participants were instructed to select up to three items that they felt may have or do hinder their ability to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth. Participants were given a pre-established list in which to select their choices. This list consisted of categorized barriers that have been identified by school counselors as interfering with their ability to perform their role successfully, including working with LGBTQ youth. Previous research, as discussed in chapter two, has identified perceived barriers at various systemic levels, working with diverse stakeholders (Smith-Millman, Harrison, Pierce, & Flaspohler, 2019) and counseling roles and limitations (GLSEN, et. al., 2019). The present barrier choices were also aligned with diverse system levels, as adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological systems theory. These barriers spanned the micro-, exo-, and macro- systems. The participants

had eight barrier categories to choose from, including the option of "other (please specify):". If participants chose the option "other (please specify):", a blank box was provided for participants to write in other barriers that they perceive to be hindering their ability to work with LGBTQ youth. The second question asked, "In what ways have these barriers impacted your ability to work with or engage in issues surrounding LGBTQ youth?" Participants were provided with the text box to write their response. The second question was not marked as a required field for the participants to answer. This question did not require an answer to move on to the rest of the survey as some participants may have selected "I do not feel there are any barriers to me working with LGBTQ youth in my school" in the previous question. This selection would indicate the participants do not have barriers in which they can elaborate on how these obstacles have impacted their ability to work with or engage in issues surrounding LGBTQ youth. A full outline of the questions related to barriers can be viewed in the demographic questionnaire survey in Appendix A.

**Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale (SOCCS).** The Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale ([SOCCS], Bidell, 2005) examines counselor competencies when counseling lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) clients. Through integration of LGB-affirmative counseling and alignment with multicultural counselor competency theory, the SOCCS allows for exploration of counselor's biases, knowledge, and ability to accurately work with LGB clients. The SOCCS utilized a sample of 312 mental health graduate students, professionals, and educators from the United States (Bidell, 2005). This 29 item scale contains three factors: (a) Factor 1: Awareness (10 items) of biases and attitudes towards LGB clients and issues, (b) Factor 2: Skills (11 items) utilized and needed when working with LGB individuals, and (c) Factor 3:

Knowledge (nine items) of issues faced by the LGB population. Each survey question on the SOCCS is rated on a seven-point Likert scale (ranging from one= not at all true, to four= somewhat true, to seven= totally true). Prior research using the SOCCS has resulted in an internal consistency of Cronbach's alpha = .90, with the subscales of awareness, skills, and knowledge showing .88, .91, and .76, respectfully (Bidell, 2005). Additionally, a one-week test-retest analysis provided an overall reliability of .84, with the subscales of awareness, skills, and knowledge showing .85, .83, and .84, respectfully (Bidell, 2005). The SOCCS scores can be provided as an overall score or individual subscale scores. For overall SOCCS scores, eleven of the 29 SOCCS items (2, 10, 11, 15, 17, 21, 22, 23, 27, 28, and 29) are reverse scored. All values are then added and divided by the number of items (29) to produce an overall competence score. There is no detail on what constitutes a low, moderate, or high score yet based on the total overall score it can be deduced where competence values may range (Farmer, Welfare, & Burge, 2013).

Permission was obtained by the author to utilize the SOCCS. Additionally, with consent provided by Dr. Bidell, alterations were made to the language of the original SOCCS statements. Original language of "client" and "clients" was changed to "student" and "students". This change was made as all participants in the present study work within a school setting with students. School counselors do not typically refer to the youth they work with as "clients" as it is not a clinical setting.

Further studies of the SOCCS have provided insight on the validity and reliability of the scale. Factor analysis has indicated that the subscales are still relevant but with some structural differences. Awareness, knowledge, and skills remain as reliable subscales with some variance of combining knowledge and skills as well as adding an additional subscale of experience (Ali, Lambi, & Bloom, 2017; Carlson, McGeorge, &

Toomey, 2013). At this time the SOCCS scale remains in its original format. The SOCCS has been adapted by multiple researchers to research counselor competencies beyond sexual orientation. Adaptations through changing terminology has allowed researchers to explore professional counselor's knowledge and skills towards gender identity and gender expression (Bidell, 2017; O, Dispenza, Brack, & Blood, 2016). Additionally, researchers have incorporated SOCCS subscales in their research to be able to narrow their focus of research (Byrd & Hays, 2013).

A limitation to the SOCCS is that the instrument only measures counselor's competencies when working with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual clients. It is important to note this as gender identity and sexual orientation are two different aspects of an individual's identity. The absence of gender identity limits our knowledge on PSC knowledge and skills when working with students with various gender identities. Additionally, some PSCs may feel that they do not have experience working with LGB students. It is still crucial to gain their responses as these PSCs may be unaware of their interactions with the LGB community either due to student's not engaging in self disclosure, the PSCs lack of awareness of their students family structure, or the PSC interactions with staff who identify within the LGB community.

**School Counselor Leadership Survey (SCLS).** The School Counselor Leadership Survey (SCLS) assists professional school counselors and school counselor supervisors assess their leadership practices within the school counseling profession (Young & Bryan, 2015). The development of the SCLS branched over a three study-process (Young & Bryan, 2018). In the first study, the researchers conducted a literature review of survey items and utilized information collected during three focus groups. These focus groups included school counselors, graduate students, and counselor

supervisors. Next, the researchers conducted a pilot study with a 43-item survey. This pilot student was given to 102 school counselors, school counselor supervisors, and graduate students (Young & Bryan, 2018). After a factor analysis was conducted all items were found valid with Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of samples in adequacy of .74 and Barlett's test of sphericity suggesting the items were adequate ( $p < .05$) (Young & Bryan, 2015; Young & Bryan, 2018). The 43-items were analyzed by a focus group of school counselors and counselor educators for final review. As a result, four items were discarded and the SCLS concluded with a 39-item inventory. The final study conducted distributed the 39-item study to 801 school counselors and school counselor supervisors. The exploratory factor analysis yielded a five-factor survey with a total of 32-items.

Each question on the SCLS is rated in a seven-point Likert scale (ranging from one = never, to seven = always). The survey consists of 32 items within five factors; (a) Factor 1: Interpersonal Influence (nine items) examining the PSC's ability to uphold their institutes vision through their work, (b) Factor 2: Systemic Collaboration (six items) assessing the PSC work with stakeholders to create and implement programmatic change at various systemic levels, (c) Factor 3: Resourceful Problem Solving (10 items) includes the ability to explore and secure new approaches to support positive progression for all students and the school's climate, (d) Factor 4: Professional Efficacy (four items) examining the participants belief in their ability to enact change, and (e) Factor 5: Social Justice Advocacy (three items) looks at the PSC disposition to disrupt inequities within the school. Reliability for the survey was conducted with subscales of interpersonal influence, systemic collaboration, resourceful problem solving, professional efficacy, and social justice advocacy showing, .84, .87, .89, .88, and .82 respectively (Young & Bryan, 2015). A regression model was conducted resulting in the intercorrelations among the

factor scores from .54 to .70, showing compounding elements. A confirmatory factor analysis was later conducted by the researchers to examine the validity of the scale as well as comparisons across demographics.

The study consisted of 776 school counselors across the United States. The confirmatory factor analysis upheld the SCLS showed strong internal consistency. Reliability for the survey was conducted with subscales of interpersonal influence, systemic collaboration, resourceful problem solving, professional efficacy, and social justice advocacy showing, .82, .86, .88, .87, and .81 respectively (Young & Bryan, 2018). A regression model was conducted resulting in the intercorrelations among the factor scores from .52 to .76, showing compounding elements.

Despite the SCLS having two studies indicating the validity and reliability of the scale, a test-retest has not been completed. This can cause concern for the instruments construct validity, the instruments ability to produce generalizability. While the authors of the SCLS did not perform a test-retest, the instrument was correlated through extensive literature review convened over three focus groups, conducted a pilot study, and administered the survey to PSC and counseling supervisors (Young & Bryan, 2018). Additionally, both studies using the SCLS recruited participants from professional school counseling associations, such as the American School Counseling Association (ASCA). This may cause concern if generalizing the findings to the PSC community as a whole. This concern, however, is being addressed the

**Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale (MSCBS).** The final section was a six-point Likert scale known as the Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale ([MSCBS], Greene, 2019). The MSCBS was developed as a tool to evaluate PSC self-reported multicultural skills with a focus on the PSC behavior in each area of their

comprehensive school counseling program delivery (Greene, 2019). The self-assessment drew upon the ASCA ethical standards, ASCA's stance on cultural diversity, and previously developed multicultural tools and checklists. The initial tool was composed of 36 items which examined PSCs multicultural behaviors. The scale was then examined by a committee of content experts prior to the implementation of the tool for use in a pilot study. After review, 31 items remained in the survey (Greene, 2019). The MSCBS drew upon a sample of 689 school counselors, all of whom were members of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). This sample consisted of school counselors from each region of the United States (Midwestern, Western, Southern, and North Atlantic), school counselors ranging in years of experience, and diverse ethnicities.

The scale retained the six-point Likert scale (ranging from 1=Never, to 4= Weekly) indicating how often PSC engaged in a particular activity. The final survey consisted of 29 items with four factors; (a) Factor 1: Interventions (12 items) was related to the counselor's ability to work with diverse stakeholders and intervene on issues of discrimination, (b) Factor 2: Leadership (eight items) examined school counselors intentions to seek knowledge and take on leadership roles; (c) Psychoeducation (six items) which looked at the school counselor's enactment of classroom guidance lessons and group counseling; and (d) Seek Input (three items) which examined the PSC ability to elicit feedback. The four-factor solution accounted for 50.2% of the variance, and a high overall internal reliability of Cronbach's α of .91, with the subscales of interventions, leadership, psychoeducation, and seek input showing .85, .82, .83, and .85, respectfully (Greene, 2019).

The MSCBS scores can be provided as an overall score or individual subscale scores. For overall MSCBS score, all values are added and divided by the number of

items (29) to produce an overall competence score. For subscale scores, each subscale item value is added and divided by the total number of items. The subscale items were as follows: (a) Factor 1: Interventions (12 items) 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 18, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 29; (b) Factor 2: Leadership (eight items) 11, 12, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, and 28; (c) Psychoeducation (six items) 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7; and (d) Seek Input (three items) 14, 15, and 16 (Greene, 2019).

A limitation to using this survey are similar to the limitations of the SCLS. The MSCBS is a new survey tool and with this, the MSCBS has not been utilized in other research or through a test-retest. This can cause concern for the instruments generalizability to measure school counselor leadership accurately. The author correlated the MSCBS by extensively reviewed multicultural counseling competence literature, including ethical standards in cultural diversity denoted from the ASCA. ASCA ethical and multicultural standards are based on standards that experts in our field have reviewed and agree upon (ASCA, 2016a; 2019b). The author also took guidance from previously existing multicultural tools and surveys, such as the Multicultural Counseling Competence Training Survey- Revised (Greene, 2019). Additionally, all participants were members of ASCA. This sample population may already have internal desires to engage in multiculturally competent practices due to their active involvement with a national school counseling association.

**Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed for the information collected from the General Demographic Questionnaire, the Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale ([MSCBS], Greene, 2019), the School Counselor Leadership Survey [SCLS]; Young & Bryan, 2015), and the Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale [SOCCS]; Bidell, 2005). All obtained

data was input and analyzed with Statistical Program Systems Software 26th edition (SPSS). An a priori power analysis was conducted to determine the sample size needed to ensure the research was adequately powered.

An a priori power analysis was conducted to determine the sample size needed to ensure the research was adequately powered. The power analysis was based off of a medium effect size (p = .50) with a one-tailed alpha of .50 and a power = .80. The power analysis concluded that a sufficient sample size of 87 participants was needed to achieve adequate power for all three research questions. Descriptive statistics were run to determine normality, skewness, and kurtosis of continuous data. Data from the demographic questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive analysis. The data analysis was originally structured to conduct a Canonical Correlation Analysis, Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), and Descriptive Analysis to analyze the data from the instruments. Due to data complications, the MANOVA was replaced with a nonparametric test, which will be discussed further in this chapter.

