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The Queer Student's Agenda: Positive Relational, Educational, and Administrative Experiences from Recent LGBTQ High School Graduates in the Deep South

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The University of Southern Mississippi

The Queer Student's Agenda: Positive Relational, Educational, and Administrative Experiences
from Recent LGBTQ High School Graduates in the Deep South

by

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A Thesis

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Dedication

This thesis project is dedicated to Lynne Jackson Hoda who taught me how to be an advocate through her fearless motherhood. I love you more.

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This project would not have been possible without the financial, academic, and emotional support of the University of Southern Mississippi Honors College. I am especially grateful to Dr. Thomas O'Brien, professor of Education, for his genuine compassion and incredible knowledge of ethnographic research which were essential to my success in and enjoyment of the research process.

I could not possibly express in words my gratitude to the members of the LGBTQ community who chose to participate in my research project. You all show the world that we are more than the stigma society has placed on us.

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Abstract

The vast majority of research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth within secondary schools has focused on negative aspects of adolescent experiences such as victimization, suicidality, and depression. In addition, much recent sociological theory on the process of stigmatization suggests that these very ideas associated with LGBTQ identities become social stressors, requiring individuals to adapt to their stereotypical expectations. This study argues that academia's focus on solely the negative experiences associated with marginalized identities, without due attention given to the positive, perpetuates the social expectations that these negative experiences are essential realities. To contribute to an emerging body of research that reveals a clearer understanding of the spectrum of LGBTQ youths' experiences, this qualitative study uncovers holistic accounts from LGBTQ graduates of public high schools within the Deep South. The study made use of a snowball sampling recruitment method to find six research participants. During in-depth, semi-structured interviews, participants discussed their memories of experiences and interactions with peers, teachers, administrators, curricula, institutional policies, and student organizations as they related to their membership within the LGBTQ community. After reporting these findings, the study concludes with several school climate improvement suggestions for teachers and administrators, as well as suggestions for further research on improving school atmospheres for LGBTQ youth.

Keywords: Deep South, holistic, LGBTQ, positive experiences, public schools, stigma

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I grew up in a small town in south Mississippi where I was unwillingly ‘outed’ as gay to my peers in high school. Following this experience, I lost friendships, was ridiculed by peers and school faculty, and even pushed out of my faith community. Luckily, I was surrounded by supportive family and a small group of encouraging and open-minded friends that helped me find a productive and healthy outlet for these experiences—chartering a student Gay Straight Alliance. This project was met with equal opposition from the community, my peers, and the school administration. Hate messages online and in person became a constant part of my life, and this hostile community and school environment left a psychological toll. There were not supports in my school for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) students: no anti-bullying initiatives, no LGBTQ supportive or inclusive policies, no faculty or counselors with insight or empathy into the various experiences of LGBTQ peoples. This is a common story, especially in the Deep South, and I’m lucky that mine was not much worse. LGBTQ students all over the country and especially in deeply religious southern and rural areas face intense social and psychological pressures, hostility, and danger with little or no supports, such as inclusive student organizations, affirming faculty, protective policies, or LGBTQ inclusive curricula.

While this daunting experience was my reality, not all of my adolescent experiences related to my sexual orientation were negative. However, in my review of the literature on the experiences of LGBTQ youth, what I found was largely negative. From this finding grew a desire to highlight more holistic experiences of the LGBTQ community. A deeper review of the literature revealed that I am not the only researcher to attempt such a task. In the past decade, a growing body of research has explored the holistic experiences of LGBTQ youth and students,

giving equal attention to both the positive and negative. This study contributes to this growing approach.

Through a snowball sampling method, I recruited six recent LGBTQ graduates of Deep South public high schools to participate in personal interviews intended to uncover their holistic high school experiences with an emphasis on the positive. The aim of the study was to evaluate the interview findings and craft suggestive strategies for teachers and administrators to create more affirming and healthy school environments for their LGBTQ students, especially in the Deep South. Before exploring the literature on the topic and the findings of the study, there is a set of terms that must be defined to discuss the LGBTQ community.

Defining the Terms

Cisgender. This term refers “to a GENDER IDENTITY that corresponds to the culturally determined gender roles for one’s birth sex (i.e., the biological sex one was born with.) a cisgender man or cisgender woman is thus one whose internal gender identity matches, and presents itself in accordance with, the externally determined cultural expectations of the behavior and roles considered appropriate for one’s sex as male or female” (American Psychological Association, 2015).

Gender identity. “One’s self-identification as male or female. Although the dominant approach in psychology for many years had been to regard gender identity as residing in individuals, the important influence of societal structures, cultural expectations, and personal interactions in its development is now recognized as well. Significant evidence now exists to support the conceptualization of gender identity as influenced by both environmental and biological factors” (American Psychological Association, 2015).

Queer. Queer “is an umbrella term that individuals may use to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to dominant societal norms. Historically, it has been considered a derogatory or pejorative term and the term may continue to be used by some individuals with negative intentions. Still, many LGBT individuals today embrace the label in a neutral or positive manner (Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010). Some youth may adopt 'queer' as an identity term to avoid limiting themselves to the gender binaries of male and female or to the perceived restrictions imposed by lesbian, gay and bisexual sexual orientations” (American Psychological Association & National Association of School Psychologists, 2015).

Sex. Sex “refers to a person's biological status and is typically categorized as male, female or intersex. There are a number of indicators of biological sex, including sex chromosomes, gonads, internal reproductive organs and external genitalia” (American Psychological Association & National Association of School Psychologists, 2015).

Sexual orientation. Sexual orientation “refers to the sex of those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted. Categories of sexual orientation typically have included attraction to members of one's own sex (gay men or lesbians), attraction to members of the other sex (heterosexuals), and attraction to members of both sexes (bisexuals). Some people identify as pansexual or queer in terms of their sexual orientation, which means they define their sexual orientation outside of the gender binary of "male" and "female" only” (American Psychological Association & National Association of School Psychologists, 2015).

Transgender. Transgender “is an umbrella term that incorporates differences in gender identity wherein one's assigned biological sex doesn't match their felt identity. This umbrella term includes persons who do not feel they fit into a dichotomous sex structure through which

they are identified as male or female. Individuals in this category may feel as if they are in the wrong gender, but this perception may or may not correlate with a desire for surgical or hormonal reassignment” (American Psychological Association & National Association of School Psychologists, 2015).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Defining the Deep South

NewWorldEncyclopedia.org (2008) defines the Deep South as consisting of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, so these are the states that will be referred to when using the phrase throughout this project. Many of the characteristics often attributed to the Deep South—Christian religiosity, conservatism, homophobia, and racism—are more accurately traits of rural communities. However, evidenced by the United States Census Bureau's (2010) interactive map of rural America, rural populations are more heavily concentrated in Deep South states, making these social characteristics more prevalent in the southern region. These dominant attitudes within rural and southern communities, especially Christian religiosity and conservatism, are also incredibly influential on the social and psychological development of LGBTQ youth.

Religiosity and region. Gallup (Norman, 2018) identified that the Southwest and Southeast regions of the United States, encompassing all the Deep South states, produced nine of the nation's 11 most religious states. Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama were in fact listed as the top three most religious states in the union. Chalfant and Heller's (1991) review of the 1984-1988 General Social Survey showed an early indication that regional religiosity was tied to the rural/urban divide by citing the general tendency for rural religious practice and belief to be more orthodox than in urban populations. Dillon and Savage (2006) further explored the General Social Survey from 1972-2004, finding that the orthodoxy of rural religiosity paralleled these communities' tendencies to hold conservative political ideologies with circumstantial and generational variation. Their findings specifically cited rural populations' opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage.

LGBTQ in the Deep South. According to the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) Williams Institute (2019), the South has the highest regional population of LGBTQ adults in the United States, recorded at 3.87 million, more than one third of the nation's LGBTQ adult population. Hasenbush et al. (2014) quantified the disparities that LGBTQ Americans face by region with data gathered through UCLA Williams Institute surveys. They reported that the LGBTQ population in the South disproportionately faces disparities in social climate, household income of parenting same-sex couples, and healthcare. The social climate score for the South was recorded at 55, the lowest of all US regions. Their study also indicated that there were no state-level legal protections for members of the LGBTQ community in any southern state even though 35% of the United States' LGBTQ population resided within the region.

In accordance with Hasenbush et al.'s evaluation of the social climate of the American South, Baunach and Burgess (2013) asserted that the South's more traditional culture results in identity suppression for sexual minorities within the it. Examples of the harmful effects of dominant conservative and religious regional culture are plenty. For example, Reif, Wilson, and McAllaster (2018) attributed the excessive HIV diagnosis rate in the Deep South to the prevalence of rampant anti-LGBTQ and HIV stigma. Among other factors, the region's cultural fear led to widespread neglect of HIV prevention strategies. For example, Perez-Brumer et al. (2018) highlighted the individualized effect Deep South culture can have, especially on transgender individuals. Their data collection process revealed that transgender research participants often experienced stigma and discrimination in healthcare centers in Mississippi, leading them to seek most healthcare related information and treatment through online resources. Finally, and in terms of public education, GLSEN's annual National School Climate Survey (2017) reported that students in rural/small town communities and students in the South

experienced more hostile school climates and more negative schooling experiences in relation to students in other communities and regions. The survey's Executive Summary even highlighted the quote "Honestly, it's a nightmare being part of the LGBTQ+ community in school, especially in a mostly conservative, rural area," (p. 15).

