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Understanding the knowledge Masters of Social Work student's have in regard to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender foster youth issues

Amy Rebecca Taliaferro

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UNDERSTANDING THE KNOWLEDGE MASTERS OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENT'S HAVE IN REGARD TO LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER FOSTER YOUTH ISSUES

A Project
Presented to the Faculty of California State University, San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Social Work

by
Amy Rebecca Taliaferro

June 2007
UNDERSTANDING THE KNOWLEDGE MASTERS OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENT'S HAVE IN REGARD TO LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER FOSTER YOUTH ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

The Child Welfare System provides foster care for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) youth, however the level of care provided these youth is far below best practice standards. Thus the needs of LGBT foster youth are often neglected. The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the knowledge of title IV-E master level social work students at California State University San Bernardino.

After interviewing ten social work students, the researcher found that there appears to be a relationship between student’s knowledge and their personal contacts with the LGBT community. It was also found that while MSW students know a lot about best practice guidelines for working with LGBT youth there is a deficit in their knowledge of service needs. Further, it was discovered that political correctness might compensate for deficits in the students knowledge pertaining to LGBT foster youth issues and experience of working directly with LGBT foster youth.

This research study provides recommendations to improve the knowledge of MSW students in regard to LGBT foster youth issues.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to have had Dr. Paulina Martinez as my research advisor. Her time and support were greatly appreciated. Furthermore I would like to thank the Masters of Social Work students of California State University San Bernardino who were willing to make time in their hectic schedules to participate in this study.

Lastly, a special thanks is given to my life partner, Laura S. Walker, who’s energy and love have sustained me through my educational pursuits. Without your assistance and genesis in editing this project would have never materialized.
DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to all of the lesbian gay bisexual and transgender youth in the child welfare system. It is hoped that this research project promotes a better understanding of the services they need and deserve.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adolescents are entering the child welfare system at alarming rates. According to Sullivan, Sommer, and Moff (2001), these youth make up 5% to 10% of the population under the age 18, yet their numbers in foster care—approximately 750,000 (Simms, Dobowitz, & Szilagyi, 2000)—are disproportionately high due to maltreatment from their families of origin. They are also likely to experience further mistreatment once they are in the child welfare system, an institution that exists mainly to protect children from harm.

In a study of foster care systems in fourteen states, Wilber, Reyes, and Marksamer (2006) found a general sense of apathy toward children in the child welfare system who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. None of the states studied have formal anti-discrimination policies pertaining to LGBT foster youth. In addition, none of the participating states have mandated anti-discrimination/sensitivity training for
foster care professionals; only five of the fourteen states offer optional training. The study found that, though some professionals try to compensate for a lack of resources, many do not have the information or tools to provide sufficient help.

The deficit of knowledge and understanding found nearly ubiquitously in the child welfare system is causing added problems to the turbulent lives of LGBT youth in care. Individuals who are in positions to care for, empower, and create policies to protect LGBT foster youth do not understand LGBT foster youth or know their needs extensively.

Prior to 1984, the United States had no residential treatment facilities that serviced LGBT foster youth. In that year, Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services was created in Los Angeles, and soon after, Gerald Mallon began customizing services in New York, opening Green Chimneys Children’s Services (Wilber, Reyes, & Marksamer, 2006). In addition to these residential treatment facilities that offer specialized services, the Fostering Transitions Project was created in 2002 by the Child Welfare League of America and Lambda Legal Education and Defense Fund. The project holds forums for professionals
to gather and discuss the experiences of LGBT youth in foster care.

Since the mid-80’s there has been an increase in policies that service lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth, but the small improvements have provided even smaller results. According to Youth in the Margins (2001), these policy changes have created no significant changes for the LGBT youth in the foster care system, due in large part to the change agents, social workers.

Many schools across the country offer master’s level education in the field of social work. According to statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor, as of 2004 the Council of Social Work Education reported 168 accredited Master of Social Work (MSW) programs in the United States. These colleges and universities have the daunting task of preparing future social workers to enter the profession and provide adequate support to vulnerable populations. It appears from the lack of sufficient services being offered to LGBT youth in the child welfare system that many of these universities fail to prepare their graduate level students adequately. This may be related to the brief
duration of many social work programs; two or three years may simply not be enough time to prepare a student with all of the training they will need for a lifetime of social work. Whatever the reason, there must be a greater emphasis placed on the instruction of LGBT diversity issues, especially among Title IV-E students, as they are destined to work with children—including LGBT children—in the child welfare system.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the levels of competence master's level social work students have in regard to the issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender foster youth. This study was intended to generate an understanding that there is a population in the child welfare system that is generally not being advocated for. The results of this study helped gauge what MSW students know about this marginalized group as a whole, while helping to formulate a general idea of what the students need to learn.

Although the current literature concerning LGBT foster youth issues is significant, and policies advocating for LGBT foster youth do exist, little
progress seems to have been made in the treatment of these youth since the onset of this literature and policies. As seen in the review of current literature, heterosexism among social workers is prevalent (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997). The belief that heterosexuality is inherently correct while any alternatives are incorrect-heterosexism-leaves room for maltreatment, biased services, and neglect by the one holding the belief. As master’s level social work students complete their core course work, it is important that they learn not only to look at their biases but also to learn more about LGBT issues.

