

Social work students and competent practice with lgbtq clients

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SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AND
COMPETENT PRACTICE WITH LGBTQ CLIENTS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Social Work
in the College of Health and Public Affairs
and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
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Thesis Chair: Olga Molina

Abstract

Research suggests that social work students' attitudes towards the LGBTQ populations fail to mirror the expectations of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and its code of ethics. In this cross-sectional research study, a survey distributed to undergraduate and post-graduate part-time and full-time social work students conducted by two students of a post-graduate social work program, is an assessment of social work students' attitudes and knowledge of competent practice with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning clients. This researcher used the findings of the study used to analyze: the relationship between social work students' age and knowledge of competent practice with LGBTQ clients, the relationship between social work students' gender and attitudes toward practice with LGBTQ clients, the relationship between social work students' race and attitudes toward practice with LGBTQ clients, the relationship between social work students' campus region and attitude and knowledge of competent practice with LGBTQ clients, the relationship between social work students' degree program/level and knowledge of competent practice with LGBTQ clients, and students' knowledge of effective responses to ethical dilemmas involving LGBTQ clients. The goal of this researcher is to use the study's findings to contribute to the literature on this topic and to influence changes in social work schools' methods of preparing students for practice with this population.

Keywords: LGBTQ, Social work education, competent practice, heterosexism

Dedications

For the members of the LGBTQ community who look to social workers for a voice.

For my mentors Mary Mann and Michael Freeman for inspiring me to make my voice heard.

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Introduction

As this experience as an undergraduate social work student comes to an end, one thing can be said to have been made clear: cultural competency is essential in social work practice. This is especially important to be aware of when working with members of marginalized groups and populations. Although clients who are members of marginalized groups are likely to present the same issues as the majority, considerations often must be made specific to client culture and the implications they present for social workers' methods of practice. With the continuous oppression of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) community, it is anticipated that social work students will work with clients who may identify as such, and will therefore be required to be knowledgeable, comfortable, and competent with providing the necessary social services and advocating for this population.

Nearing the beginning of undergraduate field placement, there is no concern of comfort with the possibility of working with LGBTQ clients. However, there is certainly concern about the amount of preparation that has been dedicated to ensuring competent practice with this population, or the lack thereof. This concern has led to the question of the thoughts and feelings of the social work students who have gone through this undergraduate program, and will also be entering the field. Do social work students feel prepared to enter the world of social work practice? Do social work students feel the curriculum has supplied the knowledge necessary to prepare them to exercise culturally competent practice with LGBTQ clients?

The purpose of this exploratory study is to evaluate social work student knowledge and attitudes regarding culturally competent practice with LGBTQ clients. This study will investigate:

1. Does social work students' age influence knowledge of competent practice with LGBTQ

clients?

2. Does social work students' gender influence attitudes toward practice with LGBTQ clients?
3. Does social work students' race influence attitudes toward practice with LGBTQ clients?
4. Does campus region influence social work students' attitude toward practice with LGBTQ clients?
5. Does social work students' level of study impact knowledge of competent practice with LGBTQ clients?
6. Does social work students' response to ethical dilemmas involving LGBTQ clients correspond with EPAS standards?

In answering these research questions, awareness will be brought to the importance of education in the development of culturally competent social workers, especially those who can expect to work with LGBTQ clients.

Literature Review

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) asserts that, “social workers are responsible for pursuing social change and equal opportunity with and on behalf of the vulnerable and oppressed, while ensuring them access to resources, information, and services,” (Dentato, Craig & Smith, 2010; NASW Code of Ethics, 2008). Community agencies that provide services to LGBTQ youth specifically respond to the needs of that particular population and therefore require social workers to advocate for clients with agencies that are also providing services but are less familiar with practices for providing them care (Morrow, 2004).

The CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (Council on Social Work Education, 2003) require that all accredited social work education programs “provide a learning context in which respect for all persons and understandings of diversity (including age, class, color, disability, ethnicity, family structure, gender, marital status, national origin, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation) are practiced” (Standard 6.0). These educational standards also require social work education programs to integrate content on diversity (Educational Policy 4.1) and populations at risk (Educational Policy 4.2) into their curricula. Knowledge and understanding of GLBT people and the issues that affect them is a component of diversity and populations-at-risk content. The requirements of the NASW and the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards reinforces the magnitude of the ethical obligation social work programs have to include GLBTQ issues in their curricula (Morrow & Messinger, 2006; Mallon, 1999).