LGBTQ Youth in the Literature

My initial review of LGBTQ youth in the literature found a plethora of studies and reports that focus on students' negative experiences, such as victimization, depression, and suicidality. In addition to the findings of the GLSEN National School Climate Surveys, Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, and Koenig (2014) reported that LGBTQ students experienced higher truancy, lower academic performance, and greater expectations to not finish high school or not attend a four-year university. The researchers tie these findings to levels of victimization experienced by participants. Similarly, Robinson and Espelage (2011), reported that LGBTQ youth are at greater risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts, peer-victimization, and truancy than their cisgender and heterosexual peers. These findings identify severe gaps in educational and psychological outcomes for LGBTQ youth in high school but especially in middle school.

Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, and Russell (2014) highlighted how these inequities in experience between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ youth can lead to expulsion and criminalization. The studies' focus groups revealed participants were punished disproportionately for public displays of affection and for violations of gender norms. These social divergences also led to hostile school climates in which students felt the need to physically protect themselves. The researchers indicate that such social rejection at school facilitates early entry into the school-to-prison pipeline. These are only a few examples of the essential negative experiences showcased in LGBTQ research.

Stigmatization

To better understand stigmatization, this study relies mainly on David Frost's (2011) literature review on stigma in sociological and psychological theory. Frost (2011) began by tracing the definition of stigma from Goffman (1963) to Herek (2009). Frost asserted that Herek's contemporary theory on stigma placed the source of stigma on societal structures rather than on attributes of the stigmatized, as Goffman originally argued. Frost continued to highlight that those with more social capital work to stigmatize those with less power through structural inequalities (laws, organizations, religious groups), socially produced stereotypes and prejudices, and institutional and interpersonal discrimination.

Contemporary social and psychological research around stigma has shifted focus to the ways in which stigmatized groups feel the effects of stigma. Through Frost's development of the concept of stigma, this study asserts that an emphasis in the literature on stigmatized experiences of marginalized groups, without equal attention given to positive experiences, serves to further perpetuate social expectation of stigmatized experiences.

Reframing LGBTQ Research

Holistic experiences. In the past decade, scholarly research on the experiences of LGBTQ youth has increasingly shifted towards more holistic coverage of both the positive and negative aspects of experiences. For example, Higa et al. (2012) performed a multi-method qualitative study on a participant pool of 68 LGBTQ youth exploring how certain positive and negative factors of development were experienced from participants' perspectives. The researchers aligned experiences with self, peer-networks, schools, families, religious organizations and LGBTQ community involvement as either positive or negative factors. These results were used to encourage elimination of stigma in domains that participants identified as

negative factors in their lives. Similarly, Heck, Flentje, and Cochran (2013) studied a sample of 145 LGBTQ youth hailing from high schools with active Gay Straight Alliances to understand the outcomes of having such a support in secondary schools. Their study reported that the students who attended high schools with active Gay Straight Alliances experienced significantly more positive educational outcomes related to academic experiences, alcohol abuse, and psychological distress.

Suggestive frameworks. Similarly, other contemporary research ventures have explored holistic LGBTQ experiences with intentions to suggest ‘best practices’ to education professionals working with LGBTQ youth. For instance, Young (2016) conducted a study on Gay Straight Alliances in Deep South schools to establish a theoretical framework for the creation and maintenance of such groups for others in the profession. Blankenship-Knox (2017) conducted a curricular autoethnography of her social justice pedagogy in which she encouraged students to reflect on their intersectional identities. She reported her results and strategies to provide resources for other teachers seeking to encourage identity formation and understanding in their classrooms. Goodrich, Harper, Luke, and Singh (2013) addressed the mental health and academic performance disparities that LGBTQ youth experience by providing an overview of ‘best practice’ for professional school counselors when meeting the needs of LGBTQ students.

Innovative methods. The predominant means of participant recruitment for research on the LGBTQ population has been snowball sampling, the same method used in this study. Snowball sampling proves problematic when faced with time constraints, leading to minute sample sizes and to the recruitment of strictly participants who maintain LGBTQ networks. Innovative recruitment strategies, such as McCormack’s (2014), have increasingly shown more fruitful data collection methods. McCormack sought to recruit bisexual men for a qualitative

study without snowball sampling, so he and his team recruited bisexual men for their study from the city streets, successfully connecting with 90 men. Strunk, Baggett, Riemer, and Hafftka (2017) reported a model for what they call “community-based participatory research” in which the primary researchers recruit community members who are trained and tasked with conducting research on their peers. This model offers a unique perspective as the data-collectors identify themselves as ‘insiders’ within the subject population. Strunk, Baggett, Riemer, and Hafftka detailed their institutional review, recruitment, and training processes to provide a model for others hoping to perform community-involved research on marginalized populations.

Conclusion

In accordance with emerging strategies of research on LGBTQ youth, this study aimed to collect and analyze the holistic experiences of participants through personal interviews. As noted above, while the South appears to be the region of the U.S. that is least open to LGBTQ culture, more attention should be paid to holistic encounters that this group experiences. Thus, with a focus on secondary school events, this study deliberately re-centers the lens of analysis and aims to better understand the holistic experiences of LGBTQ youth in the Deep South. Due to limited time constraints, the use of more innovative recruitment methods was not possible. Therefore, six participants were found through a snowball sampling method. These findings from participant interviews were used to craft suggestive ‘best practices’ for teachers and administrators in Deep South public schools who want to foster more safe and healthy academic environments for their LGBTQ students.

Chapter 3: Method

Procedure

This study began with a brief review of the literature on experiences of LGBTQ youth in public schools, especially within the Deep South region. Among the important findings was that most of the research centers on negative aspects of LGBTQ experiences. In addition, the literature is largely silent on holistic experiences of LGBTQ youth and other marginalized groups, the net effect of which furthers stigmatization.

This qualitative study used a snowball sampling recruitment method in order to find a small group of research participants. Once six participants were identified and recruited, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were performed, seeking holistic accounts of public high school experiences with a focus on the positive. These questions can be found in Appendix A. These interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim before being analyzed both individually and collectively for outstanding positive experiences and commonalities between participants. The results and analysis were then used to espouse suggestions to teachers and administrators for ways to create safer and more affirming environments for LGBTQ students. Finally, suggestions for further research into these topics were reported.

Participants

Criteria for research participation included being a member of the LGBTQ community and having graduated from a Deep South public high school within the past five years. Six participants were recruited of which two were White, two were Black, and two were Hispanic. Five participants were cisgender while one was transgender, and four participants identified as gay while one identified as a lesbian and one identified as bisexual. Two participants attended high school in rural communities, one of which also attended a second school in a larger, town

community. One participant attended high school in a city community and three attended high school in suburban communities.

Analysis

When evaluating interview findings, the study aimed to report the holistic experiences of each participant's interview. The findings section also highlights the experiences that participants noted to have a significant positive impact. Drawing on all interviews, the study continued to establish commonalities between positive experiences. The study then attempted to generalize these common experiences in order to suggest practices to replicate at other schools.

Chapter 4: Findings

Personal Interviews

Participant 1 is a cisgender, White man who identifies as gay and uses he/him/his pronouns. He will be referred to by the pseudonym, Simon, throughout this discussion. Simon attended two separate public schools over the course of his high school career. The following statistical synopses of each school come from the National Center for Education Statistics.

The first school that Simon attended is located in a “remote rural” community, spans 7th to 12th grade, and enrolled a total of 559 students in the 2016-2017 school year. The student demographic make-up included 268 “male” and 291 “female” students, 379 of which were White, 175 were Black, 4 were Hispanic, and 1 was of two or more races. The student population also consisted of 334 “free lunch eligible” students and 71 “reduced-price lunch eligible” students. The student to teacher ratio is recorded at around 16 to 1.

The second school that Simon attended is a public boarding school focused on Arts education that enrolls students in their 11th and 12th grade years. It is located in a “remote town” community. As of the 2016-2017 school year, this school enrolled a total of 139 students with a student to teacher ratio of about 13 to 1. Unfortunately, no demographic breakdown of the student body is available.

At his first school, Simon reported a generally unsafe and uncomfortable environment for LGBTQ students. He believed that this institution was steeped in Christian religiosity, leading to an atmosphere in which his identity was not affirmed or respected by peers, teachers, or institutional policies. This was especially evident in multiple statements that he made along the lines of: “They don’t recognize LGBT people at that school. It was like we didn’t exist to them.” At this culturally homogenous and socially restrictive institution, he was exposed to regular

derogatory language from teachers and peers while experiencing dismissal of identity to the point of claiming:

I mean there were days when I literally didn't want to go to school, just because I felt like...not necessarily different from everyone, but I just felt so like unwanted. I felt like there was nothing I was gaining from the school.

Simon's only solace seemed to be two English teachers that privately supported him, knowing his sexual orientation. He initially described his experience with them after 'coming out' as follows:

I feel like, with the teachers, it bonded us closer because they were very cultured, and they were like very behind growth. Like they wanted you to exceed, and like they were the textbook definition of an amazing teacher. People that you would want to be around...I just felt really safe in their classrooms.

While Simon's relationships with these teachers were affirming and safe, he also noted the restrictiveness of their willingness to support him only in private. He recounted an interaction with one of the two after an altercation with another teacher that left him feeling "really dehumanized" as follows:

I went to her, and I was really upset. And, the only thing that she could do was like kind of reassure me that everything was fine, but of course, she like didn't do anything about it.

In contrast, Simon noted his experience at his second school as a much more positive environment for LGBTQ students. When discussing the Arts school, he addressed the benefits of entering an academic and residential situation with a diverse group of students, especially identifying a transgender individual and students who had experience traveling:

Everything changed for me for the better. That's when I embraced who I was. I was in an environment where at least 75-90% of the student body was LGBT. Um—I met my first transgender person, had no idea what that was until I went there. Um—I say I met—I guess I befriended. Um—I was just exposed to so many people that had just been 'out' their whole lives. People who were residents of [State Name] but had like spent time elsewhere. And, so I was really thrown into all these like—thrown in this environment with all these cultured people who were already exposed to things that I had no idea existed.

