

Episode 251—Dr. William Koehler and Dr. Hilary Copp: A Comparison of Urban and Rural Middle and High School Teachers' Attitudes and Observations about LGBT Students

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork, the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hi from Buffalo! On November 6 the US will be holding their mid-term elections across the country. In 1920 the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote. In 1968 the Voting Rights Act was signed into law and since 2015 the millennial generation has accounted for one third of the electors. Recent history has shown that only about 40 percent of the eligible population will vote in the midterm elections. The right to vote has been hard fought. Let's use it. I'm Peter Sobota. On October 26 2018 Matthew Shepard was finally laid to rest at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. 20 years ago at age 21, Mr. Shepard was a student at the University of Wyoming, and he was violently attacked and left for dead in Laramie simply because he was openly gay. Many things have changed in the subsequent 20 years for LGBT youth and much has not. In this episode our guests Doctors Hilary Copp and William Koehler discuss their work examining urban and rural middle and high school teachers attitudes and observations of their LGBT students. They discuss the inspiration for their work in collaboration and what they have learned about the factors that influence teachers attitudes toward LGBT students and what impact these have had on what the teachers observe. Our guests describe the challenges faced by schools, policy makers and practitioners as they attempt to help LGBT students navigate their environments with dignity, safety and acceptance. Hilary Copp Ph.D. is associate professor at Edinburgh University Department of Social Work, and William Koehler Ph.D. LCSW is assistant professor at the Department of Social Work at Edinburgh University as well. Doctors Copp and Koehler were interviewed in September 2018 by our own Michael Lynch, clinical assistant professor here at the Eubie School of Social Work.

[00:02:29] Hello. My name is Michael Lynch and I'm a clinical assistant professor for field education here at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work and I'm with Dr. Hilary Copp and Dr. Will Koehler this afternoon. We're excited to have you both on the podcast Hilary and Will. So can you start off by telling me a bit about your current project?

[00:02:45] Sure I'll start off. This will and my interest in LGBT students in general began around 2010 when I was in my doctoral program and a freshman at Rutgers University named Tyler Clementi died by suicide. Tyler had been discovered as being gay by his roommate and some of the roommates friends had taped him and outed him on social media and he was successful in dying by suicide due to that. And so I was overwhelmed by the onslaught of stories that were about bullying and harassment of LGBT students. That came as a result of that story breaking and people feeling more empowered to share their stories. So that led me to partner with Hilary on a series of studies surrounding the health and well-being of LGBT people. Our project involves the comparison of attitudes of teachers and their observances of anti-LGBT behaviors in two school districts within our county in northwest Pennsylvania. One is a primarily urban school district and the other is a rural school district. The urban teachers were sampled from a district wide in-service day training during which the teachers got to select from a number of different workshops about working with students of different intersectionality of diversity and our surveys were distributed at the beginning of workshops that addressed either Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Nonbinary student issues specifically or in general bullying issues. The rural teachers on the other hand were sampled during an in-service training day at a local middle and high schools and all teachers were required to attend the same sessions. So this gave us a general idea of how to compare attitudes about LGBT students

and what the teachers were observing as far as bullying, harassment, derogatory name calling and a variety of behaviors and actions directed towards LGBT students in their schools.

[00:04:52] Great! And why is it important for practitioners, researchers or policymakers to understand this issue?

[00:04:56] This is Hilary. The issue has recently come to the forefront as Will was saying because there have been some fairly high publicized incidents of bullying and because many more young people are starting to come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, transgender or nonbinary. That just means that they don't fit into the traditional male-female binary gender model. And so this means that schools throughout the US are starting to have to address issues like LGBTQ-based bullying as well as issues like restrooms locker rooms and other gender segregated spaces and organizations at levels that they haven't had to face before because kids are coming out younger and younger and more and more frequently. Practitioners and policymakers need to familiarize themselves with issues related to gender identity including those that are unique to the child and adolescent population, like what happens to them while they're in school. And many practitioners and policymakers and teachers don't have the resources or the knowledge to help kids navigate these issues in schools. Once they have the resources and the knowledge then they can work towards making schools a safer environment for students who are LGBTQ.

[00:06:09] And Hilary what were you hoping to discover through this project?

[00:06:11] Well we were hoping to discover what different factors influence teachers attitudes about LGBTQ students and if those attitudes were correlated with what they observed in anti LGBT incidents in their schools. And I'll let Will talk in a little bit about what we did find there but that's kind of what we were looking at. We also wanted to compare teachers attitudes about LGBTQ students between these rural and urban school settings. We've been doing some LGBTQ competency trainings for school personnel like teachers, coaches, guidance counselors in different places. And this information could help us to tailor the trainings for the specific school setting.

[00:06:53] Absolutely, that makes a lot of sense. What questions did you address?

[00:06:56] So we addressed several questions. Specifically we wanted to look at how do attitudes about LGBT people differ between teachers at the rural middle and high schools compared to those teaching at an urban middle and high school setting. We also wanted to look at how do the teachers observances of anti-LGBT behaviors among students and faculty bodies differ between rural and urban settings. And finally we also wanted to look at do these attitudinal differences correlate with the differences in rates of behaviors, anti-LGBT behaviors that they were observing.

