Inclusion with No Policies in Place for LGBTQ Students: Perceptions from Rural High School Leaders

Kevin L. Harris[*]

Washington Unified School District, 7950 S. Elm, Fresno, Ca 93706, USA

Email: kharris@wusd.ws

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to describe rural high school leaders' perception of inclusivity policies and how they support the LGBTQ student. In high schools' inclusivity is often regarded as efforts to include students with disabilities, physical or mentally who may experience educational, physical, and cognitive developmental deficiencies, which interferes with learning. The problem is rural LGBTQ high school students do not experience the same learning environment and support as non-LGBTQ high school students. This study aimed to examine the challenges faced by the district administrators, principals and counselors who may have adopted inclusivity policies without a clear direction to encompass all students. This qualitative, descriptive case study is an exploration of the inclusive practices of rural high school administrators. The purpose is to describe rural high school's LGBTQ student inclusivity. The qualitative data collection process consisted of an in-depth questionnaire with rural high school administrators in two districts located in a western state. Two sources of data collected in the study include an open-ended questionnaire and school districts' inclusion policy and procedure review. After each question, the participant completed the free text box explaining how the inclusion policy was implemented on campus, providing personal perceptions of application to the LBGTQ. Once all participants completed the open-ended survey, responses downloaded from SurveyMonkey to Excel for data analysis. Four themes emerged including: (a) be the voice of those who have not found their own voice of support, (b) turn every situation into a lens of growth, (c) there are no policies in place, and (d) we need to know what to do, but first we need to know who they are. The recommendations were awareness of our student population, training to assist them and compassion to understand who they are.

Keywords: Leadership; Perception; Rural; Inclusivity and LGBTQ students .

1. Introduction

The qualitative descriptive study explores perceptions and practices of rural high school leaders in a western state regarding roles in creating inclusive learning environments, specifically the support school principals have implemented if any to foster inclusiveness for our LGBTQ students. This qualitative descriptive case study describes how rural educational leaders support policies of inclusive practices for LGBTQ student populations, focused on answering the how, what, when, and where questions rather than the who [1]. Belonging is vital to the development of strong stable interpersonal relationships, especially for high school students [2]. When a high school student is perceived as being different, the student may have difficulty developing a sense of self and often do not feel as an accepted part of the group [3]. The researcher found the data to show students who identify as a member of the LGBTQ community sometimes face greater marginalization and harassment than students who do not. In addition, LGBTQ students often do not have the same support system and protection in school [4]. Limited studies have recognized the issues LGBTQ high school students may have, limited research focuses on the experiences rural LGBTQ students have with the educational leader's support, policies and procedure [5]. The researcher formulated three research questions using the theory of inclusivity to drive the research process.

The questions for the descriptive study were formalized to gain insight from district leaders, counselors and students.

RQ1: How do rural high school educational leaders describe inclusion practices, policies, and support for LGBTQ students?

Sub Questions:

RQ1a: What inclusion practices and policies are in place for LGBTQ students? RQ1b: What support systems exist for LBGTQ students?

The researcher found the combination of the survey questions and the self-reporting interviews provide an enriching data set in which the survey findings gathered can be complemented with the outcomes from the interviews. The comparison of the perceptions of district leaders and the leaders on campus will allow the researcher the reality of policy inclusivity and possible challenges they may be facing without policy implementation.

2. Literature Review

Most research has largely focused on the theory of inclusivity when addressing students with disabilities and special needs students. Very few studies address the perception of the leaders on the plight of the LGBTQ students on their rural high school campuses [6]. These are research gaps addressed by the present study. The educational leader's practices towards LGBTQ students are a complex topic deserving of scholarly research and attention beyond current studies. Research has just begun to advance on inclusionary practices for LGBTQ students in the last decade [7]. Upon review of the research, historical and contemporary categories emerged: 1)

educational systems; 2) educational leadership; and 3) inclusion for LGBTQ students in education.

2.1 Educational Systems

In the nineteenth century, educators experienced a paradigm shift from privileged, religiously based education to standardized, state-sponsored education. The first public school in the United States was established in 1821. Historically educational systems referred to the conscious training of the young for later adoption of adult roles [8]. The opening of public schools confronted older exclusionary practices of ordinary, non-religious students [9]. It is understood from the literature that the fundamental goal of the inclusive education classrooms is to stop the discriminatory practices [10].