Simon also mentioned that this school is where he experienced his first same-sex relationship. He continued to describe the socialization process of being in a public relationship with another male-identifying student:

Yeah, I was very lucky to be able to experience that really early on because I know a lot of people that grew up in the south are not able to experience that in high school, let alone college even, and, so I was really lucky to be able to experience that and to be exposed to that and to kind of like learn the ropes of being with someone like that at such a young age. And even like publicly be open about it—like all the teachers knew about it, all the—we lived in the same buildings, so all the students knew. It was weird because I had gone from, you know, like never talking to a guy in my life to having a boyfriend in the span of a year. And that was just from literally the environments that I was in.

I was intrigued by the seeming overt support from school staff, so I questioned this further. Simon continued to describe his teachers at the Arts school in contrast to his previous experience. I interpreted his account of the Arts school teachers as available and approachable:

I'm really glad that I was able to go there, especially when all the staff were very supportive—they were all very um—on hand if you needed them. And that's something that I didn't understand was supposed to be normal. Because I didn't have that at my first school.

In addition to the social support teachers exhibited, Simon referenced a Gay Straight Alliance at the school that met regularly and was chartered by a member of the staff. Simon continued to discuss the support exhibited by school administration through policy and situational response following an altercation with a fellow student:

I remember, my roommate's senior year, it was supposed to be me and my friend, [Name], we were supposed to be roommates again because we were roommates junior year, and so we were roommates senior year, and they threw this random new person in with us. We had no idea who they were. I already forgot his name, but I remember his friend came in one day, and they like dropped the 'f' word—fag—and I was just like what the fuck like you can't do that. And, so I told the principal of the school, and she like called him in that afternoon, suspended him because he like owned up to it. And so like, it was really cool—and then like she caught back up to me that day and let me know everything that happened. All within one day. I was really lucky to have met her. She doesn't work there anymore, but it was just so nice to know that I could go to someone with something like that, and it would be taken care of and there would be like consequences or something like that. Whereas at my first school, that would probably be dismissed, or it would probably just be locker room talk or cafeteria talk or whatever.

Simon prefaced this story with the indication that he thought this school had some policy within the student handbook specifically listing members of the LGBTQ community as a protected class. Upon further research, I found no indication of such language; however, I found an extensive anti-bullying policy with clear reporting procedure. I asked Simon how that experience and the existence of such dedicated administrative support for minority students affected the LGBTQ student population, and he responded as follows:

I think everyone just felt protected. Um—I think queer people in a regular high school setting in [State] might fall to the bottom of the barrel, they might try to, you know, blend in or just not exist, but I think, at [School Name] it helped us feel more open and more relaxed and more at home which allowed us to grow as people, so we felt like we belonged there, you know. Like we had a voice, and yeah, we were just like anybody else. We could walk around however we wanted to, say whatever we wanted, um—be active members of the student body, and not feel like we’re going to have like a negative consequence for being ourselves.

Further discussion of faculty support for LGBTQ students revealed that Simon had a teacher who was openly a member of the LGBTQ community. I asked him to expand on this individual and the experience of having an ‘out’ teacher, and he proceeded to detail her teaching style in relation to that of his teachers at his previous school:

We actually had an openly lesbian teacher which is really cool because she was like very bipartisan on everything. She was very like in the middle, and I feel like a lot of the teachers there were like that too, as far as encouraging us to have like our own thoughts and to like debate things and to like see both sides of it.

Whereas at [Previous School] it was sort of like, ‘We’re going to tell you how to

think and how to act and what's right and what's wrong.' Like all the science classes were very religious-y, like even when we were learning about evolution and the big bang. It was still kind of like dismissed in a way.

This comparison called to mind the notion of educators' indoctrination of students. Simon's clear separation of pedagogical practices between schools identified the encouragement of autonomous decision-making as more favorable than the dictatorial instruction of his previous school.

The existence of any forms of LGBTQ or queer themes within curricula was the final key issue in Simon's interview. Simon noted that the Arts school quite often introduced both queer-themed works and artists to their student body, even giving the students opportunity to express queer themes within their personal work:

It being an art school, there were a lot of queer people, so a lot of the guests we brought in were queer and had like queer themed work, a lot of the students had queer-themed work, I had queer themed work.

He further explained this experience's impact on his self-concept in contrast to that of his experience at his previous school as follows:

So, it was really neat to be in an environment at such a young age to know that there are people out there creating this art that is queer, and that's okay. They're getting all these awards for it, and like that's something that I can do. Versus when I was at [Previous School], and I just felt very alone. There was no one out there like me that, you know, did anything that I wanted to do. People like that were either looked down on, didn't exist, or whatever I had convinced myself in

my head that people like me did when they grew up or post-high school, post-college.

This exchange evidenced the positive impact of representation in Simon's schooling. Once introduced to individuals that he identified with, doing the kind of work he eventually wanted to do, Simon exhibited a firmer confidence in his artistic ability and professional future (Simon, personal interview, October 25, 2018).

Participant 2 is a cisgender, Black man who identifies as gay and uses he/him/his pronouns. He will be referred to by the pseudonym, Calvin, throughout this discussion. Calvin attended one public high school throughout his secondary schooling. The following statistical synopsis of this school comes from the National Center for Education Statistics.

This school is located in a "small suburban" community, spans 9th to 12th grade, and enrolled a total of 1,245 students for the 2016-2017 school year. The student demographic make-up consisted of 664 "male" students and 581 "female" students, 913 of which were White, 248 were Black, 43 were Hispanic, 20 were Asian, 19 were of two or more races, and 2 were American Indian/Alaska Native. The student population also consisted of 578 "free lunch eligible" students and 102 "reduced-price lunch eligible" students. The student to teacher ratio is recorded at about 14 to 1.

Calvin reported that his high school experience as an LGBTQ student was relatively mild. He noted that his perception of this experience was likely due to his personal perspective and attitude. His initial description of his general high school experience was as follows:

It wasn't bad. Um—I wouldn't say that I didn't experience the occasional—uh—what's the word? Bashing—gay bashing. Being called 'fag' and all this kind of stuff, but I guess that it's just because of the type of person that I am, I don't take

stuff like that. I just—I'm just like okay. Like you're stating the obvious. Like what else are you gonna do, ya know?

Further questioning of Calvin's demeanor towards mistreatment based on his LGBTQ status revealed that he felt that his resiliency came from the way that he was raised. He emphasized both the religiosity and general demeanor of his parents, especially when he first began to be bullied in middle school:

Um—really, it just came from like how I was raised. Yes, my family is religious, and they're not really supportive, but I mean, they don't act any different. Um—my parents always taught me to just have thick skin and not care because like people aren't going to be in your life forever. Um—because like I started getting bullied when I was in middle school. So, just the years of me being bullied in middle school just built up that backbone, I guess, and that thick skin, and once people started like saying stuff, it was just kind of like, uh okay. I mean, all you're gonna do is sit here and say it, and like obviously that's what it is, and obviously, I really don't care because I'm still here. You know? It was just kind of like I don't care attitude, and I just carried that on, like, until this day. Yeah, that's pretty much where it came from. My parents, I guess.

Calvin, like Simon, experienced the ability to be in a public, same-sex relationship at his high school. Calvin referenced that while he held private fears regarding social backlash, his public resiliency also posed a divergent dynamic within this relationship as his partner was much more timid when faced with potentially negative or dangerous situations. He shared the following story to portray this dynamic:

Um—like because you’re so—you’ve just been so like, you know, secluded for so long, and to just be out there with it, it’s kind of like, how are people gonna take it? And, a part of me didn’t care, but a part of me was also like ‘oh my god, I don’t want someone to like, throw something, or like bully me or cause harm to him or something like that.’ I remember like when I was in the bathroom at the school, and we were just talking. Like I think it was instead of like going to class, and um—part of the football team came in, and he like, got scared and ran, but I stayed. I was just like, I mean, I don’t really care.

In spite of the fear that Calvin referenced, he also mentioned that this relationship was a pivotal experience for his identity formation, even calling it “the highlight” of his high school career. His description of the effect the relationship had on his identity formation was as follows:

Well, like me dating him, it sort of helped me realize who I was, I guess you could say, with my sexuality. Um—if it was something that I was just feeling in the moment or if I actually wanted it. I mean, it was something that I actually figured out that I wanted. Um—and people really saw—that’s when people really started to see um...that I was actually gay because we would walk to class together—um—yeah, we would, you know, kiss, hang out, stuff like that. So, I can honestly say—look back in that moment, me having a boyfriend, you know, was like the highlight of it all.

In addition to the experience of being in an affirming relationship, Calvin expressed satisfaction with a certain photography teacher who actively expressed support for her LGBTQ students. He shared this by relaying a story in which this teacher overheard him and a friend discussing their LGBTQ status. The story goes as follows:

She overheard us and walked up to us and was like um—I mean she was cool. She was like, “Calvin, I knew you were, but girl, I didn’t know...” and she was like um—I just want you guys to know you can talk to me about anything, and her best friend actually was a lesbian. She had like a picture of her in the class, and we were like ‘why would you never tell us? We’ve been in this class for forever and, you know,’ and—but we had a good time with her and she, you know, I would go to her sometimes about like just guys and my family, you know, just coming out to them and just like how that negative experience happened. Um—and she was always there—she was always like easy to talk to and she was very supportive.

