Slamming the Closet Door: Working with Gay and Lesbian Youth in Care

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The developmental challenges of gay and lesbian youth are well understood by professionals in the field. Increasingly, professionals are extending this understanding to the plight of gay and lesbian youth living in out-of-home care. Such youth face additional challenges and a lack of support that greatly complicates the development of a positive identity. Inherent in these additional challenges is the responsiveness of professionals mandated to work with youth. This study explores critical worker competencies for supporting gay and lesbian foster youth. Twenty-one youth were interviewed and asked to describe workers who were facilitative and workers who inhibited positive development. The interview transcripts were assessed to identify critical competencies. This article shares critical youth themes and underlying practice competencies.

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Adolescence is commonly considered a volatile time when every youth must experiment socially and form their sense of identity. Typically the identity formation process is one where youth act or present themselves in various fashions and shape their final identity based on the social responses they receive. For gay and lesbian youth, this complex process of identity development is confounded as they must discover, and then integrate, their sexual orientation to the forming identity (Cates, 1987; Swann & Anastas, 2003). Gay and lesbian identity development involves four adjustment phases occurring in concert with the other tribulations of adolescence (Cooley, 1998):

- Sensitization—discovering same sex feelings of attraction
- Identity confusion—reacting to the same sex attraction
- Identity assumption—discovering that one is gay
- Commitment—adopting the gay/lesbian identity

As youths' identity solidifies through these stages, they discover new possibilities and implications for their future (Swann & Anastas, 2003). Concurrently, youth may engage in strategies of hiding their true identity in response to the social culture of homophobia and hate (Swann & Anastas, 2003; Tharinger & Wells, 2000).

Gay and lesbian youth are acutely aware that large and vocal segments of society disapprove and are threatened by homosexuality. Stereotypes, jokes, gay bashing, politicized religiosity, and the public debate about homosexuality affect the social culture in which gay and lesbian youth must integrate their identity. These obstacles inhibit the exploratory processes of identity development, because gay and lesbian youth cannot openly express their developing identity without some level of risk (Tharinger & Wells, 2000). Youth must make daily decisions about how much of their identity they can safely share with friends, acquaintances, and family. They also must make daily decisions about the personal meaning of negative reactions and comments. As a result, many gay and lesbian youth experience confusion, feel misunderstood, internalize hostility, and worry about their future (Omizo, Omizo & Okamoto, 1998).
Gay and lesbian youth need responsive and responsible adults to resolve the identity crises of adolescence (Cooley, 1998, Tharinger & Wells, 2000). A lack of support compounds normal developmental issues, placing gay and lesbian youth at risk of emotional problems (Tharinger & Wells). Gay and lesbian youths find it difficult to seek out support because they fear negative reactions from others (Omizo, Omizo & Okamoto, 1998). Many previously supportive relationships erode when youth share their true identity (Tharinger & Wells). Rather than focusing on the developmental needs of the youth, parents and other caregivers can divert energy into their own coping and adaptation to the disclosure (Tharinger & Wells).

For straight youth, support comes from family, friends, and school. With gay and lesbian youth, these sources of support often become sources of stress when their sexual identity is shared. When a youth shares with a parent, an adjustment period often occurs where the parent attributes multiple personalized meanings to their child’s identity (Saltzburg, 2004). During this adjustment period, the parent focuses on his or her own emotions, creating distance in the relationship (Saltzburg). Concurrently, gay and lesbian youth often experience hostility and harassment in the school setting (Omizo, Omizo & Okamoto, 1998). While the nature of such harassment often meets the legal standard of sexual harassment, gay and lesbian youth do not receive equal protection under the law (Fineran, 2002). The erosion of natural supports often results in gay and lesbian youth receiving professional supports, such as therapy and counseling or identifying alternative supports in the community (Cooley, 1998; Elze, 2002; Stone, 1999; Yarbrough, 2003).