2.2 Educational Leadership

The grand man theory of leadership evolved into the study of leadership trait [11].The situational leadership style proposes that effective leadership requires an understanding of the situation and an appropriate response [12].The transformational leadership style defines a leader as one who converts followers to transcend self-interest for the sake of the organization [13].The transformational leader convinced followers to rise to the levels of need as found in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs [14]. Research on the relationship between school leadership and student achievement found that principal leadership correlates with student achievement. There were strong links between principals' specific behaviors and student learning [15]. The supervising principal would manage school planning, teachers, and student successes [16]. The principal is a "mastermind" who can connect all these disparate parts.

2.3 Inclusion for LGBTQ Students in Education

Differences in achievement and inclusiveness among schools are not just a reflection of the characteristics of the students who attend, but more often, the efforts of the professionals within the district and schools [17]. Many studies on how educational leaders in rural high schools demonstrate inclusion of LGBTQ students reveal various factors that contribute to the lack of inclusive programs throughout the United States 18]. Inclusive education must be understood not as a decision about the placement of students but rather a school-wide philosophy dedicated to the spirit and resources needed to provide education for all [19]. In recent years there are increased efforts worldwide to educate traditionally marginalized groups [20]. For example, gay-straight alliance clubs positively affect participants' mental health, they also increase access for and equality of students with migrant backgrounds, cultural and linguistic diversity, gender-based differences, students with disabilities and gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning students, and gifted students [21]. Children must be permitted equality and access to all levels of education in order to move inclusive practices forward. The educational setting is a move in the right direction [22]. Future educational leaders must be familiar with new forms of knowledge regarding identity and differences based on inclusive values [23]. One example of such a program is the University of Cologne in Germany ("school is open" Bidungraum Project, 2011). Scholars have presented an inclusive conceptual framework used with a partner school run by the university [24]. The framework will enable teacher candidates to observe and participate with the university in classroom instruction

with a diverse group of students.

Since the institution of Title IX in 1972, a growing number of states have taken additional steps to protect and support LGBTQ students by explicitly including sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in laws that protect against discrimination, exclusionary practices, and harassment in schools [25]. [26], stated that a significant barrier to successful inclusion was lack of adequate training for school leaders, educators, and students. In the last decade, one of the most significant changes in public schools across the United States has been the rise of Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs. These clubs are student-run and allow for LGBTQ students and faculty to come together with straight peers and form a safe space [27]. During meetings, GSA members discuss any LGBTQ, gender, racial, or economic disparities found within the school to bring solutions to problems of equality and raise awareness among non-GSA members. The showing of support from GSA members positively affects the participants' mental health [28]. findings also showed that schools that do not have support systems such as GSA clubs negatively affected some participants' mental health. Most recent qualitative study in 2023 in a rural middle school [29] interviewed six middle school principals over a four-month time period. Principals noted that many of the LGBTQ plus students experienced prejudice and stigma. They also stated that some of the LGBTQ plus concealed their identity and at times internalized their phobias. Findings from the study suggest schools' awareness level is heightened but may be updating the curriculum frameworks and activities to include LGBTQ topics to provide all students with an education that develops healthy physical, mental, and emotional habits.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study developed around the foundational theories of inclusiveness. Ainscow, [30] developed a typology of inclusion. The first typology considers inclusion as a concern with disabled students, the second as a response to disciplinary exclusions. The third view considers all groups vulnerable. The perception of inclusion is complex, current research shows practice of inclusive education has shown that inclusivity occurs when all students, regardless of challenges

or difficulties, are assimilated, educated through high-quality instruction, interventions, and support that enables them to succeed.

3.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

The idea of LGBTQ inclusion in education has philosophical underpinnings in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. As a humanist, Maslow believed that people have an inborn desire to be self-actualized, to be all they can be. To achieve the goals, several basic needs such as food, safety, love, and self-esteem, is dire. Maslow's hierarchy is displayed as a pyramid, with the lowest levels of the pyramid, the most basic needs, while the more complex needs are at the top of the pyramid.

4. Methodology

The purpose of the qualitative descriptive case study was to describe educational leaders' practices and

perceptions on policies for inclusive environments for rural high school LGBTQ students. In addition, the goal of the research was to identify emerging patterns. The researcher examined educational leaders' perceptions of LGBTQ students on their campus and identified what support, practices, and policies are in place, on campus, and whether perceptions of LGBTQ students affect policies and practices.

