

UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL CLIMATE AND INTERVENTIONS FOR LESBIAN, GAY,
BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, AND QUESTIONING STUDENTS

BY

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) high school students tend to experience more physical bullying and verbal harassment than heterosexual students. In addition, LGBTQ students are at an increased risk of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and substance use as a result of negative school experiences. Comprehensive programs aimed at improving school climate for LGBTQ students have shown favorable results; however, implementation of such programs is often costly and time consuming. This study had two main goals: 1) understand the unique experiences of LGBTQ high school students in one California school district and 2) investigate the impact of two small scale interventions (district-wide social event and safe space sticker campaign). A qualitative research design was implemented and data were collected through individual interviews, document analysis, and participant observations. Results from this study demonstrate the unique experiences of LGBTQ students, and provide evidence of the positive impact of two low-level interventions.

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Prior to this dissertation my mantra was “I *never* want to do research.” Yet somehow this challenging and tumultuous project changed my outlook to “Research can be pretty amazing.” This significant shift in thinking is a direct result of many people who participated in my research and are therefore deserving of my sincere appreciation.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the GSA advisors who risk personal and professional ramifications for ardently advocating for and protecting LGBTQ youth.

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Chapter I

Introduction

It is not difficult for me to remember my high school experience as a student who was questioning my sexual identity. While I was often unsure of my sexual orientation, the teasing from my classmates suggested they had little doubt that I was gay. As some have suggested (Bishop & Casida, 2011), questioning students are frequently at the most risk because they have not accepted their identity and are unlikely to have found a supportive peer group. Although it was upsetting to have acquaintances refer to me as a “dyke,” I was most distressed when my close group of friends engaged in bullying behavior. A pivotal moment happened during my senior year in yearbook class. While developing pictures in the darkroom, my classmates used an entire roll of duct tape to lock me in the darkroom. Initially I thought they were just wasting time and playing a joke, until I realized I was locked in with two other females who were perceived to be lesbians. We exchanged knowing glances, and waited for our classmates’ laughter to cease. It was not until the end of the period when the class filed out that our teacher rescued us from the darkroom. I am unsure if my teacher was oblivious to the situation, or if he intentionally ignored it in an effort to avoid a difficult situation. However, I am completely sure that those students, my “friends,” were never disciplined for their disrespectful behavior.

Based on experiences such as these, I have a very personal interest in understanding school climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) students. Specifically, I investigated two research questions during the course of my study. First, I gained a comprehensive understanding of the experience of LGBTQ high school students in one California school district. Second, I investigated the impact of two low-level interventions aimed at improving school climate for LGBTQ students.

Need for this Study

Recent media coverage has exposed the nation to numerous tragic stories of teen suicide - many such headlines announce the tragedies as a result of bullying. LGBTQ adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the effects of bullying and are at an increased risk for anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001; Elliot & Kilpatrick, 1994; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). However, it is important to note that this increased risk is not solely a consequence of an LGBTQ identity. Studies have shown that bullying accounts for suicidality above and beyond sexual orientation or gender-role nonconforming behavior (Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr, & Sites, 2006). These data suggest that the crucial factor is not necessarily one's sexual orientation, but rather the negative effects of being bullied. Since youth are often unable to remove themselves from hostile environments such as schools and intolerant communities, it is imperative that efforts are made to create supportive and affirming settings.

School is a particularly important environment for LGBTQ youth because they spend significant time there during classes and while engaged in school-related activities. This becomes especially disheartening when, as Mufoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds (2002) stated, the classroom is the "most homophobic of all social institutions" (p.53). In addition to the very serious concern about teen suicide, several other negative aspects are associated with involvement in threatening school environments. For instance, students who are afraid of experiencing verbal and/or physical harassment at school may believe their only options are to miss class or drop out of school altogether (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). LGBTQ students who miss large portions of their high school career, or who drop out, are likely to face significant challenges when attempting to secure proper employment or obtain higher education. Although

absenteeism and school termination are not as concerning as attempted or completed suicide, they are still serious problems. Even if LGBTQ individuals are able to “suffer through” high school, they are often reluctant to pursue higher education because of the negative experiences they have had in the educational setting. Educators should provide additional support to LGBTQ individuals to increase their comfort and thus their attendance in secondary schools.

Role of School Personnel

Many people assume that teachers and administrators are doing all they can to create a positive school environment for LGBTQ and heterosexual students alike, but unfortunately this is not always the case. Kosciw et al. (2010) completed the most comprehensive study to date by surveying 7,261 self-identified LGBTQ youth about their experiences in public school settings. Their findings highlight the significant impact that school personnel have on school climate. While some LGBTQ discrimination occurs in more removed areas such as locker rooms, verbal assaults often happen in the presence of teachers. In fact, when compared to racial and sexist derogatory comments, homophobic comments are more likely to be said when a teacher is present (Kosciw et al., 2010). This suggests that teachers are less likely to intervene or impose discipline upon hearing negative remarks about LGBTQ individuals compared to racial or sexist comments. Regardless of the teacher’s true feelings, the inherent message to both the heterosexual and LGBTQ student is that a student’s sexual orientation is not worthy of being protected. Not only does this implication cause additional bouts of discrimination, but it also hinders LGBTQ students from seeking teacher assistance. It is easy to imagine how discipline-free episodes of verbal abuse can quickly turn into physical assault against LGBTQ students. Many outsiders would assume that teachers and administrators readily intervene when discrimination turns physical, but again, this is sadly not the case. LGBTQ students who report

physical attacks are often encouraged to appear less gay, or reminded that it was their choice to be “out” at school (Kosciw et al., 2010). Clearly these messages imply that the LGBTQ student is at fault for their experience of discrimination. In addition to the implicit message from teachers and administrators, LGBTQ students are often overtly punished with suspension, even when they did nothing other than be the victim of a physical assault (Kosciw et al., 2010). The lack of support provided by many administrators and teachers as well as the impact of bullying contributes to the negative school climate experienced by LGBTQ students.

Although the Kosciw et al. (2010) study demonstrates the undesirable response of many school staff, it is important to investigate the impact of such experiences on LGBTQ students and to search for interventions that may improve LGBTQ students’ school experiences. This study gained more insight into the specific experiences of LGBTQ students, as well as the effects of various interventions aimed to improve school climate in one California school district.

Rationale for Using Specific School District

Because of my personal experience and interest in this topic, I decided to study school climate for LGBTQ students in the school district where I attended high school. Through a fortuitous personal connection with the Area Superintendent, and with the approval of the District Superintendent, I gained access to four comprehensive high schools in a school district in the central valley of California. My familiarity with each of the schools, and my knowledge of the surrounding community greatly enhanced my ability to study this important topic.

This district was especially eager to study school climate for LGBTQ youth because of a prior lawsuit filed by an acquaintance of mine regarding homophobic remarks made by one of his teachers. I was attending the same high school in 2001 when the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of a senior male student who was harassed by

his Spanish teacher. According to the lawsuit, the teacher noticed the student's earring and told his class "Only two kinds of guys wear earrings, pirates and faggots, and I don't see any water around here" (www.ACLU.org). After facing weeks of continued harassment, the student withdrew from the school and completed his education through an equivalency program. The school district eventually acknowledged the charges and agreed to settle the case, which required they establish policies to prevent staff from discriminating against students based on sexual orientation or gender expression. However, as a student I remember being surprised and disappointed when the offending teacher continued to be employed at my school. Cases such as these illuminate the challenges this district has faced regarding LGBTQ students.

Although more than 10 years have passed since this lawsuit, the district still struggles to foster a positive school climate. In fact, this district was selected by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools to receive a Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) grant due to low academic performance and poor school climate. Results from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) indicated that high schools in this district scored between the 28th and 34th percentile on the School Climate Index (SCI) compared to other high schools in the state. The global SCI is the average of 3 separate domains: Supports and Engagement (45%), Violence, Victimization, and Substance Use (45%), and Truancy Incident Data (10%). One subcategory of the supports and engagement domain investigates students' perceptions of school connectedness, which is of particular interest to the study at hand. The results of this category of school connectedness range from a percentile of 23 to 66, with two schools obtaining a percentile rank of 43 in this district (California Department of Education's DataQuest website). While the data are not specifically focused on LGBTQ students, it provides information on the negative school climate experienced by the general student body in this district. As a result of the poor

scores on school climate, this district was awarded a three-year federal grant aimed specifically at improving school climate. Since the schools were especially primed to investigate and attempt to improve school climate, they were ideal locations for the present study.

It is clear that this district has been made aware of the poor school climate as a result of the California Healthy Kids Survey. Although it is important to understand the implications of school climate, it is also important to investigate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving school climate. Based on this district's previous experience with LGBTQ harassment, it was an appropriate setting to specifically investigate school climate for LGBTQ students.

Goal of the Study

The overall goal of this study was to gain more insight about the unique experience of LGBTQ students, and investigate interventions aimed at increasing LGBTQ students' sense of safety and belonging at comprehensive public high schools in one California district. One of the main research questions guiding this study was: What are the experiences of LGBTQ students in this district? A semi-structured interview protocol was used as the main instrument for gathering data about this question from students and GSA advisors as well as school administrators. Open-ended questions were employed in an effort to gain authentic examples of both positive and negative experiences of how LGBTQ students feel at school. In addition, as a participant observer, I investigated GSA members' perspectives on activities and interventions that might improve their experience at school. Based on their suggestions, two interventions were implemented during the course of this study and the second research question was: What was the impact of the two interventions employed? Semi-structured interviews were again used as the main instrument to understand the effect of the interventions. However, experiences as a participant observer also provided valuable data about the two interventions.

Participants were recruited from comprehensive high schools in one district in the central valley of California. Student participants were contacted because of their involvement with the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club and presumed knowledge and sensitivity toward LGBTQ students' experiences at school. GSA advisors were recruited because of their unique position as mentors to GSA members, and principals and the district superintendent were recruited to gain their perspectives as administrators in this district.

In sum, it is clear that LGBTQ students often have unique experiences at school. It is insufficient to allow the status quo to continue in secondary education. LGBTQ students should never feel that suicide is their only option to escape the unsupportive environment they encounter at school. Significant changes must be made to improve school climate and protect our youth as they attempt to move through taxing developmental stages in intolerant school environments. As such, students involved in the Gay-Straight Alliance were recruited in order to assess LGBTQ students' experiences of school climate at comprehensive public high schools in California. This study will focus on the valuable perspectives of how GSA students believe the school experience can be improved for LGBTQ students. In turn, their reflections on the intervention implementation were honored as the primary judge of effectiveness.

Chapter II

Literature Review

This study was guided by previous research, which provides valuable data about several components of LGBTQ students' experiences at school. For instance, the fundamental need of safety and belonging is discussed as a prerequisite of student achievement. In addition, a recent study investigated the experiences of over 7,200 LGBTQ students and described the frequency of negative experiences with teachers and peers. Theories such as the null environment hypothesis and the contact theory provide recommendations for individuals hoping to improve the school experience for LGBTQ students. Finally, previous data on interventions aimed at improving school climate are presented.

Safety and Belonging

All humans experience a wide range of needs. Maslow (1954) arranged human needs into a hierarchy, stating that basic needs must be met before higher-order needs could be fulfilled. According to Maslow, safety and a sense of belonging represent two of the most fundamental human needs that must be satisfied. These needs apply to individuals throughout their life, and are often apparent in school-aged children. New teachers are educated about the importance of fulfilling such basic needs in order to promote student achievement (Prebel & Gordon, 2011). Jensen (2008) asserted that academic thinking is impeded when students experience emotional distress. Prebel and Gordon expanded that "Unless students feel safe at school, feel a sense of belonging, and feel valued in the learning process, it is unlikely we will see students perform anywhere close to their potential" (p.4). Because students' subjective sense of safety and belonging are crucial components of student success, they were the main focus of this study. In

order to reduce jargon, the umbrella term “school climate” will be used to refer to these components of safety and belonging throughout this study.

Assessing school climate is essential, especially given the pressures on teachers to demonstrate gains in student achievement. Prior to focusing on student success, teachers and school administrators must ensure their students’ basic needs for safety and belonging have been met. Although each school may produce its own school climate, individual students’ experience of their school often differs drastically. Prebel and Gordon (2011), suggest that deeply examining school climate can elucidate the often dramatically different experiences of certain groups of young people.

In addition to students of racial minorities, sexual minority students often encounter negative school climate. Goodenow, Szalacha and Westheimer (2006) found evidence that LGBTQ students report significantly higher levels of risk than heterosexual students. Their findings are consistent with a growing body of research regarding the negative school climate experienced by LGBTQ students (Birkett et al., 2009; D’Augelli et al., 2002; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Rostosky, Owens, Zimmerman, & Riggle, 2003). While several researchers have identified that LGBTQ students encounter a negative school environment, the most compelling statistics are presented later as reported in the Gay and Lesbian and Straight Education Network’s (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey.

Identity Development

Human development across the lifespan has been described by several theorists and sociologists. One of the most prominent theories is Erikson’s (1959) eight-stage model of identity development. Erikson’s stage of development most relevant to this study is Stage 5, where adolescents attempt answer the question “Who am I?” and gradually integrate their

childhood identities in conjunction with their newly emerging identities as sexual beings. In Erikson's view, "'normal' identity development occurs with the resolution of the identity 'crisis'" (Nichols, 1999, p. 512). Individuals ranging from 12 to 18 years of age are generally believed to be experiencing this stage of identity development. This stage is often taxing for all adolescents; however, it can be especially challenging for sexual minority individuals who are attempting to integrate an LGBTQ identity, which is less common in society. For instance, LGBTQ adolescence may experience an increased burden of parental and peer rejection and potential self-hatred due to their LGBTQ identity (Nichols, 1999). Therefore, LGBTQ adolescents likely have unique experiences when trying to navigate this stage of identity development.

Sexual and Gender Identity Development

In addition to general identity development, LGBTQ individuals experience multiple stages as they move through their sexual or gender identity formation. Although the term "coming out" is frequently used to describe acceptance of an LGB identity, disclosure of sexual orientation is merely one aspect of sexual identity development. Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2008) discussed models where "LGB individuals progress through a linear series of stages starting with first awareness of same-sex attractions through an eventual acceptance, disclosure, and integration of that identity" (p. 267). One widely accepted model is Cass's (1984) six-stage model of homosexual identity development (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Her model proposes that LGB individuals move through a linear progression of identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and finally identity synthesis. Participants in this study may find themselves at various stages of their sexual identity development.

In the first stage of Cass's model, identity confusion, "individuals perceive that their behavior (actions, feelings, thoughts) may be defined as homosexual. This brings considerable confusion and bewilderment, since previously held identities relating to sexual orientation are now questioned" (Cass, 1984, p. 147). She goes on to suggest that individuals at this stage will either consider the possibility of a homosexual identity, or completely reject the possibility. If the individual is willing to accept the potential of a homosexual identity, they move to Cass's second stage, identity comparison. They then experience feelings of alienation as the difference between self and heterosexuals becomes clearer. During this stage, the LGB individual may begin to contact homosexuals in an effort to compare and explore their potential LGB identity. In stage three, identity tolerance, individuals begin to settle on an LGB identity and seek out the company of other homosexuals "in order to fulfill social, sexual, and emotional needs" (p. 151). At this stage, the individual merely feels a sense of tolerance as opposed to a holistic acceptance of the homosexual identity. Cass discusses how disclosure to heterosexuals is extremely limited during this stage and there is an emphasis on maintaining a heterosexual identity to the general public. The homosexual identity is kept private and only shared when in the presence of other homosexuals. During the fourth stage, identity acceptance, contact with the LGB subculture tends to encourage a more positive view of homosexuality, and the LGB individual gradually gains self-acceptance while developing a network of homosexual friends. During this stage of identity development, "selective disclosure is made to others, particularly friends and relatives" (p. 152). However, there is still a reliance on a passing strategy (pretending to be heterosexual at pertinent times), which prevents possible negative reaction by heterosexual individuals. Stage five, identity formation, is characterized by "feelings of pride towards one's homosexual identity and fierce loyalty to homosexuals as a group....Anger about society's stigmatization of

homosexuals leads to disclosure and purposeful confrontation with nonhomosexuals in order to promote the validity and equality of homosexuals” (p. 152). The anger and pride felt during stage five tends to subside during the identity synthesis of stage six when LGB individuals no longer divide the world into “good homosexuals and bad heterosexuals.” LGB individuals begin to feel that the homosexual identity “is no longer seen as overwhelmingly *the* identity by which an individual can be characterized. A lifestyle is developed in which the homosexual identity is no longer hidden, so that disclosure becomes a non-issue” (p. 152).

Although several non-heterosexual identity development theories have been developed, there is less agreement on gender identity development for transgender individuals. The 4th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Text Revision’s inclusion of Gender Identity Disorder leads medical communities to view transgender individuals as experiencing a psychiatric disorder. Scholars and transgender individuals express frustration at the stigmatization inherent in such diagnostic labels (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The recently released Diagnostic and Statistics Manual 5 attempts to reduce the stigma previously associated with Gender Identity Disorder by creating a diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria. Such new classification still allows individuals to receive insurance reimbursement, but removes the pathologizing term “disorder.” According to Bilodeau and Renn (2005), feminist, postmodern, and queer theorists view gender identity development in relation to social constructs (e.g. binary definitions of male and female). The authors recommend scholars and practitioners attempt to operate from more of a social construction model and less from a medical and deficit model when interpreting gender identity development.

Extent of the Problem

As mentioned above, the 2009 National School Climate Survey by Kosciw et al. (2010) provided the most comprehensive view of LGBTQ students to date. A total of 7,261 LGBTQ students in the 6th through 12th grades completed surveys about their school climate. The negative experiences among these students are astounding: 84.6% reported being verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation, and 40.1% reported being physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) in the last year. Kosciw et al. compared their participants to a general population study and found that 91.9 % of their LGBTQ participants reported being verbally harassed due to a personality characteristic versus only 47.0% of the general population participants. LGBTQ students were more than four times more likely than the heterosexual students (30.0% vs. 6.7%) to have missed at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. What is even more disheartening is that 62.4% of LGBTQ students indicated not reporting harassment or assault to school staff because they believed no action would be taken, or the situation would become worse. Among LGBTQ students, those who experienced more harassment reported grade point averages that were almost half a grade lower than LGBTQ students who were less frequently harassed (2.7 vs. 3.1). Overall, LGBTQ students were more likely to report no plans to pursue post-secondary education when compared to a national sample of students (9.9% vs. 6.6%).

In terms of psychological health, LGBTQ students reported elevated levels of distress in terms of depression, anxiety, suicidal thinking, and substance use. Silenzio, Pena, Duberstein, Cerel and Knox (2007) reported that LGB respondents had higher rates of both suicidal ideation and suicide attempts than heterosexual respondents, even after controlling for gender and age. Espelage, Aragon, Birkett and Koenig (2008) separated LGBTQ participants and found that

students questioning their sexual identity, in particular, indicated the highest level of both depression and suicidal feelings, as well as greater use of alcohol and marijuana. This becomes especially concerning as the results also showed that questioning students feel the greatest impact of homophobic teasing (Birkett et al., 2009; Espelage et al., 2008), and report significantly less parental support. LGB students did not use as much alcohol and marijuana as questioning students, but they did report significantly more use than heterosexual students. This finding becomes concerning when paired with Silenzio et al.'s (2007) data that suggested that problematic drinking and depression serve as risk factors for suicidal ideation among LGB individuals.

In terms of suicidality, D'Augelli et al. (2001) investigated several domains of suicidal behavior including previous suicide attempts, thoughts of suicide attempts, and current risk factors for suicide. The authors found that nearly half (42%) of the LGB participants in the study endorsed "sometimes" or "often" when asked about thoughts of taking their life in the last year. A significant portion (35%) of LGB respondents in this study acknowledged a suicide attempt in their lifetime. This represents a large disparity from heterosexual respondent rates, which are between 7%-16% for lifetime suicide attempts. D'Augelli et al. (2001) also found that most parents were unaware of their children's same-sex attraction at the time of the first suicide attempt. While parents can be encouraged to provide unconditional support to their children, this finding adds importance for teachers and administrators to serve as supportive and caring adults in LGBTQ students' lives.

Teacher Behavior

After reviewing the significant problems faced by LGBTQ students in hostile school environments, many would encourage teachers and administrators to be more involved. Perhaps

the most challenging hurdle is managing school staff that hold homophobic views. Although data have not been collected on the incidence of homophobic educators, media stories highlight examples of hurtful beliefs held by some teachers and administrators. For instance, in March of 2010, a female student in Mississippi was prohibited from attending her senior prom with her girlfriend, a decision made by several individuals on the school board (Joyner, 2010). Even more recently, a teacher in New Jersey made blatant anti-gay comments on her public Facebook page in October 2011 (Hu, 2011) and a Tennessee principal resigned amidst rumors that she announced “If you’re gay, you’re going to hell” at a school assembly in March 2012 (www.huffingtonpost.com). While examples of such extreme views make national news, it is not hard to imagine that many educators express more subtle homophobic views.

The National Survey on School Climate (Kosciw et al., 2010) found that there have been very small fluctuations in the frequency of homophobic remarks made by school staff between 2001 and 2009. Approximately 60% of students reported hearing educators making homophobic remarks, a statistic that has remained steady over the course of 8 years. If teachers and administrators are overheard expressing anti-gay comments, it is not surprising that students would also use derogatory language. When asked about teacher intervention after students made homophobic comments, students were given the answer choices of “most of the time” “some of the time,” or “never.” The aggregated data placed teacher interventions between the “some of the time” category and “never,” suggesting teachers intervene in less than half of the instances of homophobic language. Similar to the small fluctuations in homophobic remarks made by teachers between 2001 and 2009, teachers’ tendency to intervene also did not change significantly. Although student intervention was slightly lower than teacher intervention (Kosciw et al., 2010), the pattern of student intervention closely mimics the fluctuations in staff

interventions across years. The similarity of intervention patterns likely suggests that students look to educators before deciding whether or not to intervene. School personnel may view comments such as “that’s so gay” or “no homo” as innocuous and not serious enough to warrant intervention; however, 86.5% of LGBTQ students who heard these terms felt bothered by their usage (Kosciw et al., 2010). Infrequent intervention by school staff implies that such language is tolerated. Educators should be exceedingly aware of their influence on students’ propensity to intervene.

Few LGBTQ students endorsed reporting verbal and/or physical harassment to school staff. The previous discussion of homophobic remarks by teachers and anti-gay beliefs of school staff likely contributes to the reluctance of many students to seek adult support. The National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2010) identified seven common themes related to why students did not report harassment or assault: 1) they doubted the situation would be effectively addressed by staff; 2) they had concerns that reporting would make the situation worse; 3) they were scared about confidentiality; 4) they felt fear about the reaction of staff; 5) they believed their experience was not severe enough to warrant reporting; 6) they found other ways to deal with victimization; 7) they felt other obstacles prevented them from reporting. The largest number of responses identified that most students believed that either nothing would be done, or nothing effective would result from reporting their incident. Several case examples illustrate students’ concerns about teachers and administrators. A 10th grade student from Texas responded:

I was afraid of being harassed by the openly anti-gay teachers. Teachers love you as long as you fit into their little mold, and to get ahead in class teachers need to love you. If you

cause any problems, especially in gender and sexual orientation areas, you aren't loved (Kosciw et al., 2010, p.35).

With fears of homophobic educators, retaliation, and breaches of confidentiality, it is understandable that students would resist reporting harassment and assault.

Unfortunately, the outcome for students who did choose to report their victimization was often undesirable. Four common responses were identified in the National School Climate Survey: 1) staff did nothing; 2) the perpetrator was talked to about the incident; 3) the perpetrator was punished; 4) an incident report was completed and referred to another staff member (Kosciw et al., 2010). The most common response in this study was that staff did nothing (33.8% indicated this response). One participant commented:

Almost every time I have gone to the school office with a bullying problem I was turned away and wasn't helped. I ended up with a black-eye. It happened right in the hallway and no one did anything. The person wasn't even suspended (Kosciw et al., 2010, p.38).

When students find the courage to seek staff support, it is essential that they are adequately helped and that the bullying is not ignored. Another disappointing statistic is that 1.5% of students who sought help from school staff were blamed for their experience because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. Students were told to "tone it down" and "be less flamboyant," and that it was their choice to be openly gay at school. Behavior such as this is unacceptable from teachers, especially as LGBTQ students face increased risk of depression and suicide.

Theory of Change

Although the statistics and examples provided above present an undesirable picture of the experiences of LGBTQ students, they should not be accepted as unwavering. Humans are

capable of changing their opinions and behaviors when faced with compelling evidence. One theory of change that has been used to investigate reducing prejudice among groups with both apparent differences (such as race and disability), as well as concealable identities (such as LGBTQ status) is Allport's (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis. This theory hypothesizes that prejudice can be reduced if four conditions are present: equal group status, presence of common goals, intergroup cooperation, and explicit social sanction. Pettigrew (1998) added that another crucial component in reducing prejudice is that the contact situation must create the potential for members to become friends. While it is often difficult to ensure that all of these conditions are present, Herek and Capitanio (1996) suggested that the basic tenets of the contact theory do lead to a more positive attitude of heterosexual individuals toward gay men and lesbians. They specified that disclosure of a gay or lesbian sexual orientation to close friends and relatives can lead to an overall reduction of prejudice toward gay people as a group.

One of the unique aspects of LGBTQ individuals is the ability to conceal one's status as a sexual minority. This differs drastically from minority individuals with apparent stigma such as race or physical disability. Individuals who have significant prejudice may avoid contact with others who are visibly classified as minority group members (Pettigrew, 1998). Since LGBTQ individuals may initially conceal their identity, they are able to establish friendships prior to disclosing their sexual orientation. Herek and Capitanio (1996) suggest that a disclosure of LGBTQ identity to close friends and relatives likely leads to an explicit discussion about LGBTQ topics and may create empathy that can be generalized to other LGBTQ individuals. Although all four of Allport's components were not present in Herek and Capitanio's study, they still found support for the general assumption that exposure to LGBTQ individuals leads to more positive opinions of LGBTQ individuals as a whole.