An additional goal of this study was to illustrate information that is commonly misunderstood or unknown by master’s level social work students. This study aimed to discover whether or not MSW students are aware of the additional challenges facing LGBT youth in foster care, and to identify what challenges are recognized.

LGBT sensitivity training for social workers and social service professionals is currently not mandated. This is to say, work places are not adequately disseminating information about this vulnerable population in their care. If social work students are not
learning vital information while attaining their degree, if work place training does not exist to teach this information, and if the marginalized population is often misunderstood by the general population, one may derive the conclusion that future social workers will not have a solid understanding of how to work with LGBT foster youth. The study’s intention was to find out if master’s level social work students are aware of the LGBT population, and to explore what they do and do not know about the population’s special needs.

The process of acquiring data—that is, sitting with social work students and discussing their knowledge base of LGBT issues—also helped the students recognize any biases they may have. Assuming that some of the students would have homophobic and heterosexist beliefs, the challenge for this study was to help the students express those biases, allowing the research to uncover potential sexual prejudices.

Using a qualitative study with an interview guide allowed the researcher to ask general, open-ended questions pertaining to LGBT issues. Once the answers had been given, the researcher was then able to seek clarification concerning the individual students’
answers. This allowed for genuine answers that could not be given by simply guessing the correct answer from a questionnaire. Asking and answering questions face-to-face allowed the researcher to observe the subjects' non-verbal communication. For example, if asked a question that created uneasiness with the subject, the researcher was able to address this discomfort, which led to a more genuine and accurate answer or reaction.

Significance of the Proposal for Social Work
Research shows that LGBT youth are overly represented, marginalized and widely ignored within the child welfare system (Mallon, 1997; Youth In The Margins, 2006). These youth face losing their families and entering an unfamiliar system only to be assigned social workers who not only may have personal biases against them, but who also generally may not understand their unique needs.

Yet there has been minimal research concerning the competencies of future social workers. Researchers have found that heterosexist biases do exists in social workers, but no research has been conducted to explore the biases of Title IV-E social work students, those who
are specifically working towards entering the child welfare field (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997).

There is a need for culturally competent social work professionals as well as policies governing the treatment of LGBT youth in foster care. This study looked at the knowledge of MSW students with the aim to identify areas of significant knowledge deficits. These deficits not only would indicate what information is widely unknown and or misunderstood, they also would provide a base reference for teaching institutions to reform their curriculum. The findings additionally contributed to highlighting new areas and issues that need further research.

According to the generalist intervention model, assessment is a key element of helping oppressed and vulnerable populations become empowered. This research was an assessment of the knowledge held by master’s level social work students. As an assessment tool, this research proved valuable in making progressive changes toward social worker competencies. This research hoped to pinpoint some material that needs to be taught to MSW students prior to entering the professional field and/or what needs to be taught in work settings. For example, it
found that students do not understand the trauma and significance of an adolescent coming out as a gay or lesbian, and then having this disclosure affect how the adolescent is treated.

Thus the question for this research was: What are the LGBT competencies of master’s level social work students? The research focused on first- and second-year Title IV-E students, as they are intended to work in the child welfare system.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There are countless empirical studies that indicate that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth who are in the child welfare system experience a deficit of appropriate care due to various system flaws. These flaws are often found in the relationship between social worker and youth. Studies show that LGBT youth not only enter the system at a high rate, but that they also enter with specialized needs. These youth are largely overlooked by society; they often do poorly in school due to harassment; and they frequently go without adequate physical and mental health care for their needs. Seldom do they return home to their parents after being placed in out-of-home care.

Studies show that LGBT youth have service needs that extend beyond those of their heterosexual peers. They show that social workers often have homophobic and heterosexist views and that these tendencies can directly affect the level of care given to LGBT youth.
This chapter will explore the literature that explains how different forms of sexual prejudice, namely homophobia and heterosexism impact social work. It will also include an overview of the service needs of LGBT youth, and the current programs that function to meet these needs. The chapter will conclude with the theories that have guided the conceptualization of the study.

Homophobia and Heterosexism

Homophobia is generally defined as an intense dislike of gay or lesbian people or their lifestyle. Heterosexism is generally defined as the belief that heterosexuality is normal while homosexuality and bisexuality are unnatural and thus wrong. Morrow (1993) explains that gay and lesbian youth are a socially oppressed group that faces discrimination from a heterosexist society. Many LGBT youth enter the child welfare system because of abuse encountered in their homes. This physical, emotional and psychological abuse often comes at the hand of parents or caregivers who hold heterosexist beliefs. The youth then enter a system where, according to Mallon et al. (2002), they receive similar abuses at the hands of social workers, foster
parents, group home personnel and other social service professionals. These youth encounter people, both professional and non-professional, who do not fully understand the host of problems that accompany adolescents who admit they are different than the majority.

A quantitative study of 187 social workers found that only ten percent of those studied held specifically homophobic views; however a majority of those studied were found to have heterosexist beliefs (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997). While it may be comforting to discover such a low percentage of social workers to be outright homophobic, the prevalence of heterosexism is disturbing. Social workers are governed by a code of ethics that should greatly eliminate such prejudice; they adhere to the mission statement that promotes helping the vulnerable and oppressed to enhance their well-being and meet their basic needs (NASW, 1999). Berkman and Zinberg’s findings should cause some question as to who, if not social workers, is looking out for the best interest of this vulnerable group.

