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THE EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF HARASSMENT AND
DISCRIMINATION OF LGBTQ YOUTH IN SOUTH CAROLINA HIGH SCHOOLS

By
Melissa L. Myers

A Dissertation Submitted to the
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Approval Page

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Abstract

THE EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION OF LGBTQ YOUTH IN SOUTH CAROLINA HIGH SCHOOLS.

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In public schools, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students face the negative consequences of homophobic harassment. This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to learn about previous LGBTQ high school student opinions and lived experiences and their encounters with school employees regarding fostering a safe and inclusive school climate. There is a lack of institutional support for LGBTQ students who self-identify or are believed to be LGBTQ in public schools. An open-ended, web-based survey of 17 high school LGBTQ graduates between the ages of 18 and 24 was used as part of this qualitative research. Perceptions and lived experiences of a safe school environment and interactions with school personnel and peers, coping mechanisms, potential academic endeavors and continuing education beyond high school, quality of institutional support, and recommendations to improve the quality of institutional support for LGBTQ students emerged from the study. The topics were critical to comprehending participant perceptions and lived experiences of homophobia in public schools. The study's findings backed up the literature and the high level of institutional support provided by school employees and peers. Educational leaders and educators are given recommendations. The findings of this study are critical for stakeholders in public education who are striving to provide institutional support for LGBTQ children in the classroom.

Keywords: education, adolescence, LGBTQ, high school, students,

phenomenology, Resilience Theory, sexualities, lived experiences, harassment,
discrimination

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For much of Western history, homosexuality was considered a mental illness. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) community has been routinely harassed and persecuted, including being discharged from the military, fired from government jobs, and prohibited from drinking in public due to liquor laws; however, in the last two decades, the LGBTQ community began receiving more national recognition as a social and cultural identity. Television, movies, and literature have portrayed young and adult LGBTQ people as positive role models (McInroy & Craig, 2017).

Moreover, in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that prohibiting same-sex marriages violated the Due Process Clause and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. The Due Process Clause considers the right to marry a fundamental liberty because marriage is based on individual autonomy and does not differ between same-sex or opposite-sex relationships. The Equal Protection Clause mandates that all individuals who are in similar situations are treated the same. Thus, denying same-sex couples the right to marry violates their rights to have equal protection under the law (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015).

In education, not only are LGBTQ students demanding safer environments, but their parents are also demanding that their children are safe at school and in the public setting. In *Ketchum v. Newport-Mesa Unified School District* (Public Justice, 2016), several varsity athletes posted a video on social media threatening to kill and rape a female senior. The court found that the principal and staff created a hostile school environment for LGBTQ and female students when they did not support the female

student or discipline the athletes. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Southern California filed a lawsuit that resulted in a written apology from the district and school staff and mandatory training on sexism and homophobia to all district staff, school administration, teachers, and students (ACLU, 2009).

Background of Problem

Despite these notable events, the fight for equality is far from over for America's LGBTQ youth. The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has researched school climate and safety of LGBTQ youth since 1999. According to the 2017 National School Climate Survey, schools in the United States are “hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBTQ youth” (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. xviii). This nationwide survey assesses the quality of school experiences of LGBTQ youth regarding how safe they feel in school and how different types of bullying have impacted their experiences and well-being. In 2017, GLSEN’s school climate and safety team surveyed 23,001 LGBTQ students from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the five U.S. territories: 70.1% of these students experienced verbal harassment, and 28.9% were physically harassed while at school due to their sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender (Kosciw et al., 2018). Because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable in school, 34.8% of LGBTQ students missed at least one entire school day within the past month, and 10.5% missed four or more days (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Additionally, four of 10 LGBTQ students avoided gender-segregated spaces in schools, such as locker rooms and restrooms; 75.4% avoided school functions; 70.5% avoided extracurricular activities, and nearly a fifth changed schools. Because LGBTQ students felt unsupported by school staff or feared the situation would worsen, 55.3%

who were bullied or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff.

Interestingly, 60.4% who did report an incident stated that school staff did nothing or told them to ignore it (Kosciw et al., 2018).

For LGBTQ students living in South Carolina, the report stated that “South Carolina schools were not safe for most...LGBTQ high school students” (GLSEN, 2017, p. 1). Many LGBTQ students did not have access to LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum resources. They were not protected by inclusive district and school policies. For example, of 417 South Carolinian students surveyed, 27% reported hearing school staff make homophobic remarks. Additionally, 44% heard staff commenting negatively on students’ gender expression. Although the percentage of students reporting anti-LGBTQ harassment in South Carolina was similar to the national rate (54%), only 25% of LGBTQ students stated that the harasser’s discipline was ineffective. At least three-fourths experienced discriminatory district or school practices and policies, such as using restrooms and locker rooms aligned to their gender, wearing clothing considered inappropriate for their gender, and using their chosen name or gender pronouns. The data reported from South Carolinian LGBTQ students were as follows:

- 41% of LGBTQ students were disciplined for public displays of affection (PDA) that did not result in the same consequence for heterosexual students.
- One in three LGBTQ students, of which 63% were transgender students, were unable to use restrooms based on their gender expression.
- 29% of LGBTQ students and over half of transgender students could not use their chosen name or gender pronouns when in school.
- Other forms of discrimination experienced by LGBTQ students included the

inability to form a Gender and Sexuality Alliance organization, formerly known as the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), wear LGBTQ supporting apparel, bring a same-gender date to school functions, or participate in athletic organizations (GLSEN, 2017).

Based on this survey, schools in South Carolina are unsafe for youth identifying as LGBTQ or any student who expresses their gender identities differently from heterosexual students. Due to an increased focus on bullying in schools, parents are becoming more involved, advocating for better treatment of their children while they are in school; and requiring educators to teach diversity, equality, and acceptance for all. School and district officials must understand that they can no longer ignore or promote harassment and discrimination. There has to be a change in school and district cultures (GLSEN, 2017).

