

Gifted, Gay and Suicidal

A Study of the Adolescent Experience

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The Study

- Participants: 18 young adults (6 females; 12 males), age 18-25, self-identified as gifted and GLB
- Mailing to GLB support groups at 8 midwestern universities
- 10-page questionnaire; 13 open-ended questions related to social, emotional, academic concerns
- Quantitative and qualitative analysis

Wondering . . .

- Half before leaving elementary school
- All but 1 by grade 11
- Half responded with some behavior
- 55% males quit sports: fear
- 45% males: absence of feelings for females, but thought, "Probably the same feelings as peers"
- Not a great concern pre-puberty
- One talked to pastor—bad result

Response to “Wondering”

- 1 claimed “bisexual”
- 2 became “ultra-hetero”
- 1 denial
- 5 depressed/stressed
- 1 “seriously anti-gay”
- 1 poured energies into achievement
- 1 altruism increased
- 8—“OK”

Response to Wondering . . .

- “I remember sitting in gym class the day I realized I was gay. I was just sitting there staring at this guy with his shirt off.”
- “I would have dreams about girls. I would think, ‘Hey, that should have been a guy. What if I’m gay?’”
- 2 refrained from looks in locker room
- 1 feared being expelled
- 2—physical exploration with another male

Response to Wondering

- “In 12th grade it made me nervous and scared, and I threw myself into my relationship with my boyfriend.”
- “I learned it was normal for boys to wonder, and many experimented together around this age, so I thought it was OK as long as I liked girls, too. Wasn't too big of an issue for a couple years.”
- “I was taught it was a sin and you would go to hell. I was quite depressed and wanted to end my life.”

Wondering . . .

- “I was always more interested in men than women. While my friends liked to see pictures of naked women, I preferred the naked men in magazines, etc.”
- “I had tons of gay fantasies. I had no desire to really date girls although I pretended to.”
- “During 5th, 6th, 7th, everyone seemed to be interested in dating someone of the opposite sex. I was never attracted to them.”

Convinced . . .

- Half were convinced they were GLB during grades 10, 11
- 41%: “No one knew.”
- 59%: negative effect on school life
- 29%: negative effect on home communication
- 65%: felt danger (41% at school)
- Altered relationships with parents because “not being honest”

Identity Development

- Great self-analysis, pressure, fear, either-or thinking
“The difficult is seriously compounded by the suspicion that the person you may be becoming will not be readily accepted by family, friends, and education.”

Social/Sexual Development

- “Other kids got to have boyfriends and girlfriends and relationships that helped them mature and grow socially. Most gay youth are deprived of this.”
- “My retarded romantic and sexual development left a gap which activities filled. High drive to succeed in measurable ways.”
- “It’s very difficult to adequately articulate thoughts of sexuality at a young age.”

Emotionally

- “Despite the social hell I found myself in, I was really solid emotionally. I relied heavily on my intellect as a means of coping and my family support network was solid.”
- “I was always depressed. It always seemed to be on my mind. I made two serious attempts on my life. My emotional state was made worse by my attempts to hide it.”

With Family

- “spent less time at home”
- “fought about religion”
- “I believe their discomfort with my sexuality and my openness with it has created a greater discomfort.”
- “I felt as if he wanted a ‘son’ and I hadn’t fulfilled his wishes.”
- “when I realized it wasn’t a phase, that I was different, I could hardly be alone with Dad. We worked together on the farm, and it weighed heavily on me.”

High School

- For 12 of the 18: Improvement socially, after junior high
- Improved emotional stability after gr. 10
- 78% high achievers (some: “Balance,” “outlet,” “focused on academics to substitute for vulnerability”)
- 1 dropped out, returned as honor student
- 1 considered dropping out 3 times
- 4 who underachieved—achievers in college

Academically

- “Top of my class, hyper-involved in extra-curriculars. Since then, I’ve suspected much of that was avoiding dealing with orientation and socialization issues. In structured activities, I was safe.”
- “I always gave 150% to any school project. It was important to impress my teachers and show up my classmates. Since I wasn’t good in sports, I had to compensate.”