Positive identity development for gay and lesbian youth appears to be contingent on a stable and supportive environment (Mallon, 2003). For gay and lesbian youth raised in out-of-home care, this situation can be bleak (Mallon, 1992, 1998). Gay and lesbian youth in foster or residential care experience seven additional developmental challenges that interfere with positive identity development:

1. Past abuse or neglect in the biological family compounds adjustment as youth must integrate multiple stigmatized
elements (e.g., gay, victim, foster child) in the forming identity (Dietz, 2001).

2. Verbal harassment and gay-related abuse while in foster care create an environment that undermines the development of a positive identity through additional stigmatization of the youth (Mallon, 2001).

3. Worker turnover and multiple placements inhibit the development of a stable and supportive environment through which gay and lesbian youth can identify mentors and support people.

4. Foster parents and residential workers do not know how to respond to the unique developmental needs of gay and lesbian youth (Mallon, 1997, 1998).

5. Foster care and residential systems often screen out gay and lesbian foster parents inhibiting the development of supportive relationships and potential mentors (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001; Hicks, 2000).

6. Supportive professional services are often incompetent and unresponsive to the developmental needs of gay and lesbian youth (Mallon, 1998; Sullivan, 1994).

7. Agency policies, procedures, and protocols set up obstacles and communicate a lack of acceptance to gay and lesbian youth (Maccio & Doueck, 2002).

Given the clear developmental challenges for gay and lesbian youth, the compounding effect of these seven additional challenges for youth in care is easy to identify. Inherent in these challenges is the reality that gay and lesbian youths often must rely on professionals rather than informal sources of support when they present themselves and garner feedback for forming their identity. Inherently, the development of a youth’s identity is contingent on the competence of workers and other paid professionals within the service system.

Worker competencies for responding to the developmental needs of gay and lesbian youth are uneven at best. Social work
and other professional groups long have ignored the needs of gay and lesbian people (Van Voorhis & Wagner, 2002), and professional education continues to ill-prepare professionals for helping a gay or lesbian client (Krieglstein, 2003; McPhail, 2004; Newman, Dannenfelser & Benishek, 2002). The lack of preparation emerges in language choices and assumptions that are counterproductive with gay and lesbian youth (Sanders & Kroll, 2000). Frequently, workers feel compelled to challenge the youth's identity in an attempt to "convert" the youth to a heterosexual identity (Jenkins & Johnston, 2004). This is an even greater concern with the rapid increase of religious-based service providers, because conservative religious groups tend to be very intolerant of gay and lesbian people (Newman, 2002; Snively).

Given the systemic challenges that can exacerbate the development of a positive identity in gay and lesbian foster youth, professional training is needed. Typically, training focuses on gay and lesbian issues through broadly focused diversity training (Phillips, McMillen, Sparks, & Ueberle, 1997). Often such training sensitizes professionals to gay and lesbian issues (Quinn, 2002), the "coming out process" (Schlope, 2004), and how to make agencies more welcoming to gay and lesbian clients (Mallon, Aledort, & Ferrera, 2002; Phillips et al., 1997). The need for such training is well established; such training can highlight problematic worker behaviors and structural impediments to working with gay and lesbian youth. It often pays little attention, however, to the specific competencies required for workers to have a positive effect on gay and lesbian youth identity development.

This study seeks to supplement the literature by identifying such competencies. It adopts a balanced approach in which gay and lesbian youth were asked to share their impressions of both positive and negative worker responses and how they affected the youth's identity development while in care. From youth stories, specific worker competencies are identified.
Research Design

Multiple sampling strategies were used to engage a sample of gay and lesbian foster youth. A multitiered approach was necessary because of the vulnerability of the youth and the invisibility of the population. The first element of the strategy was to place fliers in foster care agencies and youth centers serving gay and lesbian youth. The fliers described the purpose of the research as seeking to understand the unique experiences of gay and lesbian youth in foster care, outlined interview expectations, and identified the $20 participation fee. Contact information was provided for interested youth.