Research shows that social work programs can benefit from an assessment of their curriculum’s success with providing students adequate preparation for culturally competent practice with LGBTQ clients. Issues found with social work curriculums include programs not

formally assessing student competence in serving LGBT individuals, a lack of content on LGBTQ youth, failing to provide field placements in LGBTQ-specific agencies, and a lack of faculty members who are sufficiently aware of LGBT issues even though codes of ethics have instituted requirements (CSWE, 2009; Hunter & Hickerson, 2003). Morrow and Messinger (2006) maintain that in addressing these issues within social work education programs, it is of importance that schools of social work assist students with developing “theoretical and methodological” knowledge base for understanding and working with sexual minority people.

The literature search conducted for this study has focused on social work student attitudes towards the LGBT population, the influence of education by schools of social work, and the implications the literature suggest for schools of social work and the social work profession.

Attitudes

Much of the literature studies social workers’ attitudes toward LGBT practice in terms of homophobia and heterosexism. This researcher uses ‘homophobia’ and ‘heterosexism’ as defined as, “any belief system which supports negative myths and stereotypes about homosexual people,” and, “a belief system that values heterosexuality as superior to and/or more ‘natural’ than homosexuality,” (Morin & Garfinkle, 1978; Morin, 1977), respectively. Though students may be comfortable with working with the LGBTQ population, cultural sensitivity to the LGBTQ population does not necessarily result in competency in working with this population (Logie, Bridge & Bridge, 2007). Stereotypes and negative attitudes about transgender persons (and members of the LGBTQ population) continue to be perpetuated through the refusal “to consider them as a legitimate topic for discussion in our homes or educational institutions (Mallon, 1999).” With the additional absence of a theoretical framework or model for working with LGBT people, social work practice will continue to refer to heterosexual models in work

with this population and social workers may consequently lack awareness of the particular needs and risks for LGBTQ practice (Fish, 2008).

In developing a model that increases the awareness of needs and risks for LGBTQ practice, social workers must acknowledge and address the myths and stereotypes about LGBT people that continue to perpetuate “misinformation and negative attitudes” about them (Mallon, 1999). Some of these stereotypes and negative attitudes include: the belief that Homosexuality is a lifestyle choice rather than an innate orientation, Homosexuality is not a normal aspect of human diversity, Gay and lesbian people are more likely to abuse children and/or convert them from heterosexuality to homosexuality, two people of the same sex in a relationship play masculine and feminine roles, transgender people are gay or lesbian in sexual orientation, same-sex couples do not develop long-term committed relationships, the “gay agenda” is a plan for undermining family values and for affording “special rights” to GLBT people (Morrow & Messenger, 2006).

Age and Gender

The relationship between students’ age and gender and their attitudes towards practice with LGBT clients have been frequently studied but findings have been conflicting (Crisp, 2007; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997). Male social work students’ attitudes tend to be more homophobic than female students’. However, levels of homophobia between male and female students have been found to be greater overall toward gay men than lesbians (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997). While findings of no significant difference in levels of homophobia by age remain consistent, lower levels of heterosexism among younger students have been found (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Herek & Glunt, 1993).

Social Work Education

Studies suggest that biases towards LGBTQ populations exist in social work students and within the social work profession (Logie, Bridge, & Bridge, 2007). A Canadian social worker recounts her experience and that of three other gay and/or lesbian students in their school of social work, and the discrepancies between their expectations of the education they would receive and the reality of the frustration they experienced with the program's handling of LGBTQ issues (Chinell, 2007). Social work students have reported homophobic and heterosexist comments, attitudes, and acts by heterosexual peers and program staff and faculty members. Efforts have been made in schools of social work by LGBTQ advocates to promote and influence LGBTQ-friendly campuses. However, barriers to LGBTQ advocates' efforts continue to exist and have been found to be reflected in school decision makers' ignorance of issues facing LGBTQ faculty, staff, and students; attitudes of internalized homophobia and transphobia; and opposition towards advocacy based on moral, religious, or political grounds (Messinger, 2002; 2009).

According to Morrow and Messinger (2006) many social workers have little to preparation for working with LGBTQ clients. "Most social work professionals trained before the mid-1990s had no academic preparation for working with sexual minority populations, and many social workers trained since then have had minimal, if any, academic exposure to these populations (Morrow & Messinger, 2006)."