Further exploration of this student-teacher relationship revealed numerous positive outcomes for Calvin, the teacher’s classroom environment, and the student body at large. As this was Calvin’s first positive experience with an adult that knew he was gay, it gave him a more hopeful outlook on the future:

It made me feel like there wasn’t just um—negativity in the older generation, I guess you could say, when it comes to support. So, it gave me like a positive outlook on like hope that people would change. You know, their mindsets on everything.

Additionally, Calvin mentioned that this teacher’s demeanor and compassion encouraged students not only to enroll at higher rates in her elective class but also to persevere in their academics overall:

She became um—a very popular teacher amongst the students and especially the LGBTQ students. She—I think she was actually awarded teacher of the year or

month or something, but this was after I had graduated. It just gave—it just gave her a positive—what’s the word...reputation! Yeah. Because she wasn’t really like known like that at first and once that kind of, you know, got out, the class got kind of more popular, and she had more students and you know, it was really nice... I mean, it gave us—me—um—the sense to keep going. Because when you have just so many negative energies coming from all sides it just kind of drains you. When you have that one tunnel with the light at the end, it’s just kind of like, ‘oh my god, let me just keep going,’ you know?

Calvin’s teacher’s willingness to break down authoritarian barriers with her students operated to enhance her report among the community and to encourage students to persevere.

A final note-worthy aspect of my conversation with Calvin was his perspective on the relevance of student organizations at his high school and their impact on student morale in general. He noted that it seemed to always be the same small group of resourced, influential students who participated in student organizations, and there was a certain level of fear associated with participation for him and students he associated with:

I wasn’t really active in the clubs and everything, but a lot of what I remember, it was sort of just like clique-y. Uh—so, it actually discouraged a lot of people from actually trying to step up. It was always like kind of always saw the same people—like all of them were just like, you know—which I’m not saying they’re bad people, but it was always just the same people. We were always kind of like, ‘oh, we’re dummies over here,’ and they were just like money, rich, white, you know, um—successful. I mean there were people who—we were like, you know, kind of smart. We were in AP classes, but I don’t know, it’s just kind of

intimidating. You don't know what to expect. They all went to the same church, and they all talked about God all the time, which we were comfortable with, but we were also like, I mean how are they going to feel if like we're all in the same club and they were to find out or something, how would we be accepted? So, it was kind of just an intimidation type thing.

Overall, Calvin's school seemed to have very few opportunities for diverse students to step into leadership or organizational roles. This atmosphere left Calvin and other marginalized students feeling further excluded with no venue to pursue creation of their own organizational experiences (Calvin, personal interview, October 27, 2018).

Participant 3 is a cisgender, Hispanic man who identifies as gay and uses he/him/his pronouns. He will be referred to by the pseudonym, Antonio, throughout this discussion. Antonio attended one public high school throughout his secondary schooling. The following statistical synopsis of this school comes from the National Center for Education Statistics.

This school is located in a "midsize city" community, spans 9th to 12th grade, and enrolled a total of 1,551 students for the 2016-2017 school year. The student demographic make-up consisted of 804 "male" students and 747 "female" students, 899 of which were Black, 437 were White, 86 were Asian, 81 were Hispanic, 24 were of two or more races, 13 were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 11 were Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. The student population also consisted of 536 "free lunch eligible" students and 3 "reduced-price lunch eligible" students. The student to teacher ratio is recorded at about 18 to 1.

Antonio described his experience in high school as "overall...a positive one." He mentioned that many of his peers and teachers seemed to know or assume that he was gay before

he fully understood it himself. He cited this situation as a reason why he felt that he was never treated differently due to his sexual orientation by explaining:

Even whenever I did come out, everybody was just kind of like ‘well, duh. We kind of already know that,’ but then like everything really just went on as normal. It didn’t feel like people were really talking about it, like ‘oh Antonio just came out’ or anything, they were just like ‘okay yeah, Antonio’s out now, finally.’ You know?

He continually expressed the support that he experienced in his school environment by stating, “Overall, my peers were very accepting,” “All of the teachers were super accepting,” and “The administration helped to be inclusive of everyone.” While Antonio extensively discussed the positivity that he encountered, he also intentionally highlighted the fact that his experience represents merely a fraction of the school environment due to his enrollment in the IB (International Baccalaureate) program. His explanation of why his experience should not be generalized to his greater school community follows:

So—it’s hard to say, because being an IB student, we were very um—separated from the rest of the school. Basically, you had IB, AP, and EPIC, which is an engineering program. They were all kind of very segregated from the honors and regular students, and I would generalize most of the people in those programs that I was in to be more so like forward-thinking and liberal. So, I would say, within my group of people and within like that small community of [School Name] everybody was very accepting of peers that were LGBT, and um—they—honestly it was just like—it was just a regular thing, you know?...But um—for the rest of the school um—the demographic was a little bit different...I never really had

much experience with them, so I would not be able to um—I wouldn't be able to say what that experience would be like—being like a regular or even honors student, simply because like I was never really exposed to them, but I imagine it would be much different than the experience that I had, simply because like their background or like, their general background.

However, what can be generalized about Antonio's experience is the positive impact for LGBTQ students from his principal. Antonio expressed his appreciation for a principal that valued inclusion:

The administration helped to be inclusive of everyone. Like um—the principal that I had all 4 years recently retired this year, and he was very—he pushed everything he could to be inclusive, so he made sure that there was funding for all the arts, for all these small clubs, and like there was—he approved some sort of Gay-Straight Alliance thing...He pushed inclusivity with his staff and faculty, so I think that was very big part of what made us different.

Unfortunately, Antonio was not a part of his school's Gay Straight Alliance, so there is little to say about the organization's impact; however, he was aware of immense administrative and faculty support for the group. He further highlighted his principal's impact on the school's healthy environment by sharing an interaction between the principal and the dance instructor when her dance program was first introduced:

Even whenever she first started her program, he was like, 'tell me what you need to be successful.' You know? Like he was very accommodating to her even though he—at that point—didn't know anything about dance in a high school education. He didn't know what was needed to be successful because like you

very obviously have to have like a shit ton of mirrors and like that special floor, you know? Like a sponge floor that um—has padding. But like, he was just like, ‘yep, here’s a check for that.’ He—very accommodating man. Very nice man too.

This principal’s equal support for extracurricular activities was especially impactful for Antonio because of his personal enrollment in the dance program which was particularly important to his positive experience as an LGBTQ student. When asked, he considered the idea that some of the work he created in the dance program could have been an exploration of his identity:

So, knowing what images could be emotive is a big thing in the way that I make dance, but um—in high school, I made this one dance—kind of just like generally about like the relationships between 3 women. It never really got more specific than that, but I just kind of played with like proximity and distance, and could that have been like an exploration for me, since they were all women, could that have been an exploration for me um—in terms of sexuality? Potentially, but it wasn’t necessarily—like that wasn’t necessarily my intention in making that.

He followed this consideration with an explanation that regardless of whether he created queer artwork, he felt free within the atmosphere of the dance program to be authentic with his peers and instructor:

Within the classroom, and not within dance making, I would say that I was able to express myself in any way that I wanted to. Like I feel like within the classroom, even with just the teacher, we were allowed to like talk about boys and like I—the girls in the company got so comfortable with me...I felt included whenever they would come in and like ask me my opinion on their relationship or what they

think of this boy, and like do I think he's cute or not. I feel like my peers in that situation were very um—were very open to everything whenever it came to that, so I really did appreciate that.

Finally, Antonio highlighted his relationship with his dance instructor as particularly meaningful to him, especially considering her acceptance of his LGBTQ status regardless of her traditionally conservative views:

She was a good teacher, and like even though like some of her beliefs and opinions are more conservative, I know that she like doesn't believe that being gay is a sin or that being gay is a choice. That was something that I just knew that she believed and that I really liked about her.

The final experience that Antonio shared was his ability to feel comfortable in several public same-sex relationships over the course of his high school career. He detailed how those experiences made him feel as follows:

It just felt nice to be able to—I'm not that big into like holding hands, and I try not to kiss in public, but like we were able to like hold hands or just walk close together—like if it were two straight men, uncomfortably close, you know? But um—yeah, so it was nice—even with those students—so he was part of that group that I was talking about that was like segregated from everybody else, but even—we had to walk past other students because obviously it's a high school—even then, there wasn't much like name-calling or stares. It was just like—looks would maybe linger for a second, but then they would go on about their day. It wasn't necessarily a big issue, and like looking at that in retrospect, now that I can see that even those students were chill with it, like they might not necessarily be

morally okay with it or anything but like their actions were never um—rude or discomfoting. I never felt uncomfortable doing stuff like that in high school.

This final experience highlighted that even among the student populations that Antonio did not normally associated with, his public expressions of his sexual orientation were met with relative acceptance, leaving him and his partner feeling comfortable in their school environment (Antonio, personal interview, November 7, 2018).

Participant 4 is a cisgender, Hispanic woman who identifies as a lesbian and uses she/her/hers pronouns. She will be referred to by the pseudonym, Dayanara, throughout this discussion. Dayanara attended one public high school throughout her secondary schooling. The following statistical synopsis of this school comes from the National Center for Education Statistics.

This school is located in a “large suburban” community, spans 9th to 12th grade, and enrolled a total of 1,427 students for the 2016-2017 school year. The student demographic make-up consisted of 771 “male” students and 656 “female” students, 1,227 of which were Hispanic, 90 were Black, 88 were Asian, 15 were White, 5 were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 2 were of two or more races. The student population also consisted of 1,134 “free lunch eligible” students and 39 “reduced-price lunch eligible” students. The student to teacher ratio is recorded at about 16 to 1.