High School

- 'If anyone were to find out, I would immediately have killed myself. I drew away from people, became shy so they wouldn't notice my effeminacy.'
- "Grades suffered."
- "Always felt a need to try to become straight. I was oversensitive to comments by classmates. I felt oppressed at school and was absent frequently."
- "Became expert at jokes, laughter."

High School

- “I suppose I had mild crushes on a couple friends which were under the sexual threshold—expressed as intense loyalty, interest, joy.”
- “I did what I could to prove I wasn’t gay them—locker room talk, experimenting with women. They never suspected anything at the time.”

Social/Emotional

- “I didn’t know being bisexual existed, so I was tumultuous over being just straight or gay. Incredibly indecisive, tons of anxiety as I got older, especially toward my father. I wanted to impress him, but we didn’t like the same things or value the same things.”
- (female) “Most of my friends turned out to be gay males”
- “If it hadn’t been for college, I would not be alive. College was my last hope.”

Counseling Issues

- 78% had counseling, mostly during h.s. (79% of those felt it was helpful)
- 88% experienced significant depression
- 76% suicidal
- Grade 11 (also grade 9, 10)—most vulnerable to depression
- 71% discussed depression with someone
(Only 29% with parents, none teachers)
- 85% discussed suicide with someone
(Only 31% with parents, none teachers)

Counseling: Positives

- “helped me understand who I was”
- “made me feel comfortable with my sexual orientation and self-esteem”
- “It gave me someone to sort out feelings with.”
- “I learned coping strategies.”
- “First session—knowing that my sexuality didn’t make me “sick” (mentioned by 3)
- “Helped me take the judgment away about myself. I began to love myself again.”
- “It was good to talk with someone nonjudgmental. The group experience was tough but beneficial—a challenge to say “I’m gay” to a group of people.”

Suggestions to Counselors

- “He seemed to want me to apply a specific label to myself like “lesbian” or “bisexual,” and I did not feel comfortable doing so at the time.”
- “Since she was only my girlfriend and not my ‘partner,’ the counselor could’ve stopped calling her my partner. Partner seems like we’re married.”
- “Obviously if you go to a counselor to discuss sexual orientation issues, you shouldn’t be treated by someone who is trying to sway them in one direction or another.”
- “Perhaps he could’ve clued me in to just how many people there were out there just like me—or shared issues clients who had come out to him had dealt with.”

Vulnerability to Suicide

- Too much invested in image of control and competence?
- Can't show vulnerabilities? Too much to lose?
- Teachers seen as interested only in curriculum, academics, productivity?
- G/T teachers need to broach the subject, focus on the affective, "give permission" to discuss it, normalize the Angst
- G/T (all?) teachers need training in listening, responding
- These students don't necessarily talk with parents about depression.

Coming Out

- 72% at age 18 or beyond
- 28% junior high (1) or h.s. (4)
- Parents: 33% supportive—after adjusting (cried, shocked, frightened, silence, not surprised)
- Siblings: extremely varied responses
- Peers: 61% supportive (56% out just after h.s.)
- Relationships: 63% good since h.s.
- “I have yet to come out to my h.s. friends.”

Coming out

- “I’ve always had an easier time coming out to people I don’t know very well. As far as friends go, I almost prefer if they find out that I’m gay from someone else so that I don’t have to say it to them. I generally take a pretty passive role about revealing my homosexuality.”
- Observation: At age 18—when threat of family, peer abandonment not so great (leaving anyway . . .)

Needs

- “Narrowed the field of people I can relate to”
- **Information!**
- Worrying about the effect on future, careers
- **Hypersensitivity:** awareness of labels, homophobia, reactions of others, fear for the future

Danger

- “On a mission trip, a group of 8 from school, plus an ineffectual moderator—one person claimed he’d never speak to, or would beat up, a best friend or cousin if he ‘turned queer on him.’ Made me wonder how a really ‘out’ person would fare at school.”
- “A group of boys made me their pet project. They almost had me cornered several times.”
- “I became an easy target for passive and aggressive acts, all anonymous.”
- “Everywhere, in the halls, in class, at lunch, before and after school, and at school activities. The potential for danger was always there.”

Danger, continued

- “There is almost no support for coming out of the closet.”
- “I need people in my life to talk about problems that I have or what will happen in the future.”
- “My successes made me high profile and even more reluctant to explore a possibly scandalous sexuality.”
- “Being queer intensifies experiences in school. Sexuality adds a new dimension to social adjustment during adolescence.”