Table 1 shows that the negative experiences of LGBTQ youth while in school also resulted in higher rates of depression, bullying, suicide, lower academic achievement, and higher dropout rates for LGBTQ students than their heterosexual peers (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Table 1*Effects of Victimization*

Effect	LGBTQ	Heterosexual
Missed school in the past month	44.6%	15.7%
No plans to pursue postsecondary education	9.5%	5.0%
Considered dropping out of school	20%	8.9%
More likely to be disciplined at school	44.0%	26.5%
Experienced higher levels of depression	63.2%	39.1%
Grade point averages (GPA)	2.9 GPA	3.3 GPA

As seen in Table 1, LGBTQ youth were more than twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to have missed at least one day of school in the past month or to consider dropping out of high school. They were also more than two-thirds likely to have higher levels of depression and be disciplined at school. Of the LGBTQ students who planned to graduate, approximately 9% had no plans to attend a postsecondary institution.

Interestingly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC, 2018) national YRBS report mirrored GLSEN's (Kosciw et al., 2018) survey results. Presenting national and state youth behaviors that could cause the most critical health problems, the CDC research team also focused on how these risk behaviors changed over time. With 14,765 youth surveyed and an 81% response rate, Table 2 shows the percentage of LGBTQ students in South Carolina schools who encountered homophobic behaviors while in school and some of the effects of those negative experiences (Kosciw et al. 2018).

Table 2*Negative Experiences of South Carolina LGBTQ Youth*

Incident	LGBTQ	Heterosexual
Threatened or injured with a weapon on school property	16.4%	7.2%
Bullied on school property	32.8%	18.7%
Did not attend school because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school	20%	8.9%
Felt sad or hopeless	57.8%	28%
Considered suicide	44.3%	14.2%
Had a plan for a suicide attempt	33.2%	11%
Attempted suicide	29.1%	7.6%
Suicide attempt resulted in treatment by a doctor or nurse	9.2%	2.5%

As seen in Table 2, approximately 48% of LGBTQ students considered suicide compared to only 13.3% of heterosexual students, and 23% of LGBTQ students attempted suicide, which was more than four times higher than their heterosexual peers. Additionally, the rate for developing a suicide plan tripled for LGBTQ students and was four times higher when medical attention was necessary because of their suicidal actions. The CDC also discovered that the percentage of LGBTQ students who were bullied or threatened with a weapon while on school property was double that of heterosexual students.

Although the 2017 National School Climate Survey data show that school and district policies are intended to prevent bullying, LGBTQ students have not received much protection or support from the government or school district (Kosciw et al., 2018). For example, 69% of the 2017 National School Climate Survey participants experienced

discriminatory school policies and procedures that separated students by gender or perceived gender (Kosciw et al., 2018). In 2006, the South Carolina legislature passed Article 2: Safe School Climate Act, which required school districts to adopt a policy prohibiting harassment, intimidation, or bullying (StopBullying.gov, 2017). However, some schools still discriminate against LGBTQ students by prohibiting them from bringing same-gender dates to the school dances, requiring transgender students to use restrooms consistent with their actual gender, or prohibiting educators from developing curriculum focused on LGBTQ issues (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Students in South Carolina were also less likely to find teachers and school administrators supportive of LGBTQ students or have support groups and LGBTQ-inclusive health issues. South Carolina was one of six states with a “no promo homo” law prohibiting educators from promoting homosexuality in schools (Brammer, 2018). Health education teachers cannot discuss sexual lifestyles other than heterosexual relationships. SC Statute 59-32-30 states that “instruction...may not include a discussion of alternate sexual lifestyles from heterosexual relationships including, but not limited to, homosexual relationships except in the context of instruction concerning sexually transmitted diseases” (South Carolina Legislature, 1988, sect. 59-32-30).

When students build relationships with adults on school campuses, they feel more connected to the school and are more likely to do well. Specific strategies to make LGBTQ youth have more positive experiences in high school include establishing Safe Spaces and organizations, designing a curriculum inclusive of LGBTQ topics and issues, and creating a school culture that encourages diversity and acceptance (Hill, 2019). GSAs are student-led clubs that promote awareness of LGBTQ student issues. Using door

stickers, Safe Spaces identifies school staff who are allies for LGBTQ students. To assist school districts, the U.S. Justice Department developed federal guidelines that provided information on determining whether board and school policies protected LGBTQ students.

Purpose of Study

Maximizing learning opportunities and improving LGBTQ student experiences requires school environments to be respectful, caring, supportive, and protective. Unfortunately, according to the GLSEN study, approximately 55% of LGBTQ youth felt that administrators were not providing a safe school environment (Kosciw et al., 2018). Instead, administrators place all responsibility on GSA clubs and individual advocates to address LGBTQ issues. There could be several reasons why addressing LGBTQ issues is difficult for district and school officials. First, creating an inclusive school climate can contradict personal ideals and beliefs. Second, administrators are unaware of the strategies needed to change school culture or lack the confidence to implement them. Third, the administration may also be afraid of the pushback they could receive from staff, parents, other administrators, or the community. However, administrators are placing constraints on learning and creativity by not ensuring inclusive environments, which results in school climates that do not accept all students (Hill, 2019).

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain the perceptions and lived experiences former LGBTQ high school students had with homophobic behaviors and actions from school staff and peers. By presenting their experiences regarding what was perceived and how it was experienced, this study could provide valuable information to help school leaders and educators offer LGBTQ students a safe and inclusive high school

environment. This study's findings can also encourage school administrators and district staff to develop awareness and prevention programs for staff and students that focus on LGBTQ youth problems and homophobia.

If schools express in their mission statements that they provide safe learning environments for all, administrators can no longer ignore the LGBTQ students in their schools. They must prioritize ensuring a safe, respectful, caring, and inclusive environment for all students. Listening to LGBTQ high school students as they voice their experiences and needs will help educators adopt policies to protect their rights and develop professional development to promote inclusive academic and social environments for all students (Kuehn, 2020). Once LGBTQ students feel protected and supported, they might become better able to adjust to school and be more successful.

Research Questions

1. What were former LGBTQ high school student experiences with harassment and discrimination while attending high school?
2. How did school and district policies and practices affect LGBTQ high school student experiences?
3. What support do former LGBTQ high school students believe current LGBTQ high school students need from district and school educators and staff?