Identifying and meeting with agency staff committed to gay and lesbian youth strengthened this strategy. In such meetings, the researchers described the project to allow youth advocates to challenge them to ensure the research protocols were gay-affirming. The youth advocates then were supplied with fliers to give potential subjects as part of a snowball sampling strategy. Youth who participated in the study also were asked to give fliers to other youth as a second element of the snowball sampling strategy.

During an 18-month period, 21 youth were interviewed. They ranged in age from 16 to 22, with an average age of 19.5 years. Thirteen were gay males and eight were lesbian women. The sample also was racially diverse, with 11 African American youth, eight Caucasians, one Latino, and one Asian American. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews conducted by a male researcher sensitive to gay and lesbian issues in the foster care system. The youth were given control over the interview setting, with most selecting interviews in gay and lesbian youth resource centers. The interviews involved the following questions and potential prompts:

- What have workers said and done that affirmed you as a whole person, even though they knew of your sexual identity?
- What have workers said and done to help you relax and open up about your sexual identity?
• What can workers do to make it more comfortable to explore your sexual identity?
• What are some of the subtle things workers say and do that make you decide not to tell them about your sexual identity?
• What are some of the statements that set off your radar that they cannot be trusted?
• What are some of the universally stupid things that many insensitive workers tend to say?
• What kinds of things have workers said and done that make you feel they treat you like someone who is sexually different rather than a "whole person"?
• When you have brought up issues with workers, what have some workers done that cause you to feel that you are nothing but a problem or "diagnosis" to them?
• What have they said and done that makes you feel they are treating you differently?
• What knowledge do workers need to share with you to help you move into independent living in a way that is safe and affirming?
• What kinds of information do you want them to provide you before you move into your own place?
• What connections would you like them to help you make in the community?
• If you were to design an independent living program specifically for gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered youth, what would the program be like?
• How would you recruit and train staff for the program?
• What training would you give them before they started working?
• What special procedures would you want to include in your program?

The youth interviews were recorded and transcribed. Two researchers independently conducted content analyses on the transcriptions to identify themes. After the two independent
analyses, the researchers met to discuss the themes to ensure that all contained implications for youth–worker relationships and the youth’s identity development. All themes had to integrate gay and lesbian identity development issues with helping relationship issues to be included in the analysis. After identifying such themes, each researcher repeated their analysis to identify sub-themes within each category.

Findings

The content analysis identified three dialectical themes, which reflected polarities in the helping relationship. In these dialectical polarities, movement in one direction reflected worker actions and responses that interfered with optimal youth identity development. Conversely, worker responses that oriented to the other pole enhanced the youth’s identity development. The themes included:

- Vulnerability versus empowerment,
- Stigmatization versus validation, and
- Acceptance versus rejection.

Each theme is discussed separately in order to better understand it and its corresponding worker competencies. Comments from youth are used for illustration and support.

Vulnerability Versus Empowerment

Youth identified a sense of vulnerability associated with being gay or lesbian in the foster care system. Workers who knew the youths’ true identity had a powerful influence over their coming out process, given that the workers could disclose the sexual orientation to others in the system. All youth shared concerns about others knowing their true identity before they were ready to come out. In the foster care system, multiple people could discover a youth’s identity through deliberate or inadvertent worker actions. Many youth shared fears and stories about not trusting workers to protect their sexual identity:
Another reason why it's really hard for kids to come out to anyone (in the system) is because you don't know how they are going to react and the state doesn't make that any easier by throwing you around from home to home.

The first subtheme was associated with the closeness of people within the system and the corresponding vulnerability of being discovered. Often, youths worried about a full range of discoveries (e.g., other foster youth, foster parents, workers, teachers), each with possible consequences to their identity. The consequence of being outed to other children typically shifts the youth in the peer pecking order; the gay or lesbian youth is ostracized or picked on by other children in the home. Such shifts have drastic implications for identity development, as these two youths describe:

When in foster care you do anything you can to survive—not get picked on, not get your stuff stolen. You don’t want to be ‘branded’...If you tell the caseworker before they move you, they’re gonna tell them [the new placement]. So before you even get there, you’re already branded.