Mallon (1999) maintained that despite receiving an undergraduate education, which he assures is absent of any mention of practice with transgender youth, it is likely that graduate students entering the social work profession will have little foundation knowledge about transgender youth. "Despite mandates, they might not even receive much content about gay and

lesbian persons in social work education, as most social work educators have been relatively unwilling or unresponsive in their approaches to integrating curriculum content on this population in any meaningful way (Mallon, 1999).”

Even with increased public attention on LGBTQ civil rights and issues, the inclusion of sexuality [and practice with LGBTQ clients] within the social work curriculum has been found to be “extremely minimal” (Camilleri & Ryan, 2006; Fish, 2008). In social work literature, often used as a frame of reference in developing social work curriculum, heterosexism has not been addressed as a concern as great as homophobia and is a result of a lack of LGBTQ education (Brownlee, Sprakes, Saini, O’Hare, Kortess-Miller & Graham, 2005; Fish, 2008).

The role schools of social work are expected to play in the education of students to ensure cultural competency is not reflective of the findings of research. Inadequate attention is given to LGBTQ issues in social work education and it is important that social workers address personal biases, especially in the classroom, in order to prevent further marginalizing LGBTQ clients (Hidalgo, 1992; Murphy, 1992; Chinell, 2007).

Method

Sample

The study was completed with part-time and full-time undergraduate and post-graduate students in the social work program at the University of Central Florida (UCF). To determine student's attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of competent practice with LGBTQ clients, a survey was created and distributed by two post-graduate students during the fall and spring semesters of 2011 and 2012 respectively. The eight page survey titled 'Social Work Student Knowledge and Attitudes Regarding Culturally Competent Practice with LGBTQ Clients: An Exploratory Study' included four sections: (1) demographics (student), (2) four practice vignettes which required students to respond to a series of ethical dilemmas involving LGBTQ clients, (3) twelve attitude questions, and (4) twenty-five knowledge/competency questions. A total of 105 social work students attending UCF's Orlando (main) and Daytona campuses were surveyed. All surveys were collected immediately upon completion.