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological approach to research “seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 91). The goal is to describe the meaning of the encounter in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced. This model uses

in-depth descriptions to examine participant experiences and determine how a phenomenon is given meaning and reaches its essence (Lloyd, 2012). Quantitative approaches, such as experimental and descriptive methods, are inappropriate. Descriptive studies establish only associations between variables, and experimental methods provide causality. For this study, the goal was to explore how LGBTQ students interpret their homophobic experiences and interactions with school staff and students and what these experiences mean; therefore, a qualitative phenomenological design was appropriate for this research.

An open-ended, web-based survey served as a guide to understanding the lived experiences and perceptions of a small sample of LGBTQ graduates of high schools in South Carolina. Participants were self-selected based on their interest in the study and their willingness to share their high school experiences of discrimination and harassment. The survey also focused on what participants perceived they needed to have a more positive high school experience. A pattern of shared realities emerged from the interviews about their lived experiences of being a sexual minority student in their school. This qualitative phenomenological study offers recommendations to improve practices and policies that may create an inclusive, safe, supportive, and respectful learning environment for LGBTQ students.

Assumptions

This study was based on the following assumptions:

1. The participants will understand the interview questions asked and freely answer without hesitation.
2. The participants will answer the interview questions truthfully and candidly.

3. The inclusion criteria assure that the participants have all experienced the same or similar phenomenon of the study.
4. The participants have a sincere interest in participating in the study.

Delimitations

Delimitations limit the significance and specify the limitations of the research. Several delimitations defined the scope of this study. First, the information collected may exclude LGBTQ students who have dropped out of high school or may not be currently enrolled in a postsecondary institution. The population of participants was restricted to South Carolina. The study results will not extend to the targeted population in the United States or international countries. Therefore, it is delimited by narrowing the targeted community to those who attended high schools in South Carolina. Another drawback of the research was that the web-based survey was restricted to former LGBTQ high school students between the ages of 18 and 24 with memories or experiences. Although non-LGBTQ students can comment on their experiences with discrimination and harassment, choosing to focus on the LGBTQ high school community's specific experiences was required for this particular study. A third delimitation was that participants were self-selected. LGBTQ high school graduates who felt strongly about their school experiences and were willing to share them were selected and asked to provide recommendations for others who may want to participate. Due to this self-selection, the sample may not represent the entire population and may be skewed toward a more vocal sample. The final delimitation is the sample size of the study. Although the sample size is appropriate for a phenomenological study, it may not represent all LGBTQ student experiences in the United States.

Limitations

Many possible limitations influenced the outcome of the qualitative phenomenological analysis. The sample was limited to LGBTQ graduates between the ages of 18 and 24 who attended high school in South Carolina. This qualitative phenomenological study aims to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of former LGBTQ high school students and their experiences with school staff regarding promoting a healthy, inclusive, and tolerant school climate. Due to the purposeful random sample used in the analysis, the study's findings would not be generalizable to the entire LGBTQ student population. This qualitative approach was not intended to generalize to a population but to concentrate on a selected contemporary phenomenon.

Organization of Study

This study is organized and presented in five chapters. The research presented in Chapter 1 addressed the social problems in the school environment impacting LGBTQ adolescents. Homophobic attitudes and actions exhibited by school administrators, educators, and heterosexual peers have long-term adverse effects on the mental, emotional, social, and physical well-being of LGBTQ teens. As many LGBTQ learners avoid the school atmosphere for fear of their safety, future academic endeavors are also affected. A long-term consequence of homophobic discrimination and victimization also can be the reluctance of teenage LGBTQ students to continue education beyond high school.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to the study of Resilience Theory, heteronormativity, LGBTQ student problems while in school, and the impact school leadership has on LGBTQ student experiences. Chapter 3 details the research

design and methodology by providing the chosen sample and data collection and analysis procedures. A summary of the data collection and data analysis method and the study results are given in Chapter 4. A summary of the study and its results, guidelines for future studies, recommendations, and implications for further study are included in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This study examined LGBTQ high school graduate perceptions and experiences during high school and how school climate impacted those experiences. This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section outlines the theoretical structure used in this analysis and defines Resilience Theory and heteronormativity. Section 2 aims to determine what research says about LGBTQ students and their interactions in schools related to their peers, teachers, and administrators. The third section identifies how school policies and activities impact the social lives, academic endeavors, and well-being of LGBTQ students. In the final section, the focus is on how these negative experiences affect the academic and emotional well-being of LGBTQ youth. This study also provides suggestions on policies and activities that make school cultures more welcoming for LGBTQ students.

Theoretical Framework

Resilience is defined as young people's ability to adapt effectively to conflict by fostering successful development in the face of adversity (Schmitz & Tyler, 2019). In particular, the experiences of LGBTQ adolescents are influenced by their social interactions at school, affecting their processes and perceptions and their capacity to promote resilience and draw on crucial developmental tools (Schmitz & Tyler, 2019). Resilience Theory offers a context for studying and understanding how certain young people overcome risk exposure and guide preventive strategies using a strategy focused on strengths (Schmitz & Tyler, 2019). In the face of risk, Resilience Theory focuses on positive youth growth. It offers a conceptual basis for researching and recognizing why,

despite risk exposure, some young people grow up to be healthy adults. Resilience happens when the pathway from risk to pathology is disrupted by environmental, social, and individual influences (Zimmerman et al., 2013). These positive contextual, social, and personal variables are referred to as promotional variables and help young people resolve the adverse effects of risk exposure (Zimmerman et al., 2013). There are two types of promotional variables – assets and resources. Assets are positive variables that reside within individuals, such as self-efficacy and self-esteem (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Resources refer to external factors such as parental involvement, adult mentors, and youth programs that offer young people opportunities to learn and practice skills (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Assets and resources include the individual and contextual qualities needed for healthy development for young people (Zimmerman et al., 2013).