Another important effect of the contact theory was suggested by Wright, McLaughlin-Volpe and Ropp (1997; as cited in Pettigrew 1998) and labeled the extended contact hypothesis. The researchers found that in-group members had more positive attitudes toward ethnic out-group individuals, if those in-group members knew of friends who supported the out-group. This suggests that even without explicit experience with an out-group member, individuals can change their beliefs based on the opinion of others in their in-group. While this is encouraging, it is important to remember that the greatest change in attitude typically results from repeated exposure to out-group members (Herek & Capitanio, 1996).

Null Environment Hypothesis

Previous research demonstrates how explicit discrimination and anti-LGBTQ comments affect LGBTQ students. However, Freeman (1975) contends that a neutral environment merely lacking overt discrimination is insufficient in reducing prejudice. In her chapter entitled “How to Discriminate Against Women without Really Trying,” she investigated the unique experiences of women in male-dominated higher education settings. She created the term null environment and described it thus: “an academic situation that neither encourages nor discourages students of either sex is inherently discriminatory against women because it fails to take into account the differentiating external environments from which women and men students come” (p. 198). She continued, “Professors don’t have to make it a specific point to discourage their female students. Society will do that job for them. All they have to do is fail to encourage them” (p.198). Although Freeman developed the null environment hypothesis in relation to women in educational and vocational contexts, it can be applied to other groups who have previously experienced societal oppression and discrimination.

More recent research has investigated the null environment hypothesis with people of color, individuals with disabilities, and LGBTQ groups. Betz (1989) extended the theory by stating, “The concept of the null environment is important for anyone trying to be himself or herself in a society that reinforces or values directions contrary to that.” Fassinger (2008) also asserted that the null environment applies to a variety of minority individuals. She stated:

This [null environment] concept is also relevant to other diverse groups in that a seemingly benign educational or work environment—that is, one that does not actively oppress—still may have deleterious effects on marginalized students or workers through its failure to recognize and proactively address the disadvantaged or discouraging context from which they come (p. 258).

In another article, Fassinger (1991) specifically applied the null environment hypothesis to LGBTQ individuals. She stated, “Because of pervasive homophobia and heterosexism, as well as covert and overt discrimination against gay people, a intervention that is null (i.e., one that is not clearly affirming of gay life-style [sic] and choices) essentially perpetuates societal oppression and maintains the attitudinal status quo” (p. 170). Therefore, even with a lack of overt discrimination, LGBTQ individuals are still vulnerable to null environments that do not explicitly display support. If teachers and school administrators wish to improve the school experiences of LGBTQ students, they cannot simply provide a null environment that is devoid of discrimination. Instead, they must make explicit attempts to provide an LGBTQ-affirming setting.

Recommendations and Effective Interventions

Although schools are often still hostile or null environments for LGBTQ students, some research has been done in an effort to improve school climate. Both qualitative and quantitative

data have provided recommendations for various interventions. Since there is considerable overlap among these interventions, they will be presented as follows: first, the effectiveness of comprehensive programs will be discussed; second, student involvement will be discussed; third, teacher and administrator participation will be presented.

Comprehensive programs. Goodenow et al. (2006) and Horowitz and Hansen (2008), attempted to investigate interventions aimed at improving school climate. Their data showed that systems-level interventions were correlated with reduced suicidal behavior and overall school climate improvement. The interventions utilized included staff development activities, incorporating LGBTQ issues into curriculum, promoting support groups such as Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs, and school-wide events about LGBTQ topics. In Horowitz and Hansen's study, respondents reported that students and staff discussed LGBT issues more often, encouraged and respected LGBT support groups more, and seemed more comfortable talking about LGBT issues after a year of intervention. In addition, students felt more comfortable attending LGBT support groups such as the GSA. Prebel and Gordon (2011) would agree that the change in school climate is a result of a comprehensive program involving all members of the school community. While these results are encouraging, the comprehensive set of interventions employed was time-consuming and labor-intensive, thereby making it difficult to implement similar programs in other schools. In addition, these studies failed to identify if a particular intervention produced the biggest gains in school climate. Further research is needed to understand the effects of each type of intervention.

Student involvement. Prebel and Gordon (2011) asserted that students must be an essential component of improving school climate. They continued by articulating that change cannot be imposed on people in a top-down manner. According to Prebel and Gordon, teachers

and students must work together to create a positive and accepting school climate. Their research has found that having a diverse student leadership group can greatly enhance the process of improving school climate.

Gay-Straight Alliance. One way to foster student and teacher leadership is by establishing a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club. Although this component has been included in several comprehensive programs, it has also been a helpful intervention apart from an overarching program. For instance, Goodenow et al. (2006) demonstrated a link between LGB youth behaviors and such support groups. Their data supported their hypothesis that LGBTQ youth would report less suicidality and victimization if their school had a GSA or LGBTQ support group. These findings are particularly striking given the vast variety in the nature and size of such support groups. While some groups are student-run with an emphasis on social justice, others occasionally take a counselor-led quasitherapeutic form (Goodenow et al.). Although it is inappropriate to conclude causality in this study, the findings do support the assertion that GSA and other support groups can positively impact school climate for LGBTQ youth.

While many schools are still without such a support group, the prevalence of new GSA clubs is encouraging. As Lipkin (2004) stated, “GSAs play a transformative role in schools” (p.4). However, many GSAs still lack sufficient support from teachers and school administrators, and closeted or questioning LGBTQ students may jeopardize their safety by participating. This may discourage students from joining a GSA because of the discrimination and harassment they may receive, even as a heterosexual student (Lipkin, 2004). When such heterosexual students want to provide a supportive environment, it is difficult for them to do so in a hostile school environment. Supporting GSAs is one of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight

Education Network's (GLSEN) top recommendations for improving school climate for LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al., 2010,) and is endorsed by several researchers (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Goodenow et al., 2006; Heck, Flentje & Cochran, 2011; Weiler, 2003).

Awareness days. While GSA clubs are capable of impacting school climate by providing a supportive environment for LGBTQ students, additional school-wide LGBTQ awareness events are also recommended (King, 2008; Young, 2011). Several of King's (2008) participants articulated a desire for school personnel to help educate the school about LGBTQ issues. One participant stated that his school needed an:

...awareness week about it, or even one day, just to make students a little bit more aware, that helps too, cause if the school environment is more open to it and more knowledgeable, then not only will the counselors be but everybody else (p. 369).

Other participants discussed their desire to have school counselors or guest speakers visit classrooms and openly discuss LGBTQ topics. LGBTQ students expressed a desire to have LGBTQ-related concerns discussed in a similar vein as other diversity activities in their school. Overall, respondents in King's study believed that school climate would improve if school staff modeled appropriate discussions and brought more attention to LGBTQ issues through awareness days and diversity activities.

Safe space stickers. Since LGBTQ-related topics are often considered "controversial," it can be difficult to identify and locate individuals who are supportive of LGBTQ youth. Poynter and Tubbs (2007) asserted that "many LGBTQ people will assume a space is not safe until shown otherwise" (p128). King (2008) found one of the main suggestions by all 10 of the participants in his study was for counselors to display LGBTQ-friendly posters or stickers. Respondents "described needing these visuals to provide the first step in knowing who in their

environment is supportive” (p. 380) and encouraged the use of these explicit displays to cue which individuals are safe to approach regarding LGBTQ concerns. Jill, a respondent in King’s study, discussed the impact of seeing a PFLAG sticker in her Catholic high school counselor’s office:

He had a rainbow sticker and then on his bulletin board, and then he also had...asked me about a PFLAG scholarship underneath it...so that’s how I knew like well if he’s got that on his board he would be pretty open to me talking to him about it...the first time I told him, I went in there for something else, and then I said, you know, I was wondering about that scholarship up there, and it kinda opened the door (p.375).

Several researchers (Murdoch & Bolch, 2005; Poynter & Tubbs, 2007; Weiler, 2003) also highlight the importance of posting LGBTQ-friendly posters and stickers. By displaying such explicit signs, hesitant youth are able to locate and identify supportive staff and peers. In addition, these symbols send a larger message to the student body and may encourage others to participate and create a more accepting campus (Poynter & Tubbs, 2007).

Teacher training. Although identifying supportive staff can be improved by displaying explicit LGBTQ-friendly symbols, it is also important to ensure that teachers intervene effectively. As discussed previously, LGTBQ students have significant fears related to the response of teachers and school staff. It appears that student fears may be valid as Goodenow et al. (2006) and Whitman, Horn, and Boyd (2007) discuss how school psychologists and counselors have little professional training and feel unprepared to provide appropriate support. King (2008) maintains that school counselors need to have a better understanding of the unique developmental needs of LGBTQ youth, and Bishop and Casida (2011) assert that school personnel should be prepared to show acceptance and listen when LGBTQ students seek support.

Many researchers highlight the importance of training for school staff to effectively handle LGBTQ-related concerns (Goodenow, et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2010; Poynter & Tubbs, 2007; Sadowski, 2010; Weiler, 2003). Although training is usually limited to teachers and administrators, these authors suggest that coaches, school bus drivers, and other peripheral school staff be included in such training.

Different training methods have been suggested that range from an intensive three-day summer program (Whitman et al., 2007) to graduate classes aimed at preparing pre-service teachers (Sadowski, 2010). Regardless of the method, most training programs focus on effective responses to homophobic language, violence, and harassment. Poynter and Tubbs (2007) highlight the importance of providing training to LGBTQ allies in order to increase effective communication. The authors articulate a seven step training outline used to provide training and encourage appropriate responses when approached by LGBTQ individuals. Whitman, Horn and Boyd (2007) discuss the effectiveness of their training program where attendees reported feeling highly motivated and prepared to create a safe environment for LGBTQ youth after an intensive three day summer program. It is clear that most teachers and school counselors alike would benefit from training related to effective interventions and communication with LGBTQ youth.

Inclusive curriculum. In addition to attending training, several researchers have suggested that LGBTQ topics and important figures should be infused into the classroom curriculum (Kosciw, et al., 2010; Sadowski, 2010; Weiler, 2003). While schools attempt to present positive images of civil rights related to the women's movement and racial minorities, less emphasis is placed on portraying LGBTQ individuals in a positive manner. As teachers face significant pressures related to standardized testing they may resist the recommendation to seek out information related to LGBTQ individuals. However, Weiler (2003) suggested, "There are

many examples in history, literature, and science—such as Alice Walker, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Richard the Lion Hearted, Alexander the Great, and Margaret Mead—as well as in politics and current events” (p.12). Although teachers may argue that inclusive curriculum does little to improve school climate for LGBTQ youth, data suggest otherwise. For instance, Kosciw et al. (2010) specifically found that LGBTQ students reported less harassment and had a greater sense of school belonging when their teachers included positive images of LGBT individuals in the curriculum. Not surprisingly, these students’ increased feeling of safety resulted in reporting fewer days of missed class due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable. In addition, students reported staff intervened more frequently with homophobic remarks in schools with inclusive curriculum.

Summary

Safety and belonging are essential components of student success. Recent data suggest that LGBTQ students feel significantly less safe and suffer increased mental health problems and suicidality compared to their heterosexual peers. Teachers and administrators set the tone for school climate and thereby influence the behavior of the student body. Allport’s (1954) contact theory explains how prejudices toward LGBTQ students can be reduced through the various interventions recommended above. In addition, Freeman’s (1975) null environment hypothesis asserts the importance of displaying explicit support for LGBTQ individuals in order to counter societal prejudice. While comprehensive programs have shown effectiveness in increasing school climate for LGBTQ youth, it is unclear which components are the most beneficial, or if less comprehensive programs may also have positive effects on school climate. Research has suggested that various interventions such as GSA clubs, LGBTQ awareness days, safe space stickers, teacher training, and LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum can be utilized to improve school

climate. This study sought to privilege the unique voices of LGBTQ students in one California district to understand their experience with school climate as well as attempt to improve their sense of safety and belonging through less comprehensive interventions.

Chapter III

Method

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students are likely to have unique experiences in the school environment. Previous research has revealed that these students are frequent targets of verbal harassment and physical bullying at school (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009). LGBTQ students are also more likely to experience depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation (Birkett et al., 2009; D'Augelli et al., 2002; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Rostosky et al., 2003). Their school performance is also impacted as LGBTQ students often miss class or drop out of high school prior to graduation (Kosciw et al., 2010). This study investigated the experiences of high school students in one school district in the central valley of California. A total of 31 interviews were conducted with seven student participants, four GSA advisor participants, three principal participants, and one superintendent participant. Two research questions guided the focus of this study. First, this study attempted to understand the individual experiences of LGBTQ students in this district. Semi-structured interviews and observations served as the primary means of data collection. During the data collection trips, students were asked for their opinion about interventions that may improve their experiences at school. The second research question investigated students' perspectives of the impact of two interventions employed: a district-wide GSA social event, and a safe space sticker campaign. The following sections discuss study design, participant selection, and data analysis.

Study Design

In order to accurately understand how students interpret and attribute meaning to their experiences, a basic interpretive research design was utilized. As discussed by Merriam and Associates (2002), “[In a basic interpretive qualitative study] the researcher is interested in

understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved” (p. 37). Such a design allowed me to learn about how students make sense of their school experiences. Inherent in this study is a phenomenological view, which allows for a variety of truths to be expressed by participants. For instance, students and administrators may have different perspectives about the research questions, each of which can be viewed as valid and powerful with this study design (Merriam, 2009). Previous quantitative studies provide valuable information about the frequency of verbal harassment and physical bullying, but they fail to identify the impact of such experiences. While it may be striking to see that over 84% of LGBTQ students report experiencing verbal harassment, little information is provided about how student interpret those incidents. It is impossible to understand the level of student distress from this numerical figure. Therefore this study attempted to extend the impact of previous quantitative research by providing data in the form of richly descriptive emic quotes of participants’ experiences. A more comprehensive understanding of student experiences can be gathered with this type of study design.

Relatedly, the field of counseling psychology often promotes the value of clients’ perspectives. For instance, when discussing effective psychotherapy, Duncan (2010) explained the benefit that occurs when clients are viewed as the experts on their life. He articulated:

Valuing clients as credible sources of their own experiences allows us to critically examine our assumptions and practices—to support what is working and challenge what is not—and allows clients to teach us how we can be the most effective with them (p. 16).

Duncan’s assertion is also supported by data as his therapeutic approach is recognized as one of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP). Such a distinction is difficult to obtain and

requires significant data demonstrating client improvement. Although Duncan is referring to the relationship between a therapist and client, his explanation bolsters the use of qualitative data in this study. This approach was especially apparent when LGBTQ students were asked about their perspective on interventions aimed to improve their school experiences. As Duncan discussed, viewing the LGBTQ students as experts allowed them to teach me what would be most effective in their school environment.

This study occurred over the course of the 2012 – 2013 school year. A total of four trips were made to collect data at different times in the year. Such a design was warranted in order to first learn about students' experiences at school and their perspectives of various interventions before intervention implementation. At the end of the school year, participants were interviewed to investigate their reaction to the intervention implementations. A cross-sectional study would not have provided an opportunity to both understand participants' perspectives of interventions as well as their view of the impact of such interventions.

As a qualitative design conducted over a school year, this study was flexible in nature, which provided me with the ability to respond to changes during the study. For instance, during the middle of the year a teacher made a homophobic comment that made local news. Interview questions were then crafted and included to gather participants' reactions to this event. In addition, a new GSA club formed at the fourth high school in the district mid-year. The flexible nature of this study allowed me to gain information from the newly formed club in the middle of the study. Responding to and incorporating relevant events was beneficial to achieving the most accurate understanding of participants' experiences.

Sample Selection

The focus of this study was to understand the unique experiences of LGBTQ students in one school district; therefore purposeful sampling was utilized. Maxwell (2005) asserted that purposeful sampling can “ensure that the conclusions adequately represent the entire *range* of variation, rather than only the typical members or some ‘average’ subset of this range” (p. 89). Purposeful sampling differs from probability sampling in which the researcher attempts to generalize the results from one sample to a broader population. Because of the sensitive nature of LGBTQ topics and experiences, purposeful sampling was necessary. Attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals vary greatly across geographical locations and school settings, thus generalization should be approached cautiously.

A personal connection facilitated participant sampling through my previous school district in central California. High school students were selected as participants for this study because they have had sufficient exposure to school climate in different settings (i.e. elementary, middle, and high school). In addition, adolescence is a unique and powerful period of identity development. Because of this developmental milestone, high school participants are likely aware of how their developing identity impacts their interactions and experiences with others.

In order to include participants knowledgeable about LGBTQ students’ experiences, a sampling criterion was student participation in their school’s Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) club. Therefore, sampling included both LGBTQ students as well as heterosexual students known as “allies.” Participation in the GSA club was used as a criterion in an effort to recruit participants that were sensitive to and aware of the unique situations of LGBTQ students. Although heterosexual allies may not have experienced verbal harassment and bullying related to sexual orientation or gender identity, it is believed that these students would hear about such

experiences (or lack thereof) from their LGBTQ peers in the club. Due to the difficulties in translating the consent form and survey questions, students were excluded if they, or their parents, were unable to read fluently in English.

Although students' perspectives were highly valued in this study, advisors to the GSA clubs were also thought to have a unique and important perspective on LGBTQ students' experiences at school; therefore, the GSA club advisors were included as participants in this study. During the course of the study, it became apparent that school administrators, namely the principals and district superintendent, should also be included as participants. This was a reaction to students and advisors who were often left to speculate about administrators' support for LGBTQ students. Directly interviewing administrators provided another nuanced layer of detail to the data.

During the safe space sticker intervention, I became interested in how teachers were responding to the campaign. After distributing safe space stickers to nearly 400 teachers in this district, each principal sent a mass email to their staff requesting teacher volunteers to participate in an interview regarding their reaction to the sticker campaign. A total of six teachers responded about their willingness to participate; however, three of the teachers were already being interviewed as GSA club advisors. The remaining three teachers were contacted via email to schedule appointments. Two teachers failed to return email requests, and one teacher could not be interviewed due to scheduling conflicts. Therefore, teachers other than the GSA advisors were not included in this study. Based on the sample selection and study design, approval was sought and granted from the Human Subjects Committee, Lawrence (HSCL) in addition to the school district.

District Characteristics

The school district is located in a city with a population of more than 100,000 people. Approximately 20% of individuals in this city do not graduate from high school and the median household income is \$54,290 based on 2010 data (<http://www.clrsearch.com>). The surrounding town is also known by locals to be conservative, both politically and religiously. During the 2012 presidential campaign, very few candidate posters were observed. It appeared there was a consensus about the correct candidate to elect; therefore it was unnecessary to show support for a specific individual. In terms of religion, many participants discussed the prominence of Catholic, Mormon, and Evangelical Christian individuals in this town. In addition, this city is located in a fertile valley, which leads to a significant amount of agricultural production. Because of the large influence of the farming industry, each school provides significant options for students to pursue vocations related to agriculture.

Students who attend high school in this district are diverse: approximately 50% identify as Hispanic, 30% identify as Caucasian, 4% identify as Asian, and 16% identify with other ethnicities. There are over 7,000 high school students in this district, with approximately 1,500 students per high school. Academic achievement and graduation rates are important benchmarks for this district. At each school, posters with reminders about attendance requirements for graduation were displayed. When conducting classroom observations in remedial classes, teachers were often heard lecturing students about the importance of attending class and earning passing grades. In contrast, students who performed well on standardized tests were often recognized at school assemblies or granted special privileges such as a longer lunch. School spirit and athletics are a prominent aspect of this district as daily bulletins included near constant updates on school competitions. In addition, all of the assemblies attended as an observer

included a focus on the current season's sports teams. Participants regularly commented that their school either had a positive reputation regarding academics or athletics.

One concerning aspect of this district is the threat of violence and gang activity. As a middle school student in this district, I once overheard a male discuss how he and his older brother broke into a home and killed the owner's dogs with guns. Later in the day he threatened to hurt me if I reported his crime. The district attempts to manage gang activity by having a strong presence of school staff during passing periods and enforcing strict dress code requirements around gang-related clothing. However, rival gangs are often in contact with one another while at school. Approximately one week after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, one of the high schools in this study received a tip that a student was threatening to shoot people at school the following morning. The threats were suspected to be gang-related. Thankfully police were able to arrest the individual before he committed any acts of violence. With over 1500 students per high school, it is not surprising that conflicts and differences occasionally occur. Thankfully most episodes of violence are foiled before serious injuries are sustained.

Student Participant Recruitment

At the beginning of this study, there were GSA clubs at three of the four high schools in the district. Based on the sampling criterion, student participants were recruited directly from GSA meetings. Some of the schools in the study hosted a school-wide "club rush" day when students are encouraged to learn about and sign up for clubs. At one school this happened in late September. Therefore, study recruitment in October was thought to be fruitful due to the potential influx of new members. One high school placed an announcement in the school bulletin about the recruitment meeting for this study. The two other clubs learned about the

meeting from their advisors. Pizza and drinks were offered in an effort to encourage student attendance. All of the meetings were conducted in the advisors' classrooms at each of the respective campuses. Two of the three GSA meetings were held during the student's lunchtime, and one meeting occurred after school.

In an effort to establish rapport and recruit GSA members, I developed a short YouTube video that introduced myself and explained the study. Although the intent was to play the video at all three of the meetings, timing and technical issues prevented it from being played at all but one of the meetings. The video was subsequently placed on one school's GSA Facebook page.

At each meeting, students were informed about the study (either through the YouTube video or by myself), and were asked about their interest in the study. Approximately 75 students attended the meetings and 37 students completed a form expressing a desire to participate in the study. On the interest form, students provided contact information such as their email and phone number, as well as approval to contact them about the study. Each of these students were then given a packet containing parental consent and a written student assent. A self-addressed stamped envelope was included to facilitate the return of forms. A total of three consents were returned through this method.

Prior to the second data collection trip, students were sent follow-up emails and text messages to gauge their continued interest in participating in the study. Approximately twelve students expressed their desire to participate but stated their parents either refused to sign the consent form or did not know they participated in the GSA club. During a second trip to the schools in December, consents were again distributed to students who continued to express interest in participating. A total of five participants secured parental consent during this visit. Although a total of eight students returned parental consents and student assents, one student did

not respond to attempts to schedule interviews; therefore a total of seven student interview participants were included in this study.

Advisors and Administrator Recruitment

While preparing for this study, I conducted a “mini study” for a class project intended to learn about qualitative research. Three GSA advisors in this district were recruited via email for that mini-study. They each provided verbal assent to participate in the interviews, and in March of 2012, each advisor engaged in a semi-structured interview. These interviews occurred in their classrooms during either their planning period or after school. Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes. Initially the data collected were merely intended to be used to learn about qualitative research. However, as data and themes emerged from students in the 2012-2013 school year, it became apparent that the previous data from advisors would be beneficial to include in this study. Therefore, approval was sought from Human Subjects Committee Lawrence (HSCL) to use the information previously gathered. After receiving approval from HSCL, a printed transcript was taken to each advisor to review their previous comments from the 2011-2012 school year. Advisors then provided verbal assent to use their previous responses. One advisor requested her statements be slightly modified before she provided consent.

The same advisors were contacted via email at the beginning of the current study. They each provided written consent to allow their responses from semi-structured interviews as well as informal discussions to be included in this project. In addition, the district superintendent and the four high school principals were recruited via email. The district superintendent and three principals responded to email requests to participate in semi-structured interviews. A fourth principal did not respond to repeated email requests to participate in an interview.

Participant Demographics

Student participants ranged in age from 14 to 17 years old at the beginning of the study. Each class level was represented as one freshman, two sophomores, two juniors, and two seniors participated in the study. Two students reported their race as Caucasian, one student reported being Hispanic, and one student stated she is Mexican. The three remaining students identified themselves as biracial (Caucasian/Mexican, Caucasian/Puerto Rican/Other, and Caucasian/"Native"/Hispanic).

In terms of gender, there were a total of four female participants and two male participants. In addition, one participant who identified herself as female at the beginning of the study later described herself as gender neutral at the end of the study, stating she sometimes felt female and sometimes felt male. She reported she still preferred to use the pronoun "she" when referring to herself. One of the male participants is transgender; however, he chose not to discuss his experiences as a transgender student because he views himself as a male and does not interpret his experiences as a transgender individual. In terms of sexual orientation, both the gender neutral and transgender male participant identified their sexual orientation as pansexual, stating they are attracted to individuals of all gender identities and biological sexes. Two of the female participants identified themselves with the terms gay or lesbian while two preferred the term bisexual to classify their sexual orientation. The other male participant was the only individual who identified as heterosexual.

Adult participants ranged in age from 27 – 55 years of age. All of the GSA advisors were female. The four advisors reported their race as Caucasian and all of the advisors have completed a four-year bachelor's degree. Two advisors have also completed Master's degrees and one advisor is currently enrolled in an Ed.D. program. The advisors all served as full time classroom

teachers, three as academic teachers and one in the art department. Advisor participants had between 2 and 22 years of teaching experience at the end of the study. One participant had served as the GSA advisor for four years while two participants served as the advisor for two years, and one as the advisor for three months.

The three principals and district superintendent were all male between the ages of 45 and 53. Two principals hold a Master's degree while one principal and the district superintendent have obtained a doctoral degree. All principals will be referred to with the title "Mr." therefore the comments of the principal who holds the doctorate are not identifiable with the title "Dr." thus increasing participant confidentiality. One principal identified himself as Caucasian, one as Hispanic, and one as Caucasian and Native American. The superintendent identified himself as Asian.

Timeline of the Study

Based on the longitudinal nature of the study, a total of four trips were made for recruitment and data collection in October 2012, December 2012, March 2013 and May 2013. Each trip lasted between 12 and 14 days.