When discussing her general experience in high school, Dayanara emphasized her school’s focus on economic and racial inequity alongside immigration due to the student population’s demographic make-up. She noted that because of this cultural focus, her membership in the LGBTQ community was not a major factor of her experience until her senior year, when she chartered a Gay Straight Alliance. She detailed this circumstance as follows:

The majority of students were immigrants, from a family of immigrants, or were first-generation high school students. A lot of them were DACA recipients, and I think our school focused—because that was very urgent and is still very urgent now, and it deserves all kinds of attention. I think that because of that we placed a lot of emphasis on, you know, like racial inequity and um—immigration, and everything like that that I think LGBTQ issues were kind of um—not really focused on, and I think it was a good and bad thing in a way. Because I felt like me being queer wasn't necessarily a focus of a lot of our conversations. Um—during high school, my close friends knew, people around me knew, but it was very under the radar because like it was not something we really focused on and that could have been a thing that happened with a lot of cultures because a lot of us do come from like Latin America, and it's just not something we talk about a lot because of our ties to the Catholic church and a lot of other cultural reasons. So, it kind of helped like go under the radar because we placed a lot of emphasis on other like pressing issues.

Dayanara valued her school's authentic focus on the social issues that were most pressing to her and the study body, and she seemed to view the community apathy towards her sexual orientation as both a benefit and drawback. She avoided some negative encounters and pressures, but she felt that she missed chances to have more positive experiences associated with her LGBTQ status earlier in life, evidenced by her feelings toward starting the Gay Straight Alliance late in her high school career:

We started it—it was also my senior year, so I feel like I could have done a better job with it, and I look back on it now and I'm like, I wish I would have done more

with it... I wish I had done more—done it earlier on in my high school career, but it didn't really work out that way.

Overall, Dayanara's appreciation for the diversity and support she experienced throughout her high school career was obvious:

And to be honest, I think I was pretty lucky to be at the high school I was with. I've heard a lot of other experiences from people who went to school in the Deep South that weren't as great as my experience, but I think that because of the background of my school and because of the diversity that the south can have, it just allowed me to exist. I was a part of the other identities—like the racial identities at my high school, and I just so happened to be queer.

She continued to highlight this appreciation for her high school by explaining that lack of resources was never an obstacle to the administration showing support for the student body:

The high school I went to, regardless of like the racial inequity that we had with other schools, regardless of the lack of resources we had, we demonstrated that. Like we didn't need resources to demonstrate that we care about all of our populations. It wasn't always like that, but I think we're getting there.

Dayanara's high school experiences that seemed to be most relevant to her LGBTQ status were situated around her starting the Gay Straight Alliance during her senior year. Her initial retelling of how she began the organization highlighted her positive relationship with a supportive teacher that became the advisor:

I think the time where I felt like it deserved—like I didn't want to be under the radar was my senior year, and I actually started the Gay Straight Alliance at my high school my senior year...So, it's still ongoing after that, and you know, when

I started, I remember it was because my literature teacher at the time talked about her brother who was a gay man, and I was like, ‘oh, this might be a teacher who is with the shits.’ So, I talked to her, and I was like ‘hey, I think this is something that our school needs.’ She talked to me about how we had previously had a Gay Straight Alliance, but it had just died down. Like I said it was an issue that was very under the radar. It was one of those things that we like knew existed, but we didn’t really talk about. Our classes didn’t discuss it, our friend groups didn’t discuss it. Um—so, when we started the Gay Straight Alliance and I talked to her, she was really with it.

This literature teacher who became the Gay Straight Alliance’s advisor seemed to have a profound effect on Dayanara’s experience, even becoming a catalyst for her to charter an organization that is still ongoing and has received a steady growth in support over the years. Dayanara describes this growing support despite minor negative feedback as follows:

So, I think the only time I had like an [negative] experience was when I—we were working on the Gay Straight Alliance. I remember I asked like a teacher for um—some tape to put up fliers for the Gay Straight Alliance meetings, and she asked, ‘what’s it for?’ I was like ‘Gay Straight Alliance.’ And she was like ‘Oh, I don’t want to let you borrow my tape for that.’ I was like ‘that’s ugly,’ but also like whatever, it’s just one teacher. I was young and not aware of like, how much impact a teacher can have, so—but there were also a lot of supportive teachers, so I don’t want to like, you know, not talk about—because it was a bad experience, but I think my friends and I were just like, ‘that’s ugly,’ and moved on to the next teacher that like was supportive of us. Um—some teachers didn’t let us put

posters up for the organization in their classrooms, but we also had an overwhelming amount of support. That one teacher—the literature teacher that had the gay brother—she was totally supportive, and she’s still their advisor. Other teachers like slowly became supportive of the program, and I think we saw a lot more support besides like two bad experiences...but I think that the overwhelming amount of teachers supported the fact that we had a lot of LGBT students that needed a place on campus to feel like they belonged, and they made that evident. So, I’m really thankful for them.

Dayanara further expressed her satisfaction with Gay Straight Alliance support coming from the greater school community, including fellow students and organization members as follows:

A lot of underclassmen were interested in it. A lot of my friends were interested in it, so that was really nice. It was a pretty good group, and it was a really supportive group. We had a lot of events. We had a movie night. We did tie-dyes, so it was nice while we had it, and I’m really glad that it’s like flourishing now...Um—when we had the Gay Straight Alliance, we would have events announced on the morning announcements and we didn’t really get any backlash for it either. So, it was a pretty smooth ride for it.

Finally, she highlighted the support that the group experienced from school administration in their immediate recognition of the organization:

I think my school supported it just by um—you know, they recognized we were there, and I think my senior year, the year we started the Gay Straight Alliance,

that's when they said 'this is a population that we have, and this is something that we need to pay attention to.'

Although Dayanara felt great satisfaction with her school's treatment of LGBTQ students socially, she expressed disappointment with its curricular treatment of LGBTQ history, movements, and figures:

Yeah, in history we did like a section on like civil rights, and I think it had a small paragraph [on LGBTQ rights] in our textbook... Yeah, it was super, super small. A small paragraph, and I remember it was not even a paragraph that we went over in class. It was a paragraph that we were assigned to read for homework, and it was very minimal.

Discussing this disappointment led to Dayanara expressing a key issue that she wished her school had addressed—the intersection of immigration and LGBTQ issues. She believed that this was an intersection essential to the experiences of her student body, but it was overlooked:

Um—I think that because my high school dealt a lot with immigration issues, one thing I would have liked for us to talk about more—and this is something that I think I'm looking back on and wish I would have brought up then, but also I didn't have the knowledge that I do now to bring up those issues. I feel like immigration in a way—especially in the way we experience it in [State Name], the immigration population is growing, you know, we're getting a lot in the south—is that immigration and LGBT issues intersect so much. So many people leave their home countries, you know, to get away from LGBT discrimination because they're automatically killed or, you know, they face a lot of issues. So, I think that because of that persecution they face, they immigrate to the United

States for more equality or just the opportunity to exist, and I think that because of that—especially under the Trump administration—I think we saw that LGBT people were excluded from the asylum criteria, and I think that just shows how immigration and LGBT issues intersect so much, and I think that’s something that as the Latinx community who is really passionate about LGBT issues need to discuss. So, I think it’s something that needs to be brought up more, and I wish that I had because our school cares so much about immigration issues because it was what was pressing then and now, that we overlooked a lot of issues. I think that intersectionality is just so important. Especially in the south. Especially in [City Name]. We have a lot of minorities—especially black people. We have a lot of LGBT people, but it’s like those things don’t just exist on their own. They intersect, and I think that—especially in public schools—I didn’t necessarily see a lot of that intersection when we talked about LGBT issues in school. That one little paragraph didn’t really include a lot of people that people in the school identified with—even those who were LGBT. Um—so I think especially because the racial disparity of people who attend public school being people of color, I think that’s something that I wish we would have talked about.

Dayanara’s final point of interest in her interview unknowingly captured the essence of this study. She expressed the internal conflict that she felt over not experiencing discrimination in high school based on her sexual orientation. She felt that she somehow was not truly a part of the LGBTQ community because she had not experienced stigmatized discrimination:

I wasn’t so overt about my sexual orientation. Um—and I think that because that kind of indifference that our community had toward the LGBTQ community—it

was weird because I couldn't say I was discriminated against, and a lot of that, I attribute to the fact I was a cis, straight-assumed woman—um—and I was like 'oh, maybe I'm not discriminated against,' but I think the way we talk about LGBT people, especially in the south, is that we have to go through all these hardships to just exist, and I think that because I didn't necessarily go through that, maybe I need to be more overt, and I need to make myself more vulnerable to these attacks to be a person just living in the south that's queer. Um—but then, later on, I was like, you know, this is just who I am. I don't need to be discriminated against automatically or like continuously to be a part of the community, but that doesn't mean that we can't speak up against the discrimination to the most vulnerable in our community.

This expression directly addressed the problem that my research aims to address.

Dayanara both acknowledged the hardship that many in the LGBTQ community face and relinquished herself of the need to experience that same hardship to belong (Dayanara, personal interview, November 24, 2018).

Participant 5 is a cisgender, Black/African woman who identifies as a bisexual and uses she/her/hers pronouns. She will be referred to by the pseudonym, Kendra, throughout this discussion. Kendra attended one public high school throughout her secondary schooling. The following statistical synopsis of this school comes from the National Center for Education Statistics.