**Research hypothesis one.** A Canonical Correlation Analysis was run to examine the relationship between elementary PSC competencies to work with LGBTQ youth pairs of variables (as measured by *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale-Knowledge Subscale* [SOCCS-K]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Awareness Subscale* [SOCCS-A]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Skills Subscale* [SOCCS-S]; Bidell, 2005) and their cultural competencies (as measured by the *Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale* [MSCBS], Greene, 2019) and leadership abilities (as measured by the *School Counselor Leadership Survey* [SCLS]; Young & Bryan, 2015), as shown in Figure 4. Within a Canonical Correlation Analysis, two types of variables are utilized, known as

criterion and predictor variates (Meyers, Gamst, & Guarino, 2017). This study examined three variables in the criterion variate set: attitudes, knowledge, and skills (as measured by *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Knowledge Subscale* [SOCCS-K]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Awareness Subscale* [SOCCS-A]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Skills Subscale* [SOCCS-S]; Bidell, 2005) and two variables within the predictor variate set: school counselor's cultural competencies (as measured by the *Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale* [MSCBS], Greene, 2019) and leadership abilities (as measured by the *School Counselor Leadership Survey* [SCLS]; Young & Bryan, 2015). A total of two canonical functions will be performed due to the smallest variate set containing two variables (Sherry & Henson, 2005). Eigenvalues will be obtained to explain the variance associated with each canonical function and Wilkes Lambda will explain statistical significance of the canonical functions. Structure coefficients and canonical function coefficients will interpret the strongest relationships between individual variables and variate model. This interpretation will assist in the deduction of which canonical function(s) will be further explored.

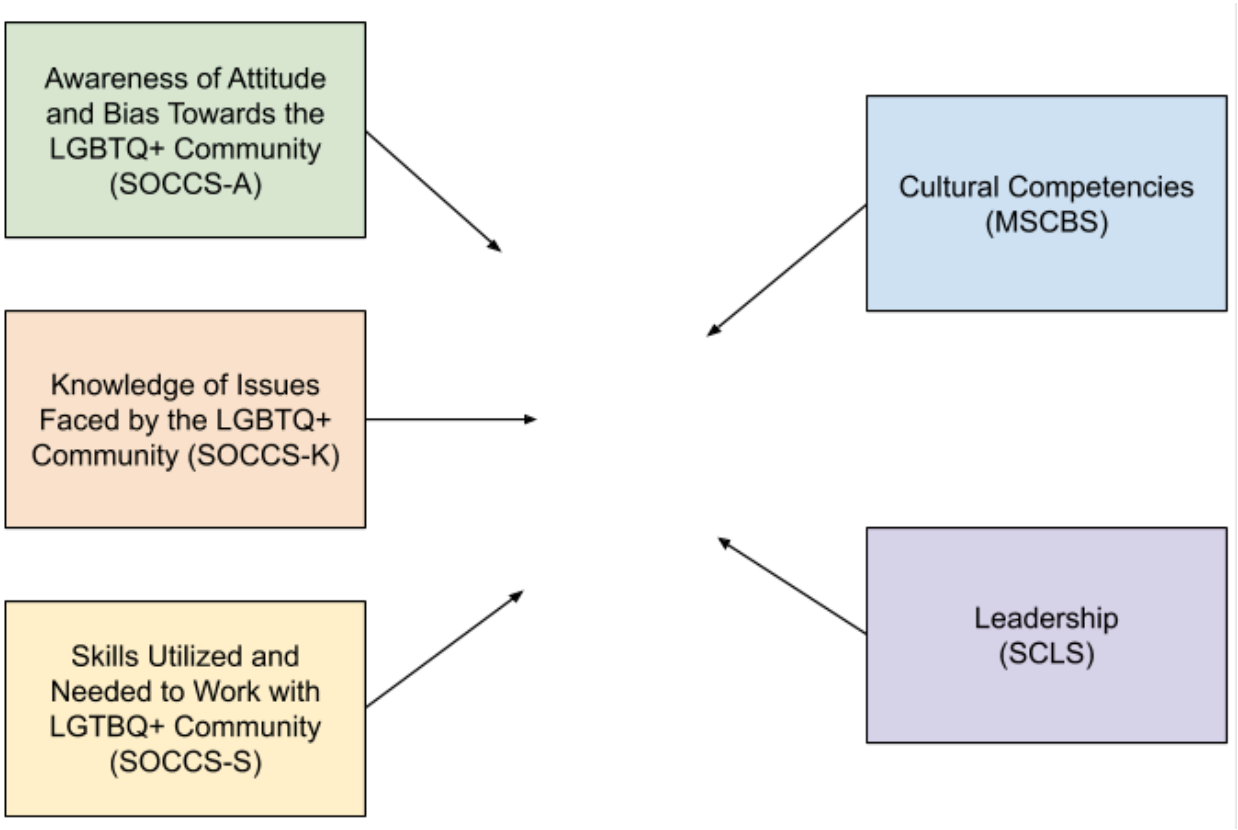


*Figure 4.* Canonical correlation analysis for research hypothesis one.

**Research hypothesis two.** A MANOVA was conducted to examine the magnitude of difference in elementary school counselors' knowledge, awareness, and skills (as measured by *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Knowledge Subscale* [SOCCS-K]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Awareness Subscale* [SOCCS-A]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Skills Subscale* [SOCCS-S]; Bidell, 2005) based on their current school setting (as measured by the *General Demographics Survey*). Within the MANOVA, the independent variable of current school setting has ten levels: (a) public schools, (b) religious-affiliated private school, (c) other independent or private school, (d) urban, (e) suburban, (f) rural, (g) Northeast [CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT, NJ, PA, NY], (h)

South [DE, DC, FL, GA, MD, NC, SC, VA, WV, Al, KY, MS, TN, AR, LA, OK, TX], (i) Midwest [IN, IL, MI, OH, WI, IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD], and (j) West [AZ, CO, ID, NM, MT, UT, NV, WY, AK, CA, HI, OR, WA]. The dependent variables consisted of three scales measuring the following: (a) knowledge of LGBTQ issues, (b) skills to working with LGBTQ youth, and (c) awareness of personal dispositions towards the LGBTQ community.

Due to non-normality for the data, which is further discussed in chapter four, a nonparametric test was utilized. A nonparametric test is used when data is not normality distributed for nominal or ordinal data (Privitera, 2015). A nonparametric test is appropriate for this study as the data in research question two was found to be not normally distributed and the data collected was both ordinal and nominal. When using nonparametric tests, the data is run through an analysis of variance (ANOVA). This differs from the researcher's original intent to conduct a MANOVA. An ANOVA differs from a MANOVA as an ANOVA includes only one dependent variable where a MANOVA includes multiple, dependent variables (Meyers, Gamst, & Guarino, 2017; Privitera, 2015). Additionally, Kruskal-Wallis Test was conducted to examine the differences of counseling competencies to working with LGBTQ issues between school community locations. Kruskal-Wallis test is utilized to identify the significance of difference when working with non-normal data (Privitera, 2015). The current research question contains three dependent variables; (a) knowledge of LGBTQ issues, (b) skills to working with LGBTQ youth, and (c) awareness of personal dispositions towards the LGBTQ community; and its current configuration does not meet the definition of an ANOVA. As a result of this disparity, the research conducted three separate nonparametric tests to allow for the examination of one dependent variable at a time.

**Research hypothesis three.** Descriptive statistics was utilized to analyze the identified barriers (as measured by the *Demographic Questionnaire Survey*) to working with LGBTQ youth. Descriptive statistics will examine one form of central tendency (mode) to distinguish the most frequently selected barrier to working with LGBTQ students. Higher frequency of selected barriers will be examined to determine the highest indicated obstacle for LGBTQ advocacy.

## Ethical Considerations

Appropriate measures were taken to ensure all participant involvement criteria has been approved by the institutional review board at Rowan University. Additionally, permission to distribute the survey has been gathered from the American School Counselor Association, each state's school counselor association executive board, the administrators of the "Elementary School Counselor Exchange". CESNET-L is an open online forum which is not monitored allowing individuals to send messages to registered users. CESNET-L creators assume their users are using professional discretion when contacting other subscribers. Due to this, permission to distribute the current survey to registered CESNET-L individuals was not needed.

Elementary school counselors recruited for this research were provided a link to the survey through Qualtrics. Upon selecting the link, participants were greeted with a message informing them of the nature of the study, estimated time of completing the survey, and information about how they can withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, participants were informed that for participating in the survey, they were eligible to enter to win one of six $25 Amazon gift cards. Participants were informed that involvement in the incentive drawing was optional and only participants who opted to participate in the incentive drawing would have to provide their name and email address.

Finally, participants were ensured that all efforts were made to protect the confidentiality of participants. This is especially prevalent to those working in states in which they are restricted from discussing or advocating for LGBTQ youth within schools, as previously discussed in chapter two. In order to achieve this, participants will be identified by a randomly assigned number during data input and analysis. Additionally, research data responses were stored in a secure computer file and only the researcher had direct access to all of the collected data. Finally, during the creation of the survey the researcher enabled the termination option of "Anonymize Response" provided through Qualtrics. This tool prompts Qualtrics to not record any personal information and remove any contact information linked to the survey response upon survey termination.

**Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

This research study is not without its limitations or areas of assumptions. In conducting this research, the researcher is assuming that elementary PSCs are aware of and knowledgeable about LGBTQ youth. This would include a basic understanding of the LGBTQ community and issues surrounding this population. As PSCs, the researcher is asserting that these participants are aware of and adhere to the ASCA national standards and competencies when working with marginalized populations, such as LGBTQ youth, discussed in chapter two. This includes leadership and advocacy for oppressed populations. Additionally, this research is assuming that elementary PSCs have thought of LGBTQ issues arising within the elementary grade levels or given thought to how they would react when faced with issues surrounding LGBTQ youth.

A limitation for this study is in the delivery method of emailed the survey to school counselors. The rate of response to emailed surveys has declined over the past few decades (Shannon, Johnson, Searcy, & Lott, 2002). Individuals presented with the

opportunity to take an emailed survey may delete the email without reading it, may feel less confident using technology, and may have concerns about their confidentiality within the survey. Additionally, there may be issues in terms of accessing email addresses and verifying that the correct email address has been obtained (Shannon, et. al., 2002). An alternative communication to invite participants, such as a mailed letter, as well as a different means in completing the survey, such as paper-based, could increase the response rate.

Survey error can also occur within this study. Survey error occurs when only a small portion of a population subgroup is surveyed (Dillman, 2007). In this study, two types of survey error could occur. First, a coverage error may occur if all participants emails are not obtained or are incorrectly obtained. This would lead to not all elementary school counselors within United States having the opportunity to participate. Secondly, nonresponse error could occur if a large number of school counselors do not respond to the survey and if some respondents do not fit the characteristics needed for this survey (Dillman, 2007). This can occur if individuals are hired under the title of 'school counselor' but do not hold a school counseling degree. In these cases, individuals may be school psychologists, school social workers, or other mental health providers who are working in the school as the counselor. Additionally, this would be a concern if individuals completed the survey who work outside of the elementary setting, such as in middle, high school, or community-based settings.

Furthermore, this survey is being made available to individuals who are members of ASCA, state school counselor associations, "Elementary School Counselor Exchange", or in communication with a member of CESNET-L. The narrow scope of participants that have access to the study may eliminate large subgroups of the elementary school

counseling population that are not involved in these school counseling networks. This may be due to a lack of awareness of professional school counselor networks, insufficient funds to join professional organizations, or disinterest to be involved in these professional communities. Also, the surveys this study used relied on pre-existing measures. Due to this, there was very little to no availability to alter the language or structure of the measure.

Additionally, this survey is only recruiting participants who work within the elementary setting, defined as grades PreK-6. By narrowing the criteria of participants to a limited range in grade levels, the data will not reflect the attitudes and willingness to alter the heteronormativity in schools by PSC from higher grade levels. While previous research has examined middle and high school PSC interactions and work with LGBTQ youth, exclusion of this population in this study will not allow for comparison of the data across all K-12 grade levels.