Trip 1: October 2012. During the first trip in October, I engaged in three days of classroom observations (one day at each of the three schools with established GSA clubs). In an effort to learn about school climate, I also attended sporting events at one of the high schools and observed pep assemblies at two schools during this trip. A main focus of this trip was attending GSA meetings at each of the three schools as a participant observer. The goal was to establish rapport and recruit student participants as well as gain understanding of the nature of each GSA club. One student provided parental consent during this trip and therefore engaged in a semi-structured interview. Two additional parental consent letters were returned through the postal

service. Participants were then contacted about participating in interviews during the next data collection trip.

Trip 2: December 2012. A second attempt was made to secure parental consent during this trip. Five additional consents were obtained and four of these student participants engaged in a semi-structured interview during this trip. The student participant whose parental consent was previously received in the mail also participated in an interview in December. Additionally, the student who was previously interviewed in October participated in a second interview. Subsequent to this trip, the final student participant scheduled an online interview through Skype in early January.

One GSA advisor also participated in a semi-structured interview during this trip. I attended several GSA meetings as a participant observer and learned about members' perspectives on school climate and interventions that would improve their experience at school. Many informal conversations occurred during this trip with advisors.

Trip 3: March 2013. Based on the first two trips and data collected, two interventions (discussed below) were implemented during a trip in March 2013. Five student participants were interviewed again during this trip. In March, the fourth high school established a new GSA club. The advisor of this new club was recruited for the study and engaged in her first semi-structured interview. In addition, the three other advisors participated in their second or third interview. Several GSA meetings were attended during this trip, including the inaugural meeting of the newly formed GSA club. During interviews and GSA meetings, some initial reactions were collected from students and advisors during this trip; however, participants provided a more impactful reflection of the interventions during the final data collection trip in May 2013.

Trip 4: May 2013. All but one student participant engaged in a final semi-structured interview in May 2013. In addition, three of the four advisors participated in a final interview. During this trip, the superintendent and three of the principals also engaged in semi-structured interviews. I attended a cultural lunch fair as an observer at one of the high schools where the GSA club hosted a table. Additionally, I attended a pep assembly at one school as an observer.

Procedures

In order to become as immersed in school culture as possible, I attempted to gain access to a variety of school environments and activities. Classroom observations allowed me to witness how students and teachers interact in a more formal setting. Student interactions outside of class and during extracurricular activities provided examples of student behavior apart from formal adult supervision. School bulletins and GSA Facebook pages also proved beneficial in learning about student activities occurring at each campus. However, in order to gain the most impactful data about LGBTQ students' experience, semi-structured interviews were employed at multiple times throughout the study.

Interviews. Throughout the course of the study, a total of 31 interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary means of data collection. Merriam (2009) explained that:

The largest part of the [semi-structured] interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic (p.90).

Based on the unique experiences of each GSA student, this method of inquiry is warranted.

All seven student participants engaged in at least two semi-structured interviews. Four of the student participants participated in three semi-structured interviews during the course of the study. In total, 16 interviews were conducted with students; 15 interviews occurred in person, and one was conducted via Skype. On two occasions interviews were conducted with two students present, a result of scheduling difficulties and student preference. Interviews lasted between 15 and 90 minutes and occurred either during lunch, after school, or on the weekend. Nine of the in-person interviews were conducted on school campus, either in a private office or the GSA advisor's classroom. One interview occurred in a private office at a local business, and five interviews took place at Starbucks. Student participants were always given the choice of interview location to ensure comfort in discussing their experiences.

Students were informed of the nature of the study and reminded they could discontinue the interview at any time. Verbal permission was obtained in all interviews to utilize a digital voice recorder. Interview questions were prepared prior to the interviews and remained fairly consistent among student participants. While the interview questions were always developed with an intention to learn as much as possible about LGBTQ students' experience at school, each set of interview questions had a slightly different main purpose.

The purpose of the first set of interview questions was to learn about the students' experiences at school, both in general and specifically as an LGBTQ student or ally. Student participants were asked questions such as: What three words come to mind to describe your school? How do you think LGBTQ students are treated the same or differently at your school? What caused you to join your school's GSA club? Significant effort was made during the first student interviews to establish abundant rapport and increase student comfort. In addition to learning about participant perspective of school climate, student responses often included

personal stories about their identity formation as an LGBTQ individual as well as varying levels of acceptance within their family and peers group. The first set of interviews allowed me to learn about student participants on a personal level as they shared emotionally laden material. For example, many students lamented about the link between their family's conservative religious beliefs and intolerance of LGBTQ individuals. Most of these interviews occurred during the December 2012 trip; however, one student participated in a "first round interview" in October 2012.

Given the emergent nature of this study, the second set of interview prompts were developed after learning about students' personal identity development and their perceptions of school climate during the first set of interviews. One of the main intents during this set of interviews was to learn about the initial impact of the social event and safe space sticker interventions. In order to learn about students' reactions to the social event, open-ended questions (e.g. What did you think of the social event?) were asked. Some student participants did not attend the social event therefore this question was omitted during a few interviews. Prior to the safe space sticker campaign, some student expressed a fear that they would be very disappointed if most teachers did not display a sticker. Based on these concerns, interview questions explicitly investigated every student's reaction to the safe space sticker campaign. In an effort to continue gaining examples of LGBTQ student experiences at school, students were also asked to discuss if there had been any memorable situations involving LGBTQ students at their school since the first interview. An attempt was made to ask about both positive and negative experiences in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of LGBTQ students' experiences. It became apparent that some student participants were less active in their GSA club during the second interview when compared to their involvement at the beginning of the

study. Therefore, students were also asked about their current level of involvement with their GSA club as well as reasons they were more or less active with their club. Due to successful rapport building, students appeared more open and casual during the second set of interviews. Some even began asking me questions about my experience in high school, and a few stated they enjoyed being part of the study.

The main purpose of the final interview questions was to assess student perception of the lasting impact of the social event and safe space stickers. Students were also asked to reflect on the best and worst part of their entire school year, often in relation to their GSA participation. Finally, students were asked about their impressions of the current study, and they were encouraged to offer suggestions for a hypothetical future study. The dialogue during this set of interviews was often reflective and insightful. At this point in the study, significant bonds were formed between some of the student participants and myself. We often exchanged high-5's and they seemed genuinely excited to participate in the interviews. As mentioned above, one of the interviews that was conducted with two students present lasted over 90 minutes. After 30 minutes I was finished asking my interview questions, but the students continued talking with me for an additional hour about their experiences at school. The ability to interview the same students on multiple occasions allowed the students to respond in a deeper and more meaningful way as the interviews progressed.

In addition to the student interviews, advisors and school administrators also participated in semi-structured interviews. During the 2011-2012 school year, advisors participated in the first set of formal interviews for a separate class project I conducted. Each advisor engaged in at least one semi-structured interview during the 2012-2013 school year. During the course of the study, a fourth advisor was identified at the school with a newly established GSA club.

Although she did not participate in any interviews during the 2011-2012 school year, she participated in semi-structured interviews during the 2012-2013 school year.

Interviews with advisors lasted between 20 and 50 minutes and were conducted during planning periods or after school. All but one interview occurred in the advisors' classroom; a final interview with one advisor was conducted outside of her classroom on a school bench. She felt this would prevent interruptions as many students visit her classroom during her planning period. Prior to starting each interview, advisors were asked to give verbal permission so I could use a digital recorder. Numerous informal conversations also occurred in person and through email with each of the advisors throughout this study.

Similar to the progression of student interview questions, the purpose of each interview with GSA advisors varied slightly during each data collection trip. The initial interview questions that were asked of three advisors during March 2012 focused on school experiences for LGBTQ students. Advisors were asked how they believed LGBTQ students were treated at their school by both heterosexual peers as well as school staff. They were also asked to discuss interventions they thought would be effective at improving LGBTQ students' school experience. The interviews conducted during the 2012-2013 school year continued to focus on their perception of LGBTQ students' experiences; however, questions were also developed to assess the impact of the district-wide social event and safe space sticker campaign. Advisors were in a unique position to discuss interactions among school staff members and level of support expressed by their colleagues. Based on both student and advisor comments, interview questions were also created to understand how advisors' felt about their principal's support for LGBTQ students. Advisors typically responded with a great deal of candor during all of the interviews.

Establishing rapport with three of the advisors during the March 2012 trip provided a foundation for the interviews that followed as part of this study.

Although not planned at the outset of the study, three principals participated in semi-structured interviews in May 2013. These interviews became necessary based on the responses provided by both students and advisors, which suggested principal's level of support was sometimes lacking. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted in the principal's office. Principals were asked about how they believe LGBTQ students are treated at their school as well as their reactions to the current study. They were also asked to provide recommendations for a hypothetical future study. Two of the principals discussed how they were initially very hesitant about the purpose of the study and the possible ramifications. However, one explicitly stated that my ability to establish rapport via email and work directly with the GSA advisors without negative consequences allowed him to feel comfortable responding openly during our interview.

Throughout the study, several informal meetings and emails were exchanged with the superintendent regarding procedural questions (e.g. contacting students, intervention implementation). In addition, the superintendent participated in a semi-structured interview in May 2013. This interview was conducted in his office and lasted approximately 40 minutes. The main purpose of this interview was to learn about the superintendent's perception of the current study, as well as any ramifications from school staff or community members. Because of his unique position as a superintendent, interview questions were developed in an effort to investigate district-wide topics. Similar to the principal interviews, he was asked to provide recommendations for a hypothetical future study. Previous informal conversations as well as my

openness and flexibility to district restrictions allowed for the superintendent to respond in a seemingly candid manner.

Observations. Classroom observations were conducted at three of the high schools in October 2012. I was scheduled by either the principal or vice principal at each school to attend a variety of classes. School administrators stressed either in writing, verbally, or both that I was not allowed to interact or talk with any students during these observations. Both academic and artistic classes were observed. I sat silently in the class and took notes either on a laptop or in a paper notebook. Two substitute teachers were observed in addition to 15 full time teachers.

Additional observations were made outside of the classroom such as during passing periods and lunchtime. Throughout the year, four school-wide assemblies were observed at three different schools. This provided unique opportunities to observe messages delivered to the entire student body. Two sporting events were observed that featured inter-district competitions. One GSA club participated in their school's cultural lunch fair by selling cupcakes and lemonade. I observed this event and focused on the interactions between the student body and the students identified as GSA members.

Participant observations. While attending meetings and activities sponsored by the GSA clubs, I often became a participant observer. In total 10 GSA meetings were attended (2 at North High, 3 at South High, 1 at Central High, 2 at Stadium High). As North High prepared to host the pizza party and ice cream social, I met with a few GSA members and the advisor to help create signs and discuss the focus of the event. During the social event, I actively participated by facilitating introductions and a group discussion. At the beginning of the event, the advisors identified me as the leader and facilitator of the event. At the end of the study, another club

organized a district-wide picnic at a local park. I also attended this event and actively participated in games and discussions.

Document analysis. Beginning in October, I subscribed to the daily bulletins of the three schools with GSA clubs. In February, I also subscribed to the fourth schools' bulletin due to the newly forming GSA club. Bulletins were read on a near daily basis during the week to stay informed of school activities and events at each of the schools. Special attention was paid to announcements about GSA club meetings and events as well as LGBTQ-affirming or heteronormative language and activities.

In addition, I was "added" to the Facebook pages of two of the GSA clubs. One of the clubs was fairly active in posting announcements on their Facebook page. This forum was used to post the recruitment video at the beginning of the study as well as to communicate with club members about the social event.

Researcher as Instrument

In qualitative research, "*the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis* (Merriam, 2009, p.15). This allows the researcher to determine which data are more relevant to the particular study. During the course of this study, several types of data collection were employed: semi-structured interviews, participant observations, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Although each element provided beneficial information, semi-structured interview responses were the mostly highly valued source of data. This was honored as the most accurate data because participants provided explicit verbal comment in response to research questions. Utilizing participant quotations verbatim reduced the need for me to provide interpretations.

In addition to data gathered during interviews, observations as a participant observer also served as an important source of data collection. The purpose of participant observations was to supplement as well as corroborate data gained during interviews. Because several students who participated in their school's GSA were unable to obtain parental consent for this study, participant observations during GSA meetings allowed me to learn about a wide range of perspectives expressed during meetings. Their comments often provided data not previously discussed in individual interviews (such as several requests to participate in a parade). In addition, as a participant observer, I was able to verify data from individual interviews with a larger group of students. Finally, the role of participant observer was an immensely meaningful method for data collection during the social events. Becoming involved as a participant in icebreakers and emotional discussions provided an immersive experience for data collection.

The final two methods of data collection, non-participant observations and document analysis, served as secondary data sources. Classroom observations provided me with a broader understanding of general school climate. At times, participant comments during interviews were corroborated during observation. For instance, a student was overheard in class making a disparaging comment about a football team "because they're gay." Reading each school's daily bulletin often provided supplemental information about school activities as well as the prominence of GSA events at each campus. At one school, bulletin announcements about GSA meetings were frequent and on going, while another school's bulletin very rarely included information about GSA activities. In a similar manner, Facebook pages of GSA clubs offered ancillary data about student interactions in an online format. Because the researcher acts as the primary instrument of measurement, the sources of data in this study can be differentially valued.

Another effect of the researcher serving as the primary instrument is the ability to categorize the importance of groups of participants' response. In this study, student and GSA advisors comments were the most highly valued. This is because students and GSA advisors are likely to be immersed in the experiences of LGBTQ students. In contrast, principals and the district superintendent are required to consider the experience of all of the students at their school or district. While this does not negate the perspectives of the administration, their probable distance from LGBTQ student experiences caused their comments to be considered secondary to student participants and GSA advisors.

Unlike quantitative research, which aims to reduce instrument bias, qualitative research typically allows for bias that is inevitable when the researcher serves as the primary instrument of measurement. Throughout this study, my personal experience in this district, as well as my experience as an LGBTQ individual living in a sometimes-hostile society undoubtedly impacted my data collection process on both a conscious and subconscious level. As discussed above, conscious decisions were made regarding the value of student and advisor comments over administrator comments. However, subconscious processing also influenced how I attended to various data. For example, my initial interactions with some of the principals in this study caused me view their comments as less supportive of LGBTQ students. During my first trip in October, one principal appeared unwilling to speak with me or shake my hand. He turned and instructed his assistant principal to meet with me. A second interaction in March after the safe space sticker intervention also caused me to feel unsupported by this principal. During an unintended interaction near teacher mailboxes, I asked him about teacher reaction to the sticker campaign. Again he appeared unwilling to discuss my project as he responded with minimal information and limited eye contact. My personal bias caused me to consider these interactions

as evidence that he was unsupportive of LGBTQ individuals. Conversations and email exchanges with the other principals also prompted similar feelings of lack of support regarding LGBTQ topics. In addition, students and advisors often commented about uncertainty regarding their principal's level of support and acceptance. Given these experiences, at times I found it difficult to believe the authenticity of principal comments when they voiced support for LGBTQ students. For instance, although all three principals reported they want to create a safe environment for LGBTQ students at their school, I noticed none of them had a safe space sticker displayed in their office. As I consciously reflected on this data, I attempted to curb my personal bias by entertaining various reasons for principal behavior as well as valuing those student comments, which occasionally suggested principals were in fact supportive.

Interventions

After conducting semi-structured interviews and attending GSA meetings as a participant observer, interventions were developed in an effort to improve school climate. Each intervention employed is discussed in more detail below; however, a brief overview is presented here.

One of the overwhelming requests voiced by students was to have the opportunity to interact with more GSA students. They expressed how they felt they knew the 10 – 20 students who actively participated in their GSA club, but they wanted to meet other students in the area. Two different forums were discussed in an attempt to facilitate students' interaction: a district-wide social and an online social networking site. Based on these requests, approval was sought by the district to establish a social networking site and coordinate a district-wide social event. Due to complications with managing social networking sites, the district did not approve the creation of a site to be utilized by all GSA clubs. However, approval was granted to coordinate a social event.

Another intervention suggested by some students was the opportunity to participate in a local parade. They expressed a desire to increase their visibility in the community. Advisors initially hesitated at the thought of organizing a float entry for the parade; however, they relaxed with the suggestion they could pair with local LGBTQ groups whom already organized a parade entry. Some students also reported an inability to participate in such an event because their parents do not know about their status as an LGBTQ individual or GSA participant.

While the preceding interventions were all student-generated, I also sought student perspective on distributing safe space stickers to teachers and school staff. I specifically discussed this intervention due to participant comments about the inability to identify supportive teachers coupled with previous research supporting explicit displays of support for LGBTQ students. Students expressed both excitement and concern about this intervention (discussed further in the Results section).

St. Patrick's day parade. As mentioned above, students reported a desire to have the larger community know about their existence as a GSA club. While some students expressed great interest in participating in a parade, others stated they would be unable to participate due to their parents' disapproval or lack of knowledge about their involvement with the GSA club. Because numerous students stated they would like to participate in a parade, I discussed this request with the superintendent. After multiple conversations, it was decided the students could participate in the parade but it could not be a school-sponsored event, and therefore could not be advertised in school bulletins. Transportation to the event could also not be provided by advisors in school vehicles. Nonetheless, I contacted a local LGBTQ-affirming group that was planning to participate in the St. Patrick's Day parade in March. The group welcomed me and any students to join their group in the parade. One student participant had already arranged to

walk in the parade with this group prior to my involvement. Although multiple students expressed interest, no students arrived at the parade, perhaps due to difficulty obtaining transportation and trouble communicating details of the event.

As a researcher, I participated in the parade in an effort to gain greater understanding of the local LGBTQ groups. In total approximately 40 people from 8 different LGBTQ groups gathered to march together in the parade. Members ranged in age from middle-aged parents of LGBTQ individuals to young grandchildren supporting their older LGBTQ family members. Prior to the start, the grandmaster of the parade drove by our gathering location and the group erupted in applause and cheers. Other members explained that the grandmaster was the mayor of the town, who is an openly gay woman. Emotions ran high as the mayor recognized the group and stood up and showed her support. During this experience, I learned this was the first time any LGBTQ group had participated in a local parade. Many participants were nervous about the crowd's reaction. In fact, as we began to turn the corner at the start, several individuals were heard saying brief prayers in hopes that the reaction would be favorable. One even disclosed she was nervous because her young grandchildren were present and she worried about their safety. Within the first 100 feet, several of us had tears in our eyes because of the overwhelmingly positive support expressed by some members of the crowd. For instance, one particularly meaningful group stood in unison as we approached and raised their hands above their heads clapping in support. Although a few disparaging comments were heard about our group, the overall reflection by the group was that the experience was so positive they would continue to participate in future city parades.

District-wide social event. Given the students' request to meet other GSA members, a district-wide pizza party and ice-cream social was planned. After gaining district approval, one

GSA club offered to host the event on their campus. I advertised the event to the other advisors and student participants. Students who did not participate in this study were also invited to attend the social event. Announcements for the GSA social were made in three of the four schools' daily bulletins. The host school's club made signs and posted them around campus to encourage student attendance. However, all of the signs were ripped down and found in trashcans.

Based on district policy, students were allowed to attend the event without parental permission as long as they arranged their own transportation. Students who utilized district transportation were required to obtain parental permission. However, the advisor to the newly formed GSA was informed her students did not need permission slips even if they used school transportation. The night before the event the superintendent became aware of the miscommunication and informed me that the students must obtain parental consent prior to riding in school vehicles. Because the event was occurring the next day, students would not have an opportunity to obtain parental consent, thereby prohibiting a significant number of students from attending the event. My disappointment was clear as I held back tears when speaking with the superintendent. I contacted the advisor to inform her about the parental permission requirement and how her students would not be able to attend. She too discussed being upset with the last-minute requirement and her distress was so profound that she contemplated alternative options. She made a plea to her principal to allow her students to be transported in school vehicles even without proper parental consent. The school principal and superintendent discussed the significant risk of allowing students to attend without parental consent, but eventually decided to benevolently allow an exception. Two of the advisors from the other schools obtained proper parental consent and transported students in school vehicles. Three

additional teachers attended the event in an effort to show support for the GSA students. In total, six adults were present from three different schools. One advisor was unable to attend the event because she teaches additional classes in the afternoon.

Approximately 36 students attended the social event. Students arrived after school was dismissed and were encouraged to wear nametags and socialize with other students. I then led an “ice-breaker” for students to introduce themselves. A group discussion followed to facilitate student discussion about the successes and challenges in each of their clubs. Pizza, ice cream, and drinks were then distributed as students talked among themselves. The event lasted approximately an hour and a half.

Safe space stickers. I designed a colorful safe space sticker to be distributed to teachers and school staff. A double-sided flyer was created listing a few statistics about LGBTQ students’ experience, the importance of explicitly displaying support for LGBTQ students, and resources to assist LGBTQ individuals. In March, I arrived at each school on a Monday morning and placed a flyer and sticker in every teacher box and as many staff boxes as were made available. Almost 400 stickers and flyers were distributed among the four high schools. Teachers were encouraged to display the sticker on their classroom door or near their desk.

Data Collection

All semi-structured interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder. Recordings were transcribed in a word processing program after each data collection trip. Transcripts were created as I listened to the tapes and typed the verbal interaction. Both the participant’s and my statements were transcribed near verbatim. Verbal pauses were not always included in the transcription. Toward the end of the study, sufficient rapport was established with participants,

which sometimes led to off-topic discussions and irrelevant responses. Therefore, these statements were not included in transcripts.

Extensive notes were created throughout the study. When possible, observation notes were made in real time while observing. During events when I participated in a more active role and note taking was unmanageable, events and reflections were detailed in writing directly after the event.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was on going and likely impacted interview questions and observations on both a conscious and subconscious level throughout this study. Experiences during each trip had a direct impact on the preparation of interview questions and activities developed for subsequent trips.

Data were analyzed from multiple perspectives. Both a priori and inductive approaches were used. For example, an a priori outlook was used when analyzing the data based on previous research and recent media stories indicating LGBTQ student often have negative experiences at school. In addition, my experience as an LGBTQ individual as well as a student in this district also influenced how the data were attended to and analyzed. For example, it is likely I was especially attuned to negative experiences and statements while interacting with administrators and observing in classroom settings. At the same time, my desire to improve LGBTQ student experiences may have caused me to attend more closely to positive data during the GSA social event or after the safe space sticker campaign. This a priori approach also likely impacted the development of initial interview questions and prompted me to value statements and observations directly related to bullying and harassment of LGBTQ students throughout the

study. Although previous research and personal experience influenced data collection and analysis, an inductive approach was also employed.

An inductive approach allowed the data to be analyzed from a more flexible position in the event that experiences of the participants in this school district were different than those in previous studies. Several results were revealed due to this inductive approach. For example, students' request to participate in a parade, host a district-wide social, and establish a social networking page all resulted from an inductive analysis of the data. In addition, one of the main themes related to leadership was exclusively developed through this approach. While my personal bias and previous research caused some data to be analyzed from an a prior approach, the inductive approach was more highly valued as new themes and topics were allowed to emerge.

The main source of data analysis revolved around participant statements made during interviews. As discussed by Ryan and Bernard (2003), "For those who tape their interviews, the process of identifying themes probably begins with the act of transcribing the tapes" (p. 88-89). After each interview was transcribed, I highlighted the participant statements that directly related to research questions or that provided insightful information about the participants' experiences. All of the relevant quotes across participants were then combined into one document of "important quotes." When participant quotes were included in a theme, they were highlighted on the "important quotes" document to signify their inclusion.

In order to identify themes within the salient participant responses, several strategies were used. The first data analysis technique involved identifying repetitions across participant responses. For example, participants frequently expressed statements about bullying, religion, and leadership. Therefore, comments with terms similar to bullying, religion and leadership

were then physically grouped together through the “cut and paste” word processing technique. All of the main themes presented in Chapter 4 became apparent through this process of categorizing repetitions.

An additional method, constant compare, was used to analyze similarities and differences among participant statements. This method allowed for an effective analysis between similarities and differences among participant groups. For example, students and advisors typically expressed similar sentiments thereby creating a natural grouping. Principal statements on the other hand were often disparate. Therefore, throughout this study the comments of students and GSA advisors were compared against the comments of school principals. Similarities and differences were also analyzed within participant groups; however, statements within participant groups tended to reflect more similarity than difference.

In addition to comparing statements across and within participant groups, the constant compare approach was used to compare statements within broader themes. For instance, once the theme related to bullying was identified through a prior and frequency of repetition approaches, similarities and difference were analyzed. In contrast to previous research, students in this district were somewhat unlikely to experience physical harassment due to their status as LGBTQ individuals. However in a similar vein as previous literature, participants often commented about the ubiquitous nature of verbal harassment. The constant compare method was employed through data analysis and frequently resulted in subtheme identification.

Data gathered through participant observations, non-participant observations and document analysis were analyzed secondary to participant interviews. This allowed themes and subthemes to first be identified through direct participant quotes. Additional data from observations were then included to expand participant comments or provide data not explicitly

discussed during individual interviews. For example, student comments directly illustrated how comfortable they felt while attending the GSA social event, but participant observations provided data about the depth of student conversations related to self-harm behaviors (e.g. subtheme Genuine Dialogue). Again, both a prior and inductive approaches were employed with these data.

An initial draft of the Results section was written after the data collection trip in March 2013. This allowed me to continue crafting interview questions to more thoroughly understand common responses, as well as investigate those that were dissimilar yet important. While prominent themes had already been formed, I approached the data with flexibility in the event themes changed based on the final data collected in May 2013. In addition, I reviewed the data for new themes not previously apparent using similar procedures such as repetition and constant compare. However, the main themes identified with the repetition technique remained consistent at the end of the study. Participant quotes were then assimilated into the previous draft. A review of the “important quotes” document was made to ensure the most relevant and essential quotes had been included. Finally, the subthemes were reduced and reorganized to improve readability.