It is important to note that even though this project has used the terms heterosexism and homophobia
Massey noted that concerns have been raised concerning the use of these terms in comparison to the more comprehensive term of sexual prejudice (as cited in Martinez, 2006).

**Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Service Needs**

In a study of 45 self-identified LGBT youth in foster care, Mallon et al. (2002) found that the youth’s needs were not only unique, but that many of these needs were not being addressed adequately. The study took place in the nation’s only two LGBT based residential treatment facilities, Green Chimneys in New York, and Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services (GLASS) in California. While this research focuses primarily on the barriers LGBT youth face in finding permanency in the system, it also highlights some unique needs many LGBT foster youth have. For example, they found these youth need LGBT competent staff as well as a safe environment to disclose their sexual identity. It also reported that many LGBT youth face higher placement numbers, a greater chance of becoming homeless, and have a higher risk of meeting verbal harassment and physical violence (Mallon et al., 2002).
Mallon's additional studies (1997; et al. 2002) noted that LGBT youth typically suffer from being marginalized and ignored, causing them to receive inadequate health care, education, and social support. It was also found that many of these youth who enter out-of-home care frequently do not return to their families, a scenario that often results in multiple unstable placements or even homelessness. It was also found that academic performance is lowered due to homophobic acts of heterosexual peers (Mallon et al. 2002).

Furthermore, Ragg, Patrick, and Ziefert (2006) conducted a qualitative study of 21 self-identified gay and lesbian foster youth over an eight-month period. The youth were interviewed concerning their perceptions of worker competencies and facilitativeness. They observed from a youth's perspective social workers who helped and those who hindered; helping and hindering where seen in relation to the positive development of the foster youth. The youth were also allowed to explain how they were treated by social workers. It was found that the three areas of worker competence that the youth found to be
helpful were supportive engagement, responsive exploration, and openness.

Current Programs for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth

Legal Services for Children and the National Center For Lesbian Rights introduced the Model Standards Project in 2002 (Wilber, Reyes, & Marksamer). The project, which aimed to circulate appropriate standards for working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender foster youth, ultimately produced four recommendations. The first, "creating an inclusive organizational culture" (p. 3), refers to the fair and equal treatment of all youth, regardless of sexual identity, within the child welfare system. The second recommendation is to recruit and provide support for caregivers and staff who can competently and compassionately serve LGBT youth. Third is the promotion of healthy development for adolescent clients through the "exploration and expression of [sexual] identity" (p. 5). The project’s final recommendation is to ensure that the privacy and confidentiality of LGBT youth are respected.

In affiliation with the Child Welfare League of America, Wilber, Reyes, and Marksamer also published a
Best Practice Guidelines (2006), which focuses on identifying the needs of LGBT youth in out-of-home care and providing professional standards to supply these youth with appropriate resources. These guidelines give an extensive overview of the services that should be provided to LGBT youth in foster care. The guidelines include providing permanent and stable homes for LGBT youth; promoting positive adolescent development, which includes identity development; providing safe spaces for youth to come out; managing confidential information appropriately; providing appropriate physical and mental services; and ensuring safe educational opportunities.

Outcomes of Current Programs

Although research shows that LGBT youth do experience discrimination and programs have been implemented to avoid this mistreatment, little to no difference has been seen in regards to the services they actually receive. Sullivan, Sommer, and Moff (2001) conclude that child welfare agencies have not incorporated the knowledge that has been gained from research concerning sexuality and adolescents. They note that the majority of professional standards do not
recognize a child's sexual identity when working with her/him in out-of-home care. Research has generally neglected looking at those who are studying social work and who will eventually work face to face with LGBT youth. There appears to be a need to assess what master's level social work students know about the needs of LGBT youth.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth live in a society where few people understand them, including their own parents and families (Wilber, Reyes, & Markamer, 2006). The misunderstanding, harassment, mockery and blatant disregard LGBT youth encounter is likely to have an adverse effect on them. In fact, the way in which a person is treated affects how s/he develops. While looking at the competencies of social workers in regard to the LGBT issues, it is important to consider the moral development of LGBT youth.

Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development can serve as a guide to understanding the actions of LGBT youth because it gives an overview of their moral development based on how they have been mistreated
Within Kohlberg’s theory lie three levels, each containing two stages. The first level, known as pre-conventional, is highlighted by children regulating their behavior in response to punishments and rewards. The second stage of this level involves a switch to seeking rewards and avoiding punishments. During this stage children seek to do the “right thing” to receive a reward.

In relation to LGBT youth in the foster care system, these two stages could be misconstrued if the socially appointed “right” behavior is not the youth’s natural choice. In other words, if the behaviors of a child who is inclined towards homosexuality are seen as incorrect by one with a biased opinion, this behavior will then be regarded as punishable. Such misguidance of moral behavior can be internalized by the child and can result in the child sensing that what s/he feels naturally is wrong.

Kohlberg’s second level is called the conventional level, and involves the youth internalizing the opinions of others. One’s behavior patterns are formed according to what others deem socially acceptable. This stage of moral development may cause confusion when an adolescent
feels and acts a certain way and in response s/he is mistreated or misunderstood. This stage is characterized by the adolescent’s desire to please others. Thus with LGBT youth, there is a dilemma created of having to hide instinctual behaviors with false, socially acceptable ones, which may be a factor in many LGBT adolescent’s desire to remain in the closet and act heterosexual.