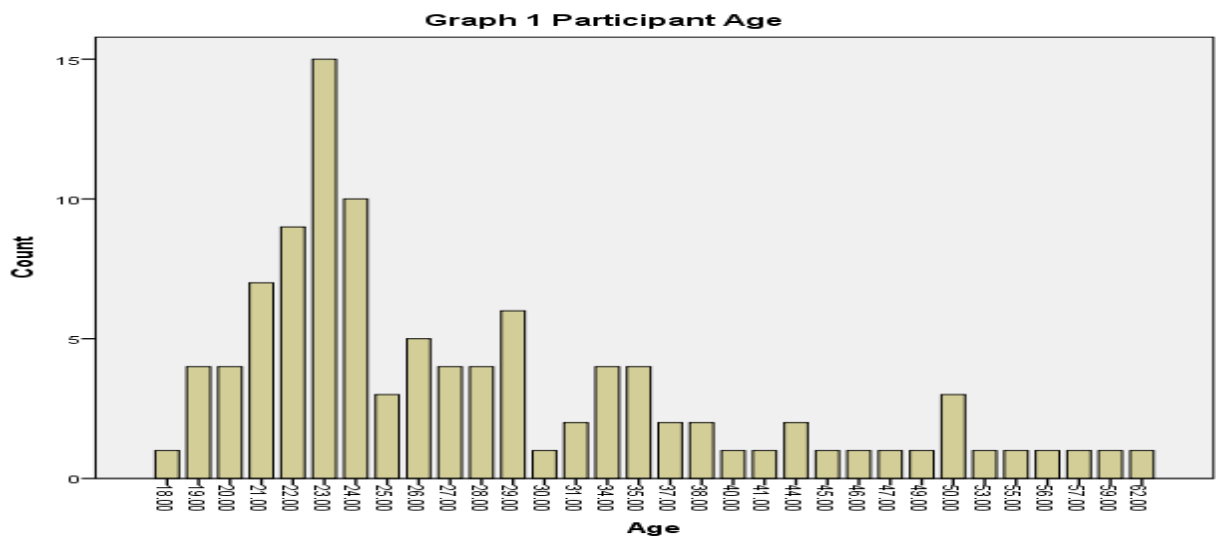
Results

Survey Results

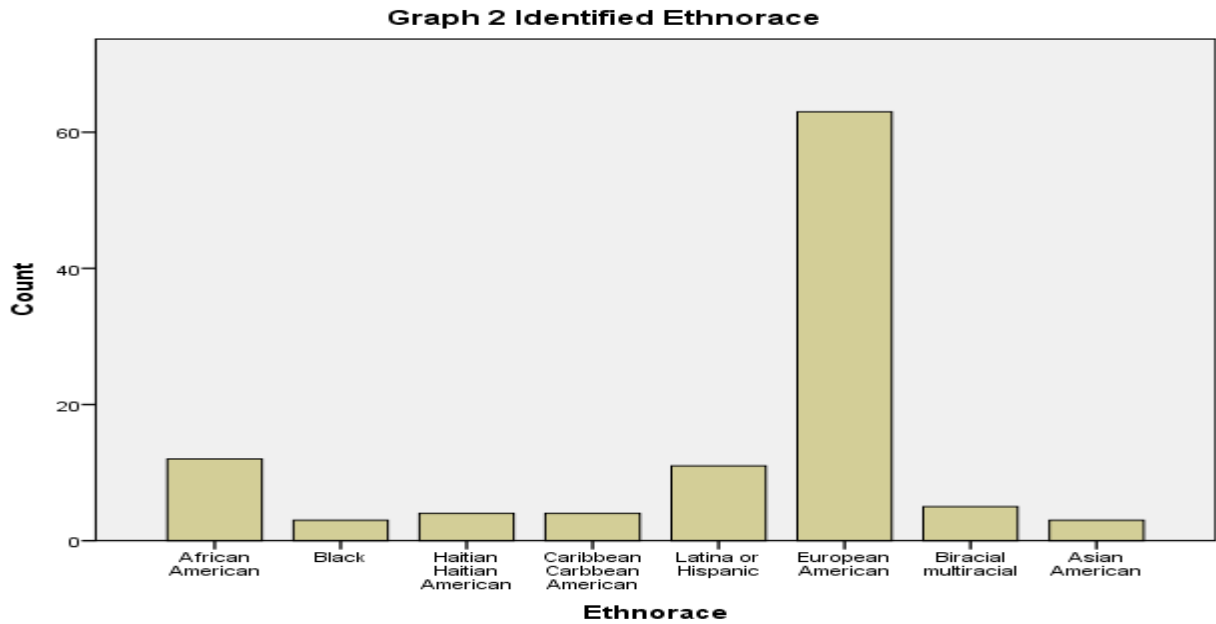
Student Demographics

The data sample included 105 Undergraduate and graduate UCF social work students, 93 identified as females and 12 males (Graph 3). 44 of the survey participants were BSW level students, 36 were second year MSW students enrolled at the Main Orlando campus, and the remaining 25 participants were first year MSW students enrolled at the school's Daytona campus. The mean age of participants was 29.5 years (SD = 10.4) (Graph 1). Participants' identified ethnicities (Graph 2) were as follows: 12 African American, 3 Black, 4 Haitian/Haitian American, 4 Caribbean/Caribbean American, 11 Latina or Hispanic, 63 European American, 5 Biracial, and 3 Asian American.