[00:07:34] And what were you able to learn through this process?

[00:07:36] Well as we thought, rural faculty showed significantly poor attitudes about LGBT people than urban faculty. But overall there was no significant difference in the number of behaviors and types of behaviors they were observing among the student and faculty bodies. But there was one difference that we did notice that significantly more urban teachers reported hearing a peer call an LGBT student a name than their rural counterparts.

[00:08:07] And I'm just curious if you were to guess a reason for that, what would you say could be behind something like that?

[00:08:12] Well I think that in general we see that teachers that teach in urban settings are exposed to more students that are coming from different walks of life than in an urban setting, it tends to be

more people of the same race, ethnicity etc. And so I think that name calling is something that starts out kind of the actions of aggression or bullying and it kind of escalates from there. And so I think that people interacting with more people that are different here and see more of those same callings that occur just because people are bumping up against different people more frequently.

[00:08:49] Something that was interesting was that we were asked to come to a training at the rural school because there was a student who had come out as transgender and was needing more support and services than they had provided in the past. They've never dealt with this before that they knew of. And so that also was a piece of it that in the rural setting there was sort of a semi-high profile student that most of the faculty kind of knew about because there had been some sort of briefings and conversations about well we have this student who has this issue that we haven't dealt with before how do we even start to do it. And so that's part of why Will and I were even there and then while we were there we collected this data about attitudes. But that also was sort of a difference between the two settings.

[00:09:39] Ok that makes sense. Hilary what can social workers offer in this area to meet the challenges related to your current research?

[00:09:45] Well I mean social workers specialize in working with all kinds of different people, especially people who are traditionally vulnerable populations and obviously LGBTQ people fall into that. And social workers sort of more concretely can definitely offer education and resources to teachers, guidance counselors and other school staff about LGBTQ people and issues and about the ways that these things can emerge in an adolescent population. Again since this is happening younger and younger even long term school staff are starting to see issues that they haven't seen before. And so social workers that have done the work to learn about this population maybe have worked with members of this population can bring that information into the schools to help support them in supporting the students, because a lot of well staff have fantastic intentions but they just have no idea how to even begin to support these students. Which makes sense when it's an issue they haven't faced before. And maybe it's something that they have some conflicted feelings about but most school staff goes into this because they want to work with kids and support kids and make a safe environment for kids while they're in school and so I think that school staff wants to do the right thing but sometimes has no idea what that even is. So social workers can bring this information and training and resources and ideas into the schools to help them kind of puzzle out how are we going to handle these situations. They can also help school staff understand why this matters that LGBTQ adolescents are at higher risk of mental health issues, suicidality, bullying, ostracism, lower grades, higher absenteeism, physical health issues, so that also can help school staff understand why this really matters even if they don't want to make LGBTQ issues sort of their thing. This is a subpopulation in their schools that's at higher risk and needs extra attention, extra support. And then finally social workers can help school staff understand the way that having more negative attitudes can be connected to a tendency not to notice anti-LGBT incidents like bullying or name calling or a tendency not to report it. So just because certain staff or teachers are saying "that's not happening in my classroom" or whatever. Well what's their attitude about it and if we know that their attitude is more negative than it the higher chance that it actually is happening and maybe that teacher or staff person just isn't noticing or maybe is noticing but doesn't prioritize it to report it. So that's something else that social workers can help school staff understand.

[00:12:25] Yeah I think one of the things that was really helpful for the trainings that we did in parallel to this study was that a lot of teachers like Hilary said are well-meaning but for those that have strong opinions that may have moral, morality conflicts or dilemmas. In other words they're not sure that LGBT people should have a fair equal treatment because of their beliefs. We were able to frame this in a matter of providing a safe education for all students. So we were able to help them understand that we're not trying to change their beliefs about LGBT people necessarily. We're just

simply saying there are LGBT students here in your school and they are facing these issues that are causing them to feel unsafe. And that was in some ways helpful for teachers that may have felt kind of a dilemma about how to treat this issue by saying "this is really about providing a safe environment for everybody regardless of their sexual orientation gender identity cetera it's about providing a safe learning environment." And I think that was very helpful for some of them that were conflicted about that. So I think that's another role that social workers can play is kind of helping those that may be struggling with their own personal views and values feeling that this really is about doing a good job as a teacher and providing a safe environment for the students.

[00:13:52] I think that's a great way to frame it. I also imagine that social workers would be really helpful in teaching other staff in the building how to communicate with the families of some of these students who may not have any experience with any issues around LGBTQ rights or know anyone around who is LGBTQ. So I think that could be helpful too.

[00:14:10] Absolutely. I would say definitely that social workers can work with families because often it's a tremendous shock to a family when their child comes out as LGBTQ and that's something that social workers are trained to deal with is the whole family system and to help different members of the family process that kind of thing.