Validity

The careful attention utilized in designing this study and creating appropriate questions facilitated validity (Merriam, 2009). Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of participant responses and to bolster the findings through the use of direct quotes. In order to increase the validity of quotes, only minimal editing was employed to remove language that impeded comprehension. The interview results were organized to provide the reader with sufficient detail to find the results credible, while also identifying limits of generalizability of

each theme. I engaged in a high degree of reflexivity in order to minimize the impact of personal bias. Ethical standards were upheld as participants were informed of their voluntary participation and right to confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms.

Techniques such as triangulation and member checking were also used throughout this study. Formal member checking was conducted on one occasion when three of the GSA advisors were provided with a written transcript of important statements they made during interviews for the mini-study conducted in March 2012. Casual member checking occurred during follow-up interviews with students and advisors. I frequently provided a verbal summary of participant statements and asked for confirmation that I had accurately understood their comment. Follow up questions were also asked in subsequent interviews to increase confidence in participant perspectives. Multiple data collection techniques (e.g. interviews and observations) as well as interviews with various participants (e.g. students, advisors, principals) provided an opportunity to triangulate data, thereby increasing validity. Saturation was sought to foster appropriate conclusions but at the same time, discrepant findings were analyzed in order to provide the most comprehensive answers to the research questions. Validity of theme identification is increased through the use of several data analysis techniques such as repetition and the constant compare method. In addition, the combination of the inductive and an a priori approach provided confidence in the identification of themes. Finally, as discussed by Bernard and Ryan (2003) providing an explicit description of data analysis increases validity.

Chapter IV

Results – Research Question #1

The following sections are comprised of the major themes discussed by participants in this study. Participant quotes are included to provide the most authentic examples of participants' experiences. Additional data are included that were collected through participant observations (e.g., attending GSA meetings and GSA-sponsored social events) as well through review of the daily bulletin distributed by each school. Due to the similarity of participant responses, the themes identified are applicable across all four schools in this district.

A total of four main themes will be discussed in this chapter. These themes attempt to answer the first research question: What are the experiences of LGBTQ students in this district? In the first section of this chapter, two themes are organized around students' unchanging experiences at school. For instance, the theme "You're Going to be Bullied" is discussed first because it was the most pervasive theme in that every single student participant expressed a belief in the ubiquitous nature of bullying at their schools. In addition, participants stated that they had little hope that bullying experiences would be reduced. The second theme, "For the Bible Tells Me So" also illustrates the near-constant impact of religion on LGBTQ students from their community, family, and school interactions. A more hopeful perspective is presented in the second section of this chapter, as participants discuss experiences that provide the opportunity for the development of a more positive school environment. Although some negative situations are discussed in the third theme "Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way," positive examples are also provided about the improvement possible with successful leaders. Finally, the impact of participating in the GSA is captured in the last theme "Birds of a Feather Flock Together."

Section 1 – It Won’t Change: Inflexible Aspects of the School Experience

In order to fully answer the first research question regarding LGBTQ students’ experience, this study attempted to understand several different components of participants’ school experience. During the course of this study, students provided examples of positive and negative as well as flexible and inflexible aspects of school climate. For the sake of organization and readability, this first section contains examples provided by participants of the chronic and pervasively negative characteristics present at their schools. The two main themes of bullying and religion compromise this section about inflexible facets of the school environment.

In terms of bullying, participants described several components of bullying behaviors at their school. This provides insight into one aspect of their sense of safety and belonging, thus addressing the first research question related to LGBTQ students’ experience at school. In the sections that follow, participant quotes are organized around subthemes to increase readability. First, responses about the prevalent nature of bullying for all students are compared with the unique experiences of LGBTQ bullying behaviors. Second, different forms of bullying such as physical altercations versus verbal harassment are presented. Third, participants provide examples of their reactions and the negative impact of being bullied. Finally, student comments about different societal views regarding acceptance of individuals in the LGBTQ population are discussed. Together, these subthemes address LGBTQ students’ experiences of bullying in this district, which partially answering the first research question.

“You’re Going to be Bullied”: Pervasiveness of Bullying

In 2009, Kosciw et al. surveyed over 7,000 LGBTQ students in the 6th through 12th grades about their experiences at school. The results indicated over 84% of respondents experienced verbal harassment and over 40% experienced physical harassment because of their

sexual orientation. Based on previous findings such as these, students were asked about their personal history regarding bullying behaviors, their perception of bullying frequency for all students, and the unique bullying experiences of LGBTQ students. The most prevalent reaction from participants in this study was that bullying is common, not only for LGBTQ individuals, but heterosexual students as well. For example, Apollo stated, “I think in general most everybody gets bullied about the same amount...because if somebody’s going to bully you they’re going to bully you regardless of whether you’re straight, or gay, or lesbian.” Tina concurred, “There’s no stopping bullying, it’s gonna come. Even if you’re not gay, you’re going to get bullied.” Apollo provided an illustration of the type of bullying he endured as a straight student. Although his sexuality was not a focus of his bullies’ comments, he remarked that his thinner, perhaps less stereotypically masculine body type caused him to be a target. He hypothesized, “I guess with my weak physical physique they just figured ‘Let’s choose him to pick on him.’” He reported the bullying he experienced started in elementary school and continued through his junior year of high school. He portrayed how incessant his experience has been by lamenting, “I had a broken leg and they would still try to harass me and bully me anyway. Nothing really stopped them. I’d try to go the other way and they’d cut me off.” Monica also expressed little hope that bullying could be eradicated. She maintained, “You can’t do anything about bullying. You just kinda let it happen.” She predicted, “Once you graduate you’re fine. It’s all I’m looking forward to.” Although Monica suggested little could be done to curtail these experiences, Tina envisioned a more affirming school experience. She stated, “Bullying happens, but regardless of why a student is being bullied, it shouldn’t be allowed at all. Regardless of whether it is sexual preference. I want to see people [be] more accepting.” Student participants agreed that bullying behaviors were common at their schools for

heterosexual and LGBTQ students alike. However, few expressed hope that a significant change would occur so that all students felt safe and supported at school.

In addition to negative experiences at school, Monica highlighted how bullying continues outside of school in online formats. She stated, “I know kids on Facebook who are openly gay and they post stuff about their relationships and sometimes they get called like faggot online or people post ‘Ew that’s gross.’” During one school’s GSA meeting, members discussed how students were posting irreverent images of a female who had recently attempted suicide. They expressed frustration and sadness that others would be so cruel in an online format to someone who was already experiencing enough pain to attempt suicide.

They judge me because I’m gay: Bullying specific to LGBTQ students. Although participants asserted bullying happens to most students, they admitted that their perceived or actual sexual orientation or gender identity are a frequent focus of harassment. Jordan conveyed how bullying often goes unnoticed when it is less severe. He stated, “It’s not like a Matthew Shepard case. It just kinda flies by because it’s not that big of a deal to them so they don’t really see it.” Jordan’s reference to Matthew Shepard (who was murdered in 1998 in an anti-gay hate crime) serves to differentiate the type of bullying and harassment that makes national news, and the more subtle acts of discrimination experienced at his school. He suggested:

I think the teachers and the students need to be a little more aware of what’s around them. Because a lot of people will talk about bullying and kids are like “That doesn’t happen on campus” and I’m like “Actually it does because it happened to me last year and a little bit this year.” So it exists, it’s just not thought of as bullying ‘cause it’s kinda casual.

Apollo also reflected on the difference between how heterosexual and LGBTQ students (or allies) are treated as members of the GSA. He stated, “The only thing that probably sticks out in

my four years is that the GSA people are probably the ones that get bullied for a lot of things. I guess cause it's just easier to go after them." During participant observations, members of the GSA clubs discussed experiences of being teased or verbally insulted because of their appearance or gender non-conformity. At South High, students seeking GSA leadership positions gave an impromptu election speech. During these speeches, every single candidate mentioned a desire to reduce bullying experience for LGBTQ students. Monica also indicated that students' houses have been TP-ed or egged because of their participation in GSA events or perhaps because the students have LGBTQ parents. In fact, during the course of the study, Tina had to reschedule a planned interview because she woke up to find her lawn had been vandalized by trash and food. However, she did not specifically indicate if she thought her status as an LGBTQ individual caused the negative event. Although participants reported that "everyone gets bullied," the impression during GSA meetings was that LGBTQ students are common targets of disparaging comments.

As an advisor, Ms. Wilson summarized her perspective of LGBTQ students in relation to the larger school community. She stated, "I don't think they feel safe enough to be true to themselves." For example, she shared a poignant moment in her class when an LGBTQ student asked if he could read a poem aloud. She recounted:

It was this whole poem about how he feels he has put up walls because he is gay and there's no place for him and he wants everyone to know it is not a choice; it's something he's born with. And whether they appreciate it or not, don't say anything, just don't be rude because it's just who he is.

She also described how her school launched a campus-wide campaign encouraging students to create a more positive school climate for all students. One aspect of the campaign included a

moving assembly where a group of hand-selected students engaged in thought-provoking and challenging activities. At the end of the assembly, students voluntarily approached a microphone to discuss how they felt unsafe at school or to offer an apology to students whom they had previously teased. Ms. Wilson reported, “I think there were a lot of homosexual students who mentioned ‘I’m gay, and I don’t feel like I have a place. And I think you judge me because this is who I am.’” She rejoiced about how her GSA club was just starting after the positive impact of the challenge campaign. Examples such as these paint a nuanced picture of how LGBTQ students are treated in a context in which “everyone gets bullied.”

Sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me: Types of bullying. Although students report bullying is common, examples of physical bullying were thankfully infrequent. Ms. Brown was the only participant who provided an example of a physical altercation. She recounted a difficult conversation around bullying behavior experienced by a student in her GSA club, implying the participants were bullied because of anti-gay sentiment. She shared:

The student said, “I have seen people follow someone into the bathroom and that person comes out and says ‘Yeah, I was pushed’” and the student says “What do you do? I want to protect him, but I’m scared. Am I gonna make it worse? Or is that person finally going to be able to find a way to get out?”

On the other hand, Ms. Sanchez was merely able to hypothesize about LGBTQ students’ experiences. She wondered about the link between limited physical bullying and LGBTQ students’ comfort being open on campus. She stated, “I think that if physical bullying were happening they wouldn’t be as open if they thought ‘Shit we’re going to get beat up for this.’” However, she added, “I think they do get criticized. I think they do have bullying, I’m just

assuming that kids get bullied. I haven't actually seen it. They're just not coming to me."

Although national data indicates physical bullying occurs among LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2010), it appears students in this district are often spared from physical altercations.

Apollo provided an insightful comment about the potential reason for limited physical bullying. He hypothesized, "The physical stuff I think really died down in high school because by then they are grown up enough to know that the physical stuff kinda gets you in more trouble...you suffer more consequences." He summarized, "So in high school it starts becoming more verbal and like every now and then probably they'll push you...but other than that it's mostly verbal abuse or neglect [sic] from groups." While improvement can still be made regarding LGBTQ students' experiences at school, it is encouraging to learn of limited episodes of physical bullying.

Although physical bullying was not a frequently cited problem of most participants, verbal harassment was a prime concern. For instance, Lisa stated, "I haven't seen or heard of any physical bullying, but verbal abuse is very high. It can be pretty abusive. It does major damage." Monica also shared, "If we were to completely express our sexual orientation, we'd get name-called." Tina also stated, "I remember telling someone that I was in the GSA and they were like 'Oh, so you're a faggot.'" Monica discussed how negative comments are made when LGBTQ couples display affection in same-sex relationships. She described, "If we hold hands on campus we get called 'Nasty. Faggots.' stuff like that." Tina discussed the experience of one of her openly gay male friends who was often a target of bullying. She explained, "He would come over to my house after school all the time, and then he would show me that all of his notebooks and stuff were covered with 'faggot' and 'gay' and all this stuff." Lisa also discussed an incident that happened to a male peer, reporting, "My friend today told me that some guy

called him gay just because of how he was acting and his friend doesn't know that he is bisexual...so it just made him feel worse." While Lisa's example included a student who was not openly LGBTQ, it points to the impact of anti-gay comments on all students.

In addition to comments that are intentionally disparaging to LGBTQ students, the terms "That's so gay" or "You're gay" are ubiquitous on all of the school campuses studied. Ms. Michelson asserted, "When I'm out and about and I see teenagers, it just became the buzz word. Like 'That's so dope.' Those words just catch on and just hold and they're just not thinking." In fact, a GSA member who identifies as LGBTQ was heard discounting a bag of cookies because the band endorsing the cookies was "so gay." Her use of the term seemed to shock even herself as she looked around to other GSA members. She then justified that she can use that terms "since I'm gay." However, other participants agreed that even GSA members should eradicate that term from their vocabulary. Tina explained, "If we start saying it then it makes everybody think that they can say that." In addition to the phrase being said by a GSA member, it was also overheard during a classroom observation. In an elective class, students were working on individual projects and talking among themselves while the teacher moved around the room assisting students. Two boys in the front were engaged in a conversation about football teams. One student exclaimed, "I don't like the Raiders because they're gay!" This student's use of the term gay to justify why he does not like a team is notable. While it may be true that students who use these derogatory terms may not specifically intend to hurt LGBTQ students, almost every participant discussed how offensive they find those comments.

Julia reported how hearing students say "'that's gay" or "you're a fag" impacts her. She confessed, "That honestly gets to my feelings." As an advisor, Ms. Michelson was keenly aware of the impact of such terms on her GSA members. She proclaimed, "That was just one of our

mission statements to eradicate that word because it does happen a lot.” In order to spread awareness about the negative impact of using these terms, Ms. Michelson and her GSA club designed buttons that read “That’s so PWAC” and “You’re PWAC” with PWAC standing for Perfect, Whole, And Complete. Before the club began selling the buttons, the school’s broadcasting class developed a skit about the buttons and ending the use of “that’s so gay” on campus. The episode was aired in each classroom during their homeroom period. After the broadcasting skit and the sale of buttons on campus Ms. Michelson explained how they seemed to be effective in reducing the use of the word: “I’ve heard it less. I really have!” However, during the middle of the year she lamented, “I started to see the word start sneaking back in class. In fact, today I had to take a kid out of class because of it.” Ms. Michelson associated the decline in GSA participation with the increase in hearing the negative terms. She reported that she and the club planned to redouble their efforts and commit to wearing their buttons every Tuesday. Ms. Wilson also declared, “I hate, hate that negative use of the word gay.” Even unintentional comments such as “that’s so gay” can have a significant impact on LGBTQ students.

Fight fire with fire: LGBTQ students’ desire to fight back. Although most students reported that they did not retaliate after negative comments were made, some did intimate they were tempted to respond with physical aggression. For instance, Jordan recounted a team-building experience in his science class. Each student was required to respond to the prompt “What are you most proud of.” Jordan shared how one of his peers interjected “Coming out of the closet!” for Jordan’s response. During the interview, Jordan joked that he thought “I’m going to punch you in the face” about his peer, but he concealed his anger during class. Similar sentiments were expressed by students during their GSA meetings. In one club, a male student

reported that earlier in the day he was walking on campus and students in an industrial arts class has made a disparaging comment, calling him gay from their classroom door. Although he too expressed a desire to engage in a physical altercation, he instead sought out a teacher to help handle the situation. At another school, an openly gay male student also discussed an interaction with a female peer at his school. He dramatically reported to his friends that the peer was making disparaging comments about him attending the GSA meeting. Animatedly, he toyed with the idea of confronting her and asking “if she had a problem with me.” The advisor quickly stepped in and encouraged him to allow the teaching staff to handle the intolerant comment. Julia also reported how her friend became angered at intolerant comments made about him at his new school. She disclosed, “I think he said that the first day that he went, he almost got into a fight.” While many students discussed a desire to retaliate with violence, students frequently chose to enlist the assistance of teachers to handle the situation.

In the previous examples, students indicated they were merely tempted to engage in a physical altercation. Monica, however, disclosed how she started to participate in a fight with a male football player. As one of the only open lesbians on her campus, she was the victim of frequent verbal harassment from football players and cheerleaders. She remembered,

They made comments to us for a few weeks and one time when they said a comment I actually stopped them in the hallway. He tried walking past me so I grabbed his arm and I was like “Can you not say comments anymore? It really offends me ‘cause I know you’re being negative about it.” And he started cussing at me and then started to get puffed up. We started saying things back to each other then like four administrators had to come in and block us.

Although students did not report many experiences of physical bullying, they provided several instances of verbal harassment, which had the potential to become physical. Examples such as these indicate how impactful verbal harassment and negative comments can be to LGBTQ students.

No choice but to leave: Impact of bullying experiences. Unfortunately the bullying experiences discussed above are not benign. Previous research suggests negative school experiences impact students' mental health as well as academic success (D'Augelli et al., 2001, Kosciw et al., 2010, Silenzio et al., 2007). Apollo discussed how bullying can have drastic consequences in terms of depression and suicide. He stated:

Once students experience too much bullying they start thinking suicidally [sic] or they get really depressed or they become really antisocial with friends, family, and other people. And that's a bad thing because then they emotionally and socially detach themselves from everybody else so their problem never gets solved. And they tend to have shorter lives than most people because they let depression and everything get to 'em and they don't seek help.

In addition to Apollo's warning about the impact of negative school experiences, several participants disclosed mental health concerns. Monica admitted, "Last year I was really depressed. Suicidal, I guess. I just got treated so badly. I just felt horrible." Lisa also disclosed, "I have depression really bad. I'm struggling with that right now. I'm taking antidepressants." Jordan too indicated a mental health diagnosis, "I've been diagnosed with cyclothymic disorder – which is like bipolar light." A total of five out of seven student participants stated that they had a current or previous mental health diagnosis. In addition to students discussing their diagnoses, several students commented about participation in therapy. While Lisa reported weekly

counseling sessions, Tina stated “I’ve been pushing my mom to get my therapy and next month I get to finally go!” Several other students reported either a desire to talk confidentially with a counselor, or current participation in some form of group or individual counseling. Although students maintain that bullying is common, the prevalence of mental health concerns among study participants is somewhat disheartening.

Another negative consequence of bullying relates to poor academic performance and absenteeism (Kosciw et al., 2010). Monica provided an example of how her peers’ school attendance was impacted by negative school experiences. She stated that her friends “were getting pushed around,” and chose to leave school for independent study, which allowed them to complete academic credit without interacting with a large student body. In total, she estimated four or five of her friends left her school because of their experiences. Tina also reported, “My friend Emmett ended up having to go on independent study, not only because he was failing, but he was getting bullied so much for being gay.” She illustrated the connection between academic performance and negative experiences, hypothesizing, “I think most of his grades were just because he didn’t have enough ambition because he was bullied so much.” In addition, Julia discussed how one of her close gay male friends chose to attend another school. She insisted, “He was being bullied here. And he really didn’t like being here.” Apollo also acknowledged, “I have a friend who is leaving, second semester because he said ‘people here are mean.’” Jordan also observed of a classmate, “I know he left because of the negative school environment. He couldn’t take it anymore.” Numerous examples were offered of friends and acquaintances that left school at least in part due to their experience of being bullied.

It also became clear that participants not only had friends who left school to participate in independent study, but participants themselves were occasionally interested in leaving school. In

fact, during the course of this study, Tina left her school for independent study. She denied that bullying served as a motivating factor for her decision, and instead insisted she preferred the flexibility offered with independent course work. During her final interview, Tina reflected on her experience with independent study. Although she completes most of her work at home, she interacts with other students when she meets with her master teacher on a weekly basis. When discussing her peers who are also completing independent study she stated, “I can tell a lot of people are in there for bullying.” Overall Tina reported enjoying her independent study coursework. She also believes her peers are succeeding in a nontraditional school environment. She asserted, “You can just look at people and tell by the way they act; they just feel so comfortable over there, and they seem like they’re happier over there.” Monica discussed how she thought about choosing independent study during her junior year. She reported that the negative reactions of students to her status as an LGBTQ student “put [her] in a bad spot for a while.” As she weighed her options she considered the pros and cons of leaving school. She stated a negative impact of leaving school would be “not seeing the people I’m used to seeing everyday” and continued, “but the pros were just being able to get away from it.” The prevalence of negative experiences at school appears to be common enough to cause participants to consider leaving school for an alternative educational setting.

GSA advisors and principals also commented on the increased number of independent study students. When asked about participants discussing a desire to pursue independent study, Mr. Arnold reported that independent study has been growing by approximately 100 students each year. However, he asserted that most students only pursue independent study for a short time to “catch up” on credits. Later he disclosed, “Sometimes it might be the big school isn’t working out for them, but that’s usually not the case.” Mr. Ford expressed frustration with

independent study options because he does not believe students learn the skills needed after high school. Instead, Mr. Ford wished his LGBTQ students would continue to attend traditional school. He suggested, “Let’s link arms and get through this together.” However, he quickly stopped himself and admitted, “The other side of me realizes it’s deeper than that – absolutely deeper than that.” In the middle of the school year, Ms. Michelson lamented that several of her active GSA members left school to pursue independent study, thereby disrupting the leadership of her club. Ms. Wilson also shared that one of her most active members was required to attend independent study due to his failing grades. Although several factors including grades and family life likely impacted these students’ decision to leave school, most of the students were also identified as having negative experiencing at school due to their status as an LGBTQ individual. It is not difficult to imagine the viscous cycle in which students may find themselves if they are bullied, experience mental health concerns, and have difficulty with their grades. Coupled with these challenges are students’ views that bullying will always be present, thereby exacerbating feelings of hopelessness. Student participants agreed on the pervasiveness of bullying at their schools as well as the negative impact of bullying experiences.

Born this way: Unequal acceptance between LGBTQ individuals. During the course of the study, participants often talked about the differential treatment among LGBTQ students. Ms. Brown first discussed the differences between lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students. She recounted the reaction of teachers to a transgender student who recently joined their school. She explained:

We recently received a transgender youth where the sexuality was in question at the time of birth so the parents had to make a choice...and he’s now choosing the other choice. Our teachers really get it, so I think if they’re getting that they’ll also get sexual

orientation. That you are born gay, it's not something you choose, it's something you're born with.

Jordan concurred as he discussed his interactions with teachers when he arrived at his new school. Since his legal name has not yet been changed, his female birth name appears on his teachers' roll call sheets. Upon arrival, he went to each teacher and asked him or her to call him Jordan. He remembered, "All my teachers have been fine with it. I can't think of a single teacher that's done anything about it. They're just kinda like 'alright' and they write down my name and that's it." According to Ms. Brown, being given the background knowledge that Jordan's parents had to make a choice regarding his gender identity caused teachers to be supportive. However, she lamented that school staff still view sexual orientation as a "choice" and not related to genetics or inborn preferences.

In addition to the varied acceptance between LGB and transgender students, many participants discussed the differences between lesbian and gay male students. Ms. Brown stated, "My lesbian girls feel very comfortable holding hands on campus. Even giving a slight peck to each other or sitting together being affectionate as any other heterosexual couple would be." Ms. Sanchez added, "The girls that are out, they're kissin' and huggin'." Ms. Michelson too shared, "We have [lesbian] couples all over campus." Tina added, "I have a lot of friends who are lesbians, and they don't get [harassed] a lot." Advisors and students alike agreed that females who identify as lesbian or bisexual tend to feel comfortable being open and affectionate at school.

Although lesbian and bisexual females were described as being open on campus, participants described a stark contrast for gay and bisexual male students. Monica asserted, "Guys are treated horrible. They get the worst. They actually get physically harassed. They get

all the mean name calling, like I guess they get more than we do.” Apollo estimated, “There’s quite a bit of guys that are gay, I’m pretty sure.” However, when asked if any of them were a couple he responded, “Not that I know of, no. And if so it probably isn’t at school.” Tina simply reflected, “I’ve never seen guys who are out [at school].” She continued, “Actually the guys, they’re the most bullied, like Jim who is in the club, he’s been REALLY bullied because he’s gay.” Monica predicted what would happen if a new openly gay male came to her school. She foretold, “A lot of guys would harass them or verbally assault them, just be really really mean to them.” Because of the intensity of the harassment, Monica theorized that the gay student would likely end up getting in trouble or possibly suspended. Each of the advisors also discussed the lack of support for male students. Ms. Brown stated, “For the men, it’s not there.” Ms. Michelson too explained that being a lesbian was almost seen as cool. However, she reported, “But the boys – oh no! Not cool. And I don’t think that’s fair.” Ms. Sanchez hypothesized:

I really feel like if two guys were together out holding hands they would probably be harassed. That’s just my sense of it is that boys are not as free to be [open]. So I don’t notice public displays of affection between men.

While the participants generally agreed about the differences between how male and female LGBTQ students are treated, they offered varying explanations for the disparity. Tina suggested lesbians are more accepted because “They fit in with the guys, because it’s a sexist thing that it’s more acceptable to be a guy than a girl.” Ms. Michelson offered, “I think it’s the boy/boy fantasy [compared to] the girl on girl fantasy.”

Ms. Sanchez shared a similar perspective:

I think that's indicative of the larger culture. I think that men, teenage boys especially, are so worried about how to be a man, and what does that mean, and I think there's more of a stigma associated with being [a gay or bisexual male]

Ms. Sanchez continued describing the difference between LGBTQ students by saying, "The more effeminate gay man stands out." She asserted that less effeminate gay males were definitely on her campus, but she wondered why they are never open with their sexuality and do not choose to participate in the GSA. Ms. Wilson also highlighted how stereotypical LGBTQ behaviors may cause more resistance. While referring to one of her gay male students she said, "He's very effeminate. And I think that kinda turns a lot of people off." In a similar vein, Carissa discussed how her personality tends to prevent her from experiencing more severe harassment. She alleged, "People have said that I don't exaggerate what I am. Some groups they just like to be really really open with [their sexuality] so I think it makes others uncomfortable." When hearing about how other LGBTQ students are treated, she exclaimed, "It really shocked me. I was like 'What? They really picked on you?' Because I'm so accepted. So I forget how it is for the others."