This school is located in a “large suburban” community, spans 9th to 12th grade, and enrolled a total of 2,404 students for the 2016-2017 school year. The student demographic make-up consisted of 1,232 “male” students and 1,172 “female” students, 971 of which were White,

625 were Black, 490 were Hispanic, 215 were Asian, 91 were of two or more races, 8 were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 4 were Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander. The student population also consisted of 628 “free lunch eligible” students and 190 “reduced-price lunch eligible” students. The student to teacher ratio is recorded at about 21 to 1.

Kendra’s high school experience seemed to be defined by her struggle to understand her identity. She explained that her high school community was more so dismissive of the LGBTQ community than it was directly oppositional. She evidenced this dismissal by sharing that most students referred to individuals ‘coming out’ as joking or seeking attention. This treatment was especially problematic for Kendra as she was seeking to understand her sexual orientation as bisexual, which is an identity often dismissed as a phase, joke, or scapegoat. She detailed this experience as follows:

I didn’t really figure out like my—the sexuality that I wanted to identify with until like my junior year, so before then, I kind of was just kind of like ‘eh, there’s something wrong’... So, that’s when I experienced my first girl crush. The person at the time identified as a girl, now does not identify as a girl. They are non-binary. Um—and I was like, ‘oh my god, I’m a fucking lesbian.’ Like, because the concept of bisexuality didn’t—wasn’t privy to me. Like I never knew that. So, I was raised in a Catholic home, and I never really—I don’t remember myself ever being like rampantly gays are bad. It was just kind of like, I think like gays are okay, um—but I’m not one of those. And I mean if I want to extrapolate further, my best friend at the time—also a guy that I was like in love with—a lot of people always accused him of being gay because he was kind of effeminate, but he was straight. You know, just a more femme guy, so I had seen the effects

of that on him, and you know, it wasn't like I was 'oh, I hate gay people.' I was like 'oh, what's wrong with being gay. Why do they have to be mean to him?' He's totally straight, to this day...It was very background noise to me, until I like had a gay crush. And, I guess in terms of like, how I would describe how it was different than others is like—it was like wild because I had always been—like for as long as I can really remember...I've always been into guys...So, when I had feelings for someone who identified as a girl at the time, it kind of hit me like a truck. I don't know about other people, because like it was like emotions that I was so used to having for men, suddenly someone who was very femme, not masc at all, a person who identified as a girl. I was like, 'what the hell.' And then, eventually, I kind of got over that. I was like, 'okay, that was a one-time thing'...this is my best friend. Um—so, I was like whatever, right? Went to high school. And, so, I was just like, 'that was weird, but I'm not really worried about it anymore.' I didn't really think about it. It was just something I swept under the rug—didn't tell anybody it. Um—and I went on still being interested in guys, but the reason why I wanted to talk about like my other experiences outside of high school but during my high school life is because like in soccer was when I started to interact with other girls, and I was like, 'oh, she's pretty,' and stuff. You know? And, that's kind of when—the first time, I just considered it a girl crush, just a fluke, but then, I started having more, and I was like, 'okay, girl crush 1, 2, 3, 4.' Then, there's that stereotypical Google search, you know, 'how many can you have before...?' So—and um—I think by the time of my sophomore year, it just kind of became a joke to me. Like I was just like here she goes again, I see

another pretty girl, and I'm like 'okay, she's number 11 or something, right?' But I was like, it's whatever because like I don't think that I would ever have to act on any of these things...So, I was like, the concept of a boy liking me back was already not realistic, so a girl liking me back? Like, finding a girl who was gay and then one that would be interested in me? So not even in the picture, so I was like not worried about it. This is just going to be a joke between me and me, and that's it.

Kendra further detailed her observation of the way her fellow students treated peers who 'came out,' especially women who came out as bisexual, and how that affected her:

I know that there would definitely be like rumors, especially for queer women—they'd be like 'oh, they're not even gay, they're just doing it for attention.' That was always a thing—oh my gosh. Because it was always with girls who were identifying as bi. Which is another reason that it put me off to identify as bi for a while.

Kendra eventually gathered enough information to settle her internal conflict over identifying as bisexual, and she notes that the greatest influence for this change was finding individuals with similar feelings and experiences through social media platforms:

Like junior year, I kind of made the change from like 'ha-ha, girl crush,' to like 'oh shit, this is my sexuality.' It was more awareness about bisexuality. It was like, 'she's a lesbian,' – 'no, I'm not. I like guys, so whatever.' So, I'm on Tumblr. Kind of a trademark...And someone was like, 'have you ever heard of this sexuality,' and 'I was like what the...?' And then, so, I don't—I don't even know if I would say it's correct that I'd never heard of bisexuality, but I thought

that it was super rare and very specific. Like you had to be like 50/50, like you were a combination of being gay and straight. Which, that's not true, and it can be identified as sort of a distribution, it's very fluid. So, I think further understanding of that, and just an accumulation of having all these girl crushes, so I was like, 'alright, I'll just be bi'... Yeah! So, yeah, the only thing that was keeping me, honestly, from being bi, was the lack of understanding of what that meant, and social media kind of helped.

Kendra also suggested that another key aspect of her conceptualization of her LGBTQ identity was the presence of an openly gay US History teacher who was received quite positively by the school community. Her peers' acceptance of this teacher offered a stark contrast to that of their fellow students, but Kendra seemed to appreciate this treatment:

I think he might have been my only out, queer teacher...he was sensational. He's like an Irish Catholic man. Then, we find out he's gay, so we were like, 'what's going on,' right? Like you're fucking Catholic and gay...people loved him, so they, first of all, like that he was much more relaxed and personable because of his like sassiness. You could just like banter with him, versus like a teacher where there's just like a student-teacher relationship. He kind of broke that barrier... You would think that would be the perfect time for all these rumors to fly around about what he's doing and what to be afraid of and all that, but I would say a good thing is that nobody was like, 'oh god, I don't want to be taught by him.' Not that I know of.

Kendra finally expressed that once she eventually took ownership of her sexual orientation, she found satisfaction in the impact that her openness could have on the community

around her. She noted that being situated in a culture in which LGBTQ identities are connotated negatively gave her a unique attention and influence over her environment:

. Um—so, I guess, when it comes to being queer in the Deep South, it kind of has given me kind of like a front row seat to seeing what it’s like to have more of an influence on the space around you. Because again, I think if you’re queer in a space where it’s accepted to be queer, it’s like ‘okay you’re just another fish in the sea,’ but here, like I was acknowledged as the face of [State Name] for the LGBT faces of pride. And, I mean, I feel like, I guess you could look at this two ways, but I don’t know if I would have gotten that if I was in [Another State], you know?

Kendra seemed to have endured significant personal ambiguity throughout her high school career due to a lack of positive representation of individuals with a similar experience as her. Resulting from generational changes, she was eventually able to achieve these connections through social media (Kendra, personal interview, November 24, 2018).

Participant 6 is a transgender, White man who identifies as gay and uses he/him/his pronouns. He will be referred to by the pseudonym, Fred, throughout this discussion. Fred attended one public high school throughout his secondary schooling. The following statistical synopsis of this school comes from the National Center for Education Statistics.

This school is located in a “fringe rural” community, spans 7th to 12th grade, and enrolled a total of 368 students for the 2016-2017 school year. The student demographic make-up consisted of 195 “male” students and 173 “female” students, 249 of which were Black, 85 were White, 16 were of two or more races, 9 were Hispanic, 5 were Asian, 3 were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 1 was Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander. The student population also

consisted of 266 “free lunch eligible” students and 37 “reduced-price lunch eligible” students. The student to teacher ratio is recorded at about 10 to 1.

Fred described his high school experience as generally negative, mostly referencing the poor state of his mental health at the time and his inability to be open about being transgender despite his confidence in his identity. He attributed much of his mental health status to “some traumatic experiences growing up,” of which the details he chose not to disclose, that made “socializing and stuff more difficult.” However, in relation to his LGBTQ status, he described the struggle of being ‘closeted’ as follows:

My high school experiences were—I—they’re not—they’re definitely not positive, but they weren’t—they weren’t like violently negative. They just were um—kind of like look-the-other-way negative if that makes sense, and I think for me, a lot of it was complicated by the fact that like I’m trans and I wasn’t—like I knew I was trans, but I wasn’t like ‘out’ really...but there were times where like there were issues because like I came off as very like queer I guess, if that makes sense. Um—or like ‘butch’ or whatever, so I think there was like issues with that, especially.

Fred further underscored the complications this situation presented by sharing his inability to pursue help for bullying that he experienced:

I never specifically reported anything that happened to me, but part of that was because—so like for me, the issue I had was that people knew that they could get a rise out of me by like calling me by my legal name. So, there were people that would just, you know, do it just to be stupid, which was an issue for me because like, you know, obviously, so—but at the time, since I wasn’t just like ‘out’ and

like living—like I wasn't like living as a man. I wasn't like 'out of the closet.' They would have just perceived it as a girl who just didn't like her legal name, and so, like there wasn't—I didn't feel like there was a way that I could really go to the administration about it without them feeling like it was like a really petty issue.

This school's failure to outline clear guidelines for reporting verbal harassment and bullying coupled with Fred's inability to live openly as a transgender man made it seemingly impossible for him to pursue structural aid. To further situate the climate of Fred's school toward LGBTQ students, he disclosed an encounter that his friend, an openly gay man, had with the principal:

I mean while I was there, I didn't have a lot of contact with the administration to be perfectly honest—I, from what I've heard, they were—so, like the principal isn't specifically accepting, so like I mentioned, there was only like one 'out' gay kid in like the high school, and me and him have talked because we both go to college here now. He told me that there was one point when he was interested in starting a Gay Straight Alliance. Um—and, that the principal was basically like 'please don't. Like please don't make us—like please don't make me have to fight you on this' if that makes sense.

