

Youth Sexual Orientation 2011

A Youthline Position Paper

BACKGROUND

In the past couple of decades we have been made more aware of the presence of gay, lesbian bisexual, transgendered and queer (GLBTQ) people in our communities and a large number of these are adolescents and young people. In a survey conducted in secondary schools in New Zealand, though most young people identified as heterosexual (92.2%), there was a small portion that identified as being “attracted to the same sex” (0.9%) and being “attracted to both sexes” (3.3%). The survey also identifies that there were young people who did not know what sex they were attracted to (1.8%) or not attracted to either sex (1.8%)(Rossen et al., 2009).

During adolescence young people’s bodies’ under-go changes and they start to explore their gender and sexual identity. Sexual behaviour does not determine sexual orientation, the way an individual expresses their feelings is not the basis for their sexual identity (Frankowski, 2004). Also young people may identify as homosexual or bisexual without ever having had such sexual experiences. In addition to the usual developmental challenges and possibilities GLBTQ youth face prejudice and discrimination either at home, school or in the community due to their sexual orientation. GLBT youth experience stigmatization and are more vulnerable to being ostracized and isolated by society due to homophobic attitudes and values, thus leaving them susceptible to psychological distress due to their sexual or gender identity.

DEFINITIONS

Sexual identity is “who you are attracted to” while gender identity is “a person’s own sense of identification as male or female (Rainbow Youth, 2009). Being able to define one’s own identity is an important contributor to healthy and positive youth development.

Homophobia refers to the “irrational fear or hatred of same-sex attractions expressed through prejudice, discrimination, harassment or acts of violence” (Clauss – Ehlers).

Queer represents “sexuality and gender diversity. We use it to encompass lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, fa'afafine, and takataapui identities, as well as everyone in between and not sure” (Rainbow Youth, 2009).

Sexual Orientation is an “individual’s pattern of physical and emotional arousal toward other persons.

Lesbian refers to a “woman who is physically and emotionally attracted to other women”

Gay is a term used for someone who “forms physical and emotional relationship with persons of the same gender”, it can be used for “both men and women or ...the gay community” (Clauss-Ehlers, 2006).

Heterosexual individuals are attracted to persons of the opposite sex.

Homosexual individuals are attracted to persons of the same sex

Bisexual individuals are attracted to persons of both sexes.

Transgendered individuals feel themselves to be of a gender different from their biological sex; their gender identity does not match their anatomic or chromosomal sex

- Frankowski (2004: 1827).

The Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (YDSA) presents a youth development approach comprising six key principles: These principles have been identified by working groups and young people as elements that will help achieve the YDSA's vision to create, 'a country where young people are vibrant and optimistic through being supported and encouraged to take up challenges' (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002).

1. Youth development is shaped by the 'big picture'.
2. Youth development is about young people being connected.
3. Youth development is based on a consistent strengths-based approach.
4. Youth development happens through quality relationships.
5. Youth development is triggered when young people fully participate.
6. Youth development needs good information.

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1. *Youth development is shaped by the 'big picture'*

Young people are shaped by society's political, social, economic and cultural systems. New Zealand is a multi-ethnic and social environment, and socially, politically and culturally GLBT identities are recognized. It is important for GLBTQ youth to understand the aspects that affect and shape their lives. Such an understanding promotes their self-discovery and provides a platform for young people to effect change within themselves and their community.

2. *Youth development is about young people being connected*

GLBTQ youth need healthy supportive connections with community, family, friends, school, and workplaces. Strong, positive connections with many social environments combine to protect and foster development. Negative experiences in the community reduce the ability of the young person to connect with their social environment, and the YDSA hopes to challenge such attitudes in society.

3. *Youth development is based on a consistent strengths-based approach*

Youth development is strengthened by the identification and development of each person's strengths. When GLBTQ youth develop various social, emotional, physical, and autonomy skills it mitigates the risk of these young people experiencing low self-confidence, participating in risky behaviour or exhibiting anti-social behaviour, and strengthens the likelihood that they will realise their potential.

4. *Youth development happens through quality relationships*

Young people need community support and positive relationships throughout their lives. These relationships provide essential support for GLBTQ youth to accept their identity and

increase the opportunities they have to develop the social skills and other competencies that help develop and boost their self-confidence and a sense of wellbeing.

5. *Youth development is triggered when young people fully participate*

Young people need to be given the opportunity to take control over the lives they lead and the direction they choose. Thus GLBTQ youth need to be accepted and supported by their communities, and provided with opportunities to participate in the work and development of their communities. GLBTQ youth should be consulted about issues that impact them, and providing them with such opportunities for community participation can contribute to the positive development as young people.

6. *Youth development needs good information*

Youth development is fostered by evidence-based practice. GLBTQ young people need clear, unbiased information in order to help them make informed choices about how they plan, live and direct their lives. Such information includes providing links to community and youth-focused services that specialize in working with GLBTQ youth and/or adults, and education for young people in schools to those who do and don't identify as GLBTQ.

APPROACHES TO WORKING WITH GLBT YOUTH

Previously gender and sexuality was defined as stable concepts and that which could not be altered or changed. With the emergence of new research and theories there is growing knowledge which recognizes that gender and sexuality are fluid and unstable concepts. This research also provides guidance on how to work with GLBTQ people and youth, thereby reducing the gender gap in society.