4.1 Population and Sample

This sample consisted of rural high school leaders from a Pacific coastal state in the United States. Rural high school leaders consisted of the superintendent, human resource director, principal, vice-principal, and school counselors. Ten to fifteen high school leaders from three rural high schools in a Pacific coastal state in the United States participated in an open-ended survey. As depicted in Table 2, there are ample administrators eligible to participate. These include counselors (40%), human resource managers (20%), vice-principals (20%), principals (10%), and superintendents (10%), with the majority being male (62%) (Figure 5). Rural high school leaders were selected using the following inclusion criteria: 1) Work or are associated with a rural high school, 2) at least two years of administrative responsibilities, 3) be greater than or equal to 18 years of age, and 4) possess knowledge of high school student inclusion policies. Administrators were excluded if: 1) they worked outside of the identified districts or in an urban school, 2) had less than two years of administrative experience, 3) were less than 18 years of age, or 4) did not know of the school policies related to inclusion.

Table 2: Demographic Data

Variable	*n*	*%*
Categorical Age		
● 30-40	5	50%
● 41-50	3	30%
● 51-60	2	20%
Gender		
● Male	6	60%
● Female	4	40%
Categorical Years of Experience		
● 0-5	2	20%
● 6-10	0	0%
● 11-15	3	30%
● ≥ 16	5	50%
Job Title		
● Superintendent	2	20%
● Principal	2	20%
● Assistant Principal	1	10%
● Human Resource Manager	2	20%
● Counselor	3	30%
Race/Ethnicity		
● Pacific Islander	1	10%
● Mexican American	3	30%
● Caucasian	6	60%

Administrators consisted of but were not limited to a superintendent, human resource director, principal, vice principal and school counselors. Ten administrators participated in an open-ended questionnaire. As depicted in Figure 1, counselors make up the primary group of rural administrators (40%), followed by human resource managers (20%) and vice principals (20%) respectively, with the majority being male (62%).
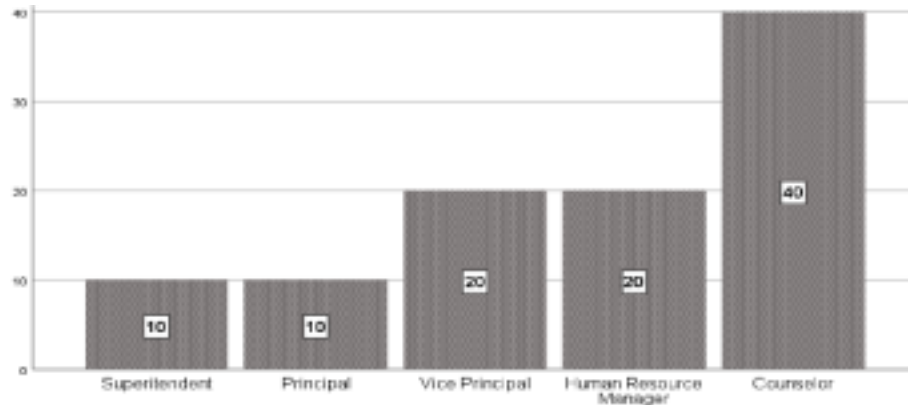

Figure 2: Rural High School Administrators, by Position and Percent

4.2 Instrumentation

An open- ended questionnaire was designed to distribute to the various leaders on campus and district policies and procedures reviewed. Table 2

Table 2: Questionnaire

 1. Tell me about your experience working with students who identify as part of the LGBTQ   community.

2. How do you feel internal factors (teaching, philosophy, life experiences, beliefs, identity) influence how you work with students who identify as part of the LGBTQ community?

 3. How do you think you would feel having in your class or interacting with a student who identifies as part of the LGBTQ community?

 4. Tell me about any concerns that you have to meet the needs of a student who identifies as part of the LGBTQ community.

 5. How are students who are part of the LGBTQ community protected in your school?

 6.Tell me how you, as an educational leader, would respond to students using language such as: "You're so gay", "You're acting like a girl/boy"?

 7. Who do you feel needs protection through policies of inclusion?

 11. Tell me about how you, as an educational leader, would respond to bullying incidents based on gender identity.

 12. What policies does your school have in place to support the inclusion of students who identify as part of the LGBTQ community?