The administration's clear stance against the rights of LGBTQ students to assemble overwhelmingly contributed to an unsafe atmosphere for Fred and his LGBTQ peers.

Regardless of Fred's personal struggles and overt environment opposition, he found some solace in the community that he found on the Internet. While citing these relationships'

significance, he further noted that he found his first true LGBTQ-accommodating environment with the therapist he began seeing the latter half of his senior year:

Coming from like a really conservative, Christian background, I wasn't—like I wasn't really used to like an accepting environment. I would say—like because—probably like the first accepting environment that I ever like experienced would be like on the Internet where I found, you know, videos of trans people or gay people like talking about their experiences and stuff, but you know, that's different from like you yourself being accepted, so for me, being able to talk about those things in therapy was really helpful because like I was so—like it was like I couldn't. Like because at the time like my therapist was like 'well, do you want me to call you Fred?' And I was like 'oh, I don't care, you can call me whatever you want.' My therapist was like 'no really, what do you want to be called?' Because even though—because I was so used to um—to caring about what other people thought—what other people wanted just like acquiesced into what other people needed.

His therapist's intentionality in using Fred's preferred name and pronouns allowed Fred to feel affirmed in his identity for the first time. His sharing of this experience sparked intriguing further discussion into the effects of Deep South culture's emphasis on gentility or hospitality. Fred and I shared the concern that this excessive hospitality can socialize Deep South LGBTQ youth to sacrifice their mental and emotional health to accommodate others with few limits:

I think it's also an issue though of they teach you to be accommodating of other people, but they never like—they never teach you about like when other people need to accommodate you or like when it's okay to like stand up for yourself or

any of those things. Then, that really comes and like bites people in the ass eventually.

Regarding experienced within the classroom, Fred expressed a mild sense of satisfaction with teachers who tended to support all students fairly, regardless of demographic differences:

A lot of other teachers were just like tolerant in general if that makes sense, but there wasn't really just an air of being super accepting per say. It was just sort of like um—not—you know, like I guess in their own way, I would consider it accepting just because it wasn't um—like rude or mean or like bad. You know what I'm saying? So, even though they may have maybe didn't feel comfortable or they didn't know how to show that they supported me or they supported like being LGBT in general, just like the fact that they would let me talk to them about stuff, or that they would try to help get A's in their class. Like, you know, teachers can be petty, but they were like genuinely interested in seeing me graduate, seeing me go to college, seeing me do well in life. Like they wanted that, so I think, in that way, even though it wasn't like directly LGBT related, so like I would consider that positive from that standpoint.

Fred found himself in a community and high school in which he did not feel safe to be authentic with anyone aside from his therapist, and any positive experiences that he was able to speak to seemed to be qualified by an accompanying negative factor. Unfortunately, experiences such as this are all too common for transgender youth; however, there are many improvements that teachers and schools like Fred's can make to create healthier academic environments for LGBTQ youth (Fred, personal interview, November 30, 2018).

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study was designed to compile the holistic experiences of LGBTQ individuals in public high schools throughout the Deep South both to combat the stigmatization of LGBTQ youths' experiences as perpetually negative and to suggest practices to schools, teachers, and administrators that improve the general experiences of LGBTQ students. This section of the study will discuss commonalities in positive experiences found across interviews, limitations of the methods of the study, suggestions for teachers and administrators based on the findings of the research, and suggestions for further research. Table 1 offers a snapshot of the common positive experiences among participants.

Common Themes and General Take-Aways

Rural experiences. While rural schools can be found in every state within the United States, these types of communities are much more heavily focused in Deep South states. One of the major negative commonalities that the study found was the intensity of distaste for school experiences from the two participants who attended rural schools, Participants 1 (at his first school) and 6. Both participants described their experiences at their rural schools as uncomfortable, citing animosity towards LGBTQ people from peers and faculty. Participant 1 mentioned his unwillingness to attend school on many days because of this unsafe atmosphere, and Participant 6 referenced peers' refusal to use his preferred name and administrators restricting LGBTQ students from chartering a student organization. The experiences presented by Participants 1 and 6 at their rural schools were the most negative experiences found throughout the research process.

LGBTQ representation—in person and online. Drawing from Participants 1, 4, 5, and 6, the study found that having the opportunity to see positive representations of LGBTQ individuals was an important influencer on perspective positive identity-formation.

Participant 1 referenced a teacher at his second school who happened to be an ‘out’ lesbian. In addition to her sexual orientation, this teacher was celebrated as an encourager of classroom autonomy and personal inquiry, contrasting Participant 1’s previous experience with rural teachers who offered little academic freedom. Participant 4 discussed one of her teachers who talked about her openly gay brother in class one day. This teacher’s public appreciation and acknowledgement of her brother’s sexual orientation showed Participant 4 that there were adults at her school who supported the LGBTQ community. This realization encouraged her to pursue the charter of a Gay Straight Alliance. This teacher also became the Gay Straight Alliance teacher advisor and an impactful mentor for Participant 4.

While Participant 5 referenced her experience of having an openly gay teacher, she most connected with LGBTQ representation online, much like Participant 6. Participant 5 situated her own sexual identity through the understanding of bisexuality that she developed on social media. Social media also became the space in which she found validation for LGBTQ identities whereas her peers at school treated LGBTQ identities as phases or jokes. Participant 6, however, reported having a strong conceptualization of his gender identity in spite of being unable to ‘come out’ and finding hope in seeing other transgender people live openly on social media.

Public romantic relationships. Throughout interviews with Participants 1, 2, and 3 significant attention was given to each of their ability to have publicly recognized same-sex relationships at their schools. At his second school, Participant 1 referenced complete acceptance from his peers and teachers for him and his boyfriend, and Participant 3 referenced the same.

Participant 2 cited some situations in which he and his boyfriend did not feel completely safe; however, he noted that they generally felt no fear holding hands or being together at school. The interviews found that each participant seemed to find satisfaction in the realization that their relationships were treated equally with opposite-sex couples by peers and faculty, meaning that they were both policed and celebrated in the same ways.

These findings emphasize the idea that LGBTQ students often expect to be treated differently than heterosexual and cisgender students. Especially regarding public romantic relationships, LGBTQ youth expect to be excessively policed or mistreated resulting in many youths postponing what has become a normalized form of socialization. All three participants that focused on this commonality were cisgender, gay men. No other participants emphasized romantic relationships.

Approachable teachers. Teachers are the front line of the secondary education system, and students' experiences in high school are often entirely shaped by the attitudes and personalities of their teachers. All six participants, to some extent, referenced positive experiences with teachers that had significant impact on their high school careers.

Participants 1 (at his first school) and 6 discussed having only a few teachers that made them feel supported and affirmed as LGBTQ students in their rural schools. For each, these teachers knew of the participants' LGBTQ status and maintained personal relationships with them without ever publicly voicing support for the LGBTQ community to other students or community members. Participant 1 specifically cited this unwillingness to act publicly in support of LGBTQ students or issues as a frustration in his relationship with two privately supportive teachers.

Participant 1 (at his second school) and Participant 3 both found great satisfaction in the general support that they felt from faculty at their schools. Participant 1 acknowledged that all or most of his teachers knew that he was in a same-sex relationship and that they were a generally supportive, approachable, and accessible staff. Participant 3 also referenced the general support of his school's teaching staff while citing his principal's push towards inclusion as a contributing factor.

Participants 2, 3, 4, and 5 all expanded on the positive influences that they felt from relationships with specific teachers. Participant 2 discussed an elective-subject teacher with whom he and other LGBTQ students developed a strong relationship. This group of students had such a great appreciation for this photography teacher because of her public celebration of the LGBTQ community and her casual demeanor. Participant 2 spoke at length to the positive effects this teacher had on his and many other LGBTQ students' academic performance and perseverance. Participant 3 also highlighted a similar relationship with an elective-subject teacher who came to be somewhat of a mother figure for him. He referenced their continued relationship beyond high school graduation and her influence on him as a dance instructor as he is currently pursuing dance as a career. Participant 4 developed a strong relationship with a teacher and mentor who spoke openly to students of her love for her brother who was gay. This teacher not only became a positive mentor for Participant 4 but also helped her charter a Gay Straight Alliance, maintaining it to this day as the faculty advisor. Participant 5 discussed an openly gay teacher at her school that students generally loved even though her student body was generally dismissive of LGBTQ students. What seemed to stand out to her most about this teacher was his approachability and casual demeanor; however, she did not discuss any personal relationship with him or its impacts.

Supportive administrators. As the leader of school culture, the principal and their administrative staff have policy, operational, and relational influence over the atmosphere of a school community. Participants had an array of experiences with school administration; however, Participants 1 (at his second school), 3, and 4 noted administrators that exhibited healthy general support for students with special attention to LGBTQ and other minority students.

Participant 1 shared an experience in which he approached his principal with concerns about someone using derogatory slurs towards the LGBTQ community. His principal acted swiftly and confirmed that bullying and discrimination were not acceptable in their school culture. Participant 3 referenced his principal's dedication to treating all student groups equally, especially extracurricular groups such as his dance program. This seemed to evidence the school's value of all areas of learning and student involvement rather than solely those that bring funding to the institution. Participant 3 suggested that this characteristic was only a part of his principal's dedication to inclusion that he pushed with his teaching staff. Participant 4 discussed at length her administration's constant support and focus on the lived experiences of their student body. They focused heavily on the experiences of low-income families, immigrants, and people of color; however, their support for the LGBTQ community was evidenced by their immediate approval of Participant 4's Gay Straight Alliance proposal. This approval was especially significant given the tendency for Deep South administrators to oppose such student ventures to avoid bad publicity or loss of funds.