Positive Experiences with Teachers

- Teachers who were “out”
- “Classroom discussions on topics like ‘gays in the military’ validated sexual orientation as an important topic to explore, understand.”
- Sunday School unit on homosexuality (with a positive teacher)
- Opportunities to discuss civil/human rights issues in class

Negative Experiences with Teachers

- Teachers assumed heterosexuality when mentioning dating and the “opposite sex.”
- Teachers never mentioned that historical/literary figures were gay (for role models).
- Health and wellness completely omitted GLB health issues.
- Teacher said that gays were sick and should be deported to their own island.
- “Sexual orientation became an issue in debate and marketing classes. Had to drop debate altogether—then didn’t join other organizations.
- “A teacher started a rumor about me and my best friend—later apologized.”

Negative Experiences, continued

- “The jr. high PE coach made degrading, foul-mouthed comment about me to my male classmates. I was horrified. At that moment I realized that my peers weren’t the only people I had to fear. I left school and cried the entire day, repenting my sins.”
- “I was afraid of feeling feminine in gym and other male-dominated classes. Felt I could participate only in liberal activities such as theater.”
- “I was labeled a ‘theater fag’ and never got male leads because I didn’t fit the strapping young buck. In h.s., teachers squelched my desire to work with gay issues.”

Negative Experiences with Teachers, continued

- “Teachers verbally assaulted me about being gay, and no one cared.”
- “There are two ‘F’ words in every classroom, and ‘fag’ is the other one.”
- “It sucks that teachers can say ‘faggot’ and ‘queer’ during classes.”

Suggestions: “Tell them they’re not alone.”

- “Let them know they’re OK. That there are others. I wish just one had said, ‘You’re OK.’”
- “I wish I had had a couple of other gays I could ask the questions I had.”
- “To have known even ONE gay person, to have had famous or respected people come out of the closet, or to have had the PC movement has seen a lot of gay-friendly movies in the last few years.”
- “It was as if gay people didn’t exist.”

Suggestions . . .

- “Entertain the reality of gayness more—in history, literature.”
- “Stop the name-calling—like ‘dyke,’ ‘fag’ (in class). SAY something!”
- “What you don’t say can matter as much as what you do.”
- “Ask, ‘Is my classroom safe? Respectful?’”
- “I suppose I was such a model student and a ‘joy to teach’ that they didn’t feel an urge to change anything—that I should ease up on myself.”

Suggestions . . .

- “Look out at a classroom and understand that there are probably GLBT students—scared, proud, confused, in love with someone of the same gender, lonely.”
- “Be alert to the possibility that sexual orientation may be the reason for someone’s being suicidal, being involved with substances, or dropping out.”
- “Let them know they are not ‘bad,’ ‘evil,’ ‘sick.’”
“Know there’s so much going on in their heads.”

Students: Questions That Should Have Been Asked

- Drug use
- Dropping out of school
- Role of the church
- What questions during adolescence?
- Where found answers?
- First sexual experience (Gay? Peers/adults? Positive/negative? Playful/harmful? Affected future?)
- Reactions of siblings
- Ideas for promoting healthy gay image in schools

Observations

- Danger in “no perceived support”
- Without a place during vulnerable adolescence; isolation; separateness; “the only gay”
- Developmental issues
- Self-esteem
- Depression
- College—support, finally
- Significance of parental silence, support

Observations, continued

- Significance of “it takes time” (for others to adjust)
- Drug/alcohol use: for “self-medication,” not rebellion
- “Just because someone is gay and depressed doesn’t mean they are depressed because they are gay.”
- Gifted-ed teachers’ potential role in support; need for staff development
- Potential for group work for affective concerns
- Difficulty with percentages/stats—masking the complexity of responses
- A “new era,” now?

Regarding Giftedness

- “To be both gay and gifted means doubly different.”
- “Gifted education has been open to controversial issues. It seems there would be room to explore these issues.”
- “Gifted education would be a good place to explore exuality concerns because of the greater ability to think through the subject.”
- “How many AIDS cases would not be in the stats if they had been affirmed at an early age and hadn't gone out seeking sex as an affirmation.”