Finally, the method in which the data is being collected is through the means of a survey. With this, the participants are self-reporting their beliefs and actions on a predetermined rating scale. Participants may report their responses in contradiction to their authentic actions. This may occur if the participant is unaware of their daily interactions or responses relating to issues surrounding LGBTQ youth or if the participants hold incongruent views of their efforts to provide leadership or advocacy for LGBTQ youth. The dissonance participant responses can also be seen through response bias. Response bias is the action of research subjects to respond to survey items inaccurately. Response bias can be found within survey design research as the participants are self-reporting for each survey item (Furnham, 1986). When response bias occurs, the final outcome of research data can be an over or underestimation of the

population sample (Lavrakas, 2008). A type of response bias found within survey research is social desirability.

Social desirability bias is the occurrence of a participant in a study to respond to questions in a way that the participant believes is more favorable to others and serve as a potential threat to the validity of survey data (Aiken, 1997; Dillman, 2000; Fowler, 1993; Groves, 1989; Latkin, Edwards, Davey-Rothwell, & Tobin, 2017). For instance, participants in this study may feel they need to answer survey items more favorably to indicate LGBTQ support regardless of their current actions or beliefs. While each survey accounts for social desirability, it is still a factor which must be considered when interpreting the data.

**Summary**

The research methods for this study were used to examine the self-assessed competencies, advocacy, and leadership to work with LGBTQ students within elementary school. The research methods presented in this chapter included; (a) population sample, (b) data collection, (c) instrumentation, (d) research design, (e) research hypothesis and exploratory questions, and (f) data analysis. Furthermore, the chapter included a description of the assumptions, ethical considerations, and potential limitations to the study.

# Chapter 4

## Findings

The purpose of this research is to explore elementary PSCs knowledge, skills, and dispositions to working with LGBTQ youth and factors that may influence these competencies. The research questions that guide this study are:

1. What is the relationship between school counselors' cultural competencies and leadership and their attitudes, skills, and knowledge towards LGBTQ youth?

   *Research Hypothesis One:* Elementary School Counselors' cultural competencies (as measured by the *the Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale* [MSCBS], Greene, 2019) and leadership (as measured by the *School Counselor Leadership Survey* [SCLS]; Young & Bryan, 2015) will have a strong relationship with their disposition towards LGBTQ youth (as measured by *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Knowledge Subscale* [SOCCS-K]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Awareness Subscale* [SOCCS-A]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Skills Subscale* [SOCCS-S]; Bidell, 2005).

2. What is the magnitude of difference in elementary school counselors' disposition, knowledge, and skills based on their current school setting?

   *Research Hypothesis Two:* Elementary school counselors' skills (as measured by *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Knowledge Subscale* [SOCCS-K]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Awareness Subscale* [SOCCS-A]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Skills Subscale* [SOCCS-S]; Bidell, 2005) will have a strong relationship

with region and community setting (as measured by the *General Demographics Survey*).

3. What barriers (as measured by the *General Demographics Survey*) do elementary school counselors identify to working with LGBTQ youth within the elementary school setting?

   There is limited current knowledge of barriers for elementary school counselors working with LGBTQ youth, thus, a hypothesis was not developed.

To investigate these questions, the researcher utilized multiple quantitative statistical analysis to gain a better understanding of elementary school's competencies to working with LGBTQ youth and potential barriers that may impede this work. The following chapter analyzes the quantitative data collected from the surveys. More specifically, this chapter will examine: (a) demographics of research participant, (b) descriptive statistics, and (c) an analysis for each of the three research questions.

**Demographics**

Of the 111 participants, a vast majority, 105, were employed in a public school. This overrepresentation of public-school elementary counselors is representative of the field as a vast majority of school counselors work within public schools (Cox, Parmer, Strizek, & Thomas, 2016). The over representation of public-school elementary PSC's in this study caused a level of non-normality. There was even distribution of participants across the four regions of the United States allowing for equal representation. In regard to community setting, a little over half of the participants worked in a suburban setting with the remaining participants evenly distributed within urban and rural settings. The professional location of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Professional Location of Sample*

| Variable | Number of Responses | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Type of School | | |
| Public | 105 | 94.6 |
| Religious-Affiliated Private | 4 | 3.6 |
| Other Independent or Private | 2 | 1.8 |
| Community Setting | | |
| Urban | 27 | 24.3 |
| Suburban | 60 | 54.1 |
| Rural | 24 | 21.6 |
| Region of U.S. | | |
| Northeast | 28 | 25.2 |
| South | 30 | 27.0 |
| Midwest | 27 | 24.3 |
| West | 26 | 23.4 |

The majority of participants (87%) were members of ASCA with the next highest professional affiliation (70%) belonging to state level school counseling associations. In terms of years of experience as a professional school counselor, over half of the participants had five or less years of experience as professional school counselors. In regard to the number of students on participants caseload, the majority of participants had 251-500 students with the smallest group having over 1,000 students. The professional characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.1.

Table 2

*Professional Characteristics of Sample*

| Variable | Number of Responses | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Professional Affiliations | | |
| ASCA | 96 | 86.5 |
| ACA | 8 | 7.2 |
| State Level | 78 | 70.3 |
| County Level | 22 | 19.8 |
| Other | 4 | 3.6 |
| No Professional Affiliations | 6 | 5.4 |
| Years of Experience | | |
| 0 – 2 | 31 | 27.9 |
| 3 – 5 | 35 | 31.5 |
| 6 – 10 | 17 | 15.3 |
| 11 – 15 | 14 | 12.6 |
| 16 – 20 | 7 | 6.3 |
| 21+ | 7 | 6.3 |
| Students in Caseload | | |
| 0 – 250 | 14 | 12.6 |
| 251 – 500 | 49 | 44.1 |
| 501 – 750 | 35 | 31.5 |
| 751 – 1,000 | 10 | 9.0 |
| 1,001+ | 3 | 2.7 |

The vast majority of participants were female, which is representative of the school counseling profession (Gilbride, Goodrich, & Luke, 2016; Holcomb-McCoy,

2005). In terms of ethnicity, most participants identified as white, which again is representative of the professionals within this field (Gilbride, Goodrich, & Luke, 2016; Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). Participants overwhelming identification as either white or female is also depictive of ASCA's professional membership (ASCA, 2020). The personal characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.2.

Table 3

*Personal Characteristics of Sample*

| Variable | Number of Responses | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Gender Identity | | |
| Female | 104 | 93.7 |
| Male | 6 | 5.4 |
| Nonbinary | 1 | 0.9 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Hispanic/ Latinx | 9 | 8.1 |
| White | 90 | 81.1 |
| Black/ African American | 8 | 7.2 |
| Asian/ South Asian/ Pacific Islander | 3 | 2.7 |
| Middle Eastern/ Arab American | 1 | 0.9 |
| Native American/ American Indian/ Alaska Native | 1 | 0.9 |
| Multiracial | 1 | 0.9 |

**Analysis**

Descriptive statistics for the dataset are presented in Table 2. Awareness individual mean score do not meet normality as skewness and kurtosis values outside of the suggested normal range of +/- 3.00 (Osborne, 2013). Figure 5 examines the negative skewness of awareness individual mean scores. The inflation of high awareness scores is consistent with previous research in multicultural awareness, which found that professional counselors displayed high scores on awareness subscales and lower scores on knowledge and skills scales (Bidell, 2005; 2012; Holcomb-McCoy, 2001; 2005).

Table 4

*Descriptive Statistics: Means, Standard Deviations, Skewness and Kurtosis*

| Variable | *M* | *SD* | Skewness | Kurtosis | Cronbach's Alpha |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Awareness Individual Mean Score | 6.6 | .77 | -3.04 | 9.92 | .91 |
| Skills Individual Mean Score | 3.73 | 1.15 | .22 | -.65 | .85 |
| Knowledge Individual Mean Score | 5.57 | .59 | -.74 | .92 | .66 |
| SCLS Individual Mean Score | 2.36 | 4.106 | -1.106 | 1.326 | .93 |
| MSCBS Individual Mean Score | 3.43 | .67 | -.11 | -.28 | .91 |

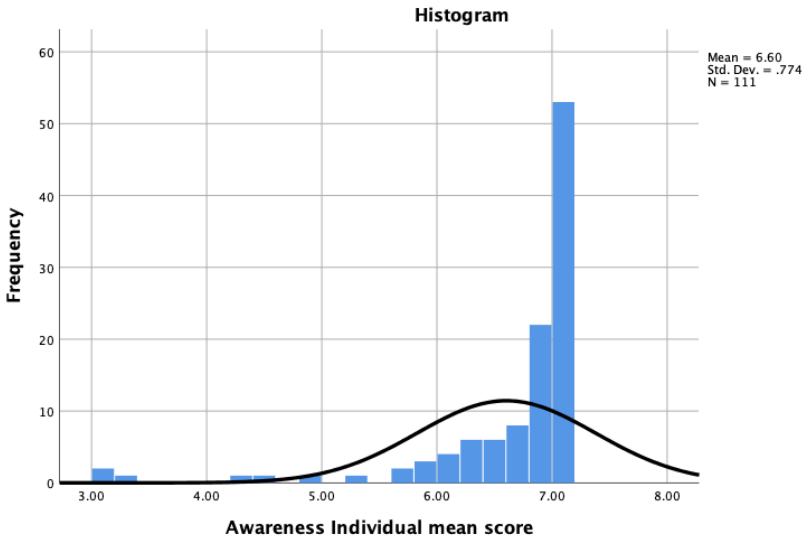


*Figure 5.* Histogram of awareness individual mean score.

**Research question one.** A canonical correlation analysis (CCA) was used to explore the relationships between school counselors' cultural competencies and leadership and their attitudes, skills, and knowledge towards LGBTQ+ youth. The dependent variables were dispositions towards the LGBTQ community, their knowledge of LGBTQ issues, and their attained skills to working with LGBTQ youth. The predictor variables were elementary school counselor's cultural competencies and their leadership skills.

With a total of 111 cases, the relationship between the sets of variables was statistically significant, Wilks' lambda =.732, $R_c2$. =27, Approximate $F(6, 212) = 5.94$, $p < .001$. $R_c2$ explains the amount of variance that can be explained by the predictor variables. With an $R_c2$ of .27, approximately 27% of the observed variance can be explained by the model. All two functions were extracted. Eigenvalues, percentages of variance explained, and the squared canonical correlations for each function are shown in

Table 3. The first function accounted for approximately 91% of the explained variance, and the second function added 9% to that. The dimension reduction analysis indicated that only the first function was statistically significant; therefore, the researcher interpreted one function.

The structure coefficients and canonical function coefficients for the function for the predictor and dependent variables are shown in Table 3.1 and 3.2, respectively. The predictor function is associated with lower levels of cultural competencies and leadership; the dependent function is associated with lower levels of skills when working with LGBTQ youth. Taken together, the function appears to indicate that having a lack of cultural competencies and leadership practices is predictive of low level of skills needed to work with LGBTQ youth.

Table 5

*CCA: Eigenvalues, Percentages of Variance Explained, and the Squared Canonical Correlations*

| Function | Eigenvalue | Percent Variance Explained | Squared Canonical Correlation | Function Coefficients |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | .32 | 91.37 | .24 | .49 |

Table 6

*Structure Coefficients and Canonical Function Coefficients for Predictor Variables*

| Predictor Variable | Structure Coefficients | Canonical Function Coefficients |
|---|---|---|
| Leadership | -.70 | -.31 |
| Cultural Competencies | -.96 | -.81 |

Table 7

*Structure Coefficients and Canonical Function Coefficients for Dependent Variables*

| Dependent Variable | Structure Coefficients | Canonical Function Coefficients |
|---|---|---|
| Awareness | .27 | .27 |
| Skills | -.96 | -.93 |
| Knowledge | -.35 | -.11 |

As previously stated, descriptive statistics indicated that awareness individual mean scores were not normally distributed. To ensure the analysis accurately depicts the relationship between the variables, an additional CCA was conducted omitting awareness individual mean scores. The relationship between the sets of variables was still statistically significant, Wilks' lambda =.771, $R_c2.$ =23, Approximate $F(4, 214) = 7.44$, $p < .001$. The first function accounted for approximately 99% of the explained variance. As evident in the first CCA, the predictor function is associated with lower levels of cultural competencies and leadership; the dependent function is associated with lower levels of

skills when working with LGBTQ youth. Due to the CCA analysis with and without awareness individual mean score indicating similar statistically significant results, it was determined that awareness individual mean score would remain in the analysis. This was largely due to the non-normality of awareness individual mean scores being negatively skewed by high indications of awareness competencies. Participate self-reported scores were deemed important to the observation as it provides valuable insight to a field with limited knowledge on elementary PSCs awareness to working with LGBTQ youth.