"I don't blame them": Heteronormative societal views. Even though LGBTQ students readily recounted their negative school experiences, some of them simultaneously made excuses for their peers' unsupportive behavior. Many of their comments appear to reflect the heteronormative views of their society where being gay is seen as a deviant option. For instance, when pondering why heterosexual classmates make negative comments about students who participate in the GSA, Monica allowed, "They're just scared I guess. The typical couple is a boy and girl. It's kinda different to see same-sex couples at school and they're not used to it." She continued, "I mean, I don't blame them. It's new." Carissa suggested that gay students

should be intentional when presenting themselves as an LGBTQ student. Her rationale for this was “so people are ready if need be, to prepare themselves to act friendly.” Monica insisted the burden was placed on LGBTQ couples because they “just need to learn how to control their affection because certain students don’t approve.” She continued by suggesting LGBTQ students would be treated better if they downplayed their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. She remarked, “If you don’t draw attention to yourself, but you’re still ok with who you are, you won’t get messed around with that much...as long as you don’t put it out there.” Comments such as these appear to represent a heteronormative belief that heterosexuality is the “correct” or “normal” orientation, and those who are different must make others more comfortable by not being too visible.

In addition to dismissing the intolerant actions of heterosexual peers and placing the burden on LGBTQ students to “fit in,” participants also minimized the negative interactions with their peers. Jordan hesitated, “They shoved my shoulder, but it didn’t really affect me that much because it kinda...it felt more like a pat cause it was usually around a teacher, or a teacher was in the vicinity, so they wouldn’t do anything.” He also disclosed “I get called faggot sometimes, but that’s about it.” Apollo reported how he often heard peers making fun of one of his gay male friends. Although he stated they would frequently make comments about his sexuality to get a laugh from others, he defended them by saying “It’s not like they do it outta ill. It’s not like something they would do to like hurt him.”

Some participants described a more ambiguous situation when their friends engaged in joking behavior related to LGBTQ topics. Tina explained, “Whenever I come out, people will get really weirded [sic] out and stuff, but I don’t even consider it bullying.” She explained, “I mean there are some things that people say that are supposed to be jokingly to their gay friends

that might not actually feel so right...I mean everybody thinks ‘Oh, well you’re gay so I can say this because we’re friends.’” Carissa asserted how she views jokes about LGBTQ students as a sign of friendship. She stated, “My friends, they even make gay jokes and stuff. And I don’t take it offensively or anything, cause I know they’re kidding.” In fact she insisted, “It just like feels good to know that they accept it enough to where we can all mess around.” Participant comments expressed above are indicative of a heteronormative society where LGBTQ individuals are viewed as deviant and homophobic behaviors are seen as understandable.

You’re going to be bullied summary. Throughout the study, participants expressed the belief that all students suffer from bullying behaviors, regardless of their sexuality or gender identity. However, participants also articulated that anti-gay content is often the focus of bullying directed at LGBTQ students. Thankfully physical altercations were rarely reported, but verbal harassment was a common occurrence for the students in this study. An interesting topic surfaced as participants excused and minimized the behavior of their perpetrators. In addition, participants discussed the sometimes drastic differences between how subgroups within the LGBTQ population are treated. The preceding comments provide examples of the inflexible nature of bullying behaviors, thus answering one component of the first research question: What are the unique experiences of LGBTQ students in this district.

For the Bible Tells Me So: Prevalence of Religion

An additional theme identified when investigating the school experiences of LGBTQ students was the impact of conservative religious beliefs. Similar to their perspective on bullying, participants rarely expressed a belief that improvement would occur regarding how religious individuals interact with LGBTQ individuals. Throughout the course of this study, virtually every participant discussed how religious beliefs impact acceptance of LGBTQ

individuals. In the section that follows, participant responses illustrate the effect of religion across several settings. The first segment contains comments about the overall influence of conservative beliefs, which participants link to lack of acceptance for LGBTQ students. Next, participants provide examples of how their families' religious views frequently have a negative impact on their ability to accept their sexual orientation or gender identity. While family belief systems are not directly related to the first research question regarding LGBTQ students' experiences at school, the level of support (or lack thereof) expressed at home likely influences how positive and negative school experiences are perceived by the student. The discussion becomes more explicit as LGBTQ students respond to religious symbols in classrooms, evangelical school staff, and intolerant religious students. Finally, this section concludes with examples of how LGBTQ students have been positively impacted by individuals with liberal religious beliefs.

“Bible thumping crazy”: Religion and lack of acceptance. Early on in this study, participants were asked to articulate components that negatively impacted their school experience. Strong consensus appeared as nearly every student referenced how conservative religious beliefs hindered acceptance of LGBTQ individuals. For instance, when discussing aspects that make her school less welcoming, Tina asserted, “Religion plays a big part.” Julia hypothesized, “I think that the Christian people are probably opposed to it because they follow the Bible...where it’s only a man and a woman.” A more dramatic stance was illustrated by Jordan, who reflected, “A lot of Christians here are really...I’m trying to think of a word that isn’t offensive....they’re just really Bible-thumping crazy.” He continued by discussing the contradictions inherent in enforcing the part of scripture related to same-sex relationships while disregarding other verses in the book of Leviticus. He referenced Leviticus 11:9-8 and joked,

“No playing with pigskins – there goes football. No one pays attention to those. Those, *those* are silly.” Lisa portrayed dismal interactions between LGBTQ students and religious individuals. She shared, “People that are very religious, they kinda like separate themselves for you. They don’t want talk to you or be around you. They act like it’s a disease, like it’s contagious. It’s sad.” Students provided examples of how religion impacts LGBTQ acceptance both locally and on a national level. Apollo offered, “Some churches I know that as soon as you walk in there are a lot of people who are just like ‘get out!’” Meanwhile, Tina exclaimed, “The Westborough Church, wow, that’s like really crazy, saying that God hates fags.” Students in this study discussed previous experiences with religious people in a variety of contexts, both inside and outside of school. Their exposure to societal beliefs that are often unsupportive likely impacts their experiences within the social institution of an education system.

The family that prays together stays together: Impact of family religion. In addition to discussing how religion influences LGBTQ acceptance on a large scale, participants also lamented about how religious conservatism impacts their familial interactions. These challenging experiences within the family unit may exacerbate a student’s negative experiences at school. For instance, students living in unsupportive home environments may rely heavily on their peers and teachers for positive experiences. Therefore, negative experiences at school are likely intensified when students are unable to communicate openly with their parents or guardians.

Several participants provided examples of how their family’s religious beliefs caused a lack of acceptance of their LGBTQ identity. For example, Julia quickly predicted how her family would respond if they knew she identified as bisexual: “Well, I know my grandma – my great grandma – and probably my grandma wouldn’t like it because they’re Christian.” She

offered no additional reasoning for her family's disapproval other than their religious beliefs. Carissa, whose mother did not initially know she is a lesbian, remembered, "My mom, she's REALLY against it. She's always saying like 'Oh, I thank God that you guys aren't like that.'" However, when Carissa disclosed her sexual identity to her grandmother, who serves as her legal guardian, her grandmother turned to her Catholic beliefs to remedy Carissa's attraction. She recounted, "I told her that I am lesbian, and she put me into catechism, for two years." Similarly, she reported her family planned to have an intervention about her sexual orientation. She admitted she resorted to deception in order to avoid religious interventions: "The next night I had to like look them in the eyes and I had to lie and be like 'I'm not gay.'" Carissa made additional attempts to successfully "come out" to her family because she did not want to hide her true identity. During her final interview, Carissa shared a text message she received from her mother stating her disapproval of Carissa's sexual orientation. Among the religious tirade was the statement "You will burn in Hell." Carissa shared how her mother's hurtful comments had caused her to feel depressed. Monica also stated, "A few of my friends are very religious, and their parents would kinda disown them if they were to do that." Throughout the study, several participants reported difficulty caused by incongruence between their parents' religious beliefs and their status as an LGBTQ individual.

Participants also articulated how their experience as an LGBTQ individual challenged their own religious beliefs. Lisa lamented about how her own spirituality has been altered:

I can't even go to church tomorrow...ever. I break down in church. My grandma went to church with me one time and she started praying for me and I'm just thinking "I'm this way". It just broke me down and I started crying in church.

She continued by discussing an interaction with her father: “He said that [being gay is] a sin, and that people shouldn’t be like that. It really hurt me when he said all those things. I’m just like (heavy sigh), he has just no idea.” Although Lisa expressed difficulty integrating her religious background and her sexual orientation, other participants maintained an ability to support LGBTQ individuals in unison with their faith. Apollo explained his belief:

It’s like God loves everybody. Even though you may not feel the way he wants you to or be the way he made you. You can still be gay, straight, transsexual, bisexual, or anything, and you can still, if you believe in it, you can still more than likely go to heaven.

While Apollo’s belief system allows him to accept LGBTQ individuals, other participant likely feel condemned due to their families’ conservative religious beliefs.

Student participants and school administrators also commented on how parents with religious convictions often oppose GSA-related events. Jordan reflected on parents who typically dispute LGBTQ awareness days and GSA activities remembering, “The religious [parents] actually, we’ve had problems with them before.” Mr. Charles also reported being contacted by several parents prior to his school’s observance of Day of Silence. According to dayofsilence.com, this is a day when “Students across the country vow to take a form of silence to call attention to the silencing effect of anti-LGBT bullying and harassment in schools.” Mr. Charles discussed parental reaction by stating, “There were some parents concerned that it doesn’t follow along the same lines of their thought.” He added, “Some families are going to take the Biblical approach or view on this particular topic.” Mr. Charles stated that these parents were not only displeased with the Day of Silence activity but they also “weren’t happy that the

GSA group existed.” Parents who express religious conservatism not only impact their children who are LGBTQ, they also have the power to negatively influence GSA events at school.

One nation under God: Religious symbols at school. In addition to religious views explicitly voiced by parents, implicit religious views are often present on the school campuses. For instance, during classroom observations, several teachers had prominent Christian displays on their walls and near their desk. Although the district’s rule of thumb is to only allow small symbols on their desk, large crosses, Passion of the Christ posters, and other conspicuous Christian symbols were visible from my observation position in the back of the classroom. Additionally, one school’s daily bulletin regularly included a footer reading “‘Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good work and glorify your Father in heaven’ Matt. 5:1.” When this was discussed with Dr. Snyder, he shook his head in disappointment and asserted, “Not appropriate.” At another school, a suburban with prominent “Jesus is Lord” decals on all sides was frequently parked in front of the school during lunch. I came to realize the occupants were passing out pizza and talking to students. During a GSA meeting, I overheard a student discuss how the owners of the vehicle were not forceful, but they typically broached a conversation about Christianity. I was then flabbergasted as Mr. Charles stated, “They are part of our S3 grant. They work internally with our students. We refer kids to work with them.” The S3 grant, as discussed in the literature review, is a federal grant aimed at improving school climate and subsequently student achievement. Examples such as these illustrate the pervasiveness of both explicit and implicit religious beliefs on the campuses in this district.

Although students who share teachers' religious beliefs may appreciate a display of Christian symbols, participants in this study expressed how they are impacted by religious displays. For instance, Jordan asserted:

I don't like the thought of being inside a building with all the symbolism and stuff. It's kinda creepy. Especially because a lot of people that put stuff up like that are kinda closed-minded about the way that I do things.

The occasional overt display of religious beliefs not only contradicts the district's general guidelines, but it specifically causes at least one LGBTQ student in this study to feel uncomfortable.

Similarly, Lisa expressed how her teachers' religious beliefs may impact their ability to accept LGBTQ students. She wondered aloud, "My PE teacher, she's really nice. But who knows if she's like really religious and defines [being LGBTQ] as a sin." During a later interview, Lisa asserted, "Some of my teachers seem like they would be kinda homophobic. So I could expect [a lack of support] from them." When questioned about how teachers presented as homophobic, she alleged, "Well a lot of them are like really into church." Lisa's direct link between religion and homophobic behavior was a common view expressed by participants. Again Lisa referenced the impact of religion when trying to hypothesize about supportive and non-supportive teachers. She discussed age and generational differences, asserting young teachers may be more accepting because "There are some older [teachers] that are like my grandma. Some grandmas are all like 'You need Jesus.'" Lisa clearly relied on religious beliefs to ascertain which of her teachers would be supportive of her as an LGBTQ student.

While students in this study frequently guessed about their teachers' lack of support, as an advisor, Ms. Brown provided an explicit example. She stated, "There's some teachers still

that are telling the students it's wrong to be gay." Ms. Sanchez hesitantly shared her perspective by saying, "I think, this is gonna sound really really awful, but I think that teachers who are very religious and who go to church are probably less tolerant." She continued with, "Some of our staff are very religious and I think that's hard." She provided a metaphor about the inability to separate one's beliefs from their actions at school by suggesting:

If you're hard-core about anything, I don't know if you can be objective. I mean about anything. Like if you're all about saving the polar bears, that's great, but I don't know if you can look at other areas, because you become laser-focused. And I think there's probably an element of that [with our teachers].

When Ms. Michelson was asked about her principal's apparent lack of support for LGBTQ students, she wondered aloud, "I don't know if it's an [Adventist] thing. Are the [Adventists] highly against it?" Like many students, Ms. Michelson's first assumption was that there is a direct link between one's religious beliefs and a lack of acceptance of LGBTQ students.

Ms. Brown expressed a clear conviction that teachers were allowed to have their own religious beliefs, but that "proselytizing should not be in the classroom." When working with teachers, Ms. Brown stated: You have to know where does your opinion end and where does your right end and the student's begin." She reported:

People say "Well my right as a Christian is being taken away" and it's like "No, your right is to educate. When you're in a public school, you're a public school teacher and you've got kids of all different religions and races, and that's not your place to impose your religious beliefs."

Mr. Ford shared an experience with one of the teachers on his staff. He asserted, "She's a good teacher, but she struggles with the juxtaposition between her beliefs and some of the kids'

choices.” Administrators, advisors, and students alike illustrated how teachers’ religious beliefs influence their acceptance of LGBTQ individuals. Religious overtones are constantly apparent on these campuses from the daily recital of the pledge of allegiance and the phrase “One nation under God,” to the Christian displays in class. It is understandable that LGBTQ students often feel uncomfortable on their campuses with both overt and subtle religious symbolism.

What would Jesus do?: Intolerant religious students. Throughout the study, several participants commented on the link between religious conservatism and lack of support from teachers and administrators. However, a few examples were provided about how religious students treat LGBTQ individuals. When describing the school environment, Ms. Sanchez discussed the difference between the safety provided in her classroom as compared to the general school campus: “The larger setting, when you move out to the school, it’s the religious conservative groups that really hammers into these kids ‘You’re going to hell.’” Tina recounted an incident when all of the school clubs were recruiting members at the beginning of the year by staffing a table and handing out flyers. “I remember when we were doing our GSA stand for people to sign up and stuff, the Christian club came over and put one of their little pamphlets on our table and said ‘that’s not cool.’” Students and advisors alike described how Christian students verbalized homophobic beliefs.

Another example was provided when Ms. Sanchez attempted to influence how a religious student viewed the LGBTQ community. As her GSA club was concluding their lunch meeting, a freshman student came into the room for his next period. She relayed his reaction:

He was like “Do you KNOW what that club is about?” and I said, “Yeah, I advise that club.” He was just shocked. And I said, “Dude, where’s this coming from?” And he told me his church stuff and I kinda flipped it on him and said, “What do you think Jesus

would do? Would Jesus toss people to the side? Aren't you supposed to love everybody? Isn't judgment reserved for God?" And I said, "You know as a teacher I accept everybody and I gotta love everybody."

While Ms. Sanchez struggled to influence her Christian student's view of LGBTQ student, Ms. Wilson offered a more positive reaction. She rejoiced, "I think it's fabulous that there are [students] on campus who genuinely are allies to [LGBTQ students] and don't care even though most people in the central valley grew up in the church and had these opposite ideas." Although examples were provided of religious students who expressed intolerance of the LGBTQ community, Ms. Wilson provided hope that not all religious students hold homophobic views.

Love wins: LGBTQ-affirming faith. Many examples were provided about the negative impact of religion on LGBTQ individuals; however, a few examples were provided of faiths that affirm LGBTQ individuals. For instance, two of the advisors discussed how their faith has influenced their desire to serve as GSA advisors. Ms. Brown stated, "I think it's ok to say I'm a Christian. For me this is why I started the [GSA] club; it's an outpouring of my faith." Ms. Wilson described a striking example of how one's faith can change over time. She admitted, "I was totally the super conservative religious high-schooler. Gays were going to hell and all that stuff because that's what I had learned all my life in my church." She discussed her spiritual journey at length as she gained autonomy and independence in college. Subsequently, she began investigating her values and learning more about LGBTQ individuals. She recounted: "Everything I'd learned up to that point was all negative and I thought, that's not the type of God I want to serve." She added:

I'd see church groups petitioning and setting up opportunities for going out and just kinda hating on [LGBTQ] people. I've changed my mind about those things and I kinda came

to the conclusion that God made people who they are and I don't think that God cares. I do believe that God made each person individually and I believe being gay is part of that. It's just who you are...hardwired into your genes. And I don't think God looks down on those people.

As Ms. Wilson started verbalizing her support with her friends and family, she was met with strong reactions. Her newfound support for LGBTQ people led her to start "speaking out when my friends who were all in a church at the time, talked negatively about those groups of people." She recounted how this caused her to lose friends. While she agonized over the loss of relationships, she was compelled to begin advocating for the LGBTQ community. Ms. Brown also shared negative reactions that many religious people have had about her participation as a GSA advisor:

I know I've been accused of almost promoting homosexuality. "You're almost promoting it Ms. Brown. How can you do that as a Christian?" And it's like, "I'm promoting these kids' rights and I don't consider it a sin." "You don't consider it a sin?" "No, I don't."

Both Ms. Wilson and Ms. Brown illustrated how their acceptance of LGBTQ students has caused religious individuals in their lives to question the authenticity of their faith.

Regarding positive interactions with teachers who are religious, Ms. Brown offered, "I've watched several of our staff really try to embrace it. I think it has been a challenge to their faith." She continued:

They are re-weaving their thinking and the stereotypes they grew up with. They're beginning to say, "This is not a denouncement from the faith in which I grew up. This is actually a reclaiming of the faith in which I grew up."

As an open LGBTQ student, Jordan felt accepted by a teacher he knew to be religious. He discussed how in the preceding school year teachers were given rainbow bracelets to wear as a sign of their support of LGBTQ students. Although the event was not a huge success, he remembered, “I don’t think many teachers took them because I didn’t see them on many [teachers]. I saw one on my PE teacher who helped me out of the bullying situation last year. And she’s Christian but she’s supportive.” Ms. Brown also indicated, “Ms. Berry, she’s very supportive. To her, faith has nothing to do with following some kind of preset arbitrary guidelines.” At another school, Mr. Ford revealed his personal convictions, stating, “My family is staunchly Catholic. The Catholic faith says that being homosexual is not a sin...it is the acting on it that is a sin.” However, he added, “With that said, there is not a kid on this campus that I wouldn’t stand in front of if they’re being attacked or I wouldn’t lay down for, or jump in the way of a car for.” When contemplating her principal’s behavior and religious beliefs, Ms. Sanchez reported, “It just doesn’t seem like he is holding his religion above the students. He’s principal first, I think.” Tina also commented, “I do know some Christians who are completely fine with it. They don’t see the big deal. And I know gay Christians.” While participants previously expressed negative interactions with religious individuals, several also commented on the positive experiences they had with religious teachers and students.

For the Bible tells me so summary. When discussing the negative aspects of their school environment, participants frequently cited religious beliefs as a reason for intolerance from family members, school staff, and peers. In addition, participants discussed how their own faith had been challenged because of their acceptance of an LGBTQ identity or as and ally to LGBTQ individuals. Ms. Sanchez articulated that she was keenly aware of how religious beliefs often impede acceptance of LGBTQ individuals, but she insisted, “I just don’t know what it’s

like to have a conviction about feeling like ‘Oh my gosh, everybody who is gay is going to hell.’” Ms. Michelson hoped for an alternative. She empathized, “I know religion is such a huge motivator here; we’re such a Bible belt here that I’d kinda like to know which churches are safe in the area. Because I know a lot of people feel disconnected because of that.” Although religion was typically discussed as a barrier to LGBTQ acceptance, a few hopeful examples were provided. For instance, Ms. Wilson discussed how her own faith had become more open and affirming, Ms. Brown suggested some religious teachers are supportive at her school, and students reported positive interactions with religious teachers and students. Given the abundant examples offered by participants, it is clear religion is an important component to consider when understanding the school experiences of LGBTQ students.

Section 2 – A Glimmer of Hope: Aspects Causing Change

Comments in this section continue to address the first research question related to understanding the school experience of LGBTQ students. While the first section identified aspects of school environments often viewed as constant, unchanging, and often negative, this section illustrates two areas that have the potential to improve LGBTQ students’ experience: leadership and GSA involvement. Unlike the preceding sections, which provided numerous examples of negative aspects of school experience, this section tends to be more balanced, illustrating participant comments about both positive and negative elements of school climate.

Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way: Role of Leadership.

Leadership is the first component discussed that is capable of causing change and increasing acceptance for LGBTQ students. Like many social institutions, the education system is organized in a hierarchical structure. Therefore, it is clear to see how individuals in leadership positions can greatly impact others. Findings in this section come from student and teacher

perspectives, as well as those who are in official leadership positions such as district administrators. In addition, participant observations and personal reflections contribute to the understanding of how effective and ineffective leadership impacts school climate for LGBTQ students. Information is presented about the district and principals' willingness to participate in this study, as well as their reactions to the study's implementation. Next, participants comment on the impact of leaders who are unsupportive and intolerant. These views are then contrasted with examples of teachers and administrators who are supportive and effective leaders. However, several participants discussed the vulnerability inherent in being a leader for a minority group. Finally, participants explained the importance of having suitable leaders in their GSA clubs.

Gatekeepers: Leadership from the top down. Throughout this study, the area superintendent and district superintendent served as strong advocates for LGBTQ students. Although they realized the subject matter might cause repercussions from parents and teachers, they willingly approved this project. When explaining their support, they referred to the guiding principles for the district, which include supporting students' physical and mental health in addition to their academic progress. While preparing for a GSA social event, one advisor was given inaccurate information regarding student permission slips and transportation. The morning of the event, the advisor learned about the problem, thus jeopardizing the attendance of several of her students at the social event. Dr. Snyder, working with the school principal, Mr. Charles, decided to break protocol and allow the students to participate without appropriate permission slips. When reflecting on the exception, Dr. Snyder summarized, "We needed to let it happen. We didn't want the procedure to get in the way. We took a risk there, I mean somebody could have gotten hurt and we could have been sued to death." However, he concluded, "it was the

right thing to do.” Examples such as these give weight to Dr. Snyder’s verbal support. Not only did he facilitate the study process, but he also willingly took a significant risk by allowing students to be transported to a GSA event without appropriate parental consent. His actions exemplified how an effective leader can improve the school experience for LGBTQ students.

Varying levels of support were voiced and displayed by school principals. At the beginning of this study, principals seemed hesitant to endorse or facilitate this study at their respective schools. When principals were contacted regarding classroom observations in October, I was frequently admonished not to speak directly with students. In fact, some of the classroom schedules also included a written statement that I was prohibited from interacting with students. At the end of the year, three of the four principals agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview. All of the principals discussed an initial hesitation in participating in the study. Some connected this project to the previous lawsuit in 2001 regarding a gay male student’s experience with discrimination in this district. For instance, Mr. Ford asserted, “There was the fear that we were going to drudge stuff up.” On the other hand, Mr. Arnold expressed a reaction to the initial study questions, which he felt had a negative skew. He disclosed:

It kinda smacked of you know “you’re guilty” rather than “I’m open-minded and I wanna see if there’s an issue.” The assumption was that there is this big problem, and so when you submitted the first thing and then we didn’t respond, that’s why.

When hypothesizing about principal attitudes, Dr. Snyder offered, “My perception would be that the principals were very much enmeshed in the ‘Let’s be careful with staff so we don’t ignite something that we can’t control or that would lead to a negative outcome.’” He continued by saying:

I didn't get push back from a belief standpoint. I got pushback from a very conservative procedurally kind of thing. Principals are trained to be very cautious with regard to what they say and what they do because you don't want to offend because if you offend you lose traction.

Although the principals seemed to be cautious initially, by the end of the study they expressed positive feelings regarding the study. Mr. Arnold surprised me by saying, "We appreciate you doing the study because it needs to be done." The principals' initial hesitation is understandable given the demanding job of managing a staff of 75-80 teachers who often hold differing views. Given their previous trepidation, their subsequent support of the project is especially rewarding.

In addition to serving as gatekeepers for this study, principal also set a tone among their teachers and staff regarding acceptance of LGBTQ students. In general, principals verbalized support for LGBTQ students. Mr. Ford said:

Kids can come talk to me. I'm never going to judge you. If you ask me for my opinion, I will try to do so in a non-judgmental way. If you ever just want to come in and talk or if you want to come in and be safe or if you want to come in and just get a smile or you need a hug or you need somebody to do some homework with you, if you need to be told you're loved that's part of our responsibility as adults.

Mr. Arnold discussed how he tried to influence his staff. He stated:

All that I can do is be a voice of reason, a voice of acceptance. And I say acceptance because I do not believe in tolerance. I'd like to move beyond tolerance.

So, that's one of the things I've really worked with my staff on. I want to move from tolerance to acceptance.

Although several principals stated they support LGBTQ students, it was disappointing during the final interviews to see that not one principal had a safe space sticker displayed in their office. As leaders of the school, even a small decision such as not displaying the safe space sticker can have a large impact on teachers and school staff.