 13. Tell me about how you, as an educational leader, think you can best support students who identify as part of the LGBTQ community.

 14. Are there revisions to the current inclusion policies that you feel need to be made to protect students who identify with the LGBTQ community?

 15. What continuing education or training have you had to work with students who identify as part of the LGBTQ community?

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5. Findings/Results

Once data collection concluded, the open-ended questionnaire content downloaded from Survey Monkey for data analysis purposes. The survey contained questions based on inclusive policies and practices on high school campuses The researcher examined the inclusive policies, support and practices in place and the implementation of each as they pertain to the LGBTQ population. Manual coding to organize, categorize, and classify the

transcribed data into codes. Several iterations of the coding process were completed, until the codes, categories, and themes were identified the four themes that emerged from the data included: 1) Be the Voice for Those Who Have No Voice, 2) Turn Every Situation into a Lens of Growth, 3) There Are policies to Protect them and, 4) We Need Education, first we Need to Know Who They Are.

5.1 Theme 1: Be the Voice for Those Who Have No Voice

The theme, "Be the Voice for Those Who Have No Voice " illustrated the participants' need to be the representatives for the students, who felt they did not have the voice to do it themselves. Many of the participants felt it was their responsibility to provide support to all students, including students in the LBGTQ community. Participants 2 stated: "The biggest concern I would have is the not knowing, I have a student who is MTF [male to female] transgender, I was uninformed. The student's name in our records is not the name he writes down on assignments or what the administration calls him. Which puts me in an embarrassing situation looking for his files?" Similarly, Participant 5 stated: I wanted to be an educator because doing so provides you with the opportunity to implement the vision that you provide for your school. I wanted to work with an educational team that would have a degree of control over daily decisions, activities, student discipline, teacher evaluations and professional development at my school.

5.2 a. Support Needed at School

The responses from several participants expressed the need for parental type support at school. Students not only needed an academic push, also social emotional support, meaning being able to discuss personal and academic issues with staff.

The participants saw their role as one of support for the students within the school. According to participant 4: "I want all students that I work with [to] feel supported in anything that they need. I wanted to be [someone] that they can count on even after they graduated ". For some, there seems to be a hesitancy to single out one group of students who needed their support. Another participant shared similar views, "My only concern is to be the very best…support I could be for all my student populations. Our LGBTQ student's needs concern me, the same as my special needs students, as any other student population."

5. 1b. Support Needed at Home and in the Community

The finding found that participants explained the conversations they had with students sometimes crossed the boundaries of academic success. The level of personal issues led respondents to believe more needs to be done at home and in the community. Participant 2 stated: "Many students who came to me were struggling with telling their family members. It was heartbreaking to see how difficult it was for them based on the possible 'rejection' they would receive". In support, another participant added,

5.2 Theme 2: Turn Every Situation into a Lens of Growth

The participants gave examples of many situations where they had to intervene with student misbehavior

towards LGBTQ students. The participants explained instead of harsh discipline they used positive behavior strategies to promote awareness for positive interactions. LGBTQ topic caused several participants to express strong emotions when they wrote about student growth. The participants expressed equality for all; they wanted to impart wisdom to students who were not a part of the LGBTQ community. Participant 8 acquiesced:

My interactions with students, when they use language inappropriately, is always a 'Teachable Moment'. I use the moment to find out where a word or statement is coming from, why it is being used, and I explain the problem with the word or statement and encourage more thought before speaking.

5.3 Theme 3: There are No Policies in Place, Despite Federal Laws

Many of the participants spoke about policies in place to protect the rights of students. Title IX is a federal law, protects students based on gender, race, religion, and sexuality. The participants seemed to hide behind this law, citing frequently that there are "laws in place to protect them" yet it was not clear if they were conveying their true feelings or being politically correct. Participant 5 stated: "Our approach is that of the federal law in which our current policies are intact, covered, and offer protection to all students, with no exceptions. However, I feel that more can be done for this marginalized group of students." Participant 3 conspired: We do have Title IX, but there is not a law in place or LGBTQ student organization where students of the LGBTQ community could go to hang out if they don't feel they're being included or not getting along with others. It's important that all students feel comfortable and know they're not alone.