**Research question two.** A total of 111 elementary school counselors from across the United States participated in this study. A one-way MANOVA design was used to determine whether there are mean differences in elementary school counselors' skills, knowledge, and awareness based on their current school setting. Data was checked for normality and homogeneity. The variable "type of school" was not balanced, with 105 school counselors identifying their school type as public, 4 as religious-affiliated private, and 2 as other independent or private school. Additionally, awareness individual mean scores was examined within descriptive statistics to be negatively skewed and too peaked. Due to the disproportionate representation of type of school, this variable was excluded from the analysis.

The correlations of dependent variables are shown in Table 4 for competencies within urban settings, suburban settings, rural settings, and regions of the United States, respectively. Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant (approximate chi square = 22.28, $df = 5$, $p < .001$) indicating that the correlations of the dependent variables were sufficient to support the MANOVA. Box's test of the equality of the variance-covariance matrices was also significant [Box's $M = 168.328$, $F(66, 2861.365) = 2.008$, $p < .001$], suggesting that the matrices were not equal. This indicates that

homogeneity of covariances is not normal and the analysis could not be interpreted accurately.

With the existence of non-normal data indicated in both Box's test and awareness individual mean score, a non-parametric independent samples test was conducted. Kruskal-Wallis Test was conducted to examine the differences of counseling competencies to working with LGBTQ issues between school community locations. No significant differences (Chi square = 1.77, p = .41, df = 2), was found in awareness with a mean rank of 49.26, 57.93, and 58.75 among the three categories of urban, suburban, and rural, respectively. No significant differences (Chi square = .36, p = .83, df = 2), was found in skills with a mean rank of 54.39, 55.36, and 59.42 among the three categories of urban, suburban, and rural, respectively. No significant differences (Chi square = 2.1, p = .35, df = 2), was found in knowledge with a mean rank of 63.78, 53.32, and 53.96 among the three categories of urban, suburban, and rural, respectively.

An additional Kruskal-Wallis Test was conducted to examine the differences of counseling competencies to working with LGBTQ issues between U.S. region of school locations. No significant differences (Chi square = 5.44, p = .14, df = 3), was found in awareness with a mean rank of 62.48, 45.9, 61.3, and 55.17 among the four categories of Northeast, South, Midwest, and West, respectively. No significant differences (Chi square = 4.37, p = .22, df = 3), was found in skills with a mean rank of 66.64, 52.7, 50, and 54.58 among the four categories of Northeast, South, Midwest, and West, respectively. No significant differences (Chi square = 1.02, p = .8, df = 3), was found in knowledge with a mean rank of 56.45, 60.47, 52.31, and 54.19 among the four categories of Northeast, South, Midwest, and West, respectively.

Table 8

*Means and Standard Deviations for Awareness, Skills, and Knowledge as a Result of Working in Diverse Community Settings in the Four Regions of the United States*

| Variable | Awareness | Skills | Knowledge |
|---|---|---|---|
| Urban | | | |
| Northeast | 6.09 (1.31) | 3.62 (1.17) | 4.82 (.9) |
| South | 6.28 (1.31) | 3.57 (1.35) | 4.75 (1.09) |
| Midwest | 6.9 (.24) | 4.26 (1.69) | 4.75 (1.12) |
| West | 6.58 (.51) | 3.3 (.8) | 4.56 (.63) |
| Suburban | | | |
| Northeast | 6.95 (.12) | 4.46 (1.05) | 4.45 (.81) |
| South | 6.32 (1.02) | 3.58 (1.03) | 4.65 (.84) |
| Midwest | 6.66 (.56) | 3.34 (1.2) | 4.27 (.92) |
| West | 6.78 (.37) | 3.45 (.9) | 4.39 (.95) |
| Rural | | | |
| Northeast | 6.96 (.09) | 3.95 (.62) | 4.6 (1.01) |
| South | 6.62 (.5) | 3.96 (1.51) | 4.3 (.68) |
| Midwest | 6.74 (.48) | 3.22 (1.07) | 4.25 (1.13) |
| West | 6.45 (1.06) | 4.44 (1.05) | 4.75 (.29) |
| Total | | | |
| Northeast | 6.68 (.83) | 4.1 (1.07) | 4.59 (.86) |
| South | 6.36 (1.02) | 3.64 (1.17) | 4.62 (.88) |
| Midwest | 6.73 (.48) | 3.51 (1.3) | 4.37 (1.01) |
| West | 6.67 (.6) | 3.65 (.99) | 4.5 (.8) |

*Note.* Values in parentheses are standard deviation

**Research question three.** Descriptive statistics were used to explore frequency distribution of school counselor's identified diverse barriers to working with LGBTQ youth. With a total of 111 cases, the percentage of response for each variable ranged from 5.4 percent to 34.2 percent. The frequency and percentage of response are shown in Table 5. Professional limitations, diverse stakeholders, professional knowledge, lack of knowledge of resources, and no barriers to working with LGBTQ youth showed the highest percentage rates at 34.2%, 28.8%, 27.9%, 26.1%, and 26.1%, respectively. The frequency of identified barriers appears to indicate that collective professional comprehension and influence from social parties are obstacles to working with LGBTQ youth, with additional identification of no systemic barriers. Alternatively, personal comfort level, feeling there is no need for this work in the elementary school, and legal mandates provided the least percentage of response at 6.3%, 6.3%, and 5.4%, respectively. The low frequency of identified barriers appears to indicate that one's internal level of comfort, lawful obligations, and skepticism of discussion in the elementary setting are not hurdles to working with LGBTQ youth.

Table 9

*Frequency and Percentage of Response of Barriers*

| Variable | Response Frequency | Percentage of Response |
|---|---|---|
| Professional Limitation | 38 | 34.2 |
| Diverse Stakeholders | 32 | 28.8 |
| Professional Knowledge | 31 | 27.9 |
| Lack of Knowledge of Resources | 29 | 26.1 |
| No Barriers to Working with LGBTQ Youth | 29 | 26.1 |
| School Setting | 24 | 21.6 |
| School Policies | 18 | 16.2 |
| Other | 9 | 8.1 |
| Personal Comfort Level | 7 | 6.3 |
| No Need for this Work in Elementary | 7 | 6.3 |
| Legal Mandates | 6 | 5.4 |

**Summary**

The analysis conducted was able to answer the research questions posed by the current research study. First, the data analysis determined that there was a statistically significant relationship between low multicultural competencies and leadership abilities with low LGBTQ counseling skills. Additionally, the study found that there was not a statistically significant difference between an elementary PSCs school location and their LGBTQ knowledge, skills, and awareness. Finally, the current study was able to determine barriers faced by elementary PSCs in their attempts to engage in LGBTQ services. The results from this study will be discussed extensively in chapter five along with implications, future research, and limitations.

# Chapter 5

## Discussion

The purpose of this quantitative research study was to explore elementary PSCs knowledge, skills, and dispositions to working with LGBTQ youth and factors that may influence these competencies. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What is the relationship between school counselors' cultural competencies and leadership and their attitudes, skills, and knowledge towards LGBTQ youth?

   *Research Hypothesis One:* Elementary School Counselors' cultural competencies (as measured by the *the Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale* [MSCBS], Greene, 2019) and leadership (as measured by the *School Counselor Leadership Survey* [SCLS]; Young & Bryan, 2015) will have a strong relationship with their disposition towards LGBTQ youth (as measured by *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Knowledge Subscale* [SOCCS-K]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Awareness Subscale* [SOCCS-A]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Skills Subscale* [SOCCS-S]; Bidell, 2005).

2. What is the magnitude of difference in elementary school counselors' disposition, knowledge, and skills based on their current school setting?

   *Research Hypothesis Two:* Elementary school counselors' skills (as measured by *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Knowledge Subscale* [SOCCS-K]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Awareness Subscale* [SOCCS-A]; Bidell, 2005; *Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale- Skills Subscale* [SOCCS-S]; Bidell, 2005) will have a strong relationship

with region and community setting (as measured by the *General Demographics Survey*).

3. What barriers (as measured by the *General Demographics Survey*) do elementary school counselors identify to working with LGBTQ youth within the elementary school setting?

   There is limited current knowledge of barriers for elementary school counselors working with LGBTQ youth, thus, a hypothesis was not developed.

To investigate these research questions, a national survey was utilized to gain an understanding of the disposition, knowledge, and skills associated with professional elementary PSCs work with LGBTQ students. The survey consisted of four sections: (a) demographic questions, (b) the Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale ([SOCCS], Biddell, 2015), (c) the School Counselor Leadership Survey ([SCLS], Young & Bryan, 2015), and (d) the Multicultural School Counseling Behavior Scale ([MSCBS], Greene, 2019). Eligible participants were identified as any current elementary school counselor working within the United States. Participants were recruited through national and state professional school counseling associations, social media platforms, and listservs. The survey ran for a total of nine weeks and resulted in a total participation of 111 elementary PSCs. This chapter provides a discussion of the results of the current study. More specifically, this chapter examines: (a) the summary of the results from the data analysis, (b) the implications for PSCs and counselor-in-training programs, and (c) the implementation of future research and limitations of this study will be discussed.

## Discussion of Findings

The current study set out to determine elementary PSCs counseling competencies in the areas of knowledge, skills and dispositions to working with LGBTQ students. The counseling competencies were examined through their relationship with elementary PSCs cultural awareness and leadership abilities, as well as their geographic location and school type. Additionally, the study sought to expose any barriers that elementary PSCs may face when working with LGBTQ youth. The following section will thoroughly inspect the findings from each of the three research questions.

**Examining competencies.** The first research question investigated the relationship between PSCs' cultural competence and leadership and their counseling competencies to work with LGBTQ youth. Counseling competencies were broken into three areas: (a) awareness of attitudes towards the LGBTQ community, (b) knowledge of issues faced by LGBTQ individuals, and (c) skills needed to work with LGBTQ students (Bidell, 2005). The analysis found that there is a significant relationship between elementary school counselors' LGBTQ counseling skills and their cultural competence and leadership abilities. More specifically, elementary school counselors who have low cultural competencies and leadership display a low level of skills to working with LGBTQ students.

The findings from this study confirm and expand previous research regarding LGBTQ counseling and their relationship with cultural competencies and leadership. Current research shows that when compared to PSC at other school levels, elementary school counselors scored lower on leadership skills of social justice advocacy (Young & Bryan, 2018). Social justice advocacy is the ability to be a social change agent within the

schools by identifying, disrupting, and challenging injustice to create an equitable learning environment. While the findings from Young and Bryan's (2018) do not mean that elementary school counselors do not engage in social justice advocacy, they do so at lower rates than counselors within the secondary school setting. Additionally, elementary school counselors scored significantly lower on LGB counseling skills as compared to middle school and high school counselors (Farmer, Welfare, & Burge, 2013). Considering these two findings, it could be inferred elementary school counselors may already be at a disadvantage in displaying two of the three variables within this research question.

Professional counselors who identify high levels of multicultural competencies have better success when working with individuals of diverse identities and backgrounds (Worthington, Soth-McNett, & Moreno, 2007). Additionally, clients have identified the positive effects when working with counselors who impose multicultural practices within their counseling sessions (Fuertes & Brobst, 2002). This is also evident when specifically addressing PSCs work with LGBTQ students. Students identify the PSC as a main source of support in the schools due to their actions of allyship and the perception of acceptance (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). Through their multicultural intentionality, PSC are able to provide the skills necessary to support their LGBTQ youth.