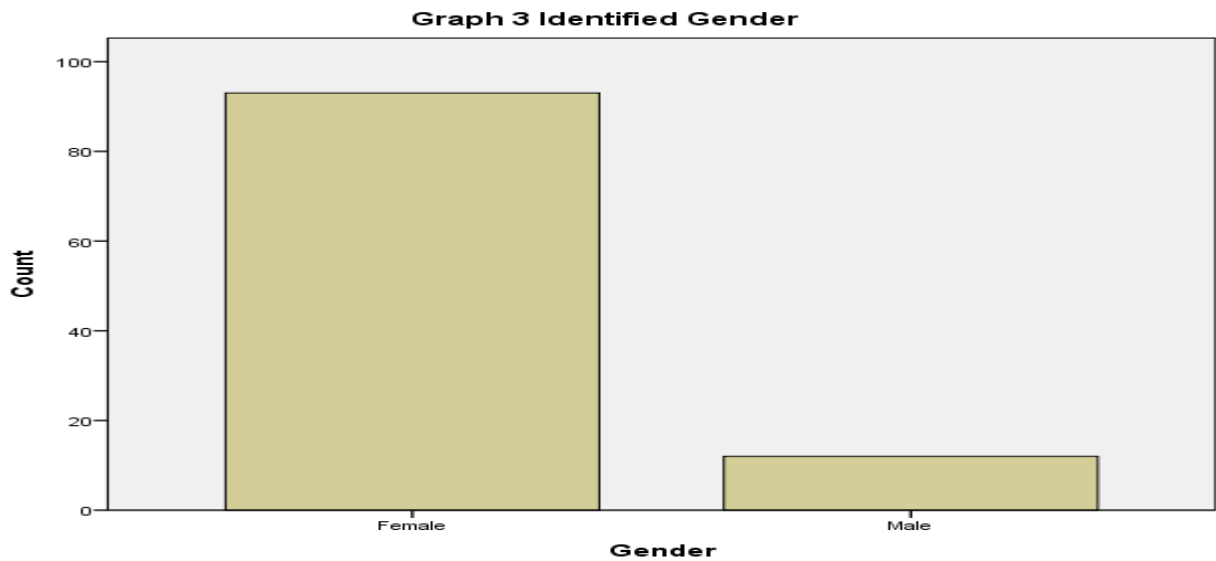
Graph 1: Students' Identified Age



Graph 2: Students' Identified Race



Graph 3: Students' Identified Gender



Age and Knowledge

Pearson correlation test was used to analyze the correlation between students' age and their knowledge of competent practice with LGBTQ clients. The ages of the social work students who

participated in the study was found to not be statistically correlated with their knowledge of competent practice with LGBTQ clients at 95% significance with alpha equaling .587.

Gender and Attitude

Spearman’s rho was used to analyze the correlation between students’ gender and attitude towards practice with LGBTQ clients as the data corresponding to the age of the population studied was not evenly distributed. Social work students’ gender was not statistically correlated with their attitude towards practice with LGBTQ clients at 95% significance with alpha equaling .411.

Race and Attitude

Spearman’s rho was used to analyze the correlation between students’ race and attitude towards practice with LGBT clients. Social Work students’ race was found to not be statistically correlated with their attitude towards practice with LGBTQ clients at 95% significance, with alpha equaling .304.

Region and Attitude

Table 1: Statistic Correlation between Students’ Campus Region of Study and Attitude

		CompsiteAttitude1	Campus Region
CompsiteAttitude1	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.632**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	105	105
Campus Region	Correlation Coefficient	-.632**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	105	105

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Because the data was not normally distributed, Spearman’s rho was also used to

analyze the correlation between students' campus region of study and their attitudes towards practice with LGBTQ clients. The correlation between social work students' campus region and attitude were found to be significant at the 0.01 level at 95% confidence, with alpha equaling .000, which is described in table 1 above.

Level of Study and Knowledge

Second year master's social work student participants surveyed at the university's main campus were found to be more knowledgeable on competent practice with the LGBTQ population than bachelor's level students and second year master's level students.

Table 2: Ranks: Knowledge of Competent Practice

	Region/Level	N	Mean Rank
CompsiteKnowledge1	BSW	44	44.39
	MSW2Main	36	59.31
	MSW1Day	25	59.08
	Total	105	

Qualitative Analysis

EPAS Standards

Bachelor's and master's social work programs are accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). The CSWE accredits programs based on their compliance with the council's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). According to section 1.1 of the EPAS, social work education serves the purposes of preparing students to become competent and effective, knowledgeable, and leaders in the development of social service. EPAS maintains that to achieve its purposes, social work education programs must provide curricula and teaching practices that prepare social work students to practice without discrimination and with respect, knowledge, and skills related to varying populations (CSWE, 2004).

Three conceptual themes arose in the data analysis process of students' responses to ethical dilemma vignettes: (a) Responding to the unethical behavior of staff workers; (b) workplace policy and procedure; and (c) responding to clients in crisis.

Responding to Unethical Behavior of Caseworkers

Survey participants were asked to respond to an ethical dilemma which involved the participant observing a client's dissatisfied response to a staff person shaking their head and mumbling after the client informed them of their request for an appointment for testosterone injections as they had begun transitioning to their "right gender."

Most students responded to the vignette stating that they would intervene with the intention of confronting the staff worker. One student indicated:

The staff person judging the patient and making their opinions evident makes them incompetent. The worker made their issue the patient's issue and that isn't fair.

Other responses included staffing the staff worker's behavior with a supervisor, intervening and assisting the client themselves, and making an effort to educate the staff worker on appropriate responses to the presenting dilemma. Few students responded with no response or indicated that they would not get involved, as one student responded:

Everyone has a right to their opinion so I would not get involved.

Workplace Policy and Procedure

Two ethical dilemmas involved service providers' unethical responses to clients in agencies whose policies failed to regulate appropriate responses. In vignette number two, an agency providing services to homeless youth provides a referral for an eighteen year old client who identifies herself as a MTF transgender person. The agency's supervisor mentions the

reason for the referral being, “They know how to handle these kind of people; we don’t.”