This theory includes three basic conceptual models – compensatory, protective, and challenge (Zimmerman et al., 2013). These models provide frameworks for understanding how, in the presence of risk or each other, promotional factors may minimize negative results or increase positive growth (Zimmerman et al., 2013). The compensatory model describes a mechanism in which promotional factors offset exposure to risk by an opposite, direct, and independent impact on performance (Zimmerman et al., 2013). The protective model applies to processes in which protective factors compensate for risk exposure and predict adverse outcomes (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Protective variables can also boost other promotional variables. The challenge model acts as inoculation, potentially allowing young people to resolve subsequent exposure. Initial risk exposure “must be challenging enough to help youths develop the coping mechanisms to overcome its effects, but not so taxing that it overwhelms their

efforts to cope” (Zimmerman et al., 2013, p. 216).

In another model, by Hill and Gunderson (2015), coping skills were not classified as adaptive or maladaptive. Based on LGBTQ individuals’ resources and personal characteristics that contribute to resilience, Hill and Gunderson identified five distinct strategies utilized by LGBTQ individuals. These coping mechanisms were situation selection, situation modification, attentional allocation, cognitive modification, and response modulation. The first four are referred to as antecedent-focused experiences because they occur before the fully developed emotional experience. By contrast, response modulation occurs after the majority of emotional responses have been initiated.

According to McCormick (2016), the process of situation selection entails anticipating the emotional experiences that will likely occur in response to an anticipated situation. The individual then takes steps to enter or create the situation that produces the desired emotions and avoids experiencing the undesirable emotions. Examples of coping strategies include seeking emotional and material support, viewing friends as family, obtaining support and information via the Internet, and setting boundaries (McCormick, 2016). Attentional deployment is the process of directing one's attention to aspects of the environment, or to one's own thoughts and memories, in order to influence one's emotions (Hill & Gunderson, 2015). The most frequently used deployment strategy is distraction, which involves diverting attention away from the encounter or experience that produces undesirable emotions. Cognitive change is the process of altering the way a situation is evaluated or viewed in order to increase the production of desirable emotions and decrease the production of undesirable ones (Hill & Gunderson, 2015). This strategy requires individuals to comprehend a situation in such a way that negative emotions are

minimized. As the name implies, the final strategy, response modulation, occurs after the emotional response has been elicited. The strategy attempts to alter the experiential and physiological consequences of the elicited emotions (Hill & Gunderson, 2015). In the case of negative emotions, individuals may reduce their anxiety and stress levels through physical exercise, deep breathing relaxation techniques, or self-destructive activities such as consuming alcohol, drugs, or food (Hill & Gunderson, 2015).

In conclusion, Resilience Theory claims that the most important thing is not the essence of adversity but how individuals cope with it. Resilience helps LGBTQ students bounce back when they experience discrimination, tragedy, or anger. In the face of victimization, it allows them to live, heal, and even succeed. A hostile school atmosphere allows instantaneous or continuing discrimination, leading to LGBTQ students hiding their true selves. An assessment of the educational experience of LGBTQ students within the Resilience Theory lens is therefore necessary. When more LGBTQ people enter educational environments that are perceived to be unprepared to protect them, their perception of hardship becomes constant. Their resiliency and coping level is an internal drive that can occur in the presence or absence of other supports. LGBTQ student experiences with adversity and resilience can help understand and describe their ability to overcome discrimination and victimization and help others characterize sexuality and gender as more than male or female (Beeson, 2017).

Heteronormativity

During the 19th century, the Common School Movement educated all citizens and immigrants on American culture and ideology (Hill, 2019). The curriculum came from a patriarchal society and consisted of teaching morality, Protestant religious principles, and

promoting patriotism (Hill, 2019). Teachers were middle to upper-class Protestant males (Hill, 2019). Their norms, also known as heteronormativity, focused on heterosexuality, the cornerstone of the sexual system (Hill, 2019). Sex, gender identity, and gender roles were male/female and masculine/feminine. Males were masculine, females were feminine, and the only form of sexual contact was heterosexual (Hill, 2019).

According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), heteronormativity is “the attitude that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality” (para. 1). Heteronormativity assumes that sex, gender identity, and gender roles fall into a male/female and masculine/feminine structure. It further assumes that sex and gender are related to children’s sexual organs. Males are masculine, females are feminine, and heterosexism is the only type of sexuality. However, it is essential to note that heteronormative social constructs continue to influence the everyday life of LGBTQ communities, regardless of gains. LGBTQ student experiences of desires, sex, and sexuality are complex, open up many possibilities, and challenge traditional sexual identity. Their beliefs redefine male/female, masculine/feminine, and the language that supports them. Furthermore, their approach to everyday life rejects conventional identities of sex and gender.

Experiences With Peers

School climate not only sets norms, expectations, and values for students but can also determine their experiences. For many students, the school environment positively impacts academic achievement, school engagement, and social-emotional well-being while reducing absenteeism, peer victimization, and risky youth behaviors (La Salle et al., 2019). Unfortunately for LGBTQ youth, more than eight in 10 experience harassment

or assault in school (Kosciw et al., 2020). As shown in Table 3, over 56% of LGBTQ students experience verbal harassment, more than double those who encounter physical victimization.

Table 3

Frequency of Verbal and Physical Harassment

Personal characteristic	Verbal	Physical
Sexual orientation	68.7%	25.7%
Gender expression	56.9%	21.8%

In Table 3, approximately 69% of LGBTQ students experienced verbal harassment due to their sexual orientation and 57% due to their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2020). During the previous year of this study, 25.7% of LGBTQ students were physically harassed, and 11% were physically assaulted because of their perceived or actual sexual orientation (Kosciw et al., 2020). Because of their gender expression, approximately 22% of LGBTQ youth were physically harassed, and 9.3% were assaulted (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Regrettably, over 20% of LGBTQ students experiencing anti-LGBTQ behaviors and actions felt unsafe in school (Kosciw et al., 2020). Attending school or participating in extracurricular activities did not promote a sense of belonging, improve self-esteem, or increase academic achievement (Kosciw et al., 2020). According to the 2019 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2020), 86.3% of LGBTQ students avoided school because of one or more personal characteristics – sexual orientation, gender, gender expression, weight, family socioeconomic status, academic ability, citizenship, ethnicity, disability, or religion. Of this percentage, approximately 69% reported feeling unsafe

because of their sexual orientation, gender expression, or both. Table 4 shows the percentage of LGBTQ students who avoided school functions, areas, and extracurricular activities; and are missing out on valuable school experiences and education (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Table 4

LGBTQ Students Who Avoid School Spaces and Functions

School spaces and functions	Percentage
School functions	77.6%
Extracurricular activities	71.8%
Restrooms	45.2%
Locker rooms	43.7%
Gym classes	40.2%
Cafeteria	25.9%
Sporting events	25.1%

As seen in Table 4, over 70% of LGBTQ students did not participate in school functions or extracurricular activities, and more than 40% avoided entering school restrooms, locker rooms, and gymnasiums due to safety reasons.

