



Voices from the Field: Special Education Case Managers' Experiences with Disabled, LGBTQ+ Students

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Abstract

In the United States, students with disabilities have a legal right to a free and appropriate public education governed by federal and state laws through an individualized education plan (IEP) (IDEA, 04). Special education case managers are responsible for developing and monitoring student progress through the IEP. When disabled students also identify as LGBTQ+, case managers need to be prepared and have awareness of the needs of students with these intersecting identities. This study provides a sample of voices from the field, as case managers share their perceived knowledge and abilities to provide support for these students. Their experiences highlight the need for more preparation to better serve disabled, LGBTQ+ students. School experiences and post school outcomes for these students paint a picture of increased bullying, harassment, suicide, mental health needs, and underemployment. This qualitative study provides insights from those working with these students to understand their needs to help improve the outcomes and the school experience for disabled, LGBTQ+ students. This study can assist schools, preparation programs, and advocacy groups to better understand disabled, LGBTQ+ student needs, and the needs of those who work with them on a daily basis.

Keywords: Disability, LGBTQ+, School, Special Education

1. Introduction

When a student is identified as having a possible disability in the United States school systems, a specialized team of education professionals conduct various evaluations. These evaluations include psychological testing, educational/achievement testing, social histories, and other specialized assessments, such as speech and language testing [1]. The team then uses federal and state guidance to determine the student's eligibility for special education services, and if eligible, an individualized education plan (IEP) is developed. Students then begin receiving special education services in the form of academic goals, classroom and school-wide accommodations, curriculum modifications, and social/emotional goals, if warranted [2]. While school supports are provided once a student is identified with a disability, current research indicates that students with disabilities report high levels of bullying and harassment [3]. When this identity intersects with LGBTQ+ identity more obstacles and hardships are experienced by students.

Disabled, LGBTQ+ youth report high levels of bullying, harassment, and anxiety in school [4]. Often, students who are openly LGBTQ+ experience increased rates of homelessness, mental health concerns, and microaggressions by school staff [5]. Students living at the intersection of disability and LGBTQ+ identity also have the highest levels of suicidal ideation as compared to their peers [6]. The student experience is challenging for those who have a disability and for those who identify as LGBTQ+. When these two identities intersect, the hardships and obstacles become even more pronounced.

Post-school outcomes reveal similar trends with high levels of underemployment, workplace discrimination, increased mental health needs, and more frequent abuse of drugs [7, 8]. As students with IEPs, post-school outcomes are an area of focus through transition planning for employment goals, post-secondary schooling, and daily living skills [9]. These similar reports of school-based challenges and post-school difficulties reveal a need to study this phenomenon.

2. Purpose

As the literature revealed the increased need for support for disabled, LGBTQ+ youth, it becomes apparent that schools need to be prepared to better serve these students. Both the school experiences and post-school outcomes reveal a need for improved services for students, a renewed focus on inclusivity, an embrace of diversity, and more services for disabled, LGBTQ+ youth.



Educational professionals need to be prepared to understand both disability and LGBTQ+ identity, and they need to be aware of resources that can be utilized to better serve these students. The purpose of the study was to examine whether special education case managers are prepared and ready for this experience in their work with the students on their caseload.

3. Methods and Participants

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative design was utilized. An open-ended questionnaire was designed and utilized to allow participants to answer questions anonymously. Open-ended questionnaires are a qualitative tool that allows researchers to gather data in an anonymous manner, while also offering flexibility to participants by allowing them to complete the questionnaire in their own time [10]. Using this type of data collection tool, participants were able to complete the questionnaire on their own time and at their own pace. Response length varied based on the participants level of experience with disabled, LGBTQ+ youth.

By using the open-ended questionnaire format, participants were able to share their personal, lived experiences. The data was collected and analyzed through a thematic analysis. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase model, initial codes were identified which then allowed the themes to emerge from the data [11].

Participants were purposely sampled with the need for them to be case managers in a public school in the United States. The participants ranged in years of experience, as well as in their professional roles. These included school psychologists, school social workers, and learning disabilities teacher/consultants.

4. Findings

Using inductive coding, the themes emerged from the data from the open-ended questionnaire. Participants shared a positive outlook toward working with disabled students who identify as LGBTQ+. They perceived themselves to be supportive of students as they go through their school experience. In this area, participants expressed a desire to know more about LGBTQ+ identity and gender identity. At times, some worry that they cannot maintain pace with changes that occur and become fearful of offending students. They also expressed a need for training to better serve students who are LGBTQ+ through programs and resources for becoming more welcoming, affirming, and supportive.

The findings also revealed that participants need more training in finding and using LGBTQ+ specific resources. As fully licensed special education professionals, the participants felt confident in their abilities and knowledge for students with disabilities; however, they expressed a need for specific professional learning in the area of LGBTQ+ supports. This included more training in gender affirming practices, more assistance with LGBTQ+ identities, and more information on LGBTQ+ specific resources and community agencies/organizations. Participants also shared a need for more assistance in using IEP supports to better serve disabled, LGBTQ+ youth. Overall, the responses from participants revealed strong support for these students, but they need more training to better serve their students.

5. Conclusion

The literature reveals that the examination of disabled, LGBTQ+ youth is understudied [12]. The results of this study reveal important considerations for schools, school leaders, and education professionals. The study demonstrated a positive belief amongst the participants in working with disabled, LGBTQ+ youth, but more training and professional learning opportunities are needed. Whether this is through college preparation programs or in-school professional development, this is an area of need that warrants more attention. The statistics reveal the challenging experiences of disabled, LGBTQ+ youth in schools. These should motivate schools and preparation programs to have a focus on better preparing educational professionals for this experience.

In addition, the results of this study, while limited due to the small sample size, reveal the need for more training in using IEP supports for disabled, LGBTQ+ youth. This can be in the form of counseling as a related service, more intentional social/emotional goals for the child, and increased work for self-advocacy for the student. As students enter into secondary settings and transition services begin, educational professionals need to be aware of various agencies and community organizations that exist to help LGBTQ+ youth. These can be easily connected to the IEP transition



services to allow for students to connect to supportive services in a post-school setting. This is pivotal as post-school outcomes reveal challenges and difficulties ranging from employment, to medical care, to counseling, and even faith-based resources.

As schools work to serve all students and to provide an educational experience to prepare for the future, more work needs to be done for disabled, LGBTQ+ youth and for the educational professionals who work with these students. The participants express the desire to grow in this area. Their voices express the need for more training, for more support, and for more resources to better serve their students. This research study was limited by the sample size and the focus on school-based experiences from an education professional perspective. More research is needed from the actual perspective of the disabled, LGBTQ+ student to better understand their needs and their personal experiences.

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