The current research highlights that the reverse of these findings is true. Elementary school counselors who possess low cultural competencies, in conjunction with low leadership skills, report low levels of skills to working with LGBTQ youth. In general, PSC who display low cultural competencies are not able to provide effective student counseling and services (Atkinson, 2004; Sue & Sue, 2015). This puts elementary

LGBTQ students and their peers at a far disadvantage to receiving essential counseling services. LGBTQ students may not be receiving the appropriate amount of support they need to foster and grow within their identity or acquire the protective factors needed to face harassment, discrimination, and bullying due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Farmer, Welfare, & Burge, 2013). Additionally, LGBTQ student's peers may also be harmed due to elementary school counselors' low cultural competencies, leadership skills, and counseling competency skills. Their peers may not have the opportunity to be exposed to discussions surrounding diverse identities, examining systemic structure's impact on heteronormativity, or work on their own intrapersonal skills to examine biases and discriminatory language and actions. These low levels of multicultural competencies, leadership, and LGBTQ counseling skills can also impact the school environment at large.

When looking at the school environment, multiple factors exist which influence the school's culture. These factors include students and teachers feeling safe in school, learning engagement, rapport between school members, and the school environment (Wang & Degol, 2016). PSC have the ability to impact their school's climate by identifying policies and structures which oppress marginalized populations, such as LGBTQ youth, and work towards creating equitable education opportunities (Gonzalez & McNulty, 2010; Goodrich & Luke, 2009). In fact, PSC multicultural competencies and behaviors have a strong relationship with their building school climate (Greene, 2015). This indicates that when PSC multicultural competencies increase, their school's climate increases. Additionally, when PSCs active multicultural behaviors rise, school climate has a positive growth as well (Greene, 2015). This suggests that when PSC possess the knowledge, skills, and awareness to work with diverse groups, such as LGBTQ youth,

their actions can create a more inclusive setting for their students. The current search may expand on this idea that when elementary PSCs have low levels of multicultural competencies and leadership skills, they do not have the skills necessary to work effectively with LGBTQ youth and may not be able to positively influence school climate.

PSC's active engagement in leadership roles may be hindered by hierarchical systems within the schools (Mason and McMahon, 2009). Prior research has shown that schools may undervalue the work of novice PSC and highlight the work of experienced school counselors in their identity as a leader (Mason and McMahon, 2009). The majority of participants in this study had less than five years of PSC experience. Due to their limited time within the profession, the participants in this study may be devaluing or limiting their engagement as a leader due to the perceptions of others within their school building. This may suggest that diverse systems, as examined through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), have an important role in elementary PSC's association and involvement with leadership practices. PSC's are more likely to be perceived as leaders by their colleagues if their administrators are supportive of PSC's taking on leadership positions (Strear, Van Velsor, DeCino, & Peters, 2018; Wingfield, Reese, & West-Olatunji, 2010). This highlights that a PSC's acceptance as a leader within the school is related to the influence and perception of their exosystem, which is composed of diverse stakeholders such as administrators and staff members. If these diverse stakeholders do not view or support elementary PSC's engagement in leadership practices, then elementary PSC may be less likely to partake in this work. The disconnect of involvement in leadership practices may directly impact marginalized students, such as LGBTQ students, from receiving the necessary services to create equitable and safe

school environments. Furthermore, this dismissal of elementary PSC's as leaders may impact the elementary PSC's personal view on their own ability to be an effective leader. This may cloud their perception and recognition of their work that is aligned with leadership initiatives. The inability to recognize these actions as leadership qualities may limit elementary PSC's active participation in LGBTQ advocacy and resistance of heteronormative practices within schools.

An elementary PSC's exosystem may also impact their cultural competencies. PSC's have identified a need for further development of their multicultural competencies, particularly in areas such as skill development. This is particularly true in areas concerning racial identity development and comfort level to working with populations who identify differently than they do (Holcomb-McCoy, 2001; Rayle, 2005; Thorn & Contreras, 2005). These competencies are typically identified and addressed within graduate training programs (CACREP, 2016). This component of an elementary PSC's exosystem has a direct impact on their comprehensive abilities to work with diverse student populations, such as LGBTQ youth. PSCs in training are provided opportunities through their graduate program to explore areas of multicultural identity development and examine how their own dispositions towards these groups impact their work with diverse student populations. Taken further, an elementary PSC's microsystem can also provide a level of influence. Within their microsystem, elementary PSC's are affected by their professional relationships with their professors. Professors and higher education educators have a direct impact and emphasis on the content that is covered within graduate level courses. These professionals guide their students' level of exposure to multicultural competence content while gauging their level of comprehension. If graduate programs and their faculty are not providing a comprehensive curriculum which not only

educates but intentionally checks for full understanding of these concepts, then elementary PSC's are not going to be prepared to meet their students' needs.

Through the examination of an elementary PSC's exo and microsystems impact on their leadership and multicultural competencies, it is evident how this may impact their competencies and skills to work with diverse populations, such as LGBTQ youth. School counselors have openly identified their lack of competencies when working with the LGBTQ community (Bidell, 2012; Hall, McDougald, & Kresica, 2013). The vast majority of PSC identified that they had very little to no exposure to formal education when working with LGBTQ youth, 43% and 27 %, respectfully (GLSEN, et. al., 2019). While counselor education programs are required to include courses specifically addressing multicultural counseling, these courses often omit discussions surrounding the LGBTQ community and heterosexist practices (Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014). Additionally, PSC self-identified multicultural competencies was directly related to the number of multicultural training experiences they have participated in (Rodgers & Furcron, 2019). When taken together, school counselors report lower levels of multicultural awareness and sexual minority counseling skills (Bidell, 2012). Through the lack of LGBTQ integration in coursework, class discussions, and counselor preparation programs, PSC are entering the field without the proper training to work with these vulnerable populations.

As noted previously, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) put forth a detailed positionality statement in regard to PSCs' work with LGBTQ students. ASCA proclaimed the expectation that PSCs will work with LGBTQ students and provide their students with an inclusive comprehensive school counseling curriculum (ASCA, 2016b). The comprehensive school counseling program would need to employ

effective counseling skills to promote affirmation, acceptance, and advocacy. This advocacy extends to PSCs taking on leadership roles within the school by identifying, challenging, and eliminating systemic barriers, such as current homonormative practices. In order to achieve this goal, PSCs will additionally need adequate cultural competencies to be able to recognize and label inequities within the school. Taken together, in order to carry out ASCA's mission to support LGBTQ youth, PSCs need to have leadership and cultural competencies to effectively provide the skills necessary to effectively work with LGBTQ youth. Given the current findings, the research suggests that elementary PSCs who do not display high levels of leadership and cultural awareness may be unable to carry out ASCA's mission for equitable counseling services for LGBTQ youth.

**Locations impact on LGBTQ counseling competencies.** The second research question was designed to examine whether a significant difference existed between the geographic location and type of community elementary PSCs are employed and their LGBTQ counseling competencies. During data collection there was an over representation of public-school elementary PSC as compared to religious-affiliated private and other independent or private, 105, 4, and 2, respectively. Due to non-normality, the type of school; public, religious-affiliated private, and other independent or private; was not included in the analysis. The elimination of a demographic variable may limit our understanding of how the type of school a PSC is employed interacts with their counseling competencies. This information would be useful to identify if there are disparities amongst the school types and how competencies may vary in these areas. A nonparametric analysis was conducted and showed that there is no significant difference between an elementary school counselors employment location and type and their counseling competencies. The current study suggests that elementary school counselors

who work in diverse regions of the United States show no difference in their knowledge, skills, and awareness of working with LGBTQ youth. Additionally, this research indicates that elementary school counselors who work in diverse community settings show no difference in their knowledge, skills, and awareness of working with LGBTQ youth. Together, the two analyses indicated that the exosystem variable of geographic location nor community setting indicate a difference in elementary PSC's counseling competencies when working with LGBTQ youth.

The results of this study indicate that elementary PSC's LGBTQ counseling competencies do not significantly vary across diverse regional demographics in the U.S. This is a positive finding in that there are not whole regions of the U.S. where elementary PSCs have drastically different LGBTQ counseling competencies. This may speculate that elementary PSCs across the country have similar levels of knowledge, skills, and awareness to working with LGBTQ youth. With this in mind, elementary LGBTQ students across the nation should be receiving or have access to the same level of service from their elementary PSC. While the services elementary LGBTQ students receive may be the same, the current research question does not infer if the services provided are effective or comprehensive.

While the analysis was able to answer the posed research question, perhaps the current study asked the wrong question. Instead of exploring location's impact on elementary PSC's LGBTQ counseling competencies, the research question should have inquired about elementary PSC's LGBTQ counseling competencies overall. Elementary PSCs' skill competence and overall self-perceived competence to work with LGB students is significantly lower than middle and high school PSCs (Farmer, Welfare, & Burge, 2013). This finding along with the results from the current study may highlight

that location does not make an impact because elementary PSCs as a whole may identify as having low counseling competencies when working with LGBTQ youth. Future research could examine the specific level of LGBTQ competencies possessed by elementary PSCs and where gaps may lie.

LGBTQ students who reside in the South and Midwest, as well as students who live in small rural towns were much more likely to report negative school experiences due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). Also, educators in rural areas are less likely to address comments made by students that are biased or discriminatory towards the LGBTQ community (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Furthermore, these students are less likely to have LGBTQ-related resources available to them at school (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). As the micro level of the location of a student's school had an impact on their experience and exposure to LGBTQ harassment, it is interesting that this study found no difference between LGBTQ counseling competencies in elementary PSC when looking at demographic factors. While this study cannot claim a correlation between these two variables, it may incite the need to examine elementary PSCs in Southern, Midwestern, and rural regions efforts and actions directly related to LGBTQ advocacy. If elementary PSCs in Southern, Midwestern, and rural regions have the same level of skills, awareness, and knowledge as their peers in other demographic areas of the U.S, how are they intervening and dismantling the drastically higher rates of discrimination their LGBTQ students are facing.

Through Bronfenbrenner (2005), there may be plausible explanations of how potential system levels factors, such as the exosystem variable of community and school influence, are causing this level of disparity. As previously discussed, an elementary

PSC's exosystem can have a large influence on their cultural competencies and self-perception as a leader within the schools. While this research found that elementary PSCs LGBTQ counseling competencies do not vary amongst setting, it may not indicate to the degree these competencies are being carried out. An elementary PSCs community (microsystem) and school setting and stakeholders (microsystem) may hinder their ability to deliver comprehensive services in areas of heightened discrimination. This may account for the incongruence of their competencies with the lived experiences of their LGBTQ student. Further investigation may be worth question to what degree system level factors are impacting elementary PSCs when compared to their colleagues and students.

**Barriers to working with LGBTQ students.** The final research question explored potential barriers that elementary school counselors may encounter through their work with LGBTQ youth. More specifically, the research aimed to identify various factors across diverse system levels that may create barriers to working with LGBTQ students. The barriers presented were: (a) professional knowledge, (b) professional limitations, (c) personal comfort level, (d) lack of knowledge of resources, (e) school setting, (f) diverse stakeholders, (g) school policies, (h) legal mandates, (i) feeling there is not a need for this work at the elementary level, (j) believing there are no barriers to me working with LGBTQ+ youth in my school, and (k) identifying other barriers than we listed. A majority of the presented barriers exist within the exosystem (professional limitations, school setting. diverse stakeholders, legal mandates, school policies, lack of knowledge of resources, professional knowledge). The remaining factors (personal comfort level, feeling there is not a need for this work at the elementary level, believing there are no barriers to working with LGBTQ+ youth) may be influenced by diverse

systems levels and their interaction with one another. For instance, an elementary PSCs personal comfort level to working with LGBTQ youth may be influenced by their personal relationships (micro), the response or support of the education system (exo), learned norms from societies ideals of heteronormativity (macro), and the interaction of these systems on each other.

The analysis found that elementary PSCs identified professional knowledge, professional limitations, diverse stakeholders, and lack of knowledge of resources as the top barriers identified to working with LGBTQ youth. Additionally, participants also indicated that they felt there were no barriers to working with LGBTQ youth. Furthermore, the least selected barriers were professional comfort level, legal mandates, and not believing there is a need for this work at the elementary level. The research suggests that professional proficiency and influence from members of the school community are impactful on an elementary PSCs work with LGBTQ youth, while policy and personal attitudes and beliefs did not interfere with their work.