However, feeling unsafe was not the only reason LGBTQ students circumvented school facilities and events. According to Kosciw et al. (2020), homophobic, sexist, racist, and other derogatory comments and graphics also prevented LGBTQ teen participation. Approximately 99% of survey participants heard “gay” used in a negative way when at school, 95% heard remarks such as “dyke” or “faggot,” and 92% heard “not acting masculine/feminine enough” (Kosciw et al., 2020). Another phrase heard by nearly 97% of these students was “no homo,” a term used at the end of a sentence to rid it of a

possible homosexual connotation (Kosciw et al., 2020). A compliment such as “I like your jeans, no homo” would be spoken to a same-gender peer (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. 22). Although this statement seems to have a positive meaning, it represents a homophobic attitude that reinforces the idea that having a same-gender desire is inappropriate.

The Kosciw et al. (2020) study also revealed that 11% of LGBTQ students were assaulted due to sexual orientation and 9.5% because of gender expression. Almost 58% of LGBTQ youth experienced unwanted touching and sexual remarks from their school peers. For instance, one student in the study stated, “as soon as [he] came out, [he] was actively tormented and bullied by the popular boys and sexually harassed by them as well” (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. 29). The data in Table 5 show the CDC (2018) YRBS study comparison rates of physical and verbal victimization experienced by LGBTQ and heterosexual students.

Table 5

High School Youth Victimization Results in the United States

Verbal and physical harassment	LGBTQ	Heterosexual
Threaten or injured with a weapon on school property	20.5%	5.4%
Were in a physical fight on school property	21.4%	8.3%
Were cyberbullied (texting and other social media)	49.1%	13.3%
Were bullied on school property	57.3%	17.1%

As shown in Table 5, LGBTQ students were almost four times more likely to be threatened with a weapon or bullied on school property than their heterosexual peers. Moreover, they were three times more likely to be in a physical fight at school or

cyberbullied.

Another behavior LGBTQ students encountered was relational forms of harassment. Behaviors such as spreading rumors or excluding students from peer activities can damage peer relationships and affect academic outcomes and well-being (Kosciw et al., 2020). According to one GLSEN survey participant, he felt “if [he was] to come out to his friends/classmates, [he] would be hated just for being who [he] was” (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. 18). Approximately 90% of LGBTQ students felt their peers deliberately excluded them from social functions, 74% had lies told about them at school through face-to-face conversation or cyberbullying, and over one-third of them reported their personal or school property was destroyed.

Unfortunately, LGBTQ students did not report victimization because they doubted the perpetrator's consequence would be effective or feared that reporting it would make the situation worse. For any student, reporting harassment or assault may be intimidating. According to Kosciw et al. (2020), the LGBTQ students did not report incidents due to the following:

- About 66% of LGBTQ students believed that the consequence the offender received would not address the victimization.
- Nearly 63% indicated they did not want to be labeled a “snitch.”
- 43.5% were worried their reports would not remain confidential.
- Approximately 42% feared retaliation from the offender.
- Nearly half did not consider the harassment to be severe enough to report.
- 25.3% handled the situation themselves.

In conclusion, many LGBTQ students experienced verbal and physical

victimization, including relational violence and sexual harassment, because of their sexual orientation and gender expression. In addition to encounters with harassment and assault, they heard homophobic remarks from their heterosexual peers, creating an unwelcomed atmosphere, which resulted in feeling unsafe in school and avoiding school facilities, events, and school altogether. Although the degree to which LGBTQ students experienced harassment was not presented in any of the studies, they are more likely to face peer victimization than their non-LGBTQ peers. Finally, LGBTQ youth were unable to disclose their victimization experiences because of reservations about the perpetrator's interventions, fear of offender retribution, or anxiety of being identified as LGBTQ (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Experiences With School Staff

Today, schools are concerned with educating children from multiple cultural, racial, and family backgrounds; a traditional nuclear family is no longer the norm for many students. However, traditional curricula consist of state standards, approved textbooks, and other educational resources that often reinforce heterosexism. The presumption that all students fit into a single-gender category remains present in current curricula. Even though there is more visibility of LGBTQ issues in the media and politics, LGBTQ topics in high school curricula are practically nonexistent (Weltsek, 2019).

Although nearly 49% of the GLSEN National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2020) found LGBTQ resources in the school library and 56% accessed related information via school computers, approximately 67% indicated their classes did not include topics related to LGBTQ issues. One student stated, "I wish there were more

education and discussion of LGBTQ people and issues, but no one will start the conversation” (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. 59). In addition to excluding positive role models, messages, and images of the LGBTQ, one-third of the participants stated non-heterosexual issues were presented falsely or in a negative connotation (Kosciw et al., 2020).

For instance, in some states, sex education teachers were prohibited from including topics outside the heterosexual realm. States with the “No Promo Homo” law prevented health education teachers from “discussing lesbian, gay, or bisexual people or topics in a positive light” (GLSEN, 2019, para. 1). Additionally, South Carolina Statute 59-32-30(5), repealed in 2020, stated that health education could “not include a discussion of alternative sexual lifestyles from heterosexual relationships including, but not limited to, homosexual relationships except in the context of instruction concerning sexually transmitted diseases” (GLSEN, 2019, para. 3). By providing false, misleading, and incomplete information, these laws stigmatized LGBTQ students. Under these circumstances, educators found it challenging to create a safe and inclusive school environment where diversity is embraced, and students and staff generally respect each other.