[00:14:30] So what theoretical frameworks have shaped this area of inquiry?

[00:14:33] We first started out with the idea of minority stress theory in forming the idea that students that are LGBTQ are by and large in the minority in their schools and understanding that schools in and of themselves are a stressful experience for adolescents at times because of all the social factors going on and there in addition to trying to learn things. So we understood that they have an extra layer of concern for safety or concern of being outed or just concerned with fitting in or how they will be perceived or how people will treat them. So that was one of the theories that we used for this. Another theory that we used is the theory of bystander intervention being a continuum. So in other words knowing how to intervene in a situation where somebody is being harassed, bullied or threatened or assaulted is a process. People don't just instinctively know how to do that. And so the theory states that you have to first notice that the behavior requires a response that somebody is being harassed. And if people aren't noticing because they have poor attitudes about a particular population or about a particular person or are making assumptions, they might not notice as quickly along that continuum of behavior as it escalates until maybe it comes to the point of physical violence or harm. Whereas if you have more exposure to people from a particular intersection of diversity then you will be more likely to notice when they're being mistreated. And so those were the two theories that we used to inform this study primarily.

[00:16:21] And Will, who are the vested stakeholders in your current research?

[00:16:24] So our current stakeholders or those that were particularly interested were obviously the school districts and those that asked us to come and do the training and also invited us to collect the information. They were very interested in knowing where are their teachers as far as attitude towards LGBT students and people on issues in general and also what kind of behaviors are the teachers seeing that maybe they just don't know the vehicle to report that or understand what will happen with that information if they do. So I think those were the two big stakeholders in our current research project.

[00:17:03] Great, and Hilary, what's next for you?

[00:17:04] Well we're continuing to work on analyzing this data. You're never actually done with the data set. It just sort of eventually dies on its own but it works, we're still working on this. And

we're also looking at this data in the context of other information that we've collected, like we've done a study of campus climate for LGBTQ university students and we actually collected data five years apart. And so we're just starting to work on our comparisons about how things have changed from 2012 to 2017. So we're going to be doing that. And then of course it's interesting to look at attitudes at the middle and high school levels versus at the university level. We also a little while ago collected data as part of a needs assessment for LGBT people in our area. And so that's been interesting as well to look at what the community says that is lacking, which segments of the community maybe have fewer resources or services or social outlets. And then how that lines up with the kinds of things that teachers and students are observing. Sometimes we can find some unusual parallels there. So we're looking at many contexts many levels of LGBTQ kind of well-being in our community here.

[00:18:20] That sounds really interesting and sounds like a lot of really good research is going to come out of some of that analysis. And what's next for you Will?

[00:18:27] So just continuing to work with Hilary on those studies and analyzing that data and see what comes of it. I am also part of a local LGBT advocacy and education organization. And so we continue to do trainings and inform the community about the needs and strategize creative ways that smaller communities can address these needs. Because some communities that are large and have lots of resources may be able to fund specific LGBT centers or LGBT homeless drop-in centers or counseling centers etc. In smaller communities that those resources aren't sustainable to provide those needs, so how do we address that within smaller communities and how can we network with the resources that do exist and what gaps are there that we can fill in with what limited resources we do have. So that's kind of where we're taking this research is how do we improve LGBT people's lives, health, well-being not just in our own communities but how can we translate that to other communities that are similar in size and demographics as ours.

[00:19:39] Sounds very impactful. Hilary and Will, before we end our conversation today do you have anything else you would like to add?

[00:19:44] Well Michael I just wanted to address the continuum of bystander intervention. That's a series of five steps. So as we were stating earlier you don't just automatically know how to intervene when you see a problem that somebody is experiencing or being harassed or threatened or harmed in some way. So that's a series of steps that research has shown a helpful way to look at it. So step one is just to simply notice that this particular person or this particular population is being harassed or experiencing negative interactions with another person. And so our research kind of started there just how many of these behaviors and what types of behaviors are being noticed. The second step is just identifying this event as a problem. So they hear another student call an LGBT student a derogatory name. That's one thing it's noticing it and then it's identifying that as a problem. This is a problem that can lead to larger problems. And the third step is feeling motivated and capable of finding a solution. So knowing what to do about that. So once you notice it, identify it as a problem, feeling motivated and capable of knowing what to do about it. And then the fourth step is having the skills for acting on those motivation and feelings of capability. And then finally acting and intervening at the event and that can happen in a number of different ways that we can go into at a later time. But those are the five steps of becoming an active bystander.

[00:21:19] Sounds like a great way to frame the work into frame sort of the goals of some of the projects you're working on.

[00:21:24] Thank you.

[00:21:25] Well thank you for answering that final question. It's been a pleasure interviewing you. I

wish you the best in your future research and work.

[00:21:31] Thank you so much.

[00:21:32] Thank you.

[00:21:33] Thanks.

[00:21:33] You've been listening to doctors Hilary Copp and William Koehler discuss a comparison of urban and rural middle and high school teachers attitudes and observations about LGBT students on inSocialWork.

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