In addition to Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, Herbert Blumer’s influential summary of symbolic interactionism (1969) may explain in greater detail the experiences LGBT youth. Symbolic interactionism explains that a person will react to things based on the meaning that the thing has for the person. These meanings are derived from social interactions and then modified by interpretation. The theory of symbolic interactionism suggests that people do not just react to each other, they interpret one another and adjust their behavior accordingly. Along with this adjustment of behavior come patterns of interactions that are constantly being readjusted by social processes.

LGBT foster youth behave as a direct result of how they interpret their interactions with others. This applies not only to their behavior but also to their
interpretation of their own identity by interactions with society. As society or the social worker looks at the 14-year-old lesbian with disgust, the adolescent may internalize her identity as such: disgusting. Another example can be found with the negative connotation that has recently been attached to the word "gay;" forming appropriate social connections in a society that uses the word gay as a derogatory slur can be profoundly difficult.

Homosexuality is viewed by a majority of society as wrong, sinful and/or perverse. This same society views children in the child welfare system as "throwaway" youth. Combining these two social constructs, LGBT foster youth face an overwhelming double blow of marginalization, which may cause a negative self-image.

Summary

Studies thus far have clearly shown that LGBT youth are marginalized in the child welfare system. With this marginalization comes the problem of the group’s needs being widely unknown among the professionals that work with them, coupled with a bounty of unique resource and support needs.
There are many articles giving best practice guidelines for working with this population, as well as evaluations of current programs in place. However, the needs of LGBT youth still are not being met.

Research has shown that many of LGBT youth's unique issues stem from harassment, volatile family/home relations, and social/system prejudices. Some of the necessities LGBT youth have are the need for open and accepting social workers, permanency plans, tailored medical attention, and education support. Above all there is a need to find out if master's level social work students know the needs of LGBT youth in the child welfare system as well as gauging what they do and do not know about this group.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This section covers the methods used in conducting this study. An explanation has been provided for the study design, the sampling methods used, data collection and instruments, and procedures. This chapter also covers protection of human subjects and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to identify knowledge of master’s level social work students in the area of LGBT youth and their service needs. Related literature has shown a huge deficit between services needed and those rendered. Literature also shows that social workers’ knowledge of LGBT issues is very limited, thus creating another service gap. There has, however, been very little inquiry into what social workers know and do not know about LGBT youth in out-of-home care. In addition to these findings, there appear to be no studies involving the measurement of competencies of master’s level social work students who plan to work in the child welfare system.
Thus, utilizing grounded theory, this study used a qualitative study design, in that it conducted face-to-face interviews with first- and second-year master’s level social work students at California State University San Bernardino. In addition, the participants where selected based on the criteria that they where in the Title IV-E program. This ensured that the students studied where intending to work in the child welfare system.

It is believed that conducting face-to-face interviews with the participants allowed the interviewer to probe and clarify any answers that appeared to be ambiguous. It is further believed that talking with the subjects allowed the researcher to watch the participants’ non-verbal communication to see if they had any reactions to a question or topic that they may have wanted to disclose. It is hoped that the intimacy of the interview allowed for increased honesty and clarity.

In conducting interviews, it was believed that the time needed to interview more than ten participants was not available. Therefore, this study was not representative of Master of Social Work students in general.
The sample size of this study was a significant limitation. The time allotted for this research did not permit the researcher to study this problem with thorough depth and scrutiny. Current literature shows that many social workers have heterosexist biases that guide their practice, yet these studies do not identify a number of significant elements. Some of these elements included identifying if there was a difference between the biases of master's and bachelor's level social workers, showing what might cause these biases, and what educational curriculum could help these professionals better serve LGBT youth. Future studies need to be done that include a larger sample size of diverse social work students.

Sampling

The sample for this study was proposed to be ten graduate level social work students who were currently enrolled in California State University San Bernardino’s Master of Social Work program. The participants were selected using the non-probability procedure of convenience sampling. The interviewer placed flyers explaining the study and the criteria for participants in the halls and classrooms of CSUSB’s social work program.
The flyer contained contact information so that persons interested could contact the researcher.

The criteria for participation included only two segments: current enrollment in the MSW program and participation in the Title IV-E grant. Because the purpose of the study was to identify the competencies of social work students in general, the criteria for participants were left to only these two elements.

The reason for using this sample was threefold, with the first and second reasons holding the most importance: first, that this group had not been studied, and second, that they would be working with the child welfare population upon graduation. The latter reason guaranteed that the sample would one-day work with the LGBT foster youth population. The third reason pertained to convenience: there were approximately 42 students who were readily available and most likely willing to participate in such a study.

Data Collection and Instruments

This study collected data by way of audio recording face-to-face interviews with Master of Social Work students. The semi-structured interview used an interview
guide consisting of 11 core questions that served as a basis for exploration. The questions were open-ended, allowing the participants to explain what they knew or believed, and were asked in succession of broader topics first, followed by narrower topics. This format was designed to help each participant feel at ease, and to allow her/him to recall as much information as possible while discussing the study's purpose as a whole.

The first question inquired about the participants' understanding of the acronym LGBT. As the interview progressed the questions developed into inquiries regarding the experiences of LGBT youth in the child welfare system. For example, the participants were asked what special issues LGBT foster youth have in comparison to their heterosexual peers. The progressive order of questions had been created to generate the most accurate and candid answers possible. In general the instrument was created to provide the highest quality of data (See Appendix A for Interview Schedule).