GSA advisors discussed how their principals and school administrators set a tone for acceptance of LGBTQ students at school. Ms. Michelson stated, “You need a leadership that steers everybody in the right direction and I don’t think it’s going that way.” She added, “I know there’s people in administration that put a smile on their face but you can tell it’s like ‘Over my dead body.’” Ms. Brown, however, shared that she was pleased with her principals statements at the start of the year: “He did a really nice job at the beginning of the school year saying how important it was that we provide understanding and protection for our LGBTQ students. And that was really nice to hear.” Ms. Wilson also shared her impression of her principal: “My principal seems to be pretty supportive.” Among GSA advisors, the perception of principal support varied. At times principals seemed supportive and provided a strong direction toward acceptance of LGBTQ students while other GSA advisors felt their principals not only failed to express support but also lacked the ability to effectively lead the school staff toward acceptance.

Although the principals serve a significant role in the school atmosphere, other administrators are also heavily involved in LGBTQ issues. For instance, Monica reported how an administrator in charge of discipline failed to effectively handle her bullying situation. She remarked, “They said it was my fault for displaying it. They kinda just brushed it off.” She stated the administrator “didn’t want issues” and “didn’t really know how to handle it.” Additionally, she took the blame as an LGBTQ student and said “I guess we caused the problems because we were pretty much the only out couple at school.” Tina also indicated that the

administration at her school failed to effectively manage a situation for an LGBTQ friend. She recounted:

I told him he needed to bring his bullying experience to an administrator, and so after enough persistence with him he finally did. And I felt really bad because they didn't end up doing much about it. It was just like "Oh, you know, don't do it again" to the student. Before they even bothered to help him out with his bullies they sent him off to independent study because of his grades.

Ms. Brown asserted, "I think it is important for anyone in a leadership position to be aware that the students are there, whether they see them or not. That there is a need whether they know of it or not." As leaders, school administrators and principals play a crucial role in establishing a safe and supportive school environment for LGBTQ students. They should be encouraged to provide a positive and accepting example of how all students should be treated, regardless of a minority status.

Toeing the line: Teachers behaving poorly. During the middle of the school year, a significant event occurred during which a teacher at one of the schools made homophobic comments on a national webpage. He came under scrutiny because he identified himself as a high school teacher in his post. Apparently a local citizen became aware of the comments and emailed several district employees as well as the local newspaper to express his concerns about a teacher making such homophobic statements. As reported in the local newspaper, his comment read: "The hom osex uals [sic] will destroy you if you say anything against them. They have a Fascists agenda. They will stomp on you with their jackboots if you say anything against them. Period." The timing of these comments was potentially serendipitous as the schools each had a planned staff development day on Monday, following the Saturday on which the article was

published. However, according to the GSA advisors, the reaction and leadership from principals at each of the four high schools varied. Ms. Michelson exasperatedly shared, “On Monday we had a staff development meeting and nobody brought it up. The administration did not bring it up. I was really expecting a huge, HUGE discussion over it.” Her frustration even caused her to encourage me to inform the district superintendent about the lack of leadership by her principal over the matter. Ms. Wilson also reported, “Nothing has been said by our current administration to any of us.” She hypothesized that the principal failed to discuss the topic because the teacher who made the homophobic comment was present in the staff development meeting and the principal was attempting to prevent negative feelings toward that teacher. However, by the final interview Ms. Wilson still reported, “Nobody’s mentioned anything. It was like a moment of (gasp) and then they moved on just like people normally do. There hasn’t been anything else.” Although the principal at Ms. Brown’s school at least addressed the event, she was disappointed with his stance as the leader of the school. She stated:

In my opinion, his response was not the sign of a leader. As a principal I would have said, “We are public school employees. Your personal opinions about the rights of races marrying, your political views, etc. should not be expressed here.”

Ms. Sanchez was the only advisor who expressed satisfaction with her principal’s reaction. She reported, “My principal was like ‘Gosh, that’s just not a good thing’ and ‘Why do people do that?’” Although these comments were made to Ms. Sanchez in a personal conversation, she implied that her principal presented a similar reaction during their staff development meeting. When school leaders fail to effectively respond to inappropriate and intolerant comments, they risk setting a precedent that such behavior is acceptable.

When discussing the general attitude of teachers at their school, several students expressed dissatisfaction with their teacher's behavior. Lisa bluntly stated, "Some of the staff here can be pretty abusive." Tina experienced a situation when a peer made an anti-gay comment in class. She asserted, "I had to push a teacher to give a referral for talking smack about the GSA. And I think he was just uncomfortable doing it because of the subject." She detailed the situation with the student:

He said exactly "We shouldn't let faggots have a club." And so that's when I said that's not acceptable. Because I saw that it went by for a whole minute, and when I didn't see my teacher giving out a referral, I said something, because that's not right.

When discussing how teachers treat LGBTQ students, Julia stated, "There are some teachers who would like give you a stink eye" and Lisa asserted teachers tend to be uncomfortable talking about LGBTQ topics. She added, "Like I said, 'I'm involved in the GSA' and some teachers are like 'Oh...Ok.' You'll get a weird reaction. They don't want to talk about it anymore."

While students recognized how school personnel were hesitant to talk about LGBTQ topics, they asserted teachers should be doing more. Apollo stated, "If teachers have a problem with it, then they should be the more mature ones." Tina described an incident when she wanted to conduct a Day of Silence at her middle school. She remembered:

I got called into the office and I was really scared. I could tell the administrator felt so awkward talking about it with me. He was like, "So this is toward...?" And I'm like "Gay rights." And he was like "Oh...Oh...ok (sheepishly)." I'm like I'm a 7th grader and you're a 40-year-old man; this shouldn't be that big of an issue.

Although teachers and administrators may not be comfortable engaging LGBTQ students in conversations about GSA activities, they typically do not express blatant anti-gay comments.

Ms. Sanchez articulated, “People who are against the LGBTQ community, I think they know it’s politically incorrect to say it.” Jordan furthered this sentiment by saying teachers will “say whatever they can say without getting in trouble.” He explained some teachers “don’t do anything offensive to people. But they’ll make off-handed remarks that they don’t think is going to get them in trouble. But it’s still offensive.” Unfortunately less explicit homophobic behavior is still present in these high schools. As leaders of the school, teachers and administrators should be encouraged to set the appropriate tone regarding acceptance of LGBTQ students.

Lead by example: Supportive teachers. Teachers play a vital role in school climate. Previous research has indicated that students’ behaviors toward LGBTQ students typically mimic teacher behavior. Therefore, teachers’ tendency to intervene in anti-LGBTQ situations and provide explicit support for LGBTQ students can dramatically influence the overall school climate. Monica conveyed positive experiences with some teachers. She stated:

I’ve had a few teachers who are completely cool with it. They’ll get students in trouble if they call you fag in class or use those words. They’re very strict about that stuff. And they’re very open if you want to talk to them.

When asked how many teachers she felt were supportive and accepting of her as an LGBTQ student she said a total of six teachers – which she felt was a decent amount. Jordan, too, found some of his teachers enforced punishment when students made comments such as “that’s so gay”. He detailed his teachers’ behavior:

Someone would say “faggot” or something along those lines and they would usually say something like “Don’t say that in my classroom, I don’t really want you saying it anywhere else, but I don’t have any control over you outside of my classroom, but don’t

say it in here.” And they were really cool about it the way that they just told ‘em to shut up.

He even reported how his teacher’s reaction had a positive effect on him. “I was kinda grinning in my chair. I was like ‘Yes!’” Apollo, a straight ally, had a difficult time deciding if teachers were generally supportive. He wavered, “All the teachers I’ve had over the four years have always been supportive of it. Like they don’t neglect it; they don’t like support it. Like some of them support it and some of them, they kinda support it.” Jordan also reflected, “I think some teachers have really good intentions; they just don’t know how to quite show it yet.”

Several advisors also shared how their colleagues were supportive of LGBTQ students and the GSA club. Ms. Wilson shared:

We’ve had a lot of support, I mean any time we send emails out teachers are like “This is great that you’re doing this.” We had A LOT of support for Day of Silence. We had emails from teachers saying “This is fantastic, I’m so glad you’re doing this. We’re totally behind you.”

Ms. Michelson also reported having teacher support at her school. She estimated, “I’d say 7 out of 10 teachers would say ‘Good for you! Awesome’ and just about 30% say ‘Why she’s doing this?’” Ms. Sanchez made a similar estimation:

I’d say that 15-20%, maybe it’s actually 30% of teachers are rolling their eyeballs, like “Oh my gosh.” I remember comments like “Oh we have to teach gay stuff in school now” when they passed that law a couple years ago for social studies.

Although all of the advisors suggested a fraction of teachers would express anti-LGBTQ views, several of them discussed how their friends demonstrated support. Ms. Wilson reported “I have a group of girl colleagues that we all hang out at lunch and I mentioned that I’m starting the

GSA, and I've had countless people say 'We'd love to help. We'd love to be a part of anything you do.'" Ms. Wilson's comment was confirmed when three additional teachers attended their first GSA club meeting and openly expressed their support for LGBTQ students. Ms. Michelson simply stated, "Well, my group of teachers are very supportive." She expanded that she only spends time with the teachers she knows are "safe." Examples such as these provide hope that teachers are willing to be open and vocalize their support for LGBTQ students.

Strong convictions precede great actions: Leadership within GSA club. In addition to having strong leaders in the administration and school staff, effective leaders are needed to run the GSA. Ms. Wilson explained, "Even though the GSA is a student-led organization, they're high schoolers and they still need a leader." Many of the advisors discussed how their role as an advisor puts them in a dangerous position. Ms. Brown shared how she was called into the office because she displayed signs on a Spirit Day – a day when individuals are encouraged to wear purple to honor LGBTQ students who have been bullied or completed suicide. The administration reprimanded her because she did not receive prior approval to post the signs. She rebutted that no one ever goes through the process of getting approval before posting club signs. Eventually Ms. Brown had to recruit the assistance of her union leader who asserted that the school could not single Ms. Brown out for her participation in LGBTQ-related activities. Ms. Michelson also described concern that her involvement in the GSA club has become a divisive topic:

I've NEVER had a letter of complaint about me, my teaching...ANYTHING. I got called in right after I started the club and the administrator says there's a letter sent anonymously. There's not even a signature on it. Saying I do this wrong, I do that wrong. All this stuff that I do in the classroom that is bad. And I've never had anything

happen like that. And then I started adding 2 and 2 together and I realized I just got two kids suspended for saying [homophobic comments], I started the GSA club and all the sudden anonymously I have this kinda hate letter. It was very hateful this letter.

She summarized, "I'm kinda freaked out by the whole thing." As a new advisor, Ms. Wilson foretold, "I can handle the storm that will come. One thing that I think makes me a better teacher is that I don't fear losing my job." Even though negative responses to her involvement in the GSA club had not occurred, Ms. Wilson was preparing herself to face an onslaught of disapproval. In an environment where teachers are known to make both explicit and implicit homophobic remarks, the leadership of the GSA advisor is crucial to the success of the GSA. Although most participants expressed extreme satisfaction with their GSA advisor, Monica disclosed that her club was suffering in part due to her advisor. She asserted the club needed, "a stronger leader...someone who is more in-tune with the club, who will spend time with it."

Student leaders also play a vital role in the effectiveness of a GSA club. During a GSA meeting early in the school year, members at one school gave impromptu speeches as they bid for leadership positions in their club. Each of the students discussed their intention and desire to reduce bullying on their campus. Although a strong leader was selected for the position of president, she left school to pursue independent study at the semester break. Ms. Michelson discussed how her club began to lose steam and focus when three of her members in leadership positions left school. At the beginning of the second semester the club elected a new president, but Ms. Michelson shared, "They elected Paul. He's a good kid, he's just not a strong leader." Paul's under-developed leadership skills were apparent in a meeting I attended in March when he was unable to effectively control the members. He often looked hesitant and relied on Ms. Michelson to direct the students. Jordan and Lisa also described how their president is very busy

and does not regularly attend GSA meetings. They lamented that her absence prevents them from accomplishing more as a GSA. However Ms. Michelson discussed how student leadership during the second year of her club had improved from their first year. She asserted:

I think we set up a good chain of command so when they come in they kinda take over and they've got the minutes and they've got the secretary and so they're coming up with a lot of great ideas. Last year I felt like I kept putting too much input, but these kids have lots of ideas.

Ms. Wilson also discussed the difficulty between setting an example as an advisor and allowing students to take on leadership roles. She admitted, "It was a little discouraging with Day of Silence, just having no involvement from the kids. They said they were going to come make signs and they'd never show up." Ms. Brown expressed similar sentiments about how her club members often want to organize GSA events but then fail to follow through. Because of these experiences, both Ms. Wilson and Ms. Brown discussed a desire to work with their student leadership. Ms. Wilson reported that she planned to meet with her leadership team bi-weekly, stating, "I really wanna start the year next year with 'these are the expectations 'cause as an advisor, this is not my club. You guys want to do stuff, you guys decide.'" Ms. Brown also took some responsibility for challenges with her student leadership explaining, "I guess we as adults have not clearly defined what it means to be a leader." She described her desire to offer leadership training where her GSA students learn about the importance of being a leader. She stated, "I have several times thought if anything we could offer is if you're going to be a club officer, these are the things you need to be able to do." In several of the clubs, advisors admitted their student leaders were sometimes ineffective. Therefore, they were sometimes required to take a more active role as an advisor.

Lead, follow, or get out of the way summary. When investigating school climate for LGBTQ students it became clear that leadership is a crucial component of promoting equality for all students. As school leaders, principals, administrators, and teachers set an important example of how LGBTQ students should be treated. Additionally, GSA advisors are subject to personal attacks and punishment for their willingness to lead their clubs. Great leaders such as these risk personal retributions in an effort to create positive changes for LGBTQ students. When discussing the emergent theme of leadership with Dr. Snyder, he stated, “Well the good thing there is they’re saying leadership has a chance to have impact. Which is a good place to be ‘cause that’s really the only tool we’ve got.” Effective leadership is often the hallmark of significant changes in societal views, and it is an important component to improving school climate in this district.

Birds of a Feather Flock Together: Participation in GSA Club

A second aspect capable of producing change in this district is the presence of GSA clubs. Although LGBTQ students reported negative experiences with both students and school personnel, they often rejoiced about their school’s GSA club. Throughout the study, participants were asked to comment on their level of involvement with the GSA club, their decision to join the GSA club, and the impact of participating in the GSA club. By investigating positive experiences such as connections with other LGBTQ students in GSA clubs, a more thorough understanding of school climate for LGBTQ students was obtained. In the section below, participants discuss the positive benefits of a designated safe space, the camaraderie with other GSA members, the membership changes during the course of this study, and the occasional negative effects of GSA involvement.

“This is THE safe space”: Positive impact of GSA involvement. Since student participants were all recruited because of their participation in their school’s GSA club, it is not surprising that many students readily discussed the impact of their GSA participation. Tina discussed how attending GSA meetings is reassuring because “Once you walk through the door [to the club], you’re in a safe area. You know that you’re going to be fine – that nobody is going to bully you.” Lisa recommended new LGBTQ students join their GSA, saying, “I think they should join this group because everyone here is supportive. Not entirely the staff or the students at this school, but THIS group you can feel safe around. This is THE safe space.” Monica too asserted, “It’s a good atmosphere. We’re very comfortable. It’s very nice.” Carissa’s school established a GSA in the year preceding this study. She delighted, “We finally got the club! I feel like now people have a place to go, to hang out and get to know everyone.” Tina, who started the school year as her GSA’s president left school mid-year to pursue independent study. While discussing her enjoyment of independent study, she stated she missed participating in the GSA. She asserted, “The only reason I would ever go back is because of the GSA.” In addition to positive comments about their GSA clubs, participants often displayed a noticeable shift in their demeanor as they happily described their participation in the club.

Students also remarked that their social circle was typically composed mostly of other GSA members. A common response from students was that they enjoyed being in the GSA because they got to know the supportive community at their school. Tina explained, “You get to make a lot of friends [in the club]. And if you have some friends you know you’ve got support.” When deciding to join the club Julia reported thinking, “I’m going to join it because I wanna meet more people.” Carissa stated that one of the best things about her GSA is “gaining new people who we never thought would be supportive. Another good thing is to have straight people

who are totally ok [with us] and they show it by joining.” Apollo concurred that attending the GSA allows him to know “who all aligns with [LGBTQ students] and who is ok with it.”

Monica also shared that not all members identified as LGBTQ. She stated, “Our president, she’s straight, and like most of the members are straight. They’re just our friends and they’re there to support us. Tina shared, “A lot of us were actually not friends at all, we just did not like each other. But once we were in that room it was like ‘Oh hey, what’s up. Glad you came.’” These participants’ responses speak to the deep impact of establishing friendships with other students who are supportive.

In addition to the positive impact of social relationships, students commented on GSA-sponsored activities. Jordan and Lisa discussed at length their participation in a regional conference called “Expression Not Suppression (ENS).” They reported the event was very helpful as they listened to keynote speakers and attended a variety of workshops. Jordan specified, “It was really cool cause not all of the workshops were like specifically LGBT-related. Like one of them I went to was like a meditation class on how to relieve stress and anxiety. It was really cool.” Lisa reported she found a workshop on students’ rights to be very helpful. Jordan recommended, “I’d say you should go cause you learn a lot and you meet a lot of really cool people.” Lisa exclaimed in response, “You DO! And then you get all inspired.” Another positive aspect was how intentional the organizers were when creating the event. Lisa squealed, “I love how the bathrooms weren’t gender related” (which allowed transgender students to feel comfortable). Monica and the president of her GSA attended another GSA-sponsored event that focused on leadership. She reflected, “It was cool. We meet a lot of cool people. And they just taught us about being a better GSA.” Student participants frequently discussed how GSA

activities and conferences provided them with an opportunity to meet supportive individuals and enhance their social support network.

Growing pains: Fluctuations in GSA attendance. The maturity of each GSA club differed significantly across schools. Unfortunately, low attendance at Central High School led the club to disband mid-year. While North High School had a well-established GSA club, the two remaining clubs were in the early stages of forming. In fact, one GSA began in the middle of the school year as a result of this study. The superintendent became aware of the need for a GSA at all of the high schools and therefore encouraged the principal to form a club. Typically student clubs in this district are a result of student request and petition. However, the superintendent decided students at the final high school should have the opportunity to participate in a GSA without having to wade through the logistics of starting a new club. The principal at this school, Mr. Charles, described the GSA club formation: “We were pressured to get a group started on campus. Our board members and my immediate supervisor pressured us to get a group started.” He discussed how the unconventional nature of starting a GSA on his campus led to some staff comments. He reported, “We got a little criticism from a couple staff members about why were WE trying to do this. Shouldn’t this come from students cause this is supposed to be student originated?” However, Ms. Michelson recounted how difficult the experience was when a student at her school attempted to start a GSA club. She was assisting the student who was obtaining necessary student signatures for a petition to start the club. She remembered, “I ushered him in, as he’s walking in one of my homeroom students says ‘Is he GAY?!? I’m not signing anything.’” As the club started to hold meetings she overheard a student saying, “I think we should start a gay-haters club.” She reported that difficulties began as soon as the club started. She gasped, “I’ve really started to see the terrible TERRIBLE discrimination

and undercurrent of hatred. It's awful." Thankfully at Stadium high, Ms. Wilson was encouraged to begin her school's GSA without the need to generate a student petition. Since students did not express interest prior to the start of her club, she admitted, "I have no clue what I'm expecting." Although Ms. Wilson expressed excitement about starting the club she worried, "I know it's going to be...it can be difficult at times. I've heard and I've read things. And I've heard some terrible horror stories."

It's not all rainbows and butterflies: Negative experience due to GSA involvement.

In addition to the positive impact of being involved in the GSA, participants also reported how being part of the GSA club occasionally produces additional harassment from students. For instance, several students discussed how their GSA signs and banners were ripped down from school property on multiple occasions. Lisa, who was initially unaware of these event stated "When I heard about [them being pulled down] it broke my heart and I'm like 'Are you serious?' That's like total discrimination against us." Across town, Ms. Michelson reported a similar experience with her GSA club and signs. She stated that her students in the club lamented "'Well, we want to display [the GSA banner], but we can't display it outside because people will tear it down' That's the feeling that even the signs for the meeting get torn down." Although this type of discrimination did not involve a direct exchange between GSA members and intolerant students, it was still impactful.

Participants discussed how GSA awareness events also produced some overt anti-gay comments from their peers and school staff. Ms. Brown as well as several students at one school remembered the significantly negative reaction when students participated in the Day of Silence during the 2011-2012 school year. A male student at this school felt very committed to his vow of silence and refused to talk in one of his classes. Instead of respecting his decision to be silent,

his teacher insisted he talk. Ms. Brown reported the teacher was so upset that he left the students in his classroom in order to complain to the administration. She happened to be in the office and overheard him say, "I have such problems with this freaking Day of Silence." Ms. Brown became involved in the banter and contacted LGBTQ support groups in an effort to understand the students' rights. She reported she was eventually reprimanded for "not being supportive of the district's policies." She exclaimed:

There's plenty of things in place for the district. I'm not out to embarrass the district, but I think that if something is wrong it needs to be brought to people's attention. And I was really trying to find out what the kid's rights were.

Monica also reported a negative experience when her club observed the Day of Silence during the previous year. She lamented, "We tried doing Day of Silence. The club did a walk around the school and they got verbally attacked...called like faggot and queer and all those mean things." Although students expressed an interest and desire to participate in awareness days, the events often incited homophobic remarks and behaviors. In fact, two GSA clubs chose not to participate in the Day of Silence during the 2012-2013 school year. Participants reported their lack of involvement was directly related to the negative reactions experienced during the preceding year.

Another obstacle for the GSA clubs relates to individuals' hesitancy to join the club. Monica offered, "There are a lot of students that are scared to join the club. They're scared to tell their parents they're in the club because they'll think they're gay." She stated she understood the fear because she felt similarly. She disclosed, "I wasn't out yet so I thought people would like say that I was gay so I was a little scared of that." Even as a heterosexual advisor, Ms. Wilson's sexual orientation was questioned due to her involvement with the GSA. She

recounted, “I’ve had tons of people ask me ‘Ms. Wilson I thought you had a boyfriend?’ I’m like ‘I do. Why are you asking?’ ‘Well you’re the advisor and you’re wearing a rainbow wristband.’” Lisa also explained, “We might not even be gay but just because we’re in this club [they assume we are]. It’s sad.” Jordan shared how it is difficult for some students to participate in their school’s GSA. He offered, “I know our president, she’s not out so every time a [permission] form comes she says it’s for a civil rights group. For some kids [participation in GSA] is really hard.” Even though students encountered negative reactions because of their involvement with the GSA, several participants maintained being a member was worthwhile. Jordan summarized, “It’s really worth it to broaden people’s horizons.”

Birds of a feather flock together summary. Participation in a GSA club can have both a positive and negative impact on the experiences of LGBTQ students. While awareness days and GSA sponsored activities are intended to increase acceptance of LGBTQ students, unintended negative consequences can occur. Participants also discussed concerns about involvement with the GSA including fear that other students would assume they were gay. Nonetheless, participants frequently reported that the positive impact of being a member of their school’s GSA outweighed any negative consequences.

Summary of Results for Research Question #1

The themes and subthemes presented in the preceding sections are findings that answer the first research question: What is school climate like for LGBTQ students? Two main sections provided a distinction between inflexible, (and largely negative) aspects, and more positive areas of potential change. Overarching themes of bullying behaviors and religion compromised the majority of participant responses related to aspects of school climate that are unlikely to change. A leadership theme emerged as a component that has the capability to positively impact school

experiences for LGBTQ students. Similarly, participation in GSA clubs was generally seen by participants to be a beneficial aspect of school climate. Overall, LGBTQ students do appear to experience negative events at school such as verbal harassment and intolerant comments from both school staff and their peers. However, protective factors such as GSA involvement appear to mediate the impact of such negative experience

Chapter V

Results Research Question #2

In keeping with the qualitative nature of this study, participants were asked to generate ideas about activities that would improve their sense of safety and belonging at school. Discussions were facilitated during regularly scheduled GSA meetings when I was present as a participant observer. Based on student comments and suggestions, interventions were created and implemented mid-way through the study. Therefore, the following section is organized around findings that answer the second research question: What was the impact of interventions aimed at improving school climate? This chapter presents the results of two specific interventions: a district-wide social event and a safe space sticker campaign. Each intervention is presented independently and participant responses are organized in approximate chronological order. For example, each section begins with participants' ideas about the interventions, and concludes with reactions and reflections after the interventions were implemented.

Intervention #1: District-Wide Social Event

When interacting with students during GSA meetings, they were initially reluctant (or unsure) of ideas that would improve their experiences at school. However, before long, students began offering suggestions related to connecting with other GSA students. This request was consistent across different campuses, as some suggested holding a GSA-sponsored dance, and others wished for a more casual gathering. The findings included below are based on both participant statements and researcher observations of the district-wide social event. In order to accurately describe the social event, I relied heavily on my observations of student behavior. However, comments are also included to illustrate the participants' desire for the social event, as well as their first-hand account of how the social event impacted them. While the initial

comments were collected during the first two trips, the reactions to the event were gathered during the third and fourth trip. In general, participants' statements in this section are responses to the prompt "What did you think of the social event?" The sections that follow include an overview of planning the social event, the positive impact of the event, and the desire to continue organizing regular district-wide socials.

Social beings: Request for social connections. During the first two data collection trips, students excitedly shared their desire to meet other GSA members. When facilitating discussions about different options for social events, multiple side conversations erupted among groups of students as they imagined a GSA-sponsored dance or a district-wide Facebook page. These desires were enthusiastically shared at several of the GSA meetings I attended. Students' eagerness was visible as they grinned, covered their mouths in excitement, and giggled when talking about meeting GSA members from other high schools. While participants discussed that they were pleased with knowing the members of their school's GSA, they expressed feeling as if they were "alone on an island" at their school. Similar sentiments were shared during individual interviews. For instance, Julia requested "more social events – with all the high schools [in the area]." Lisa also stated she enjoys, "getting to meet other people who are supportive of it. It just makes me feel happy." The combination of student requests in both GSA meetings and individual interviews made their desire to connect with more clubs truly evident.