In the 2019 National School Climate survey (Kosciw et al., 2020), nearly 47% of LGBTQ students reported that staff never intervened when comments about gender expression were made in the educator’s presence. Additionally, more than half of these students heard homophobic remarks from school staff, and 8.5% stated that school staff was part of the harassment or assault they were experiencing. These staff behaviors not only sent a message that harassment in the school was appropriate but had LGBTQ

students believing there was no recourse for reporting victimization. For instance, in the 2019 National School Climate Survey, more than 72% of LGBTQ students believed school staff would remain silent even if harassment were reported (Kosciw et al., 2020). Of those, 48% felt they would be blamed by school staff, and 28% assumed that educators were also homophobic or did not fully understand what students experienced (Kosciw et al., 2020). Some LGBTQ students claimed they were disciplined and assigned harsher consequences than their heterosexual peers.

According to Kosciw et al. (2020), students with higher victimization reports involving sexual orientation were almost twice as likely to face disciplinary reprimand. Many LGBTQ students felt school policies and procedures prevented them from presenting themselves as LGBTQ, being themselves in the school setting, and showing support or involvement in LGBTQ issues. These policies restricted student speech and helped maintain silence regarding LGBTQ individuals and concerns. More than a quarter of LGBTQ students said they had been punished for public intimacy. One female student in the study stated, “More than one teacher did not allow me to hold hands with my girlfriend and threatened detention if they even saw us in the halls holding hands” (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. 40). Also, 16.6% of LGBTQ students said they were prohibited from addressing LGBTQ topics in class assignments and projects or writing about them in school publications. Nearly 11% could not wear clothes or items, such as a rainbow flag t-shirt, that promoted LGBTQ issues, and 7.6% were discouraged from attending dances with anyone of the same sex. Unfortunately, 3% were disciplined for describing themselves as LGBTQ. The GLSEN (Kosciw et al., 2020) survey participants also reported discriminatory encounters with school coaches. Approximately 10% of LGBTQ

students reported that school staff or coaches stopped or discouraged them from playing sports based on the inability to use locker rooms based on their gender identity or same-sex attraction (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Some administrators also prohibit activities and clubs that support and address LGBTQ concerns and issues. Prohibiting organizations that do not conform to heterosexual norms may also violate the Equal Access Act of 1984. This federal law states,

It shall be unlawful for any public secondary school which receives Federal financial assistance...to deny equal access or a fair opportunity to, or discriminate against, any students who wish to conduct a meeting...on the basis of the religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the speech at such meetings.

(GSA Network, 2021, para. 1)

Since 1998, 17 federal Equal Access Act lawsuits were filed, including ACLU's suit against a school board in Indiana. In 2015, students at North Putnam High School were barred by their school board from forming a GSA, denoting the first-time club formation required board approval. After the ACLU sued, the school board reversed its decision and allowed the club to form (ACLU, 2014).

Overall, less than half of LGBTQ students indicated that the school staff was supportive. According to educators, they fail to respond to LGBTQ injustices because they are often challenged and targeted by peers, parents, and communities. Teachers stated they also have unsupportive administrators or school boards that oppose a gender-inclusive curriculum. Teachers attributed their actions (or lack thereof) to the absence of professional development in dealing with LGBTQ issues and the strong homophobic

presence in students and the community (Hill, 2019). Staff professional development must provide concrete methods to make the classroom and curriculum more inclusive and respond to verbal or physical abuse and biased remarks (Tiberi, 2019). LGBTQ students must have school staff to turn to and administrators who are proactive in supporting them (Kosciw et al., 2020). In addition to supportive educators, teachers must positively develop a school curriculum that presents LGBTQ individuals, cultures, and events. Health courses and instructional materials should include inclusive words, phrases, and content applicable to the sexual minority (Hill, 2019).

High School and District Policies and Practices

Similar to society's opinions and behaviors about male- and female-specific gender roles, a school's hidden curriculum "is...the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives that students learn" (Hill, 2019, p. 24) and defines appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Some schools have specific policies and practices that limit LGBTQ gender expression or access. For example, nearly 23% of LGBTQ participants in the Kosciw et al. (2020) study said they were prohibited from using their preferred name or pronouns in school. One-fifth of them indicated their school prevented them from wearing clothes considered unacceptable based on their gender (i.e., preventing a male student from wearing a dress because he was a boy or because staff thought he was a boy). Moreover, over a quarter of LGBTQ participants in the 2019 National School Climate Survey reported that they were discouraged from using their gender-aligned bathroom (Kosciw et al., 2020). Unfortunately, restricting access to school facilities and programs due to gender expression or sexual identity may cause emotional and physical effects on LGBTQ youth. In the Kosciw et al. (2020) study,

approximately 72% of LGBTQ students avoided school restrooms because they encountered discrimination.

In addition to restrooms, more than 62% of LGBTQ teens felt victimized when participating in school activities. Almost half of LGBTQ students in the 2019 National School Climate Survey indicated that their school had gender-specified homecoming courts, prom kings and queens, or other forms of dance honors. These competitions and other school events enhanced heterosexism by reinforcing the perception that being heterosexual was the norm. Homecoming courts and dances required males to compete for the title of king and females as the queen. Additionally, students were required to wear gendered attire for graduation and school portraits (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Because school and district policies lacked comprehensive procedures relating to bullying, abuse, and attack, many LGBTQ students felt rules were unfair and oppressive. When schools have comprehensive anti-bullying policies, less than 36% of LGBTQ students regularly heard anti-LGBTQ remarks. This rate increased to 47.5% for students in schools with no policy. Likewise, schools with inclusive policies experienced lower levels of victimization based on gender expression or sexual orientation, 23.4% compared to 33.2% in schools with no policy. When anti-LGBTQ statements occurred, the highest frequencies of staff involvement (25.3%) were recorded by schools with comprehensive policies compared to 6.8% in schools without a policy (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Overall, incorporating school policies and practices that focus on heterosexual student structures, ideals, and behaviors can hinder how LGBTQ students disclose their sexual status to others and with whom they choose to be open (Parodi-Brown, 2019). Policies must explicitly provide provisions for young sexual minorities opportunities to

participate in all school activities. Comprehensive policies can also offer educators career development, help combat bullying and harassment in and out of the classroom, and provide detailed protocols to collect and record bullying and abuse cases (Hill, 2019). The Kosciw et al. (2020) National School Climate study also indicated that comprehensive policies effectively foster a safer school climate for LGBTQ students, giving teachers and other school staff the message that it is expected and essential to respond to LGBTQ-based harassment. These policies can also send students a message that anti-LGBTQ comments are unacceptable (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Academic Achievement and Well-Being