The questions are as follows: (1) What does LGBT stand for? (2) What do you know about this population in general? (3) What are your experiences with this population? (4) Do you think that LGBT youth are in the
foster care system? Y/N? - How many? (5) What special issues may LGBT youth have in comparison to their heterosexual peers in foster care? (6) What service needs may LGBT youth have? (7) What may be some best practice ideas for working with this population? (8) How would you work with a gay adolescent that was unable to stay in a placement for longer than a few days? (9) What might a lesbian or gay teen be thinking or feeling about themselves? (10) How does this population cope with their marginalization, if they are marginalized? (11) What are your age, ethnicity, religion and political ideology?

Procedures

Once a list of interested students was created from the response to the flyers, the researcher invited these students to participate in the study and offered them a retail store gift card as compensation for their time spent. A sample of ten students was used for the purpose of this study. Interviews were conducted within a two-week period at the rate of five interviews per week. The interviews consisted of ten open-ended questions interspersed with probing questions. The interview was approximated to take forty-five minutes and was held at
the location specified by the participants. All but two of the participants chose to be interviewed at California State University San Bernardino. At the conclusion of the interviews, the participants were asked if they could be contacted later to provide any additional information that might have been needed.

Protection of Human Subjects

Due to the personal nature of interviews concerning student knowledge of LGBT issues, precautions were employed to ensure the confidentiality of participants. These included assigning a random number to each participant that corresponded with the researcher’s notes so that an association was not made between the participant and the data from the interview; the timely transcription of all audio recordings; and the destruction of audiotapes in order to prevent the possibility of identifying the participants from their voice recordings. Additionally, the data was stored so it was only accessible to the researcher.

The peer relationship of researcher and subject created an additional problem in the protection of the subjects’ rights. To additionally protect the subject’s
anonymity, the data received was treated with extreme sensitivity. The researcher actively avoided any discussion of the study, interviews, and/or data with all persons except the research advisor or professor.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was conducted using qualitative analysis techniques. First, the data from the audio taped face-to-face interview was transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read several times; with each reading notes were taken. Each note explaining significant pieces of data, as they appeared in the responses from each set of questions. A journal was used to keep track of this information. From these significant chunks of data numerous themes were discovered. A list of the highlights taken from the chunks of data was compiled and from these I was able to identify six relevant themes. The major themes were noted and presented as the study’s findings.

Summary

This chapter has presented the methodology that was employed in this study design. Issues pertaining to the study were discussed, including study design, sampling,
procedures for data collection, and an explanation of the interview guide questions. This chapter also described the means that were employed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the human subjects, and concluded with an explanation of how the data was analyzed.
CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

Introduction

This section will serve to present the findings of the data collected during the interview process using the questions found on the interview schedule (See Appendix A). The data will be presented according to six different themes, which are: subject connection to the LGBT community, best practice knowledge, service needs, political correctness, negative perceptions and population confusion. Due to the small sample size of participants, demographics do not play a significant role in this study’s findings and will not be given.

Presentation of the Findings

The researcher conducted ten interviews, six with second-year students and four with first-year students. The students were selected based on their enrollment in the Master of Social Work program at California State University San Bernardino and their participation in the Title IV-E program. No male students volunteered for this study.
The following are the themes discovered from the participants’ answers provided in response to the questions listed on the interview schedule:

Subject Connection to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community

Participants who have LGBT friends or family tended to know more about the population while respondents who said that they do not personally know anyone in the LGBT population often gave general, ambiguous answers. For example, one student said that she does not personally know of any gays or lesbians. When asked to explain some service needs of LGBT foster youth, she replied that they (LGBT foster youth) have no different service needs than their heterosexual counterparts. When asked what the participant would do if a gay or lesbian youth on her case could not stay in placement for more than a few days, one participant noted that she would not do anything different with this youth than with a heterosexual youth.

One participant in particular had what was presented as very firm ties to the LGBT community, both personally and professionally. It was this participant alone who mentioned that LGBT youth would need the option of having
spiritual outlets—places to go and worship without fear of discrimination. She was also the only participant to mention that as social workers we have to understand that when working with LGBT foster youth their sexual orientation is not their only concern. It is likely that these youth are in the child welfare system for reasons other than their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Another participant with strong connections to the LGBT community was able to give several relevant answers for each question asked in the interview. This participant displayed a well-rounded knowledge of LGBT foster youth issues, as well as best practice approaches. When asked what LGBT foster youth may feel or think about themselves she focused not only on the negative aspects but mentioned that some youth may feel proud about who they are. She focused on the fact that LGBT youth are like heterosexual youth and what they feel or think about themselves varies drastically. She also brought up topics that had been generally overlooked by the other participants, one of these being that LGBT youth have higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse.

While these participants were relatively close to a variety of LGBT people, others admitted that they
personally knew no one who identifies as LGBT. This latter group had many answers that mirrored this isolation from the LGBT community. For example, one person said that LGBT foster youth do not need additional services in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts. While another said that this group does not have special issues in comparison to other youth in foster care.