Based on the request to interact with other GSA clubs, I organized a social event for all of the clubs in the district. One high school offered to host the event, and I worked to spread the word and facilitate the gathering. Lisa and Jordan served as two of the main ambassadors for the host club. While preparing for the event, Lisa suggested a discussion should occur among all the members: "What do you guys do in your GSAs? What should we do in ours?" In addition, they

suggested a mixer would help them become more comfortable interacting with the other clubs. A myriad of barriers related to transportation and parental permission slips threatened the success of the event. However, advisors worked diligently, organizing their students and even getting permission slips signed by parents mere hours before the event was scheduled. In total, over 36 students attended the event from all four high schools in the district. Advisors were present from three of the four high schools, as well as a handful of other teachers who attended to show their support for LGBTQ students.

During the event, students participated in a “toss and talk” activity where they hit a beach ball around and had to introduce themselves and answer a question prompt written on the ball (i.e., What would you buy if you had a million dollars? What’s your favorite food? Where would you like to vacation?). Pizza, drinks, and ice cream were then provided as a large-group discussion ensued about challenges and successes around LGBTQ topics at their respective schools. Several students lamented about their safe space stickers and club posters being ripped down by intolerant students. Unfortunately, no club members had a solution to the problem other than “post them out of reach.” The other main topic discussed among students was the upcoming Day of Silence. Students offered warnings of negative experiences as well as positive results from participating. Overall, the feeling in the room was one of cohesion and support for each other. However, Ms. Wilson reported two of the students who attended from her school expressed how they no longer wanted to be part of their club after hearing about the frequent negative experiences expressed at the social event.

“I’ve never felt so comfortable!”: Positive impact of social event. As the social event concluded, students from one of the schools expressed interest in holding a subsequent potluck picnic for all of the GSA clubs. Based on these students’ desire to continue establishing

relationships with different club members, a second district-wide social occurred in late May. My final data collection trip was planned with this social event in mind, which allowed me to attend as a participant observer. While the first social was held in a teacher's room, this event took place in a large community park. Approximately 20 students attended from three of the high schools in the district. There were no students who attended the potluck from Central High School. Monica, a student participant from this school previously discussed how her club was dissolving and was basically "non-existent." She was the only participant from her school to attend the first social, and she discussed how it was difficult to attend without any of her own friends or club members. She participated in an interview a few days before the second social event and stated she was unaware that it was planned. Her advisor had not communicated the event to her, even though her advisor was included on several planning emails. Although Monica expressed interest in attending the second social, she did not participate. Therefore, students from only three of the district high schools were present.

During both events, students were observed interacting with individuals from different schools; however, the exchanges between students became more serious during the second social. The host club organized an icebreaker where students stood in two lines facing one another approximately six feet apart. A student leader posed questions and the students took a step toward the middle if the question applied to them. While the first questions were superficial and related to cartoon characters and food preferences, the prompts soon elicited emotional reactions. For instance, about 80% of students present stepped forward when asked if they had attempted suicide or engaged in self-harming behaviors. Later, students were asked if they had experienced abuse or been disowned by their families because of their LGBTQ orientation. One female participant became visibly emotional as she moved forward in response to the question.

Members from other GSA clubs quickly moved to embrace her and provide support. When reflecting on the interaction offered by various club members Ms. Michaelson remarked, “It was heart-warming, just the whole thing.” Even though the students hardly knew each other, they were willing to connect with one another on an authentic and genuine level during the social events.

Every participant who was interviewed about their experience at the social events provided positive comments. Carissa illustrated how beneficial the experience was for her by stating, “When we were at the park and we were just playing volleyball, I’ve never really felt so comfortable with other people... ’cause I knew they were somewhat like me and we had something in common.” She added that the picnic potluck was her “high point” of the year in terms of GSA involvement. When reflecting on the first social event Jordan stated, “It was pretty fun – and the food was really good.” Monica also stated, “It was cool. I liked it.” Ms. Brown shared how her students reacted to the social events by saying, “The students love the get-togethers.” Other students who attended the socials but were not participants in this study were overheard making positive comments about how fun it was to meet new people from other GSA clubs in the area. In fact, they were often seen taking pictures and exchanging phone numbers with one another.

“A sustainable low-risk activity”: **Continuing the social events.** In addition to student reactions, advisors and school administrators expressed their pleasure with the social events. Ms. Michaelson’s club served as the host club for the second social event. Directly prior to the event, several of her student leaders were suspended and the date of the activity had to be moved due to a conflict with another advisor’s schedule. She disclosed,

I'm not going to lie; I thought, "Oh my god, this is not going to [go well]." I was dreading it. I was like "the date changed, I can't get a van, I had to do all this paperwork, half my people are gone. How's this going to work?" and I'm just like "Oh this is going to be ugly."

However, she described the positive outcome. "We got there and it just worked out perfectly. Like the gods shined on us and made the perfect day and the kids were so happy." She summarized, "It was so great. So great. I was so happy about that. And that was GREAT to cap the year." The positive experience led several participants to suggest that the district-wide social events continue on a regular basis. Ms. Wilson expressed, "I really like these district get-togethers; I would love to see each school host one quarterly. It'd be really cool to do that so we're still staying connected as a district and that way people could feed off each other." As a district superintendent, Dr. Snyder also expressed excitement for the possibility of future district-wide social events. He stated, "I'd like to find a way to continue [the social events] – or support the kids in continuing them." He envisioned, "We could have four of those a year. I mean it's the kind of activity you can sustain...it's not just sustainable but a really apt, low risk kind of thing to do." Not only did Dr. Snyder feel the events were "a great place for kids to come together and talk and share concerns and also to share successes," he believed the social events would have an impact on the GSA clubs' acceptance in the larger school community. He asserted:

All that increasing numbers is going to do is raise the prominence of acceptance within the general culture. "Ok, it's just a club and they're just getting together and it's ok. They've got a float in the parade." You know, whatever it is, it's all good stuff.

Because logistics can often be overwhelming for GSA advisors when organizing students from four different high schools, Dr. Snyder's desire to assist on-going social events is greatly appreciated.

Social events summary. The support offered by Dr. Snyder coupled with the students' and advisors' desire to organize more socials will likely produce additional district-wide socials in the next school year. Overall, the students' requests to connect with other GSA clubs were well received by students and administrators alike. With individuals such as Carissa stating the social was one of times she felt most comfortable, it is possible to see the large impact one event can have on a student. The preceding findings provide data to answer the second research question which investigated the impact of an intervention aimed at improving school climate for LGBTQ students. Based on participant statements, it is accurate to conclude the district-wide social event had a positive effect on the students involved.

Intervention #2: Safe Space Sticker Campaign

In addition to the student-generated suggestion of coordinating a social event, students attending GSA meetings were asked about teachers who supported LGBTQ students. All students present were able to identify at least one teacher (usually their GSA advisor) who supported them. However, many students were unable to name additional school personnel. Some guessed about teachers who seemed open-minded, but they frequently retracted their comments, admitting they were not sure about their teachers' stance on LGBTQ topics. During the interviews and GSA meetings, students were asked how seeing safe space stickers in their classrooms might impact their sense of safety while at school. Participants' responses were varied and sometimes uncertain. Students involved in the GSA meetings expressed concern that they would be disheartened to see how many teachers failed to put up a sticker. For example,

Jordan disclosed, “It’s weird to not know who is on your side, but knowing that so many people wouldn’t be on your side is a little unnerving.” However, during GSA meetings, the conversation often shifted in support of stickers as a result of students praising the benefits of seeing a visible representation of teacher support. Lisa announced, “I would really like that, even if none of the teachers put it up. Because I would be more cautious. I would know what teachers to be more careful around.” Carissa too indicated:

If I saw a sticker up in a teacher’s room that I never would have expected I’d be like ‘Oh, wow!’ and I’d be more comfortable in that environment because I’d know they probably would not tolerate homophobic comments. So it would be reassuring.

Jordan also settled on:

It would be a good idea to give out stickers. I think I’d rather know who is for me and against me, rather than not knowing at all. Because that kinda freaks me out. It makes me a little paranoid because what if something happens and they don’t care? Then I know who to go to if something happens and I know who’s going to be available or care about that certain issue.

Because of the initial hesitancy expressed by some students regarding the safe space stickers, I continued to ask for various perspectives during several meetings and individual interviews. However, students typically came to a consensus either individually, during an interview, or as part of their GSA meeting that they would like teachers to be given safe space stickers. The sections that follow also attempt to answer the second research question by investigating how the safe space sticker campaign impacted LGBTQ students. Both positive and somewhat negative reactions are shared regarding the safe space sticker intervention.

“They’re everywhere!”: Prevalence of safe space stickers. After several conversations with students and GSA clubs, safe space stickers were distributed to nearly 400 teachers and administrators in the district. The sticker was affixed on a two-sided flyer that presented a handful of statistics about LGBTQ students’ experiences such as their increased rate of suicide attempts compared to their heterosexual peers. Educators were encouraged to reference the back of the flyer for local and national resources related to supporting LGBTQ students. Jordan was the participant who was most aware of the sticker’s presence, as he happily announced, “I’ve been seeing [the stickers] everywhere. Almost all of my teachers have them up!” The stickers were distributed on Monday morning, and by Tuesday I had visited Jordan’s campus. I was emotionally moved to walk through the attendance office and see the stickers on almost every single door. Jordan too noticed, “If you walk into the office and you look at the attendance office and the counselors, all of their doors have stickers on them.” Carissa reacted to the stickers during her final interview. She stated, “I’ve seen them! I’ve been noticing them everywhere.”

Although Ms. Wilson admitted she had not intentionally walked her campus to look for stickers, she was aware of stickers being posted in her building. She stated, “Downstairs I’ve seen quite a few stickers being posted. A lot of people have put stickers on their doors, people that I have specifically talked to that are going to stand up and advocate for [the LGBTQ] population.” Because of limited access to classrooms, it is difficult to estimate how many teachers posted stickers inside their rooms. However, a cursory walk around each campus revealed between four and ten stickers visible on the exterior surfaces at each school. Monica was interviewed directly after the stickers were distributed. She reported not seeing any stickers posted, but within three weeks she sent me a picture message of a sticker on a teacher’s door. Her message reported she had seen several stickers up, and she thought I would like to know.

During the final interview, she reported seeing approximately 8 or 9 stickers on teachers' doors and in classrooms. These quotes above represent a participant from each of the different high schools, which demonstrates that the stickers were displayed and visible to some participants at all four of the schools.

“I can go to them now”: **Identification of supportive teachers.** In addition to the prevalence of stickers, participants were asked about their reaction to the stickers. Jordan offered, “The stickers are really cool. It made me really happy [to see them].” Carissa stated, “I was shocked” about some of the teachers who affixed the sticker in their classroom to show support. She added, “Oh my gosh I can go to them now if Ms. Michaelson isn't available.” Ms. Wilson reported that she is unaware of any in-depth conversations between students and teachers as a result of the safe space stickers, but she stated, “I think it's good for them to be aware of the fact that there are places they can go that are safe.” As the district superintendent, Dr. Snyder was so pleased with the campaign that he suggested distributing stickers again the following year. He wondered, “If we can continue the stickers and it just becomes part of the landscape, it might mean we're making headway (hitting desk for emphasis). And it might mean we're getting people to understand that this isn't a bad thing.” Responses such as these signify the intended impact of the safe space sticker campaign in that students would more easily be able to identify supportive school staff and feel an increased sense of safety and belonging.

Disappointment: Lack of visible stickers. On the other hand, as discussed in interviews and GSA meetings, some negative reactions were expressed due to a lack of sticker prevalence. Lisa was present as Jordan exclaimed that almost all of his teachers had displayed the stickers. She stated, “I'm kinda mad now because I haven't seen any.” In an effort to ascertain if the sticker distribution became a negative for her, she was asked if she felt worse now that her

teachers did not post the stickers. She wavered in her response, saying she was upset but added, “Well, I know what teachers to watch out for and not talk about this kind of stuff with. It’s kinda like an uncomfortable feeling. But at least I know who not to turn to if something ever happens.” Monica also shared some disappointment in the lack of stickers displayed. She reported, “I deliver stuff to the teacher boxes, so I saw all the stickers in the boxes and only like 8 of them put them up.” She added, “I think some teachers even though they may not completely agree with it, should just put it up ‘cause there are more students than teachers. I think we matter just a little bit more.” Ms. Brown also lamented that she did not feel enough safe space stickers were up in teachers’ classrooms. Other participants, including Apollo and Julia, ambivalently stated that they had not noticed any stickers. While some participants’ responses, such as Jordan’s and Carissa’s, illustrate the positive impact of the safe space sticker campaign, participants who did not see many stickers expressed feeling disappointed, uncomfortable, or ambivalent. Due to the mixed experiences of students regarding the safe space stickers, participants were asked if a hypothetical future study should include a safe space sticker campaign. The consensus among both students and administrators was that the positive impact outweighed the negative reactions.

“Some jackoff took my sticker”: **Unsupportive student behavior.** Although both positive and negative reactions were discussed prior to and after the sticker distribution, an unexpected pattern occurred at all of the schools when the safe space stickers were ripped off of teachers’ doors. Jordan described:

My history teacher had one on his door [for two days] and his got torn down. He told me, “Hey some jackoff took my sticker off my door, can you go get me another one?” It makes me happy that he cares so much that it got ripped off the door that he was adamant about having another one.

At the campus across town, Ms. Wilson also stated that a colleague's sticker had been removed from the door. Initially she indicated they were unsure if the sticker was taken down because of animosity or because a student wanted the sticker. However, a day later Ms. Wilson's own sticker was physically ripped off of her door. At that point, it was easy to assume the other stickers that were disappearing were due to a negative reaction from students. Additional stickers were provided to administrators and GSA students in an effort to replace stickers that were torn down. Teachers also began altering the location of the stickers after they were ripped off the first time. Jordan reported, "His got ripped off his door so now it's on his desk. Because he was afraid someone might try to rip it off again." Ms. Wilson initially used tape to affix her sticker on her door. After it was removed, she permanently placed the sticker on her door in an effort to avoid further removal. Even months later, during the final data collection trip, Monica reported, "I saw one ripped down today, actually!" Although these reactions from students were not anticipated, this is not a unique incident as participants frequently reported having their GSA signs and banners ripped down at school.

No teacher negativity – surprisingly: Lack of teacher resistance. An additional area of surprise was expressed by some principals and the superintendent regarding teachers' reactions to the safe space sticker campaign. Mr. Ford admitted, "To be perfectly honest, we have some pretty conservative folks here, and I absolutely expected from a few folks a sorta, 'What is this crap? What are we turning into now?'" Dr. Snyder also disclosed:

I am a little surprised that we didn't have some backdoor questioning. That is kinda unique because typically when something is initiated on a school campus people ask because they want to know "What's REALLY going on here?" I would have thought that

that would have occurred when the notes went into the boxes with the stickers, and we didn't have any...I didn't get anything on that at all. Which was surprising to me.

Although Mr. Ford expected some negative questioning from his staff, he reported he did not hear even one complaint from teachers. Mr. Charles also stated, "I didn't hear anything from staff members. I sent out the email that this was happening, but no one responded with anything negative to me directly." These statements by school administrators are bittersweet: while it is encouraging that teachers did not verbalize disapproval of the sticker campaign, the anticipation of negative reactions illustrates the possibility of intolerant teachers.

Safe space sticker summary. Based on previous research that supported the use of safe space stickers (Murdoch & Bolch, 2005; Poynter & Tubbs, 2007; Weiler, 2003), I sought participant opinion about a safe space sticker campaign at their school. Initial discussions included hesitancy, as students expressed concern about possible disappointment if very few teachers displayed the sticker. However, students often voiced their desire to know which teachers are supportive as evidenced by safe space stickers. After the sticker campaign, participants reported both positive and negative reactions to the prevalence of safe space stickers displayed at their schools. Therefore, the second research question regarding the impact of the safe space sticker intervention is multifaceted. Although some participants discussed somewhat negative effects of the intervention, they all recommended a similar intervention should be included in a hypothetical future study. Additionally, principals and the district superintendent expressed surprise at the lack of negative teacher reactions to the campaign. Although the safe space sticker intervention caused some negative reactions (e.g., disappointment with lack of teacher participation, stickers being ripped down), participants reported the campaign overall helped identify school staff that were supportive of LGBTQ students.

We are the Same

In addition to the two specific interventions employed in this study, participants voiced one other request that proved more difficult to implement. Their request centered on the desire for teachers, parents, and students alike to view LGBTQ individuals as “normal.” Jordan announced, “We’re not any different than any other student except for who we choose to be with. Other than that there is no difference. And I think some teachers need to get that through their head.” Lisa agreed, “We’re not different. We’re the same. People shouldn’t be scared of us.” Julia affirmed, “We’re just like other people. If you find out that we’re bi or lesbian, or gay, it doesn’t mean that we’re not the same person you met before you knew our sexuality.” Comments such as these speak to the deep desire for LGBTQ students to be treated just like any other student.

Summary of Results for Research Question #2

In order to investigate the second research question, student participants were asked to discuss interventions they thought would improve their experience at school. They proved to be exceedingly capable of suggesting activities that would positively impact their experiences at school. In addition, students were proficient at predicting and weighing the positive and negative reactions that could occur due to the interventions (e.g., disappointment if teachers did not display safe space stickers). Based on observations as well as student comments, it is possible to conclude that the interventions impacted students’ sense of safety and belonging. Specifically, the ability to connect with students from other GSA clubs increased students’ sense of belonging and connectedness. In addition, safe space stickers allowed students to recognize more teachers who are supportive of LGBTQ students, thereby increasing their sense of safety at school. The overall lack of negative staff reaction as well as the superintendent’s desire to continue both

interventions suggests that these events can be employed in the future in an effort to solidify the positive experience for LGBTQ students.

Discussion

The results of this study provide insight into LGBTQ students' experiences at four public high schools in one California district. Overall, data from this study tend to coincide with several previous studies. However, this study extends current literature by investigating the impact of two low-level interventions aimed at improving the school experience of LGBTQ students. Participants' experiences also illustrate important psychological processes including the impact of heteronormative societal beliefs and the null environment hypothesis. In addition, a rationale is provided for discrepant opinions voiced by principal, student, and GSA advisor participants. Because of the qualitative nature of this study, I served as an instrument of data collection and therefore experienced personal reactions to participant statements. Each of these aspects, as well as implications for future research will be discussed below.

Heteronormative Society

Although public opinion in the United States regarding LGBTQ individuals has changed in the past several years (Pew Research, 2013), there are still significant barriers regarding how LGBTQ individuals are treated. For instance, only 17 states and the District of Columbia have laws expressly prohibiting workplace discrimination of LGBTQ individuals for sexual orientation or gender identity (Human Rights Campaign). Heteronormativity refers to the outlook that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation and therefore LGBTQ people are seen as deviant and "unnatural." Heteronormativity differs from homophobia in that homophobia includes a fear or apathy regarding homosexuality.

Societal ideologies and institutions frequently privilege non-LGBTQ individuals, thus creating a heteronormative society. For instance, schools in this district held assemblies with heteronormative themes such as "Battle of the Sexes" where males were encouraged to dress like

T-Birds and females like Pink Ladies. As students arrived at the assembly, school staff instructed males to sit on one side of the gym and females on the other. A few students seemed to hesitate; perhaps finding it difficult to decide which side of the gym most accurately represented their gender. Ms. Brown also discussed an on-going struggle with her school's administration regarding an award assembly centered on electing "Mr. North High." She adamantly discussed how the award should be open to students of all genders, thus reducing the heteronormative precedent at her school. Dr. Snyder discussed how the challenges inherent in societal beliefs can be even more difficult to control than episodes of violence. He stated:

In a sense it's easier to make a school safer from violence than it is from cultural influences. Because cultural influences are transmitted by everyone on campus; an act of violence is transmitted by a very small number of folks on campus.

This comment, coupled with other comments about the conservative nature of the surrounding community, illustrates how pervasive negative societal beliefs are on these school campuses.

Parents can often be a cause in perpetuating heteronormative views. Multiple participants discussed the power that parents have to disrupt GSA events. Ms. Wilson shared how she had to radically modify her Day of Silence presentation because a parent called and complained to the principal. In addition, numerous students discussed an inability to participate in this research study, or engage more openly in GSA events because their parents did not approve of LGBTQ individuals or the purpose of the club. A few participants discussed the possibility that LGBTQ students would be "disowned" by their parents if their parents found out about their sexual orientation or gender identity. In fact, one student showed me part of a text message from her mother, which stated she would burn in hell for being a lesbian. Parents' strong beliefs such as these reflect sentiments of a heteronormative society.

Although heteronormative bias is often endorsed and perpetuated by heterosexual individuals, the pervasiveness of these ideologies can impact LGBTQ individuals' perspective as well. Internalized heteronormativity occurs when non-heterosexual individuals unknowingly adopt the view expressed in a heteronormative society. For instance, LGBTQ individuals may be comfortable with their identity but feel it is less worthy than a heterosexual identity. Participants occasionally offered responses indicative of internalized heteronormativity. For example, Monica reported that she did not blame her heterosexual peers for reacting negatively toward her and her girlfriend. She stated that her same-sex relationship was "different," and she gave her peers leeway, saying they needed time to adjust to her relationship. At another time, Monica took the blame for being the victim of verbal harassment because she was too "open" with her sexual orientation. Other participants also discussed a responsibility to not be too affectionate or obvious about their LGBTQ status lest they offend their heterosexual peers. Societal views that promote heteronormativity were apparent in this district. In addition, student participants occasionally offered comments indicative of internalized heteronormative beliefs.

Null Environment Hypothesis

Given the heteronormative society in which these LGBTQ students function, it is important to consider how environmental symbols impact LGBTQ individuals. As discussed in the literature review, the null environment hypothesis was developed by Freeman (1975) and asserts that environments that are not explicitly supportive of minority groups are inherently oppressive. Students and GSA advisors unknowingly supported this hypothesis throughout the study. For instance, without explicit displays or comments, participants were left to guess which teachers and school staff would be supportive of LGBTQ students. At one school, student participants were unable to name any teachers other than their GSA advisor who would affirm

LGBTQ students. These students' failure to identify other supportive adults also contrasts with their advisor. Ms. Brown's assertion: "I've seen several staff really try to embrace it." It is possible that as a teacher Ms. Brown is privileged to conversations among teachers about support for LGBTQ individuals that are outside the students' purview. Because explicit displays or comments were not present, students tended to assume teachers were unsupportive, thus showing assumptions consistent with the null environment hypothesis.

In the few situations where students were able to name supportive teachers, they often reported they saw a visible sign from their teacher. For instance, one student discussed how he saw a rainbow bracelet on his teacher's wrist and therefore knew his teacher was accepting of LGBTQ students. Reactions from the safe space sticker campaign also demonstrate the assumptions caused by a null environment. For example, several students stated they were "shocked" to see teachers who chose to display the LGBTQ-affirming sticker. Prior to these explicit displays, these teachers maintained a null environment in which students assumed they were unsupportive. Support for the null environment hypothesis is evident in student's initial assumption that teachers are intolerant and subsequent surprise at teachers who displayed the safe space sticker.

As a researcher, I had a similar experience when interacting with one principal in this study. When I initially arrived at the school to introduce myself and conduct classroom observations, the principal appeared unwilling to speak with me when I was in his office. I attempted to shake his hand, and he looked away and asked the assistant principal to meet with me. In addition, he avoided all eye contact and never acknowledged my presence. Given his behaviors, I assumed he was unsupportive of me as an LGBTQ individual. The GSA advisor at this school also shared that she had a difficult time "reading" her principal and she felt his lack of

verbal support must indicate discomfort with LGBTQ students. However, I was pleasantly surprised when in the individual interview he expressed some of the most supportive beliefs of any principal in the district. For instance, he specifically asserted he did not feel *tolerance* was sufficient enough and that he wanted his staff to display *acceptance* of LGBTQ students (emphasis added). He also disclosed having family members who are LGBTQ and a personal desire to act as a “beacon” of acceptance in a very conservative community. Although this principal discussed an intentional desire to support LGBTQ students, the null environment I initially encountered in his presence caused me to assume he was unsupportive. Given that similar experiences have occurred with students and GSA advisors, the importance of displaying safe space stickers (or other LGBTQ supportive symbols) is apparent.

One area of growth for this district is to understand the impact of a null environment. When reflecting on how students often feel unsupported by teachers, especially those who display religious symbols, one principal quipped, “Well I think the important thing is for the students not to make assumptions. While they don’t want to be judged then they shouldn’t judge.” Unfortunately this principal failed to realize how relevant societal oppression is for students who are attempting to discern which teachers are supportive. Another administrator stated, “One of the gray areas here is we’re presuming the fact that a sticker isn’t up might mean a teacher’s not supportive. That may not be 100% true.” Although his comment is accurate, it fails to fully understand the impact of a null environment. LGBTQ individuals are constantly bombarded with intolerant messages from society, and therefore it is perhaps easier (and safer) to assume teachers are unsupportive until proven otherwise.

How to Succeed in a Conservative Community

Throughout this study, adult participants made comments about the conservative nature of the community. While many of them discussed how their personal views did not necessarily align with the views of the community, they did illustrate how the beliefs of the community often create intolerance of LGBTQ individuals. Mr. Arnold stated, “It’s the community. I’m not saying there’s bad people...I’m just saying it’s very conservative and I will say, intolerant at some times.” In addition, Mr. Charles discussed how his school has “a strong variety of conservative religious groups or churches that our students attend.” The prevalence of religious beliefs in the town was also apparent from Christian displays in classrooms to a school-sponsored youth ministry team with a “Jesus is Lord” vehicle parked outside the school during lunch. It is important to consider how the conservative nature of this town impacts LGBTQ students at school and in the larger community, especially with the preceding discussion of the null environment hypothesis.