The 2019 National School Climate Survey explored the relationship between academic performance, psychological well-being, and LGBTQ students who encountered elevated levels of in-school victimization based on their sexual identity or gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2020). The study found that schools that are less accepting and have more unfavorable educational results for LGBTQ students can induce peer victimization and social prejudice. Because these students experienced victimization, they were more likely to have lower academic expectations, lower grades, and greater absenteeism. They were also more likely to encounter school punishment, leading to withdrawal from school and possibly entering the criminal justice system. The survey also showed that a hostile school environment could negatively affect an LGBTQ student's emotional well-being, weaken their sense of belonging to their school group, and harm their mental health and self-esteem. For instance, LGBTQ students who experienced higher victimization levels were twice as likely to have no intentions of pursuing a postsecondary education as other students (9.9% versus 5.8%). Regrettably,

approximately 93% of them felt they would not graduate from high school because of mental health reasons, 68% due to academic issues, and 61% because of a hostile school environment (Kosciw et al., 2020).

For LGBTQ students, this greater intensity of victimization also resulted in lower academic performance and lower grade point averages (GPAs) than other students. For students who had higher levels of discrimination based on their sexual identity or gender identification, the mean recorded GPAs were significantly lower than for students who experienced less abuse and assault. LGBTQ students with higher levels of gender-based victimization had an average GPA of 2.98 compared to a 3.37 GPA for LGBTQ students with lower levels of the same type of victimization (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, school-based victimization and discrimination can also undermine student rights to an education. Students who are bullied or abused continuously while in school may escape these hurtful encounters by not attending school. As shown in Table 6, LGBTQ students who experience victimization based on sexual orientation are nearly three times more likely to have missed school in the past month.

Table 6

Absenteeism Based on Victimization and Discrimination

Type of victimization	Lower	Higher
Sexual orientation	21.7%	57.2%
Gender expression	21.8%	59.0%
	Had not experienced	Experienced
Discrimination	16.4%	44.1%

LGBTQ students' reasons for their absenteeism were feeling unsafe at school,

being very cautious of who they were close to, and being afraid to go to the restroom or raise their hands for fear of being verbally or physically attacked (Hill, 2019). One student in the Kosciw et al. (2020) study stated, “I love learning, but most days I...hate school. I can't deal with the comments and inability [of] people to...be kind to LGBTQIA+ students” (p. 46).

Fortunately, many LGBTQ teens planned to complete high school and attend some form of postsecondary education due to their support from school staff. According to the Kosciw et al. (2020) study, reducing their experiences with victimization and discrimination required educators to minimize anti-LGBTQ prejudice in schools, eradicate discriminatory school practices and policies, and build affirming learning environments. Supportive methods were implemented at all grade levels, paying close attention to younger students who may be at greater risk of not completing high school. By reducing victimization and prejudice in school, school staff could improve the mental health of LGBTQ youth and enable them to achieve their fullest potential inside and outside of school (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Emotional Well-Being

It is imperative to explore how harassment and assault experiences contribute to the well-being of LGBTQ students. Two facets of emotional well-being are self-esteem and depression. As seen in Table 7, lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression were seen in LGBTQ students who reported more severe victimization based on their sexual identity or gender expression.

Table 7*Experiences of Victimization and Discrimination*

Type of victimization	Self-esteem		Depression	
	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher
Sexual orientation	51.0%	31.6%	42.3%	72.0%
Gender expression	50.7%	31.0%	42.9%	72.3%
	Had not experienced	Experienced	Had not experienced	Experienced
Discrimination	56.6%	36.9%	35.9%	62.3%

According to the GLSEN 2019 National School Climate Survey results, 72% of students who experienced higher levels of victimization reported higher levels of depression than the 42.3% who experienced lower harassment levels (Kosciw et al., 2020). Furthermore, of the LGBTQ students who faced discriminatory policies or activities in school, approximately 57% had lower self-esteem levels, and 62% had higher levels of depression (Kosciw et al., 2020). Depression and low self-esteem can also lead to suicidal activity for LGBTQ youth. According to the 2017 National YRBS Report, LGBTQ teens are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (CDC, 2018).

In conclusion, LGBTQ students who experienced victimization and discrimination were more likely to have lower educational aspirations, lower grades, and higher absenteeism. They were much more likely to face discipline in school, driving students out of school and even into the system of criminal justice. The study by Kosciw et al. (2020) showed that a hostile school environment could have a detrimental effect on

the sense of school belonging and psychological well-being of an LGBTQ student.

Community and school advocates must prevent and respond to in-school victimization and eradicate school policies and procedures that discriminate against LGBTQ youth to ensure that LGBTQ students are afforded inclusive learning environments and equitable educational opportunities. Reducing school victimization and bullying could lead to enhanced mental health for young LGBTQ people, allowing them to reach their fullest potential inside and outside school.

Coping Mechanisms

While some LGBTQ learners face many forms of harassment, they choose not to be victims by stepping into a state of heroism instead. These students focused on school activities to resolve LGBTQ issues by becoming members of GSAs or becoming advocates individually. Student-led organizations, such as GSAs, focus on raising awareness of LGBTQ issues, fostering school connections, and providing all students with a healthy, supportive, and inclusive atmosphere. For some LGBTQ students, GSAs “may be the only extracurricular activity where they can feel safe as an LGBTQ person” (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. 59). According to the Kosciw et al. (2020) survey, over two-thirds of LGBTQ students reported having a GSA or similar club at their school, and approximately 62% attended club meetings. The benefits of GSAs included creating positive school experiences, decreasing victimization, and reducing social isolation among LGBTQ students (Beeson, 2017). GSAs also hosted gay-pride assemblies and staff seminars and provided student panels to discuss personal experiences with anti-LGBTQ issues, bullying, harassment, discrimination, and suicide (Hall-Kennedy, 2020).