- Queer theory and social constructivism
- Transgender theory
- Gay affirmative practice
- Person centered counseling
- Essentialist approach

Queer Theory and social constructivism

Queer theory is a model or approach of study that questions the "normative assumptions about sex, gender and sexuality" (Bank, 2007). It denaturalizes the dichotomous gender constructs and states that gender roles, gender identity and sexual orientation are social constructs and can be questioned and restructured and thus self-constructed (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). It also incorporates the individual's interactions with race, class, gender and ethnicity and the power relations within which he or she is represented. An individual's lived experience is taken into context and their repeated performances of expected behavior of that sex is what shapes ones identity (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Constructionists state that gender and sexuality is made rather than born into; social and cultural contexts determine and impact ones sexual identity and gender. Yet critics state this approach can tend to portray homosexuality or transgenderism as something that can be changed with "choice" (Bank, 2007).

Transgender theory

This theory emphasizes the lived experiences of transgendered youth and recognizes the fluidity of gender, and a socially and self-constructed identity (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Transgender theory

incorporates both a fluid self-identity depending on one's social context experiences and recognizes the multiple oppressed identities.

Gay Affirmative Practice

This practice affirms that "a lesbian, gay or bisexual identity as an equally positive human experience and expression to heterosexual identity (Crisp & McCave, 2007). This framework emphasizes social work principles such as taking into context a person's environment, using a strengths perspective and culturally competent models. It also reinforces the basic humanistic theme to provide the young person with unconditional positive regard and acceptance which will affirm their sense of self and worth (Crisp & McCave, 2007).

Person centered- approach

This approach focuses on aspects such as "congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy" where the counselor is a genuine, and accepting of the individuals' values and beliefs and can communicate empathically with the young person without judgment. This provides for a safe, and understanding and facilitative environment where GLBT youth can feel free to express themselves and develop their identity (Lemoire & Chen, 2005).

Essentialist

Where gender roles, identity and sexual orientation were "binary, biologically based, heteronormative gender schema" (Nagoshi & Bruzuzy, 2010). Essentialists consider identity as natural, innate and fixed over the course of one's life – "born that way" (Bank, 2007).

HELPFUL APPROACHES

These guidelines are strongly grounded in strengths-based youth development, and culturally competent approach.

- Treat GLBT youth with respect them as individuals and treat them fairly.
- Protect their identity and maintain confidentiality.
- Implement and adopt policies for working with GLBT youth
- Provide information to the young person and their families to help provide them tools to communicate better.
- Show unconditional positive regard, congruence and empathy to GLBT youth.
- Maintain a holistic perspective of the young person and identify them in context of their families and surrounding environment.
- Promote positive youth development – allow the youth to express themselves, and support their gender/ sexual identity.
- Exposure to positive sexual minority communities and increase their socialization with other GLBT youth and social groups to help them feel less isolated.
- Create a safe environment for the GLBT
- Ensure staff that work with GLBT youth are trained and aware of proper terminology and don't use derogatory and/or inappropriate terms.
- Provide information and access to health care and education
- Encourage GLBT youth to be involved in decision-making socially and politically

UNHELPFUL APPROACHES

- Being judgmental, prejudice or discriminative.
- Telling them they are going through a phase and that they actually heterosexual or a certain gender (male or female).

(National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009)

IMPLICATIONS ON PRACTICE

Many GLBTQ people are diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID), which reinforces the gender role conformity and pathologises the behaviors and attitude that violate traditional gender constructs. Many authors and practitioners agree to have GID eliminated as a labeling method, and encourage an individualistic identity be it a transgender identity or a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity (Burdge, 2007). Such an approach encourages youth workers who work with GLBTQ youth to be supportive and accepting and thus help relieve the stress experienced by these youth to pick traditional gender identities. By recognizing the transgender and queer identities, youth workers can encourage the development of policies and protection laws for GLBTQ youth in work places, in schools, educational institutions and health and medical services. Opportunities to voice their opinions on social and political matters will empower GLBTQ youth to alleviate societal pressure and to prevent gender oppression (Burdge, 2007). Encouraging positive attitudes to gender differences and GLBT youth will require educating the community, facilitating community discussion groups, professional development training in organizations, hosting festivals and events that showcase gender differences and GLBT youth (Burdge, 2007).

YOUTHLINE'S POSITION

Youthline takes the position that:

1. Youth-focused services need to follow strength-based approach when working with GLBT youth.
2. Information that is directly relevant to GLBTQ youth should be provided through youth friendly media, for example, magazines, internet and email services
3. Gender identity and sexual orientation are dynamic concepts that should be handled with utmost care and caution, and organisations that work with youth should employ evidence-based practices to discuss and effectively work with GLBTQ youth.
4. Sexual orientation and identity cannot be isolated from other aspects of a young person, and thus a holistic approach should be employed.
5. Integrated service delivery ensures the needs of the whole individual are taken into account, and enhances the likelihood that a young person will be protected from prejudice and discrimination due to their sexuality or sexual identity.
6. Youth-focused services need to be adequately funded to provide a holistic health service to GLBT young people who may require health services.
7. Youthline's helpline is an effective way of providing help to young people, and is supported by current research.
8. Finally youth organisations need to work without prejudice to provide the best possible opportunities for GLBTQ youth.

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