The results from the analysis are consistent with findings from previous research. PSC have identified that the lack of time or time spent on other job responsibilities, insufficient training on LGBTQ issues, unfamiliarity of LGBTQ specific material resources, and the influence of diverse stakeholders are barriers to working with LGBTQ students (GLSEN, et. al, 2019; Smith-Millman, et. al., 2019). Each of these areas will be explored further.

***Professional discourse.*** As set through the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019) and CACREP graduate program standard (CACREP, 2016), PSC are held to a high standard in providing student services and implementing a comprehensive school

counseling program. PSC are expected to provide social/ emotional, academic, and career guidance while also collaborating with diverse stakeholders to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students (American School Counselor Association, n.d.b). In addition to their professional role in the school, PSCs are often tasked with duties outside that are seen as "inappropriate". These additional duties can range from lunch monitoring, student record maintenance, and discipline (American School Counselor Association, n.d.b). The diminishment of available time to address all students due to the many obligations faced by elementary PSCs may lead them to have to choose or prioritize which populations or topics they will focus on. By narrowing their focus to address the needs of specific and perhaps more prevalent populations, the needs of students who identify within smaller marginalized populations, such as LGBTQ youth, may be unaddressed. As previously indicated in chapter two, many elementary PSCs reported that they have not worked with students who identified as LGB in the past (Farmer, Welfare, & Burge, 2013). As this study indicated, it is not that elementary PSCs do not feel there is a need for this work, but more to the fact that they are not identifying this population within their schools. This may stand to reason that if there are no identified sexual minority or gender expansive students within the school, elementary PSCs may not feel the need to spend their time addressing concerns for this population.

In addition to time constraints, the current study identified that elementary PSCs have indicated a deficiency in training in issues surrounding LGBTQ youth. The lack of training surrounding working with LGBTQ youth is not a new occurrence. PSCs and PSCs in training have reported that they have received little to no training in preparation to working with LGBTQ youth (Bidell, 2012; GLSEN, et. al, 2019; Hall, McDougald, & Kresica, 2013). The lack of professional knowledge on issues pertaining to the LGBTQ

community begins with an absence of critical training within graduate programs (Kull, et. al., 2017; Owen-Pugh & Baines, 2014; Sawyer, et. al., 2006). Graduate training programs are a larger variable within elementary PSC's exosystem. Their interaction and the interaction of other system levels with graduate training programs heavily influences the work of elementary PSC with LGBTQ youth. While PSC graduate programs are mandated to provide education on multicultural counseling and competencies (CACREP, 2016), oftentimes these guidelines are not specific enough on the depth of information and knowledge that needs to be presented to graduate students. The autonomy this provides graduate programs to dictate which populations or groups are given more focus can create major gaps in learning and understanding of all multicultural identities, specifically the LGBTQ community (Dragowski, et. al., 2016; Owen-Pugh, & Baines, 2014; Quasha, et. al., 2014; Ratts, et. al., 2013). Due to the gaps in their education, many PSC feel unprepared to provide effective services to their LGBTQ students (Bidell, 2012; Hall, et. al, 2013). The gaps may be also influenced by elementary PSC's interaction with the microsystem variable of graduate program faculty. The direct interaction of counselors in training with their professors may heavily influence their knowledge and disposition of the LGBTQ community. If professors actively or unconsciously exclude course materials and class discussions surround the LGBTQ community, elementary PSC in trainings LGBTQ competencies will be negatively impacted. Without the proper time to discuss the issues surrounding the LGBTQ community, the lived experiences of LGBTQ students in schools, and the use of an ethical, affirmative counseling approach, elementary school counselors will not be prepared to meet the unique needs of these students.

The current study also found that elementary PSCs identified being uninformed about available resources for LGBTQ students. Elementary PSCs are charged with being knowledgeable about community resources to provide students and families to address their needs and provide additional support, specifically in relation to LGBTQ issues (ASCA, n.d.b; 2016b). These resources can link students and families to community, state, and national organizations and services that provide salient information and connections that may not be available within the school. These community collaborations also assure that the PSC is not working in isolation to meet the increasing needs of their students and families (Palladino-Schultheiss, 2005). Identifying community resources is not always an easy task. It requires elementary PSCs to actively research available resources, engage in dialogue about the nature of the resources, and assess the quality and availability of the services for their families (Kit-Yee Lam, 2006). If elementary PSCs identify that they have had a lack of training to work with LGBTQ youth, they may be unaware of how to properly investigate for LGBTQ resources. Further investigation could examine a potential association between elementary PSCs' lack of awareness of LGBTQ resources and their identified limited LGBTQ training.

***Impact of diverse stakeholders.*** Elementary PSC's work with their students is not done alone. As part of their role, elementary PSCs collaborate with diverse stakeholders to support and enhance their students personal and academic success (ASCA, 2019a). Often this exosystem variable of diverse stakeholders consist of administrators, teachers, staff, families, and other community members. These individuals have a direct or indirect role within the daily operations of the school either. This can be seen through their involvement within daily decision making through school policies, curriculum, and discipline, as well as through their influence on school climate and the underlying

heteronormative values and norms of which perpetuate the way the school operates (Beck, 2016; Goodhand & Brown, 2016; HRC, 2012; Wang & Degol, 2016).

Families have often been identified by students and staff as a barrier to addressing LGBTQ issues and topics. Many LGBTQ youth experience difficult, hostile, and even abusive home environments due to their family's disapproval and negative perceptions of the LGBTQ community (Balsam, et. al., 2005; Mallory, et. al., 2014; Mustanski, et. al., 2010; HRC, 2012). These negative portrayals and beliefs can also seep into the school environment. Research on this topic has been heavily focused on the teacher's integration of LGBTQ lessons and curriculums within the classroom. Elementary educators identified a belief that families have an assertion of power in regulating discussions or lessons surrounding topics which have been previously unaddressed in education (Clark, 2010; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019b; Sieben & Wallowitz, 2009). The topics which come under fire include discussions surrounding the LGBTQ community. Elementary educators experienced pushback and objection from some parents in terms of the appropriateness of discussion and exposure to sexual orientation and gender identity in the classroom.

While these studies were examining the discussions and actions of elementary teachers in a classroom setting, the same sentiment may apply to elementary PSCs attempts to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity during counseling sessions or classroom guidance lessons. If the elementary school's climate has a layer of heteronormative practices and family stakeholders are disinterested in teachers bringing this dialogue to the classroom, it can be asserted that families may also disagree to allowing these discussions in other areas of the school. In these school settings, the elementary school counselors may also be experiencing the same level of pushback.

Elementary PSCs engagement with conversations focused on the LGBTQ community or the acceptance of diverse identities may also face criticism from families. Particularly in the idea that counseling sessions are an opportunity for students to actively engage and process their identities through diverse techniques and activities (ASCA, 2016b). When experiencing a level of opposition from parents regarding a topic's place within the elementary school, administrators can have a heavy influence on determining the school's positionality and response.

Administrators were also identified in this study as barriers within the diverse category. As discussed in chapter two, an administrator can play a large role in the PSCs involvement and implementation of LGBTQ services (Beck, 2016; Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2014). Administrators have the authority to impact direct change through school policies, curriculum, and the daily structure of the school day. The controversy surrounding LGBTQ-related topics in elementary school causes some administrators to be hesitant to allow discussions or open acts of support towards the LGBTQ population (Payne & Smith, 2018). This skepticism could be a contributing factor to the identification of administrators as a barrier to elementary PSCs working with LGBTQ students. If an administrator is against or reluctant to provide inclusive services or displaying materials of LGBTQ support, such as space safe stickers or affirmative posters, the elementary PSC may be limited in the services they can provide their students. This may include group counseling, diverse classroom guidance lessons, and providing ethical and supportive community resources. Administration's positionality may also hinder the elementary PSC from educating staff on best practices for acceptance and inclusion. This may negatively impact the safety and inclusive nature of the

classroom environment; an experience that too many LGBTQ students have already faced (Kosciw, et. al., 2018).

Additionally, an administrator is a part of the larger exosystem variable of diverse stakeholders. Administrators can dictate the role of the elementary PSC in terms of roles and responsibilities (Chata & Loesch, 2007; Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, 2009). This relates heavily to the previously mentioned barrier of time restraints and multiple roles. If elementary PSCs are tasked by their administrators to take on various responsibilities throughout their day, the counselors may not have the opportunity to address the unique needs of their LGBTQ students. With this in mind, further examination could determine more specifically how administrators contribute to or restrict elementary PSCs work with LGBTQ youth. Furthermore, these stakeholders, often administrators and the board of education, have influence on the professional development opportunities provided in schools. These professional development opportunities have often been identified to exclude or severely lacking in LGBTQ competencies (GLSEN, et. al., 2019). If these stakeholders are uncomfortable creating dialogue surrounding the LGBTQ community or feel there is no need to address these topics, LGBTQ professional development may not be offered in schools (Payne & Smith, 2018).

***Not everything is a barrier.*** Not only did the current research identify barriers that impede elementary PSCs work with LGBTQ youth, the research also highlighted variables which may not interfere with LGBTQ student engagement. The current study found that a majority of participants identified that they do not experience any barriers to working with LGBTQ youth. This is an important finding as a portion of the sample is theoretically able to engage in LGBTQ initiatives and actions without opposition or feelings of lacking the ability to work with LGBTQ youth. While this finding is positive

that there are elementary settings where LGBTQ work can occur uninterrupted, it cannot be assumed that an elementary school setting without obstacles would provide or engage in LGBTQ work. A deeper analysis would need to occur to see if and to what degree LGBTQ services are being offered at these schools.

The current study also showed that elementary PSCs are aware that there is a need for LGBTQ work within the elementary setting. This is important as students are self-identifying their sexual orientation and/or gender identity at an earlier age (Bryan, J., 2012; Campbell, et. al., 2013; D'Augelli, et. al, 2002; Drury & Bukowski, 2013; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006). This increase in childhood identity development further highlights the need for elementary PSCs to be competent in their abilities to meet this population's needs (Roe, 2013). Given the early onset of gender and sexuality identity development and elementary PSCs perspective that LGBTQ work is appropriate at the elementary level, it can be a realistic expectation that elementary PSCs are engaging in LGBTQ interventions and advocacy.

Furthermore, the participants in this study did not identify personal comfort level as a barrier to working with LGBTQ youth. This finding, in conjunction with the previously mentioned barriers, indicates that elementary PSCs are not personally unsettled by working with LGBTQ students, but more lacking the appropriate knowledge to conduct work around LGBTQ issues. This is an important finding as a PSC's personal values can interfere with their professional responsibilities. PSCs who hold more favorable views towards the LGBTQ community are more likely to actively engage in LGBTQ student advocacy (Simons, et. al., 2017). Furthermore, this finding may highlight that elementary PSCs interactions with diverse system levels may not heavily affect their personal comfort to working with LGBTQ youth. By participants indicating

that their own comfort level is not a deterring factor, there is a larger possibility for further LGBTQ advocacy if provided the proper training and support.

Finally, the exosystem variable legal mandates was not identified as an obstacle to working with LGBTQ students. During the time of this research, seven states still held "No Promo Homo" laws, which prohibited the positive portrayal and discussion in schools of sexual orientation and gender identity outside of the heteronormative ideals (GLSEN, 2018; Lamba Legal, n.d.). Of the participants in this study, a quarter were from and worked in states where "No Promo Homo" laws exist. It is interesting to note that these individuals did not view this discriminatory practice as a barrier to working with LGBTQ youth. While only speculations can be made, perhaps legal mandates are an unidentified barrier due to a lack of awareness of biased laws or a disregard for them. Either of these plausible explanations would infer different interactions of diverse system levels. If elementary PSCs are unaware of legal mandates, then perhaps this exosystem variable's influence is not interacting with other system levels to directly impact their work with LGBTQ students. An alternative thought would be if the elementary PSCs other exo and microsystem factors are interacting with the variable legal mandates but are not actively adhering to this practice. This may be if the larger macrosystem attitude does not align with the legal mandates or if individual's other system variables contradict the policies and laws being pushed at the state level. Elementary PSC could experience this if diverse stakeholders, graduate programs, professors, or other personal relationships are positively influencing the elementary PSC to work with LGBTQ youth. This positive influence can support PSCs adherence to a strict code of ethics which mandates the legal and ethical responsibility of providing equitable counseling services to all students, regardless of student identity (ASCA, 2016a). With the contradiction of adhering to this

commitment to foremost due no harm and being faced with state law prohibiting the advocacy for LGBTQ youth, further investigation is needed to examine how elementary school counselors are navigating this hostile space.