**Best Practice Knowledge**

It was found that regardless of the participants' personal experience with the LGBT population, all ten of the participants gave at least one of the many best practice guidelines defined by the Child Welfare League of America (2006), while many of the students gave several appropriate responses. There were two types of best practice guidelines given. The first type outlined the need for social workers to examine their own personal biases and to educate themselves about LGBT issues. Participants noted that education would allow social workers to become a safe, open and healthy resource for the youth. To describe the characteristics of a social worker who employs best practice methods, participants
used such terms as sensitive, aware, understanding, accepting, and honest.

The second type of response focused on things that the social workers could do for or with the youth. These included helping the youth acquire mentors, LGBT community relationships, support groups, affirming therapists, outlets for self-expression and healthy peer groups.

A third group of responses regarding best practice included that of securing a LGBT friendly placement for youth. This included finding foster parents and group homes that are accepting and affirming of the LGBT youth and their needs. It was noted that these placement needs included feeling safe in their home and having the ability to create social connections with other LGBT youth or groups.

Service Needs

When asked what service needs LGBT foster youth may have in comparison to their heterosexual peers, mentoring or a mentorship program was a prominent answer. The students noted that having connections with an understanding and open adult could prove valuable to these youth. They noted that the mentor’s orientation or
gender identity is not the most significant aspect, rather more important is their ability to provide the youth with guidance and stability. It was even noted that a mentor is the greatest need that LGBT foster youth have.

A second prominent answer was counseling with a LGBT affirming counselor or therapist. The subjects noted that LGBT foster youth need to be provided with an opportunity to discuss both their sexuality/gender related issues and non-LGBT issues with a professional who can respect their orientation and provide support. This professional would not have to be LGBT himself or herself but would need to be accepting of this community, and knowledgeable of issues one may have in identifying as LGBT.

A majority of the participants were able to list several service needs of LGBT youth while two noted that they felt these youth have no different needs than heterosexual foster youth. The service needs given by the majority were: mentors or a mentorship program, supportive networks, counseling (including substance abuse counseling), LGBT-accepting placements, and/or support groups. One participant also mentioned the need for counseling to increase self-esteem, another mentioned
spiritual outlets, and a third participant mentioned the need for family identification.

Political Correctness

It was discovered that the participants would often clarify their answers with statements of what they personally believed about a situation. For example, when participants were asked to explain what LGBT foster youth might feel or think about themselves, one person noted that they might feel that they are not normal. Directly after making this statement she remarked that this is only what she thinks the youth may feel about themselves, but as for herself she believes there is "no normal."

Another example was given when a student was asked what service needs LGBT foster youth may have. One person stated that these youth might need "counseling within their own culture or way of lifestyle." Within the next sentence she stated, "not that there is any difference."

Personal comments that followed answers seemed as though the participants were trying to clarify or acknowledge that they do not have sexual prejudices.

Negative Perceptions

In answering what the participants know about the LGBT population in general, responses all followed a
pattern, this being that the majority mentioned primarily negative things. They mentioned such things as the LGBT population being marginalized, oppressed, judged, misunderstood, hated and discriminated against.

This same theme appeared when speaking of LGBT foster youth, as seen with participants noting that LGBT foster youth lack much needed services and support within the child welfare system. It was also noted that these youth often have conflict within themselves, which often leads to drug and alcohol abuse, low self esteem, occurrences of self mutilation and high suicide rates. Many participants mentioned that there is a significant likelihood that a LGBT foster youth would have a negative self-concept due, in general, to environmental and social interactions.

There were some responses that illustrated the strengths of the LGBT community. One participant mentioned that the LGBT community is diverse, having many members from different backgrounds. Another noted that that LGBT population has a culture of its own, with members referring to themselves as part of a “family.” A third student noted that it is a strong community that is gaining more power. Aside from these three comments given
by three different participants, the responses outlined the unconstructive elements of both the LGBT community and LGBT foster youth.

Population Confusion

There was a tendency for the participants to give answers regarding the LGBT community at large rather than LGBT foster youth specifically. Questions that were focused on looking at foster youth were answered with global answers. For example, when asked how this population (LGBT foster youth) cope with their marginalization, the answers were geared toward the coping tactics of the LGBT community in general. These answers ranged from developing political activism groups to generating social organizations to support their community.

Conclusion

This chapter has served to present the themes discovered from the responses given to the question on the interview schedule. The data was presented as six different themes, which are: subject connection to the LGBT community, best practice knowledge, service needs, political correctness, negative perceptions and
population confusion. These six themes will be discussed further in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction
Chapter five is an overview of the significance of the themes discovered from this study and recommendations for social work education, practice and research. The findings suggest that, while Master of Social Work students' knowledge of LGBT issues is significant, additional educational and professional outlets with the LGBT community would greatly improve their overall knowledge of related issues. In addition, this chapter includes a discussion of the limitations of the research that may have affected the significance of the findings. The chapter closes with recommendations for social work education, practice, and research.

Discussion
Subject Connection to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community

It was found that while several participants were relatively close to members of the LGBT community, others admitted that they personally knew no one who identifies as LGBT. This first group of students who noted that they
have LGBT friends and family and/or had worked with this population had an increased awareness of LGBT foster youth needs. It is evident that the more LGBT people an individual knows the more knowledge they will have about the population in general.