Vingette number four involved two male students who were referred to a University Crisis Counseling Center following rapes on campus. The responding police officer used homophobic slurs when addressing the victims and participants were asked how they would respond.

Most of the students indicated that they would advocate for policy development and/or change within the agencies, one student responded:

I would ask why are we not prepared for this particular client? Advocate for help from the CA agency in preparing our agency to provide adequate and ethical care.

Another said they would,

Try to initiate training for PO’s on same sex assault, sensitivity training, and diversity training.

And another responded,

I do not know what MTF means.

Students also indicated that they would advocate for sensitivity training, staff with supervisor the possibility of agency education, and some said they would research and refer the client to an agency that would better serve the client. Almost half of the survey participants had no response or responded that they would advocate for the client to remain in the agency. One participant indicated that they would,

Put her in a male homeless shelter.

Responding to Clients in Crisis

The third vingette asked participants to respond with how they would proceed with an older gentleman who had been referred for an evaluation for depression following the death of his partner of twenty years.

Most students indicated that they would respond as they would with any client. One participant indicated they would,

Same way you would with a heterosexual couple, however carefully considering unique situations he may encounter while being culturally competent.

Other responses included referring the client for bereavement and grief counseling, beginning assessment, and beginning treatment for depression. Many participants indicated no response and/or that they were unaware of how they would respond. One participant indicated that they,

Don't feel equipped to answer this question.

Another participant responded with:

Find a culturally competent therapist.

Limitations

A limitation of the research is the ability of its findings to be applicable as the surveyed sample may not be representative of all schools of social work. Because the sample used in this study was also a convenience sample, students of an institution that was easily accessible to the researchers, the study's findings may not be generalizable to all schools of social work. The data used in this study was not normally distributed. However, the findings using this sample will offer implications that may be applied towards improving the competency of this program's students and staff.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

Considerations that may be made when working with LGBTQ youth include assessing the client's identity development, assessing the level of disclosure necessary for meeting client needs, and assessing the safety of the client or lack thereof, all of which should be included in education to enhance competent practice (Logie, Bridge & Bridge, 2007). Personal issues of homophobia and heterosexism of social work students and professors must be addressed, faculty should be educated about issues and increased LGBTQ presence and proactive measures for dealing with LGBTQ issues within schools of social work should be employed to provide a positive atmosphere for students and discussion of LGBTQ issues (Chinell, 2011). Mallon (1999) suggests that although content on practice with transgender clients, specifically transgender youth, should be integrated in every area of the curriculum, material on practice with the transgender population should be introduced in an introductory course for graduate level students.

A positive atmosphere includes one that is open, safe, and would allow social work students to discuss and explore issues related to Morrow and Messinger's (2006) suggestions for competent LGBTQ practice:

1. Develop a GLBT content knowledge base.
2. Challenge personal biases about sexual minority people and practice in accordance with social work values and ethics.
3. Do not presume the sexual orientation or gender identity of clients.
4. Use accurate and respectful language in all communications to and about clients.
5. Avoid assuming that the characteristics and needs of all sexual minority

- groups- gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender - are the same.
6. Approach cases from an ecological systems perspective.
 7. Honor diversity among LGBT people.
 8. Honor client self-determination regarding self-disclosure
 9. Honor clients' rights to privacy regarding their sexual orientation and gender identity.
 10. Advocate for GLBT-affirmative work environments and GLBT-affirmative agency services.

Students should discuss and explore issues regarding individual work vs. group work with LGBTQ clients, sensitive issues LGBTQ clients may face in regard to identity development and coming out, relationships, health (HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, mental health and risk for suicide, diversity within the LGBTQ community, race and ethnicity, age, and ability (Mallon, 2008).

Along with integrating LGBTQ content into the curriculum, also include infusion of content on LGBTQ youth throughout the curriculum, field placements specific to work with the LGBTQ community, increased attention to gender-identity and LGBT issues, increased faculty development opportunities, and assessment of support systems for LGBT students in social work the programs, institutions, and in the community are suggested (CSWE, 2009). While the classroom is a primary location for education, social work agencies and organizations also need to provide continuous education and training to social work professionals (Logie, Bridge & Bridge, 2007). Research suggests the most effective interventions to be, “those that integrate cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains; reflect cultural competency; and address the specific functions of heterosexist beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors,” (Sears, 1997; Elze, 2007).

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