## Implications for Practice

The current study provides several implications for multiple systemic levels. The research highlights areas for suggestions or further examination in the training and delivery of school counseling services. More specifically, this section will examine the current studies implications on: (a) policy development and modifications, (b) graduate training programs, and (c) the daily implementation of comprehensive school counseling services.

**Policy development and modification.** Accrediting bodies and professional organizations which reside in the exosystem level, such as CACREP (2016) and ASCA (2019a), have provided multiple guidelines on the criteria necessary to become effective and ethical school counselors. These directives are consistently examined to ensure that best practices and recommendations are provided to meet the needs of an ever-evolving field. While these changes are made to keep up with the needs of our society, there are instances where populations are being excluded and the requirements for certification renewal are not consistent across states.

As discussed in chapter two, CACREP (2016) includes gender and sexual orientation within their definition of multicultural. The definition, however, omits gender identity and expression (Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014). The omission of transgender, gender fluid, gender non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals is unacceptable in a doctrine which is intended to protect the rights and needs of

marginalized populations during counseling services. The exclusion of this population could leave room for universities and counselor educators to intentionally exclude transgender, gender fluid, gender non-binary, and gender non-conforming from class discussions or educational materials. This study found that elementary PSC's identified a lack of LGBTQ knowledge as a large barrier to working with this population. Through the rejection of information regarding all members of the LGBTQ community, counseling accreditation standards are perpetuating this finding of lack of awareness. This can be harmful to school counselors in training as they may be ignorant to the specific needs of this population in schools. The need to include all individuals within the LGBTQ community is essential and an area that needs to be addressed promptly to ensure the ethical treatment of all who seek support from licensed counselors.

Once a PSC degree is earned, PSCs need to complete professional development requirements in order to maintain their professional certification (ASCA, n.d.d). The requirements for certification renewal differ across each state, with varying years to complete renewal requirements and identification of what professional development satisfies these requirements. This is problematic as elementary PSCs across the country are engaging in different levels of continuing education with disparities in knowledge in diverse counseling areas. Additionally, some states require professional development be completed in certain areas and topics while other states are vaguer, allowing for professional development hours to be completed in any content area (ASCA, n.d.d). National and state accrediting organizations should discuss the alignment of certificate renewal requirements, with an emphasis on multicultural competencies including LGBTQ youth, to ensure elementary school counselors are providing ethical, affirmative counseling across all U.S elementary schools. This may decrease the barriers of lack of

professional knowledge and resources that were identified by this research. The reduction or elimination of this barrier may provide greater opportunities for elementary PSCs to conduct meaningful work with LGBTQ youth.

**Graduate training programs.** Graduate programs provide students with the skills and knowledge they need to become effective, ethical counselors in pursuit of implementing comprehensive school counseling programs. As discussed previously, CACREP (2016) holds graduate programs accountable for providing multicultural knowledge and awareness to their students in efforts to create culturally competent PSCs. Universities deploy these guidelines through the creation and implementation of course content and design. The current research found that elementary PSCs who held low cultural competencies and low leadership traits had low LGBTQ counseling skills. A way for universities to address this issue is to implement a more rigorous curriculum with a focus on cultural competencies and leadership development.

When provided with multicultural training through graduate coursework, PSC cultural awareness and terminology are increased (Holcomb-McCoy, 2001; 2005; Holcomb-McCoy & Myers, 1999). The current study found that when elementary PSCs have low multicultural competencies and leadership abilities their LGBTQ counseling skills are low as well. This may be evidence that graduate programs are not providing enough rigorous multicultural training opportunities to their graduate students. Along with multicultural competencies, graduate programs may not be effectively educating their students on how to be leaders within the school setting. The skills needed to be an effective leader within the school can be addressed through various graduate level courses, such as introduction to counseling, practicum and internship, development and

design, and multicultural counseling. Through this development, elementary PSCs can begin to internally recognize themselves as leaders and take the active steps to be a leader in their building (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012; Young & Bryan, 2015). If elementary PSCs take initiatives within the school to join committees or address systemic barriers to student learning, they may gain the respect and recognition from their administration and staff as a leader within the school. The identification of the elementary PSC as a leader by administrators can incite others within the school to view the PSC as a pivotal leader in the school (Wingfield, Reese, & West-Olatunji, 2010). This recognition of the elementary PSC as a leader may assist in the barrier of diverse stakeholders, if these stakeholders value the role and input of the elementary PSC.

While multicultural competencies and leadership development are evident within these programs, a lack of LGBTQ inclusive dialogue in these areas is often missing (Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014). Counselor Educators need to be more intentional about their inclusion of the LGBTQ community to ensure their students are being given the knowledge needed to work effectively with this population. Discussions surrounding sexual and gender identity development, heteronormative school practices, and experience of harassment and discrimination by the LGBTQ community are prevalent topics that need to be included in graduate level courses (Bidell, 2012). This may address the findings in this research to increase elementary PSC's knowledge of the LGBTQ community and the ability to access resources to provide their students and families.

Furthermore, an area of school counselor training universities can consider is the idea of specialization certifications. Specialization certifications would be advanced training in specific topic areas, such as LGBTQ youth, that would allow PSC to become content experts for particular school issues or student populations. While specialist

trainings are offered through ASCA, there is currently no training that solely focuses on LGBTQ students (ASCA, n.d.c). A specialist training focused on LGBTQ students could address the unique needs of LGBTQ youth, the history of the LGBTQ community, providing affirmative counseling strategies, a review of LGBTQ specific resources, and effective interventions to identify and dismantle heteronormative inequities within the education system. This level of in-depth training may provide a greater level of knowledge and skills to working with LGBTQ youth and could help in the fight against discrimination and harassment of LGBTQ youth in schools. These courses could also be offered outside of the graduate program curriculum as a way to include school counselors in the field. This would provide an opportunity to increase the awareness of LGBTQ issues in the school to professionals who are actively engaged in school communities where LGBTQ students reside.

**Comprehensive school counseling services.** Elementary PSCs can also take steps necessary to develop more competencies and knowledge surrounding the LGBTQ community. These deliberate actions, however, are not always taken. Outside of formal education from graduate programs, a substantial percentage of PSC do not seek to expand their understanding and knowledge of skills needed to work with LGBTQ students. Almost two thirds of PSCs indicated that they rarely or never attend in-service trainings, conference workshops, or trainings presented by educational organizations that focus in LGBTQ issues (GLSEN, et. al, 2019). These findings may illuminate the results from the current study which found lack of knowledge is a barrier for elementary PSCs to work with LGBTQ students. If elementary school counselors are not attending informational sessions to increase their LGBTQ competencies, they will continue to experience these barriers. School districts and professional school counselor associations can ensure to

include LGBTQ-related training and sessions to provide a wider range of knowledge. The exposure to LGBTQ-related training can assist with generating ethically sound and effective advocacy interventions for LGBTQ youth across the elementary school.

In addition to attending professional training, elementary school counselors need to become familiar with LGBTQ resources at the community, state, and national level. Having detailed lists available for students and families will assist in creating an overall level of support for students in and outside of school. Elementary PSCs can begin to ask for this information from professional school counseling organizations as a benefit of their membership. Additionally, elementary PSCs may need to take the initiative to make connections with other PSCs in their region or grade level. This counseling community network, such as the Elementary School Counselor Exchange Facebook group used in this study, can provide a wealth of information and help bridge the gap between school counseling interventions and community level support.

Finally, elementary PSCs require self-reflection on their effectiveness when working with multicultural populations, such as LGBTQ youth. The current study found that elementary PSCs who possessed low multicultural competencies and low leadership abilities have low LGBTQ counseling skills. It would be beneficial for these elementary PSCs, as well as others, to regularly assess their attitudes, actions, and beliefs regarding diverse populations and their interactions with these students. Self-reflection can come in the form of narrative writing, video journaling, seeking supervision, and through self-assessment checklists (DeCino, Waalkes, & McKibben, 2019; Parikh, Janson, & Singleton, 2012). Through reflection, elementary PSCs can process their thoughts, feelings, and actions and their impact on their attempts of LGBTQ advocacy. More

specifically, PSCs reflective behaviors can allow them to identify their own biases and aware of the heteronormative oppression that is placed on the LGBTQ community (Owen-Pugh & Baines, 2014). By monitoring their professional actions and discourse, elementary PSCs may be able to identify when their multicultural and leadership skills and competencies are not aligned with the requirements of their position to provide affirmative LGBTQ services. If they are able to reach this level of awareness, they may be able to seek guidance on ways to improve their practices in order to provide more competent PSC interventions and advocacy.

## Recommendations for Research

Through the examination of the findings from this study, there are a few research recommendations to extend this body of knowledge. Future research can further explore: (a) the identified barriers to working with LGBTQ youth, (b) using diverse methodological approaches to address these issues, and (c) the prevalence of LGBTQ education within graduate programs. The following section will explore these future research recommendations further.

**Barriers to working with LGBTQ youth.** Participants in this study identified a lack of training, knowledge about available resources, and diverse stakeholders as barriers to working with LGBTQ students. Future research could explore these areas further to gain a deeper understanding of how each of these areas impacts the elementary PSCs LGBTQ advocacy. Research could detail the training opportunities that are available to elementary PSCs at diverse levels and platforms, such as online, through professional associations, conferences, or in-service development. This may help to understand if elementary PSCs are not being provided with these opportunities of

learning or if they are choosing to attend other trainings instead of LGBTQ-related professional development. This research could also look to see if there is a correlation between identified barriers. For instance, this study found that elementary PSCs identified lack of knowledge and lack of awareness of LGBTQ resources as barriers to working with LGBTQ youth. Research could investigate if there is a relationship between elementary PSC's knowledge of LGBTQ issues and the awareness of LGBTQ resources. Additionally, future research could examine elementary PSC's awareness and knowledge of anti-LGBTQ policies. This research could explore how elementary PSC navigate this hostile space and these policies impact on LGBTQ advocacy. Finally, future research can expand our limited knowledge on elementary PSCs counseling competencies' to working with LGBTQ youth. It is important that a baseline is determined to understand where elementary PSCs counseling competencies lie in order to implement effective practices.

Additionally, future research can examine elementary PSCs collaboration with diverse stakeholders in the community surrounding issues of LGBTQ youth. Research may help highlight which stakeholders are hindering the elementary PSCs work and in what ways is this occurring. This may provide insight into the dynamics between elementary PSCs, administrators, staff, and community members and how elementary PSCs navigate this space to provide affirmative services to LGBTQ youth.

**Diverse methodological approaches.** In order to assist the potential research opportunities as listed above, future research should be conducted using diverse methodological approaches. This can be done through the implementation of qualitative data collection. The use of interviews, observations, and focus groups can provide more contextual information as to what was observed in the current study. The use of

qualitative research would allow for more insight to the daily dynamics and activities of the elementary PSC as it relates to their work with LGBTQ youth. This information may illuminate the diverse needs of the elementary setting as compared to the interventions that are typically designed for secondary education. Furthermore, qualitative analysis could help to identify themes of specific LGBTQ knowledge that elementary PSCs do not possess. This information could aid in structuring professional development opportunities or gaps within graduate education programs.

Qualitative research may also assist in examining the tension between elementary PSCs reported LGBTQ counseling competencies and their LGBTQ students lived experiences. As detailed in chapter two, LGBTQ youth experience higher levels of harassment and bullying compared to their heterosexual, cisgender peers (Kosciw, et. al., 2018). This is highly evident for LGBTQ students who reside in the South, Midwest, or rural areas. Furthermore, LGBTQ students in these areas are less likely to have access to LGBTQ- related resources in schools. Based on the findings from this study, elementary PSCs LGBTQ counseling competency skills are not significantly different in the various regions and locations in the United States. With the disconnect of student experiences in South, Midwest, and Rural areas when compared to the self-reported counseling competencies by elementary PSCs in these areas, more research is needed to explore this discrepancy. Qualitative research would implement the ability to interview and observe the actions and knowledge of elementary PSCs in these areas and how these may impact the incongruent experiences that LGBTQ students are facing.