5.4 Theme 4: We need Education, But First We Need to Know Who They Are

The need for education came up in many of the participant's responses. The participants realized they did not know very much about the LGBTQ student populations and due to student privacy laws, they did not know who they were. Participant 3 stated:

Our world can be cruel at times, especially to those who think or act outside societal norms. As educators, we must embrace all of our kids and nurture them as if they were our own. I will reference the concept of 'unconditional love'… as the guiding principle when working with kids.

6. Discussion

The perception of leaders on rural high school campuses' regarding inclusion policies and the treatment of LGBTQ students provide valuable insights [2]. The finding indicated that existing educational policies and procedures require deeper examination to better serve all student populations [10]. However, research is currently limited on the inclusion of LGBTQ students in high school settings. While awareness of LGBTQ issues has grown in recent years, studies specifically examining how inclusive practices impact LGBTQ students' academic experiences, mental health, and social development remain relatively scarce. Much of the existing research tends to focus on bullying and discrimination rather than proactive strategies for fostering acceptance and belonging. As a result, educators and policymakers often lack comprehensive, evidence-based guidance on how to create truly inclusive environments for LGBTQ youth in high schools. This gap highlights

the urgent need for more focused research in this area [20].

As the research questions concluded, educational leaders expressed a clear need for increased support and inclusion of all students regardless of their students' sexual orientation or gender identification. Attitudes and beliefs were shown to significantly influence campus climate, as well as parental and community support. 60% of administrators appeared to provide politically correct responses, potentially masking their personal beliefs.

Moreover, all educational leaders who responded to the questionnaire acknowledged changes were needed in their campus inclusion practices and policies. While some administrators had never personally experienced isolation, others shared that their feelings of isolation during the pandemic helped them empathize with students who may feel excluded or unsupported in school settings.

The purpose of inclusion policies is to prevent the marginalization of people considered outside societal norms and in need of additional support. Yet, the culture on most rural high school campuses in the study lacked external support system, such as Gay-Straight Alliance clubs. Findings revealed that many educational leaders failed to take initiative, often waiting for guidance or action from external sources rather than leading change themselves. Their concern often appeared more aligned than with genuine concern.

Overall, the case study found that these schools are not fully engaging in inclusive practices. There is a continued lack of consistent support for LGBTQ students, despite the growing visibility of the population. Moving forward, meaningful progression inclusive education requires that all students are granted equal access and opportunity at every level of education equality and access in all levels of education to move in the right direction.

7. Conclusion

Leaders on rural high school campuses were aware there were inclusion policies on campus but not sure what they consisted of and how were they being implemented for their LGBTQ Students. Their daily interactions with all students showed a need for support, through the data results for the LGBTQ students. Furthermore, the results showed there is a need to review policies, educators need to be made aware of who these students and the policies implemented.

8. Limitations

The first limitation of the study was the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted communication with research participants. As schools across the United States and globally adapted to new operational models, this researcher had to modify communication strategies accordingly. In-person interactions were no longer possible, posing additional challenges. The second limitation would be that the topic of inclusion is inherently sensitive, and when combined with issues related to the LGBTQ community, many individuals were reluctant to participate in discussions. As a result, not all surveys were returned, and the researcher suspected that concerns about anonymity may have contributed to participants' hesitation. Another limitation, if campus leaders are unaware of the presence of LGBTQ students, they cannot provide the necessary support, resources, and

protections these students deserve. A lack of awareness leads to gaps in policies, programming, and services that are essential for fostering an inclusive and safe environment. Visibility is critical for identifying the unique challenges LGBTQ students may face and addressing them appropriately. Leaders have a responsibility to ensure that every student feels recognized, valued, and supported. Without intentional efforts to understand the diversity within their community, leaders risk failing a significant part of their student population. The last limitation would be, the responses tended to reflect participants' views of others within the educational community, rather than self-reflection on their own actions or potential contributions. Follow-up interviews or conversations with individuals could have provided deeper insights and improved the interpretation and presentation of the data.

9. Future Recommendations

Based on the outcome of the study the researcher would reconsider the method and design of the research study, and explore other research methods in order to achieve the targeted sample size for compiling the data. Consequently, include other districts; future researchers can expand the body of knowledge pertaining to the school's educational leader's attitudes and perceptions toward their LGBTQ students and the impact their attitudes and perceptions have on how the inclusive practice and policies are implemented.

The final recommendation the researcher suggests is that in future studies where when the sample includes educational leaders, the survey be distributed during the school year. Hence, not during the summer months when leaders are preoccupied with year-end testing, vacation, or other activities.

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