When kids and people at school find out you are in foster care and then they find out you might be queer... It doesn’t take long for one kid or something to overhear it from teachers talking or whatever...you just keep your mouth quiet and hope they don’t find out...

Often youth worry about differential treatment in the foster home if the foster parent discovers their true identity. Foster parents can overreact to incidents that arise, and use the youth's sexual identity as the first filter through which to interpret youth behaviors. This sets up double standards *vis-à-vis* the other youth in the home and can inadvertently cause the youth to be outed to the other children. The elevation of importance given to sexual identity can skew the youth's identity development through eroding support and stressing one, often conflicted area of identity over others:
And just because there is a gay girl and a straight girl, they can’t share a room together. They’re afraid the gay one will hit on the other. Most queer kids in the foster care system...I know for myself am not interested in looking at them sexually or anything because I wanted to be safe. I was not thinking about sex...I needed a safe place just like they needed a safe place.

The second subtheme in this dialectic involved concerns about the agency file. Youth were very concerned about how their identity would be portrayed. Workers identified as harmful to youth development often recorded the youth’s sexual identity in the file or shared it in open court, effectively outing the youth to the entire system with no prior discussion or permission. Such lack of empowerment sets up situations where others operate from preconceived notions of the youth’s identity, which creates a lack of connection between the youth’s internal identity and the identity controlling many interactions in their life: “She actually wrote it in my file when I told her. [She wrote] I ‘expressed desire to be bisexual.’ They don’t write it in your file if you are heterosexual.”

Conversely, workers identified as helpful tended to respect the youth’s identity and empower them to take control of their coming out process. Such workers would typically elect not to record sexual identity information in the file, knowing the impact that it might have on the youth. Many youths would still worry and make subtle comments to the workers to ensure that they would be empowered to control their coming out:

I just said this is a conversation between me and her and she respected that, you know. Because I didn’t feel comfortable telling other people because comments they made...comments that hurt.

The strongest subtheme of empowerment was invisibility. Most foster youths had, at times, elected to remain invisible to people in the system, allowing workers, foster parents, and others to believe
that they were heterosexual. Youths tended to make subtle state-
ments to their worker to determine how the worker would respond
if they came out to him or her. They also listened carefully for the
language choices others made for clues to unspoken beliefs and
assumptions. Youth then made the decision to either reveal their
identity and come out to the worker or conceal their identity and
maintain their invisibility. The decision to remain invisible with-
holds important elements of the youth’s identity from others, re-
sulting in a safer but more limited support system in which to in-
tegrate their identity:

I didn’t tell my first two caseworkers. I didn’t know the
first one very well. My second worker, however, I didn’t
say anything to her about being either trans or queer be-
cause I didn’t feel safe with her.

If I want to be who I am I’ll throw a little bit out there. I
might be like, “No, I stay by myself. I’ve been single for a
long time now.” The reactions that I get from that would
kind of give me the answers that I’m looking for.

Workers must be able to protect youth and manage their feel-
ings of systemic vulnerability. This is especially important when
the youth is in the stage of identity confusion where they often
question the sexual elements of their identity. The caseworker is
uniquely in the position to mediate the issues of vulnerability. To
accomplish this mediating function, the worker must develop
three critical competencies:

- “Tuning in.” Tuning in is a foundation skill that sensitzes
the worker to the plight of the youth. The worker must be
able to understand how the youth experiences life in the
system. If the worker is able to develop this skill, inadvert-
ent outings likely will not occur, and the youth is more
likely to be empowered in the helping relationship:
I think it is more about the worker getting down to the kid's level, understanding mentally where they are coming from, trying to understand the kid themselves and listen to them and not make quick judgments of snap decisions.

- **Working through.** Workers must be able to help youth resolve the potential challenges associated with their sexual identity. This requires the worker to respond to the facts of the situation and help the youth (or the system professionals) to deal with value-free facts rather than anxieties or misinformation. The worker must place issues on the table and help others think about them and how they can be resolved in the best interests of youth. In working through such issues, the worker must stress issues of respect and confidentiality to continually mitigate the inherent risks. As one respondent said: "I don't think workers should be so afraid of giving advice. Most of us don't have parents in our life... We need all the parental type of advice we can get."