**Prevalence of LGBTQ education within graduate programs.** As identified in this study, many elementary PSCs identified a lack of training when working with LGBTQ students. Future research could focus on the presence of LGBTQ issues within

graduate education programs. This research could explore specific courses offered throughout CACREP and non-CACREP counseling programs, texts used within these programs, and curricular content. The examination of LGBTQ issues discussed within PSC training programs would provide insight into how and to what extent graduate programs are preparing elementary PSCs to work with their LGBTQ students.

**Limitations**

A unique limitation faced by this study was that data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, schools across the country were placed on remote learning and the world faced a global epidemic. Due to the unprecedented circumstances, individuals may have faced vast personal and professional difficulties. With the uncertainty of personal wellbeing and the new constraints to working virtually, elementary PSC may have been unable or unwilling to participate in this study. It may also be argued that due to the increase of virtual learning and engagement, that elementary PSC were more willing to take part in the survey since they were actively engaged on their electronic devices. An examination of online survey participation during the pandemic would be fascinating to see if the quarantine had an effect on the rate at which participants engaged in online studies.

The current study is also limited in the fact that only elementary school counselors were recruited as participants. By narrowing the participant criteria, the results only allow for interpretation of elementary PSCs self-reported dispositions and work with LGBTQ students. Additionally, the recruitment qualifications did not allow for an examination of middle or high school counselors LGBTQ proficiencies. The exclusion of middle and high school counselors from this study does not allow for the opportunity to compare LGBTQ competencies across school levels.

Additionally, the current study was limited in its reach to all elementary PSC in the United States. While steps were taken to engage elementary PSCs through professional organizations and social media, many PSC may have been missed. This may be due to elementary PSCs lack of awareness of professional social media groups, financial limitations to joining professional organizations, or the personal choice to not engage in professional affiliated groups. Furthermore, elementary PSCs may be affiliated with these professional organizations and networks but do not regularly interact with their platforms. This would cause eligible participants to miss recruitment efforts to take part in this study. It is also important to note that only six out of fifty state professional school counseling organizations distributed the research recruitment flyer to their members. Due to the low collaboration with these state organizations, a large portion of elementary PSCs may have been missed. Future efforts to engage state organizations should be examined to help increase access to elementary PSC across the nation.

The current study was dispersed through online communication using email and diverse social media platforms. While this does have the potential to reach more eligible participants, the response rate to emails requesting participation in a research study has decreased over the past few decades (Shannon, et. al., 2002). Eligible participants may delete recruitment emails without reading them or the emails may be blocked through spam detection. Additionally, elementary PSCs may quickly scroll past research recruitment flyers on social media platforms if it does not catch their eye, they may dismiss the flyer if uninterested in the topic area or participating in a study, or if they are overlooking the participation request while searching for other information. An alternative option to draw more participants would have been to offer a paper-based survey or create more visual appeal in recruitment materials.

Furthermore, the use of a survey allowed participants to self-report for each item collected. This is problematic as some participants may have responded to survey questions to appear competent, for their thoughts and actions to be viewed more favorably, or participants were simply unaware of their true actions when it comes to working with LGBTQ youth. While the diverse survey instruments accounted for social desirability, the researcher cannot claim that the data collected was free from response bias. Furthermore, self-selection bias may be evident within this research. Participants may have voluntarily chosen to be a part of this study due to prior interactions, advocacy, and personal dispositions towards the LGBTQ community. This may have led to a sampling of elementary PSCs who have favorable, positive attitudes towards the LGBTQ community and a willingness to provide information to support this research. Additionally, religious influence may have contributed to self-selection bias. ASCA (2016a) denotes that PSCs must respect students' and families' sexual orientation and gender identity/ expression and not impart their own biases based on personal religious values. Participants who are not able to or struggle adhering to ASCA's decreed may not have participated in this study due to their religious driven attitudes or beliefs about the LGBTQ community.

Finally, the current research also utilized a medium effect size for determining adequate power analysis. The evaluation of the magnitude of effect size (small = .02, medium= .05, and large = .08) was determined over half a century ago by Jacob Cohen (Cohen, 1969). These effect sizes, known as Cohen's *d*, are standard guidelines to determine the significant effects of our research and the shift of mean standard deviations to reject or retain the null hypothesis (Privitera, 2015). While a medium effect size has been found to be common in previous educational studies (Lipsey & Wilson, 1993),

recent researchers are calling for more stringent guidelines in determining adequate effect sizes for educational research (Kraft, 2020). By utilizing a medium effect size, the current research may be overstating the significance of the effects in rejecting the null hypothesis. If the current study had been based upon a small effect size, the desired sample size would have been 177 participants. The final sample size of this study was 111 participants, which is in range of a reasonable sample size given the sample size range between a medium effect size and a small effect size was 87 to 177, respectively. In efforts of addressing the previous mentioned limitations, this study may have been able to reach the small effect size sample of 177 participants.

**Final Reflection**

Entering my doctoral program, I was excited for the opportunity to expand my knowledge of the PSC field and the education system as a whole. Through my coursework, mentorship, and dynamic conversations with my cohort, I gained more than I could have ever thought possible. I was not aware that I would be leaving this program with a vastly new understanding of the true structure of our education system and the inequities that so many of our students face. I have humbly been faced with recognizing my own privileges and how I can work to help dismantle diverse levels of oppression. At the beginning of this dissertation I knew elementary PSC research was limited but I was unaware just how narrow the scope of research was, especially in areas concerning LGBTQ youth.

Through the findings of the current study, I have found myself revisiting my original assumptions before entering into this research. As a current PSC and having spent time in the elementary setting, I am not surprised by the barriers that were identified by this research. I have experienced and witnessed the influence diverse

stakeholders have on the actions and programmatic initiatives of PSCs. I have attended many in-service training and conferences where LGBTQ issues are either not addressed or sparse. The lack of LGBTQ representation within these areas is disheartening as there are many youths that need competent PSCs to help fight alongside them to dismantle systemic barriers.

Additionally, the relationship between multicultural competence and leadership with LGBTQ skill set is further verification that we are not preparing all of our graduate students well enough to enter the field. Before this research I recognized the relationship between these variables, but I am surprised by the significance of their association. The link between multicultural competency and leadership plays more of a role in LGBTQ skill level than I could have thought. As a PSCs, I recognize multicultural competency and leadership as areas of consistent growth and development. The task of meeting the needs of all student populations while taking on prominent positions in the school can seem daunting, but it is the role that I and many other PSCs have taken on willingly. My identity as an ally and advocate for the LGBTQ community means I need to actively engage with my own competencies and leadership while challenging other elementary PSCs to do the same.

The results from this survey show that we are not where we need to be in supporting our elementary LGBTQ students and their allies. As a profession we need to do more for these students by adequately training our elementary PSCs to push back on heteronormativity in schools. With the information gained from this study, I hope this research can provide insight on how we can better prepare our PSC in training and those who are active in the field. While LGBTQ youth initiatives and advocacy are being brought into the schools, we need to make sure this work is being directed towards our

youngest population and in collaboration with PSCs. I am committed to ensuring that our elementary LGBTQ youth are able to grow and develop in a world where they find acceptance and a safe space within their schools.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to examine elementary PSCs knowledge, skills, and dispositions to working with LGBTQ youth and factors that may influence these competencies. The results of this study concluded that elementary PSCs who held low multicultural competencies and leadership abilities also had low LGBTQ counseling skills. The analysis also found that elementary PSCs identify professional knowledge, a lack of awareness of LGBTQ resources, insufficient amount of time, and diverse school stakeholders as barriers to working with LGBTQ students. Elementary PSCs do not find that their personal comfort level, legal mandates, or the appropriateness of LGBTQ services within the elementary setting to be obstacles to delivering LGBTQ services. Finally, the current study found that an elementary PSCs work setting or location in the U.S make a difference in their LGBTQ awareness, knowledge, and skills.

The current study expands the existing but limited research on elementary PSCs counseling competencies related to the LGBTQ community. These findings are significant as it provides insight on the elementary PSCs self-reported LGBTQ competencies and obstacles they face to implementing LGBTQ services. The identification of these barriers can help serve future initiatives to assist elementary PSCs in eliminating these challenges. Through the discovery of the relationship between multicultural competencies and leadership with LGBTQ counseling skills, the research suggests that elementary PSCs who are unable to understand and effectively work with diverse populations while engaging in leadership roles cannot effectively provided the

services needed to help oppressed populations. This may limit their ability to uphold their role as PSCs and social change agents.

The research highlights the need for a more extensive investigation on the impact of the identified barriers on elementary PSCs work with LGBTQ students. Additionally, further examination of the occurrence of LGBTQ initiates provided by elementary PSCs can provide a more concise representation of the services being offered within elementary schools. Finally, the research suggests a review of the presence LGBTQ issues in graduate programs, in-service training, and professional development. Through this study and the potential for future research, it is the hope that elementary PSCs can create safe and affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth through the delivery of inclusive comprehensive counseling services.

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## Appendix

## Survey Instrument

Demographic Questionnaire Survey

1) Gender identity
    a) Female
    b) Male
    c) Transgender Male
    d) Transgender Female
    e) Nonbinary (i.e. not identifying as exclusively male or female)
    f) Prefer to self-describe:
    g) Prefer not to say
2) Sexual Orientation
    a) Heterosexual
    b) Gay or Lesbian
    c) Bisexual
    d) Pansexual
    e) Queer
    f) Asexual
    g) Another Sexual Orientation (i.e. fluid)
    h) Questioning or Unsure
    i) Prefer to self-describe:
    j) Prefer not to say
3) Ethnicity
    a) White

b) Hispanic, Latinx

c) African American or Black (including African and Afro-Caribbean)

d) Asian, South Asian, or Pacific Islander

e) Middle Eastern or Arab American

f) Native American, American Indian, or Alaska Native

g) Multiracial

h) Prefer not to answer

4) What type of school setting do you currently work in?

a) Public School

b) Charter School

c) Religious-Affiliated Private School

d) Other Independent or Private School

5) What type of community setting is your current school located in?

a) Urban

b) Suburban

c) Rural

6) How many years of experience do you have as a school counselor?

a) 0 -2 years

b) 3-5 years

c) 6 -10 years

d) 11 -15 years

e) 16 -20 years

f) 20+ years

7) Indicate the approximate number of students in your caseload

a) 0 -250 students

b) 251- 500 students

c) 501-750 students

d) 751- 1,000 students

e) 1,001+ students

8) Indicate which region of the United States you are currently employed as a professional school counselor.

a) Northeast (CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT, NJ, PA, NY)

b) South (DE, DC, FL, GA, MD, NC, SC, VA, WV, AL, KY, MS, TN, AR, LA, OK, TX)

c) Midwest (IN, IL, MI, OH, WI, IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD)

d) West (AZ, CO, ID, NM, MT, UT, NV, WY, AK, CA, HI, OR, WA)

9) Indicate, if any, professional counseling associations you are currently a member of (check all that apply)

a) American School Counselors Association (ASCA)

b) American Counseling Association (ACA)

c) State level School Counselor Association

d) County level School Counselor Association

e) Other:

f) I am not currently a member of a professional counseling association

1) Please select any barriers that may or did impact your ability to work with or engage in issues surrounding LGBTQ youth.

a) Diverse stakeholders (i.e. parents, administrators, teachers, board of education, community members)

b) Professional knowledge (i.e. limited or no training in graduate program, lack of professional development)
c) Personal Comfort Level (Level of comfort in engaging in dialogue around or advocating for LGBTQ issues)
d) Legal mandates (state regulations, federal regulations)
e) School policies (local, county, or state educational policies)
f) Lack of knowledge of resources (i.e. unaware of community resources, accreditable online resources, LGBTQ affirmative organizations)
g) I do not feel there are any barriers to me working with LGBTQ youth in my school
h) Other (please specify):

2) In what ways have these barriers impacted your ability to work with or engage in issues surrounding LGBTQ youth?"