Given the conservative nature of the community that surrounds these schools, it is not surprising that the superintendent and principals expected opposition from teachers regarding the safe space sticker campaign. However, during interviews, administrators were asked their opinion on why the safe space sticker campaign did not cause more resistance. Instead of asserting that teachers were accepting of LGBTQ students and excited to oppose discrimination, principals provided a different perspective. For instance, Mr. Ford reported:

We were allowed to advertise the sticker as if you want your room to be designated as a safe place for a lesbian, or a black, or a person who is small and might get picked on or somebody who is unsure what’s waiting for them when they go home....anything. That’s the way we were able to push it out to teachers. That tugs on teachers’ heartstrings and

that's what makes them slap it on their door a lot easier. 'Cause it's not about an agenda or a perceived agenda, or a group, it's about giving kids a place where no matter what, they feel safe. That's why it went over well.

Even though the safe space campaign sticker clearly read "I support ALL students including those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning their sexuality or gender identity," Mr. Ford believed deemphasizing LGBTQ students is what allowed the intervention to be successful. As a researcher aimed at improving school climate specifically for LGBTQ students, it can be disheartening to see the message reduced to a general "support all students." However, a "watered-down" message may have been necessary to communicate with staff without provoking resistance.

There appears to be a fine balance when presenting "controversial" information in a conservative community such as this district. Dr. Snyder explained:

To understand what a safe environment is for all kids, we have to have conversations that might cause some discomfort with some folks. And also to get some folks who are more actively pursuing LGBTQ acceptance to maybe back off just a bit so we can get the majority of people where they need to be. It's a delicate balance and dance that we do.

From a superintendent's stance, Dr. Snyder identified how conservative individuals can increase their resistance when faced with ardent supporters of LGBTQ students. He suggested a moderate stance regarding LGBTQ students would likely be more effective with conservative individuals. Ms. Sanchez also remarked on how LGBTQ awareness events can negatively impact LGBTQ students. She shared:

If you come at it too seriously I think people just get too freaked out. And those who have an issue with it fight even more. If you bring a fighting energy to it a "You must

accept us” all you do is alienate the people in the middle, you kinda make them uncomfortable. You make them choose a side.

It is difficult to imagine asking an LGBTQ advocate to reduce their passion for students’ rights; however, it is possible that a calmer approach is more effective. Throughout this study, on many occasions I consciously avoided difficult questions so as not to evoke resistance. For instance, I frequently experienced conservative religious displays that were in violation of district policy but deliberately decided not to probe these inconsistencies. I believe these judgments allowed me to gain the data necessary to begin this important work. In addition, I often felt my options to recruit student and teacher participants were limited by the guidelines of the district. For example, teachers were recruited only through contact with the principal, and I was strongly advised not to talk to any students other than those who participated in this study. By ardently following the requests not to directly recruit participants, I was able to maintain the district’s approval. In line with participant comments above, my ability to assuage my passion for LGBTQ students’ rights likely allowed me to succeed in collecting data in this conservative community.

As discussed in the literature review, Allport’s 1954 intergroup contact theory postulates that four components (equal status, common goal, intergroup cooperation, and social sanction) are necessary to reduce prejudice. Given this framework, LGBTQ advocates may be more effective if they simply facilitate open and cooperative experiences between LGBTQ and heterosexual individuals. This study did not necessarily attempt to reduce prejudice by maintaining all four of Allport’s requirements; however, a few examples provide support for the applicability of the intergroup hypothesis when a few conditions are present. For instance, LGBTQ students who tend to work hard in class (common goal and intergroup cooperation with

the teacher) are often viewed more positively by teachers and school staff. Ms. Brown provided an emotional account of one student's ability to impact teachers. She stated,

Jordan has really been wonderful for our school, and he will never realize it. He was an ambassador for tolerance because the teachers love him. He's a good kid. He's not a trouble maker. All the teachers that would normally have complained "Oh we're letting someone transgender be here" aren't because they just think he's so awesome. And so he will have no idea what a change he has made on this campus.

In this situation, the equal status and the ability to become friends were not present, yet according to Ms. Brown teachers became more accepting of LGBTQ individuals because of their interaction with one student. Similar to Herek and Capitanio's (1996) findings, it appears prejudice can be reduced even in situations when all of Allport's components are not present. While it is encouraging to learn how one "good" student can have such an impact, the burden placed on students is troubling.

Technology

Given the conservative community in which these students live, it is important to consider how online venues may serve as a possible extension of a supportive community. Student participants in this study fall into the millennial generation, which is known for being constantly connected through social media and smart phones (Pew Research, 2010). In this study, technology served both a positive and negative purpose in LGBTQ students' lives. First, one participant's positive experience included connecting with an online community of LGBTQ individuals and establishing a long-distance dating relationship. She also reported that her online LGBTQ peers served as role models and taught her about a variety of gender identities other than "male" "female" and "transgender." In addition, one school had previously created a Facebook

page specific to their school's GSA club. Observation of the page revealed posts related to logistics and communication about meeting times and events, as well as inspirational videos related to national or local stories about bullying. On a few occasions, members attempted to "lighten the mood" by posting quirky videos related to rainbows and LGBTQ symbols. From an observer's perspective, this page seemed to serve a positive purpose in that meeting information as well as updates on newsworthy stories related to LGBTQ individuals could be quickly communicated to many students. This is especially important given Ms. Wilson's assertion that "The biggest issue is communication, getting the information out there." By the end of the year, Ms. Wilson had found an online application that allowed her to send mass text messages to her students through a confidential number. She could therefore connect with her students without jeopardizing her privacy or boundaries as a teacher.

During the first two data collection trips, students at GSA meetings requested that a district-wide social media page be created. They stated such a forum would allow them to get to know one another and stay up-to-date on activities at each of the clubs. However, the district expressed concerns about the difficulty of managing a social media page. In addition, Dr. Snyder indicated the current school's GSA page was not truly endorsed by the school and must have been student generated. He offered concerns related to the ability to effectively control membership and prevent any adults or non-GSA members from accessing the page. Additional reservations were offered by a handful of students who asserted they would not be able to "add" a GSA Facebook page because doing so would be visible to their family members who do not approve of LGBTQ individuals. Given these concerns, a district-wide social networking site was not created. However, after students connected during the district-wide socials, they began "liking" each other's GSA pages, thus allowing them to stay updated on the clubs' activities.

The negative impact of technology revolves around cyberbullying. Although few participants explicitly discussed the impact of online harassment, many intimated they encountered challenging conversations as a result of their posts on Facebook. Carissa reported how her family reacted extremely negatively to her Facebook comment stating she wanted a girlfriend. LGBTQ individuals who have not disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity often have to be especially careful about the comments and pictures posted on social networking sites due to unintended disclosure.

Role Models

Many students in this study lacked role models in their community. This became apparent as student participants reflected on their lack of experience interacting with LGBTQ individuals whom are established with a family. In an effort to establish rapport and build relationships, my wife and baby joined me as participant observers at one GSA meeting and the potluck picnic. Lisa stated, "I loved seeing you and your wife here. I was just like 'Oh my gosh it's so cute.'" Other participants commented on the limited contact they have with older gay couples and rejoiced about seeing same-sex couples being affectionate when they traveled outside their town. Some participants also asked personal questions about my experiences at school and having a family as an LGBTQ individual. In fact, the final interview with Tina and Carissa was scheduled to last approximately 30 minutes. However, the discussion continued for 90 minutes, as they asked questions such as "Are you scared to have a family as a lesbian? Do you worry about your daughter? Has anyone said anything negative to you about your family?" During this conversation, it became clear that students had many questions both about the logistics of having a family as an LGBTQ individual as well as positive and negative consequences of being out in the community. At the end of the study, participants commented

on their sadness at the loss of association with an LGBTQ adult, and some attempted to become Facebook “friends” with me in an effort to stay connected. On these occasions, I politely explained to students that due to the limitations of my research study, I was unable to accept their requests.

It is disheartening to realize LGBTQ students do not have many individuals they can turn to for advice and guidance. This was occasionally apparent in student participants’ lack of knowledge around LGBTQ topics and terms. For instance, during an initial interview, one participant was unfamiliar with the LGBTQ acronym. At other times, participants appeared to misuse terms, such as referring to someone as transsexual when the label transgender was likely more appropriate. Tina illustrated the importance of connecting with other LGBTQ individuals for her by stating, “They were the first one to teach me about gender and stuff. And a lot of it made sense to me, ‘cause I always wondered about gender.” She continued by discussing how her community of online role models feels most comfortable with the neutral pronoun “they.” As a result of her interaction with other LGBTQ individuals, Tina realized she too felt most comfortable identifying as gender neutral or gender fluid.

An additional area of missed opportunity for role models relates to the inclusive curriculum. In 2011, California’s Governor, Jerry Brown, signed a bill requiring public schools to teach students about LGBT individuals. A law such as this is the first of its kind in the nation and has caused controversy among conservative groups. However, previous research (Kosciw et al., 2010) has indicated that LGBTQ students who were given positive images of LGBT individuals in their curriculum reported a greater sense of belonging at school. Ms. Brown imagined how the curriculum could include information about LGBT individuals. She suggested:

We don't want to teach that Sally Ride was just an astronaut – she was a lesbian as well. It's a facet of her that shows people of different sexual or gender orientations accomplishing amazing things. And it didn't hinder them. And I think that's all anyone is asking for is positive role models. Not the negative role models. Too many people still have those really negative role models.

Unfortunately Ms. Brown reported that such examples do not seem to be discussed at her school. Although she hypothesized a new textbook revision may be needed before positive examples of LGBT individuals are included, she was reluctant to assume teachers would act in accordance with the new law. She described how the inclusive curriculum might be disregarded by teachers “because it's not tested.” In addition, she reported, “I'm not hearing anything about our district taking that on. I think they're going to wait until someone threatens to sue again.” Ms. Wilson recounted an experience regarding an optional PowerPoint presentation that was sent to teachers to discuss the National Day of Silence. Although California's inclusive curriculum was effective in January, parents and teachers expressed anger that class time was being used in this manner. She reported that a student went home and told his mother who then called the school to complain. The principal, Mr. Charles indicated, “We had some parents calling that were upset about the Day of Silence as well as the fact that instructional time was being used for that message.” Because of these parent complaints, Mr. Charles sent an email prohibiting teachers from sharing the PowerPoint slides in class. His rationale was that, “We don't take instructional time to advocate for one club, otherwise every club is going to want to do that.” Although his point is valid, parent complaints such as this will likely impede the effective implementation of an inclusive curriculum.

While on independent study, Tina had an experience regarding the inclusive curriculum. She reported excitement that her reading included information about LGBT people but disappointment that the material was omitted in the worksheets she completed. She explained:

When I was doing my homework for history there was a big section on gay rights and the gay movement in my history book, which was so nice to see! And it wasn't negative or anything – it was really biased positively toward it. But as I did my packet it totally skipped that part I was like “Man, that's something I'd really like to talk about.”

Tina's excitement to report that her curriculum included positive examples of LGBT individuals is apparent in her statement. However, she expressed disappointment that her worksheets did not provide an opportunity to continue engaging with the topic.

An inclusive curriculum is one avenue that can provide LGBTQ students with examples of successful LGBT individuals, especially since students are often unaware of role models in their own community. In addition, online communities provide opportunities to connect with other LGBTQ individuals who can serve as mentors. Guidance and feedback from established individuals is especially important for minority groups such as LGBTQ students. Therefore, it is important that LGBTQ students are provided with ample opportunity to meet LGBTQ adults, either in person or online, and be exposed to curriculum that highlights successful LGBTQ individuals.

Inconsistencies

After talking with several participants, it became apparent that principals and students often had different perspectives on the experiences of LGBTQ students. Principals often discussed a desire to be sensitive to the needs of their LGBTQ students, but reported that the LGBTQ students on their campus felt supported. For instance, Mr. Charles discussed how one

of his staff members attempted to start a GSA after being instructed to do so by his supervisor and the school board. He recounted how the staff member approached openly LGBTQ students and asked them if they wanted to participate in a GSA. He stated, “Their response was ‘Well why do we need that? We don’t have any issues. We’re fine. We don’t need to have a group specific to us.’” He added that several of the students who were initially recruited do not attend the GSA meetings. At another school, Mr. Arnold asserted, “We have a lot of openly gay and lesbian kids on this campus. And that’s ok. Kids are ok with that. People are ok with that. It’s not an issue.” He continued by discussing the difference between the safety offered at his school and the intolerance in the larger community, stating, “A student who is gay, lesbian, transgender is going to be much more accepted here and embraced here and supported here than when they walk out that gate.” He also provided a telling story of a female student whose mother began physically attacking her after learning she was lesbian through social media. Mr. Arnold reported the student ran away from her home and into his office 45 minutes after school was dismissed. He detailed part of his conversation with her: “I asked her ‘Why’d you come here?’ And she said ‘I knew you would be able to help me. I knew the school was going to help me. I knew that you wouldn’t judge me.’” Given situations where students return to school in crisis situations, or when students flatly deny needing a GSA club, it is easy to understand why principals believe their school offers a welcoming environment.

On the other hand, the student participant responses included in the results sections offer vastly different experiences. Students described negative school experiences with peers as well as teachers and a strong need for a GSA club. During the initial recruitment meeting at one school, club members quickly dismissed students who were not part of the GSA club. There was a palpable sense of urgency among these students to protect the safe space afforded by their club.

Although student participation waxed and waned throughout the year, each club reported strong attendance from key club members. In addition, the fact that over 36 students attended the first social and 20 participated in the picnic potluck provides evidence that students are in fact interested in GSA activities.

One of the most surprising aspects of this study was every student participant's assertion that bullying is pervasive at all of the four schools. Students suggested that all students are victims of bullying behavior regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. These statements were discrepant with one of the principals' beliefs who asserted that bullying behavior was not as ubiquitous as students indicated. Mr. Arnold rebutted, "We do a lot of surveys with all the students and that isn't what we're finding. The data is not showing that at all." Based on some of the principal comments, student participants were asked to imagine how they would respond to a hypothetical principal that asserted LGBTQ students are well accepted at school. Tina remarked, "They don't know anything! They don't know crap. Because there's so much bullying." Although two principals believed their LGBTQ students were well accepted at school, Mr. Ford seemed to agree with student participants. He summarized, "My sense is that it is still very difficult for LGBTQ students. I think they are struggling." The views expressed by Mr. Ford and student participants were often drastically different than the perspectives of Mr. Arnold and Mr. Charles. As a researcher, I trust and value the perspectives of all participants. One possible explanation to account for the discrepancies may be that the participants who chose to participate in the GSA are a micro-community within the LGBTQ student population. This idea is explored further in the double minority status section that follows.

An additional area of inconsistency relates to the enforcement of rules for GSA activities. As discussed in the results section, Ms. Brown passionately shared her experience of being

reprimanded for displaying posters on Spirit Day (a day to honor victims of LGBTQ bullying). She stated that the rules had been inconsistently enforced and that her club was subject to strict rule adherence while other clubs were not. In fact, she had to recruit her union leader who agreed that the rules should be uniformly enforced. Similarly, when attempting to organize GSA participation in the St. Patrick's Day parade, I was informed it could not be a school-sponsored event. This seemed inconsistent, as students from this district often participate in the Christmas parade as members of the school bands or color guard.

In summary, several disparities became apparent during this study. When possible, attempts were made to understand the varying perspectives, such as when students were asked how they would respond to a principal who stated LGBTQ students were well accepted on campus. However, at times inconsistencies were not explicitly discussed for fear of jeopardizing rapport with participants (namely the administrators). Nonetheless, it will be important for this district to be aware of discrepancies that appear to limit activities of the GSA clubs.

Double Minority Status

While acting as a participant observer, I noticed on multiple occasions that the students present at GSA meetings appeared to be marginalized from the student body for reasons other than their LGBTQ identity. For instance, several students appeared to have unique physical features (e.g., being short, walking with a limp, or being gender non-conforming). Ms. Brown was asked about this observation and she disclosed, "The students who are the most active I would say are probably the students who come from some fairly challenging social backgrounds on their own. And therefore they become easy targets." Ms. Wilson also described one of her students who could be classified as a double minority due to her family situation and her LGBTQ identity. She stated, "I have a girl who lives with her sister because her mom is on drugs, and

she's bisexual, and her sister is not accepting of her." Given that these participants often fall into more than one minority group, it is essential that they have an environment where they feel safe and supported. Although two principals reported little need for GSA clubs, it is possible they were reflecting on students who only experience one minority status – that of an LGBTQ individual. Advisor statements and personal observations revealed that students who tended to be the most active in the GSA clubs were often disenfranchised due to several minority labels. Although GSA members may represent a very small segment of the student body, their participation indicates an essential need for supportive environments such as the GSA.

Changes – They are a Comin'

Throughout this study, both adult and student participants likened the LGBTQ movement to those of other civil rights groups. During a GSA meeting, Ms. Brown discussed with GSA students how the relatively recent women's suffrage movement should provide them inspiration. Tina made a connection with societal views towards African Americans and the use of the "N word." She asserted that students would be severely punished for using the "N word" at school, and they should face similar consequences for saying "faggot." Dr. Snyder also made a connection between the civil rights movements in the 50s and 60s and stated, "We've come a long way in a relatively short time." Even during the course of this study, significantly positive legislative changes occurred for LGBTQ individuals.

In 2012-2013 five states (Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, and Washington) passed laws allowing same-sex marriages. Directly after this study's conclusion, the United States Supreme Court made two monumental rulings regarding same-sex marriage. On June 26, 2013, the majority of judges ruled to strike down the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which prohibited same-sex couples from receiving federal benefits even in states that allow same-sex

marriage. In addition, the court ruled that the plaintiffs in California's Proposition 8 case (which banned gay marriage) had no standing, thereby allowing same-sex marriage to resume in California. Legal victories such as these suggest that societal views are beginning to change as LGBTQ individuals gain access to equal rights such as marriage and federal benefits.

On numerous occasions, student participants expressed a strong desire for their teachers and adults in their school community to understand that their sexual orientation and gender identity are not choices. Ms. Brown lamented, "[The teachers] don't get that gay isn't a choice." Jordan, who previously attended school in the San Francisco Bay area, described how his teachers in that district readily endorsed the inborn characteristics of sexual orientation and gender. He stated, "The teachers were really really active in trying to get kids to understand that it's not a choice to be the way we are." While principals did not explicitly state their opinion on the cause of an LGBTQ identity, they occasionally used language suggesting they believe students have a choice. For instance, Mr. Charles recounted how he had a civility talk with all of the incoming freshmen at his school. He reported, "My comment to them was 'I'm not asking you to agree with someone's *choice* (emphasis added). I'm just telling you that you have to respect the person just as you would anyone else under these conditions.'" Mr. Ford also shared his perspective on the flexibility of an LGBTQ identity by saying, "I remind the teachers that we have kids on campus that for some may be a phase...for some may be their life...for some maybe curiosity." In contrast to Jordan's experience where teachers verbalized support for LGBTQ individuals by teaching students that being gay is not a choice, some administrators in this district intimated a belief that students are in fact choosing an LGBTQ "lifestyle." Given the hierarchical nature of any school district, it is important that those in administration are aware how their beliefs are transmitted to school staff and eventually communicated to students.

Balancing Act – An LGBTQ Psychologist Conducting Research

My status as an LGBTQ individual undoubtedly influenced this research project. From the outset, I intended to positively impact the experiences of other LGBTQ individuals – especially adolescents, who are so often struggling to develop their identity. My initial passion to pursue research in this district was fueled by my experiences over a decade ago, coupled with current literature, which illustrates the still-present negative experiences of LGBTQ students.

Given my status as an LGBTQ individual, it is a reality that I encounter discrimination and overt homophobic behavior on occasion; therefore, I am often cautious and perhaps hyperaware of negative comments and interactions. Returning to my school district presented both opportunities and challenges. For instance, my ability to receive district approval was likely facilitated by being an alumnus and connecting with the administrators through personal networking. One advisor shared that when the principal was announcing this project and some staff appeared resistant, another teacher who knows me stood up and advocated for me and my project. In addition, my experience of living in this town for 18 years gave me first-hand knowledge of the conservative nature of the community that I could not have fully experienced as an outside researcher. On the other hand, returning to my specific high school also included challenges. For the most part, these challenges were internal reactions such as feelings of anxiety the first time I walked on my school's campus, or frustration when I experienced resistance from school staff. I also found myself discouraged when students reported bullying situations that were similar to my experiences many years ago. Another challenge was keeping an open mind and identifying data that were inconsistent with my experiences as a student. As discussed in the method section, my experiences likely led to an a priori approach to data analysis. However, I believe my data collection methods also allowed for an inductive approach,

which led to a comprehensive and authentic understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ students in this district.

As someone trained in the field of counseling psychology, it was also difficult at times to balance my role as a researcher and my training as a therapist. This became especially challenging when one student appeared to be engaging in self-mutilating behaviors. Although I was granted access to students solely for research purposes, my personal integrity as a concerned adult prompted me to cautiously investigate potential suicidal ideation. Although several students reported a diagnosis of depression, I was especially concerned about one student. During the first interview I noticed he had several marks across the top of his hands (the only skin visible since he wore long sleeves). I casually asked about the marks to which he responded that his dog had scratched him. Although his story seemed possible, I became concerned again when the marks were present during a second interaction several months later. His demeanor and affect also suggested he was experiencing symptoms of depression. I sought consultation from my advisor regarding my role in such a situation. Given that I was still a student and was geographically separated from my clinical supervisors and resources, I attempted to focus on my role as a researcher. However, I spoke with his GSA advisors who confirmed he seemed to be doing well and that he saw the school nurse on a daily basis.

My concerns became magnified during our last interview when he disclosed that his mother recently died. In addition, his grandmother, who now has custody of him and his brother, does not approve of his sexual orientation and gender identity. Given the literature about suicide incidences in LGBTQ youth as well as the previous marks on his hands, I was acutely concerned about his wellbeing and mental health. Because of these concerns, my questions during the final semi-structured interview sometimes took on the appearance of supportive therapy and less of a

qualitative researcher. In addition, I carefully expressed my concerns to the GSA advisor in an effort to maintain confidentiality while also confirming this student had access to necessary resources. The advisor reported that several school administrators were aware of the situation and that the school counselor and nurse had frequent contact with this student. The student also verbalized that he was aware of possible resources in the town to which his grandmother was relocating him. He stated that he had been in contact with his close friends in the area, and planned to contact the crisis counselor who he used to meet with at his old school. Situations such as these occasionally challenged my ability to exclusively remain in the role of researcher.

Recommendations and Future Directions

During final interviews, participants were asked about aspects of this study that should be changed if a future study was conducted. While the principals commented on logistical components such as timing and question prompts, students and advisors provided deeper recommendations. Three of the advisors suggested the school staff would benefit from quantitative information about LGBTQ students' experiences. Ms. Wilson envisioned creating a survey in the upcoming year aimed at understanding the experiences of LGBTQ students. She reported a desire to display a bar graph of the results to teachers and students in an effort for them to better understand how LGBTQ students are treated. Ms. Brown also hoped a "needs assessment" could be conducted in the future to help convey to school staff why the GSA is important and how LGBTQ students feel at school. Ms. Michaelson recommended, "Just some of the statistics because you know, even it was shocking to me how many of these kids are dropping out." Jordan also discussed how he believes the statistics presented with the safe space sticker were impactful for his teachers. He hypothesized, "I think A LOT of my teachers read it,

and that's why they put the sticker up because they saw those statistics and thought like 'Wow, that's ridiculous.'”

Another recommendation made by participants was to make more direct contact with teachers. Ms. Michaelson requested that I speak at the staff meetings, asserting, “Even if you get resistance up there (referring to the office) if you could GET to the teachers and talk to them all you'd have way more support than you could ever imagine. Because we have amazing staff. We really do.” Ms. Brown also expressed disappointment that I was not able to make a personal presentation when the safe space stickers were distributed. She stated, “You should have been able to come to our staff meeting and make the presentation yourself,” implying a presentation from me would have been more effective than from the principal. Dr. Snyder expressed hope that the current study's results could be presented to teachers across the district in an effort to illuminate the experiences of the participants in this study.

In addition to the recommendations mentioned by various participants, the data from this study yield suggestions that may benefit this district as it attempts to improve school climate for LGBTQ and heterosexual students alike. First, it is recommended that administrators and teachers learn about the deep and lasting impact of a null environment. The data suggest that many teachers' failure to explicitly demonstrate support for LGBTQ individuals caused students to assume that they were unsupportive. In a similar vein, it is recommended that school staff become aware of the influence of a heteronormative society. This may cause them to reevaluate school activities that promote stereotypical masculine and feminine behavior (such as the battle of the sexes assemblies). An additional recommendation is for this school district to evaluate potential inconsistencies – both between student and principal perspectives, and related to rule enforcement for GSA activities. Marginalized groups such as LGBTQ students are likely to

experience even greater distress if they perceive that they are being treated unfairly by school administrators. Finally, it is recommended that principals and teachers be made aware of the findings of this study through a training or staff development meeting. Specifically, these results should be presented by the researcher, or someone who is keenly aware of the study dynamics and experiences of LGBTQ students. As discussed by nearly all of the GSA administrators, there is a desire for the school staff to hear specific examples of how the students at their respective schools are treated. Therefore, the data from this study would be more impactful to teachers than data collected on a national level.

Conclusion

Although previous research has shown that LGBTQ students often experience physical bullying while at school, the students in this district report more experiences with verbal harassment and discrimination. Participants reported negative experiences with several groups of individuals including other students, teachers, and school staff. Religion was frequently cited as a cause for intolerance and homophobic behaviors. However, positive experiences such as interaction with supportive school leaders and involvement with GSA clubs were also reported. In addition, results of this study suggest interventions such as a safe space sticker campaign and district-wide social event may improve school climate for LGBTQ students. When interpreting the comments and experiences of these participants, it is important to consider several psychological concepts such as cognitive dissonance, the null environment hypothesis, and the impact of a heteronormative society. Future studies should continue to investigate interventions aimed at improving school climate for LGBTQ students.

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