These three were the only participants that discussed administrative support for LGBTQ students at such length. They also had the most positive overall high school experiences in addition to being the only participants with Gay Straight Alliances. While it cannot be assumed

that their positive-leaning experience is a result of supportive administration, there is evidence to suggest a correlation.

Gay Straight Alliances and student organizations. Gay Straight Alliances help create environments in which LGBTQ students feel comfortable expressing themselves in authentic ways because it is assumed that everyone in the space is accepting of LGBTQ identities. Commonly, students who attempt to charter Gay Straight Alliances in conservative communities are met with resistance, further alienating LGBTQ youth; however, Participants 1, 3, and 4 had very different experiences with Gay Straight Alliances in their Deep South schools.

Participant 1 (at his second school) and Participant 3 had little to say about their schools' Gay Straight Alliances because they were not heavily involved, but they both noted that the organizations were fully embraced by their administrations and were highly active in their campus communities.

Participant 4, on the other hand, was one of the chartering members of her school's Gay Straight Alliance. She explicitly described the organization's success by referencing the amount of participation and programming achieved. The organization has been maintained beyond Participant 4's time at her high school, and she attributes much of the gains that LGBTQ students at the school have made in recent years to its activity.

LGBTQ in curricula. In 2012, California became the first state to require LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum in K-12 public schools, and in 2019, New Jersey became the second (Sopelsa, 2019). Often, inclusion of LGBTQ history, themes, or people in secondary education curriculum is missing or minimal; however, Participant 1 (at his second school) experienced a unique representation of LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum at the Arts school.

At a school focused on various emphases in the Arts, a fair amount of resources and time was spent on connecting students with professional artists and their works. Participant 1 noted that many of these artists were members of the LGBTQ community themselves, and they produced work that unabashedly highlighted that aspect of their lives. Additionally, Participant 1 and many of his classmates expressed their LGBTQ identities through the art they produced at school. He referenced this experience as essential to understanding and developing his personal artistic style.

Unfortunately, no participants could offer any examples of LGBTQ history, themes, or people being taught in their school's academic curriculum aside from Participant 4. She noted that her history textbook in high school included a small paragraph that covered the "Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement" in its Civil Rights chapter. Her and her fellow classmates were required to read this small paragraph outside of class, and the content was never followed up with in class afterwards.

Limitations of the Study

The snowball sampling recruitment method used in this study limited the size and diversity of its participant pool. All participants, except one, were currently enrolled in higher education institutions, which further skews the data in favor of the experiences of LGBTQ students with the resources to pursue higher education immediately following graduation from high school. The interview participant pool drastically underrepresented the diversity of experiences within the LGBTQ community, especially by excluding femme-identifying transgender/gender-nonconforming individuals (TGNC) and TGNC people of color. Due to the limited number of research participants and the lack of TGNC participants, the results of this

study should not be generalized to the greater LGBTQ population nor to the spectrum of school types, locations, and climates that exist within the Deep South.

Although this study defines *Deep South* as consisting of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, only participants from high schools in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi were found. Therefore, this study cannot assume comparability between states or schools. In addition, the aim of this study is not to generalize findings across the Deep South or the LGBTQ community, rather to compile holistic experiences of interview participants in order to share suggestive practices with schools, teachers, and administrators to improve school climates toward and treatment of LGBTQ youth.

Suggestions for Teachers and Administrators

The following suggestive practices were constructed based on evaluation of the positive experiences of research participants and on possible counteractions to the negative experiences of research participants. This is, of course, not an exhaustive list of best practices for schools to improve their climates for LGBTQ students; however, implementation of these strategies should help guide thought about minor changes that can be made to school operations to improve the lives of LGBTQ youth.

Teachers. As previously stated, teachers are the front line of the public education system. Therefore, it is essential that teachers maintain habitual practices that make students feel safe and comfortable to learn. Fortunately, much of what teachers can do to improve environments for LGBTQ students is social and relatively easy.

Most importantly, students who ‘come out’ in or out of the classroom as LGBTQ desire to maintain a level of respect and cordiality with their teachers, regardless of their teachers’ personal beliefs about gender and sexuality. It is vital that LGBTQ students be treated equally

with their peers. For example, if two students in the classroom are in a same-sex relationship, they should not be policed more heavily for Public Displays of Affection than an opposite-sex couple. Any classroom or school policies that are attributed to students should always be attributed equally, regardless of a student's gender and/or sexuality. This attitude should also be applied to conversation between students in the classroom. Many times, students' side conversations can venture into controversial territory where LGBTQ students can easily become victimized and harassed by their peers. It is a teacher's responsibility to be mindful and aware of these conversations and to step in when necessary to guide controversial conversations into learning situations.

Many of the teacher traits that research participants appreciated had little to do with these teachers' reactions to the participants' gender identities or sexual orientations. What seemed to affect participants the most about their teachers was their level of approachability and teaching style. Participants tended to value teachers who were not dictatorial in their approaches to classroom management but were encouraging of participation and conversation. Especially evidenced by Participant 1 (at his second school), teachers that encouraged inquiry-based pursuits of knowledge rather than lectured information were highly influential over students, increasing academic performance.

The most structural change that teachers can make to improve their classroom climates for LGBTQ students is to integrate their lessons with LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum. This can be accomplished through more detailed exploration of LGBTQ history in Civil Rights curricula, inclusion of LGBTQ authors, artists, and works in literature and arts classes, discussion of LGBTQ issues in current events topics, and much more. GLSEN—formerly the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network—released a research brief in 2011 that cited major decreases in

negative experiences (victimization, feeling unsafe/uncomfortable, missing school) for LGBTQ students among student populations with LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum. For more resources, ideas, and examples of how to include LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum in the classroom, GLSEN published free lesson plans and curriculum guides that do so while achieving Common Core Standards on their website: <https://www.glsen.org/educate/resources/curriculum> (2019).

Administrators. As previously stated, administrators have the power to sway the entire climate of an institution because of the positions they hold. Administrators can set the social atmosphere of a school through their personal attitudes and make major policy changes that alter operational functions of the institution. To create more transparent and student-focused school environments, beyond just for LGBTQ students, administrators should establish clear systems for reporting harassment and for chartering student organizations.

Many schools do have clear criteria for reporting bullying and harassment in their handbooks, but students often have no idea what these steps include. Helpful strategies could have teachers refresh students on these reporting procedures at the beginning of each school year or to implement a fully online reporting form that could be accessed by QR code. Participant 1's account of reporting bullying suggested that with clear reporting processes in place, administrators willing to quickly evaluate both sides of an altercation, and administrators also willing to swiftly enact consequences, community standards of respectability and inclusion can be easily reached.

Participant 4's experience chartering her school's Gay Straight Alliance highlighted a system in which students were given a clear process for establishing student organizations. This system made the process easy for Participant 4, and she was able to contribute to a growing culture of inclusion by creating a space for LGBTQ students to gather and educate. This

experience contrasts that of Participant 6's account in which his friend spoke to his principal about chartering a Gay Straight Alliance because the school had no communicated procedure for starting a student organization. This lack of procedure led to an impromptu conversation with an administrator in which the student was refused the opportunity to charter an organization.

Without organizational procedures for such processes as reporting harassment and chartering organizations, students have no venue through which to advocate for themselves. When these procedures are drafted and implemented, students must also be made aware of them, why they are important, and how to properly access them.

Suggestions for Further Research and Conclusion

Further research aiming to unveil holistic experiences of LGBTQ youth should dedicate more time to the participant recruitment and data collection processes. More qualitative data must be recovered from a greater and more diverse cross-section of the LGBTQ community. This cross-section must include more LGBTQ people of color, transgender/gender-nonconforming individuals, and LGBTQ people of all socioeconomic classes. It would also be helpful to gather information from teachers and administrators from the schools in question to explore multiple perspectives of the reported experiences.

Overall, much more research is needed into the lives of LGBTQ youth to better understand how best to foster healthy educational environments for all students. While understanding common LGBTQ youth experiences such as suicidality, depression, and bullying are essential to addressing academic concerns, it is equally important that experiences worth celebration and, especially, repetition are shared with the academic community and public. If social sciences research is meant to uncover truth and social reality, negative aspects of experiences should not be reported without the positive and vice versa. Holistic approaches to

researching and reporting LGBTQ and other marginalized community experiences must be utilized to end an academic process that perpetuates stigmatization as a norm rather than a phenomenon.

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Table 1

Analysis of Participant Experiences

	Presence of Publicly Supportive Teachers	Presence of LGBTQ Representation	Normal Treatment of Public Romantic Relationship	Presence of GSA	Presence of Supportive Administration	LGBTQ-Inclusive Curricula	LGBTQ Support Index
Participant 1, School 1							0
Participant 1, School 2	x	x	x	x	x	x	6
Participant 2	x		x				2
Participant 3	x		x	x	x		4
Participant 4	x	x		x	x		4
Participant 5	x	x					2
Participant 6	x	x					2

Appendix A

Personal Interview Questions

Please begin by telling me about your general perception of your high school experience as an LGBTQ student.

How would you describe the general climate of your school towards LGBTQ students?

How do you feel being situated geographically in the Deep South might have affected your school climate?

How did teachers and administrators interact with and/or support LGBTQ students at your school?

(If you were involved in any arts) Were you able to express your queerness or ideas of queerness through your artwork?

Were you ever in a publicly recognized queer relationship? What was that experience like? Did it affect you positively or negatively?

Was there any LGBTQ-inclusive curricula at your school? What was that like, and how did it affect you?

Did you have any LGBTQ-inclusive student organizations? What was that like, and how did it affect you?