- **Advocacy.** The worker must set clear standards of respect that are inclusive of gay and lesbian youth. Standards must be set for safety, use of language, selection of words, and agency protocols that respect sexual as well as other forms of diversity. When others violate these standards, the worker must challenge the violations in order to establish a safe and accountable culture. Another respondent said, "Make it clear that they are not going to tolerate stereotypes, stigmas, derogatory comments... be an advocate and demand tolerance and respect for all diversities."

**Stigmatization Versus Validation**

The second major theme in the data contained a dialectic ranging from professional responses that produce stigma to responses that validated the youth's uniqueness. The youths shared several
stories about responses that accentuated feelings of being different. Such responses tended to cause them to attach negative meanings to being different. Much of the stigma comes from the larger social context of hate; yet, personal experiences and interactions reinforce and personalize the stigma. As youths attempt to integrate their sexual identity with other aspects of their identity, a subtheme of self-hate or being unlovable can emerge. Inherent in this subtheme is a lack of validation that can alter feelings of difference to feelings of uniqueness:

You grow up hearing all these negative comments about homosexuality and how bad it is...and so when you find yourself at night in the dark laying in bed thinking about and judging your own thoughts and how sick of a person you are, and people if they really knew...(they) wouldn’t love you anymore.

There was nobody else out there like me. I felt like the odd person out. So I just did not want to share it, because I thought I was kind of a freak.

The second subtheme externalizes the stigma themes onto past experiences. Rather than dealing with self-induced feelings, the youth is able to identify specific people and reactions that produce feelings of stigmatization. Many foster parents and other professionals overreact to youth coming out. Often their responses sever the youth’s past relationships and support systems, which stigmatizes as well as isolates the child. That combination provides few resources for helping the youth to make sense out of their developing identity:

It’s never been the same...I mean we still talk every now and then but every time we talk she’ll be like “So are you still doing that whole weird thing?” I say, “What? You mean gay? Yes, I am.”
Love can't be fit into a box, but yet we're told we are bad people and it's better for our siblings and the other foster children we can't come around no more.

Many youths generalize the feelings of stigmatization to any feelings of uniqueness or difference. Inherent in this subtheme, youths feel compelled to remain invisible to escape potential negative judgments. When they described such feelings, they often spoke of needing to look and act the same through not acting on, or somehow denying, the things that make them unique:

You know, I didn't want to be different, I didn't want to be unique, I didn't want people to think I was weird or anything like that just because I have a different perspective on life.

It doesn't help when you are labeled as different. It is like living with a handicap.

In contrast to the denial of uniqueness, many youths highlighted their unique traits to generate feelings of pride. Pride made it much easier to be "out" to the broader public. Pride also appeared to be associated with social support from the gay and lesbian community. The connection to other gay and lesbian youth appeared to generate a sense of pride in these youth, which in turn helps them cope with the negative reactions and responses of others:

[Being gay] doesn't make me a bad person...I have a lot of pride...for her to say that to me was like, "How dare you...It took me a long time to get to this point."

All my friends were saying "Be happy about it, take pride in it" and I did and it totally blew my mind.

Workers can be instrumental in countering stigma and facilitating an appreciation of the youth's unique qualities. Many youths
spoke of workers who affirmed their strengths and positive attributes when they came out. This time appears to be a critical juncture for many youths, as the initial worker response can have a strong positive or negative effect on the youth’s identity. Responses that stressed normal, natural and positive elements most frequently were shared by youth as having a positive effect: “I said, ‘I’m gay’ and I talked to her about comments that I heard and she understood. She told me like, it was okay, it was normal and stuff, and I was no different.”