**Best Practice Knowledge**

The findings of this study suggest that title IV-E master's level social work students know a great deal about the LGBT community and LGBT foster youth. These finding are reassuring until compared with the fact that LGBT foster youth are still not receiving appropriate services and treatment in foster care (Mallon, 2002; Ragg, Patrick, & Ziefert, 2002; Wilber, Reyes, & Marksamer, 2006).

A disconnect appeared between what is known about best practices for working with LGBT foster youth, and the services this population actually receives. Moreover, there is a discrepancy with the reported knowledge of MSW students and the reported treatment LGBT foster youth are receiving (Mallon, 2002). This gap may be insignificant given that the sample consisted of students and not practicing social workers. However, it also may indicate
that social worker biases prevent professionals from giving these youth the appropriate services.

Service Needs

All of the students interviewed were able to name at least one best practice guideline for working with LGBT foster youth, and the majority knew numerous guidelines. This leaves one to wonder why four of the ten students, when asked what service needs this population may have, simply stated that both LGBT and non-LGBT foster youth have the same service needs. The discrepancy may be due in part to the students' ability to give universally culturally competent best practice approaches for working with foster youth in general. In essence, they may have given answers that inadvertently corresponded to those outlined for LGBT foster youth specifically. Another cause for this incongruence may be found in the students' desire to portray themselves as being culturally component.

Political Correctness

Often when participants said something negative, they would clarify their statements by saying that the negative response was strictly in reply to the parameters of the question. For example, with question number nine
that asks how gay or lesbian teens may feel or think about themselves, one person stated that the youth may feel that they are not normal. This participant quickly added that to her, there is no "normal," illustrating that she does not personally think LGBT youth are abnormal. This response could be interpreted to mean that the participant does not think that LGBT persons in general are abnormal. Such clarification may be connected to the participant’s belief that the researcher is a part of the LGBT community. The participant’s answers may have been cushioned to create a sense that the participant is culturally sensitive.

It is impossible to conclude that there is a link between student responses and student perceptions of the interviewer. Furthermore, because the study focused on the knowledge and not the attitudes, biases or beliefs of MSW students, the question of whether or not a subject could falsify knowledge of something to appear culturally competent is outside the parameters of this research. However, this may be a topic of interest for further study.
Negative Perceptions

An overwhelming theme was discovered in response to the first question regarding participant knowledge of the LGBT population in general. The ten participants used a variety of terms to express their knowledge concerning this group, all of which highlighted the negative perceptions of the LGBT community. Half of the participants said that they knew that LGBT persons were discriminated against, while three participants noted that the group is marginalized. All ten of the responses were virtually the same in implication, using such overlapping terms as misunderstood, oppressed, prejudiced, biased against, and hated to explain how society generally perceives and treats individuals within the LGBT community.

While it was expected that the students would mention these things, it was not expected that the positive aspects of the LGBT community would be so severely overlooked. The researcher expected that more students would have used such terms as: accepting, open-minded, diverse, unified, strong, growing, active, and healthy. Although it is disquieting that patterns of answers focused so heavily on the limitations and
problems of being an LGBT foster youth, these responses give validity to the call for improvement in services offered to LGBT foster youth found in professional literature (Mallon, 2002; Ragg, Patrick, & Ziefert, 2002; Wilber, Reyes, & Marksamer 2006).

This theme suggests another deficit regarding MSW students' knowledge in practice. It seems that social work students do not comprehend—or at best do not utilize—the strengths based approach. The correlation of such negative societal perceptions with the LGBT community is unsettling. It would be akin to respondents listing slavery, racism, and affirmative action as their knowledge base of the African American community, while excluding such strengths as spirituality, unity, and pride.

Population Confusion

There was a tendency for the participants to give answers that referred to the LGBT community at large rather than the LGBT foster youth community. Those questions that were answered with generalized responses left room for debate as to whether the participants misunderstood the nature of the question or simply assumed that LGBT foster youth are as politically and
socially active as their adult counterparts in the larger LGBT community. If the latter possibility is true, this confusion of two distinct groups of individuals could lead to potentially disastrous results for the LGBT youth. The assumption that a group of misunderstood, mistreated, and oppressed minors would react to their situation in the same way as the generalized LGBT community may cause social workers to perceive their clients as politically savvy and fundamentally self-sufficient. This misperception may be a clue as to why LGBT youth are frequently overlooked and marginalized in the child welfare system.

Limitations

A limitation in this study could be found in the enthusiasm of my peers to participate in my study. In recruiting participants for the interviews, flyers were handed out detailing the basics of the study. There was a quick response; within ten minutes eight of the interviews were confirmed and scheduled. There seemed to be an eagerness to assist a peer in her research. However, such enthusiasm could also illustrate that the peers willing to participate were naturally more
comfortable with the subject matter and consequently more knowledgeable as well.

One of the original motivations to conduct this research stemmed from misinformation that was being relayed between MSW students in the CSUSB program. It was hoped that talking to some of these individuals would help to discover what MSW students really know and how their knowledge may impact their future work as social workers. However, when selecting the sample of willing participants those peers who had stimulated my interest in the research question were unwilling to participate.

An additional limitation can be seen in the small number of participants studied. A topic such as this would benefit greatly from a lengthier study using a larger number of MSW students.