In contrast to the elevation of uniqueness, some workers tend to generalize specific unique qualities to all gay and lesbian youth. This stereotyping was noted by several youths who said such workers inhibited the development of a positive identity. In such responses, the youth lost their identity in the eyes of the worker, who then responded to them as a faceless member of a stigmatized group: “They assume you don’t want to go play basketball [because you’re gay]...They don’t give you that option...Treat us like everyone else...we are no different.”

Four critical competencies appear important for workers. These four skills all promote a positive identity and help to balance the dialectic. Workers must acknowledge the unique qualities of each youth while concurrently helping the youth see themselves as part of a vibrant and valuable group of individuals. The four competencies that help accomplish this task are the following:

• **Individualizing.** Workers must be able to respond to each youth as an individual, separate from their sexual identity group. Inherent in this competency, the worker reflects or describes back the youth’s unique and positive traits so the youth can internalize their positive traits into their identity:

  I told her that I was gay and that I was concerned about what people said about gay people. She said, “Don’t you even pay them any mind at all. They don’t know you. You are a kind and caring young man and anybody who knows you will tell you that.”
• **Strength finding.** When faced with the atmosphere of hate and other identity challenges it is not unusual for youth to lose sight of their positive attributes and strengths. If the youth is engaged in subcultures (e.g., the street subculture), workers equally are at risk of losing sight of positive elements. Workers must continually search for strengths in the youth so these can be highlighted and shared to balance the negative elements in his or her life:

> She convinced me [that I was okay]. She was like "Tyrone, that's you. Whoever don't like it...oh well that's one less person to worry about in the world." She made me feel like it's good [to be gay]...that I'm not ashamed of my sexuality.

• **Affirming.** Workers must affirm the youth’s internal experiences and struggles as important. When the youth describes concerns or feelings, having them affirmed as real and important helps the youth integrate their internal reality into their identity. In this competency, caseworkers must engage, listen, and help the youth explore their situation as fully as possible:

> She helped me a whole lot. She was there for me when my mom and my family wasn't there for me. I used to blame myself and she would say, "Tyrone, it was never you"...She helped me see it clearly.”

• **Normalizing.** Youths need to understand that their feelings, concerns, and yearnings are normal and natural, even when their feelings are inconsistent with the views of others. Validating the normalcy in youth helps to build a positive shared identity with other gay and lesbian youth: “She was great. We watched movies in youth group and a couple of weeks in a row she brought in queer movies like *Holiday Heart* and *Boys Don’t Cry.*”
Acceptance Versus Rejection

The theme of rejection and acceptance is slightly different from the theme of stigma and uniqueness. While rejection can lead to stigma, rejection focuses on the interaction between the youth and others, while stigma focuses on the internalization of messages. The strongest overlap between these two themes occurs with the subtheme of open rejection. Almost every youth shared a story of open rejection where a person who had previously been supportive ended their relationship or their involvement in a conversation once finding out the youth’s sexual identity. Such interactions exerted powerful influences on the youth’s identity as they had to integrate negative experiences in their developing identity:

After I told her I was gay, she [my worker] ditched me for a hotline. An emergency hotline. I was mad about that.

I asked her if she knows what “bisexual” was and she said, “Yes and I’m not going to discuss it with you.”

A second subtheme in the youths’ stories is one of rejection avoidance. Many youths began to organize their lives in a way that would minimize the likelihood of rejection. Inherent in this theme, youth would tend to withhold their identity based on beliefs that if the other person really knew them, rejection would be imminent. Such beliefs reflect the early stages of integrating a negative identity, causing the youth to experience limited relationships and receiving only qualified support (they only support me because they don’t know) from others:

If they knew the thoughts that you had in your head and you were attracted to other people...Sometimes you’re scared to come out because you don’t want to experience that pain of rejection one more time.

Concurrent with the themes of open rejection were themes of partial rejection. One was comparative valuation. Such rejection
occurs when caseworkers compare the youth to another who is valued more highly. The support person then pressures the first youth to measure up to the more highly valued person. Such rejection is indirect and often has a more subtle effect on the youth's identity, because the message is that the youth does not measure up to an external standard. Such negative messages appear to be easier to internalize in the identity. Open rejection, on the other hand, can be more readily externalized to the rejecting person: "You get ridiculed and judged because you don't fit in . . . 'Why don't you act like Brandy?' or 'Why don't you have any boyfriends?'"

A final rejection subtheme is that of dismissal. In this subtheme, the worker acts as an expert on the youth's experience and dismisses the seriousness of the youth's identity struggle. Almost all youths shared a story of a worker or other professional dismissing their sexual identity. Common messages in this subtheme are assertions that the youth is young, inexperienced, needy, or reacting to past abuse. In each message, the worker assumes expertise and attempts to define the youth's identity for them:

[My worker] says "The only reason you are gay is because they accept you...That is not it at all. I am attracted to males—that is why I am gay.

Don't make assumptions that we're queer because we've been abused. It's not true. It's not about the abuse that I went through. The abuse plays a part... but not into who I love.

[My worker asked] "Are you sure? You are just young and experimenting."

Three worker competencies promote acceptance. Each works in concert with the competencies listed previously. The competencies associated with this theme focus on keeping the worker and youth relating and exploring situations rather than interrupting
the helping relationship through imposing worker mental images or standards on the youth. The competencies include remaining open, supportive engagement, and responsive exploration.

- **Remaining open.** Workers identified as helpful avoided the traps of advice giving, sharing opinions or judging the youth. The worker remained open to the youth rather than starting to force the discussion into their prefabricated notions of what is occurring with the youth. Inherent in this competency, one must be able to interrupt automatic responses and jumping to conclusion:

  She cared about her kids and their interests and what was best for them. She listened, and she didn’t make judgments or make comments ... and wasn’t mean. My other worker was just hardcore, ridiculed, judgmental.

- **Supportive engagement.** Concurrent with remaining open, workers must remain engaged with the youth in a real and caring fashion. That requires the worker to stay in the conversation, responsive to the youth’s statements, and on track with the youth:

  They have to be like true to you because a kid can tell if a person is just bullshitting you ... You can give the best million dollar speech in the world, I ain’t gonna buy it... Their actions... the way the talk to you and treat you... Simple little things mean so much to a kid in the system. Especially to a queer kid or a kid that has come from a bad home.

- **Responsive exploration.** Concurrent with remaining on track with the youth, workers must maintain an open mind so one can explore new situations and feelings with the youth. This means that the worker tends to ask questions so that the youth can discover his or her own feelings, rather than
instruct the youth. In such exploration, one helps the youth find solutions to their concerns:

My worker, she knew... When I told her I was gay, first she asked me why did I think that and I told her all the reasons why I thought that and she was fine with it.

Discussion

The findings of this study identify some critical areas of worker competence when working with gay and lesbian youth in out-of-home care. Such competencies can be integrated easily in staff training and professional education programs for enhancing worker competence for serving this vulnerable population. While the competencies are necessary for all types of practice, they become critical when working with gay and lesbian youth in care because their identity development challenges are so enormous. Workers have tremendous influence over the messages internalized by such youth and are in the unique position to mitigate some of the systemic challenges with their responsiveness.

All of the findings are consistent with the tenets of good practice that should be adopted by workers serving youth in the out-of-home system. Obviously, workers need to attend to the helping relationship with all foster youth. With gay and lesbian youth in particular, the competencies outlined in this paper can promote the development of an adequate helping relationship and avoid partial relationships where the youth’s full identity is withheld. Many youth did not come out to their workers because the helping relationship did not feel sufficiently safe.

The importance of these competencies notwithstanding, one also must consider cautions when generalizing from these results, because of the sample characteristics. The first caution focuses on the small sample size. While the sample was very diverse in
terms of African Americans, only 21 youth were in this study. Many conclusions, while logical, are based on a limited number of youth. These youth also were self-selected and may not reflect the experience of all gay and lesbian youth in care. This study requires replication and expansion to promote confidence in the results. Despite these limitations, if the aforementioned competencies were actually enacted by workers, it would make a "world of difference," as one gay youth in foster care said to the authors.

References