Implications and Recommendations for Social Work Education, Practice, and Research

Provided below are the implications and recommendations that have come from the findings of this study. In finding that students who have a connection to the LGBT community have more knowledge it is recommended that social work students actively seek out opportunities to work with LGBT individuals. The findings of this study
suggest that their personal interactions with members of the LGBT community can increase their knowledge of LGBT foster youth issues. Therefore, it is suggested that MSW programs either provide their students with increased exposure to LGBT related curriculum and/or training, or provide their students the opportunity to work with LGBT youth. After all, it has been found that one’s “contact” with the Gay and Lesbian community is the best indicator of knowledge and positive attitudes toward Gay and Lesbian individuals (Herek & Capitanio, 1999; Massey, 2004; Martinez, 2006).

In finding that all of the students knew at least one best practice guideline for working with LGBT foster youth it is recommended that a quantitative study using a larger group of MSW students be completed with a focus on identifying the complexity of the students’ knowledge of LGBT foster youth best practice guidelines. Such a study could help future social workers better understand their knowledge deficits, thus helping them to better prepare to work with this population.

In finding that students knowledge of LGBT foster youth service needs is lower than their knowledge of best practice guidelines, it is recommended that MSW students
participate in seminar and training programs in addition to their fieldwork. There are numerous professional trainings that identify healthy ways for working with the LGBT community in social service settings. These trainings are geared toward helping child welfare social workers identify the needs and challenges of LGBT foster youth.

Where such trainings are unavailable or do not fit within the time constraints of an MSW program, curricula addressing these service needs may need to be added to the existing course materials. An additional class containing information about, and techniques for, working with marginalized and minority groups in foster care may be beneficial for title IV-E MSW students, as these students are preparing to work in the child welfare system.

In finding that many students carry negative perceptions of the LGBT community it is recommended that MSW programs provide more of a focus on cultural sensitivity, which would help the students identify not only personal biases but also the strengths of marginalized groups and minorities.
It is also proposed that such a study be done at a religious school such as Loma Linda where the Title IV-E stipend is offered, as the environment in which the students are learning and the pool of applicants that such colleges pull from may impact the knowledge of its students. An understanding of religiosity and knowledge pertaining to LGBT foster youth may be a useful combination in identifying additional aspects that prevent this foster youth population from receiving the services they need and deserve.

Conclusions

The results of the study suggested that while MSW students know some best practice approaches for working with LGBT foster youth, there was a deficit in understand this population’s service needs. It was also recommended that social work students actively pursue working with diverse groups of clients, including the LGBT community. It would also be beneficial for schools of social work to impress the need for students to become more culturally competent.

It was also discovered that the LGBT community is generally defined by negative aspects and that LGBT
foster youth are often clumped with this larger group. It has been recommended that future social workers become more familiar with the strengths of the LGBT community and the difference between this population and that of foster youth who identify as LGBT.
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
Interview Schedule

1. What does LGBT stand for?
2. What do you know about this population in general?
3. What are your experiences with this population?
4. Do you think that LGBT youth are in the foster care system/ Y/N? - How many?
5. What special issues may LGBT youth have in comparison to their heterosexual peers in foster care?
6. What service needs may LBGT youth have?
7. What may be some best practice ideas for working with this population?
8. How would you work with a gay adolescent that was unable to stay in a placement for longer than a few days?
9. What might a lesbian or gay teen be thinking or feeling about themselves?
10. How does this population cope with their marginalization, if they are marginalized?
11. What are your age, ethnicity, religion and political ideology?
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT
INFORMED CONSENT

The study you are being asked to participate in is designed to gain understanding of the knowledge of master’s level social work students pertaining to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) issues. Amy Taliaferro is conducting this study under the supervision of Dr. Paulina Martinez, Assistant Professor of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

In this study you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview regarding your knowledge of LGBT issues. The interview should last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Your name and identity will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researcher. Your name will not be given with your responses. All data will be reported as themes discovered. Upon completion of the study, June 2006, if you wish to obtain a copy of the findings, please contact the Pfau Library at (909) 537-5084.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may decline to answer any question(s) and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. When you have completed the interview, you will receive a debriefing statement that will explain the study in greater detail. In order to ensure trustworthiness of the study, you will be asked to refrain from discussing this study with your peers or other participants. While your participation may help to identify what master’s level social work students know about GLBT issues, some of the interview questions may cause you to feel slightly uncomfortable. At the completion of the interview you will be given a $10 gift card to compensate you for your time.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Paulina Martinez at (909) 537-5584.

By placing a check mark in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand, the purpose and nature of the study, and I willingly consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older.

Please place a mark here □  Today's Date: _____________
APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

The study you have just participated in was about the knowledge master's level social work students have concerning the issues of LGBT youth in the child welfare system. The researcher was also interested in learning if MSW students are aware of the overrepresentation of LGBT youth in the child welfare system. In addition, the study is intended to reveal if students are conscious of the special needs of LGBT youth, such as placement with open-minded foster parents and social workers. It is hoped that the study will help outline necessary changes in social work curriculum as well as demonstrate how one social work program is preparing its MSW students to enter the social work profession.

Thank you for participating in this study and for not discussing the contents of the interview with your peers. If you feel uncomfortable or distressed as a result of your participation, please feel free to contact the San Bernardino County Department of Behavioral Health's Access Unit at (888) 743-1478 or CSUSB's Psychological Counseling Center at (909) 537-5040. If you wish to obtain a copy of the study, feel free to contact the Pfau Library at (909) 537-5084 after June 2007.
REFERENCES