However, other LGBTQ teens wanted to remain in the background and preferred

blending in or isolation, which are the most common coping mechanisms. While some LGBTQ students opted to separate themselves and avoided getting involved in education or extracurricular activities, others engaged in athletics and other activities deemed appropriate for their physical appearance. Blending in also meant concentrating on managing their identity and image by focusing on their mannerisms and clothing. No matter what coping mechanisms were used, LGTBQ students regarded their sexual orientation as a natural part of themselves and firmly believed they were not terrible individuals (Hall-Kennedy, 2020).

Federal Laws and Regulations

First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution

On December 15, 1791, the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution, generally known as the Bill of Rights, went into effect. The First Amendment states, “protects the right to freedom of religion and freedom of expression from government interference” (Cornell Law School, n.d.-c, para. 1). Thus, students "have the freedom to be 'out,' to speak out about LGBTQ problems, and to organize peaceful protests" when it comes to the LGBTQ community. They also have the freedom to go to prom with a same-gender date and dress and express themselves in a way that best reflects their gender identity” (Kosciw et al., 2018). Students' fundamental civil rights are violated when school districts restrict these expressions or establish district policies that violate these student protections.

For example, *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969) was a significant Supreme Court case concerning First Amendment rights. This issue arose after a middle school teacher and a group of her students decided to wear black armbands to school to express their

opposition to the Vietnam War. When the students and teachers refused to remove the bands, they were taken home and informed they would not be allowed to return to school until they consented to do so. The plaintiff won this case, which determined that students should not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (ACLU, 2021, para 5). This case demonstrated that the First Amendment protects practices in public schools, and school educators were prohibited from regulating student speech and expression unless it interferes with the instructional process (ACLU, 2021).

In another incident, Maverick Couch donned a T-shirt to school with a rainbow Ichthys, or "symbol of the fish," and the words "Jesus Is Not a Homophobe" in honor of GLSEN's National Day of Silence. Maverick was summoned to the principal's office and told to turn the T-shirt inside out. Maverick complied, but he was instructed to take it off or face suspension when he wore it the next day. He was threatened with suspension again when he submitted a written request to wear it. His school administrators claimed the clothing was "sexual" in nature. Lambda Legal filed a lawsuit against the Wayne Local School District and Principal Randy Gebhardt on Maverick's behalf. The school district and the principal agreed to the judgment entered against them, affirming Maverick's right to wear the shirt whenever he wanted. The court also awarded him \$20,000 in damages, costs, and attorney's fees (Lambda Legal, n.d.).

14th Amendment of U.S. Constitution

The Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution, often known as the 14th Amendment, declares that "No state shall...deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws" (Cornell Law School, n.d.-a, sect. 1). Equal protection is

promised to all citizens under this amendment, and it is effective in public schools. As a result, all students have a federal and constitutional right to equal protection under the law. Like all other students, schools are responsible for safeguarding LGBTQ+ students from harassment and discrimination (Cornell Law School, n.d.-b).

Nabozny v. Podlesny (1996) is a well-known court case involving the 14th Amendment. Jamie Nabozny was subjected to verbal and physical harassment from students at his public high school in Wisconsin for four years. Students urinated on him, pretended to rape him in class, and kicked him in the stomach so many times that he needed surgery. Despite knowing about the assault, school administrators told Nabozny that if he is gay, he should expect it. Nabozny made repeated suicide attempts, dropped out of school, and eventually ran away. In the end, he filed a lawsuit against his former school so that other students did not have to endure what he had. This case became a precedent-setting lawsuit in front of a federal appeals court. In the first legal ruling, the Court determined that a public school could be held liable for failing to prevent anti-gay abuse. The school officials were held liable for the injury they caused to Nabozny, and the case was settled for nearly \$1 million (Lambda Legal, n.d.).

Title IX

The Education Amendments of 1972, or Title IX, is a federal civil rights statute that forbids discrimination in educational programs and activities based on gender. Title IX applies to all public and private schools, school districts, and post-secondary institutions that accept federal financial assistance in any form. Sexual harassment or sexual violence, such as rape, sexual assault, sexual battery, or sexual coercion, are examples of sex discrimination under Title IX (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

When school educators learn about sexual harassment or violence that creates a hostile environment, they must act quickly to stop the harassment or violence, prevent it from happening again, and address the issues. Even if a student or his parents do not want a complaint filed, the school must investigate any reports of sexual harassment or violence so that the circumstances can be promptly resolved (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Furthermore, if law enforcement files a complaint, criminal charges do not absolve the school of its responsibility under Title IX to resolve complaints immediately and responsibly (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). In addition, Title IX requires that all institutions establish a policy against sexual discrimination. Schools must establish a policy inclusive of the LGBTQ community, indicating that the district does not discriminate in education or associated programs based on gender (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

The Equal Access Act

The Equal Access Act of 1984 applies specifically to secondary schools and their extracurricular activities. This federal statute assures that non-curriculum clubs have access to school meeting spaces and resources. It states, “It shall be unlawful for any public secondary school receiving Federal financial assistance and having a limited open forum to deny equal access or a fair opportunity to, or discriminate against, any students who wish to conduct a meeting within that limited open forum on the basis of the religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the speech at such meetings” (Cornell Law School, n.d.-b, para. a).

If a school permits the development of any extracurricular activities, it must also permit the formation of a GSA. Furthermore, no specific regulations or restrictions may be imposed on the GSA that are not imposed on other clubs. LGBTQ students should be able to engage in school activities regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. For example, Anthony Coln, a Southern California high school student, first attempt to form a GSA was denied by the school board. As a result, unlike other student clubs, the GSA could not hold meetings in the school. The school board then advised the GSA members that their application would only be reconsidered if the group changed its name. During the lawsuit's proceedings, the GSA members were allowed to meet at school, utilize the school's public address system to make announcements, and be featured in the school yearbook, just like other student organizations (Lambda Legal, n.d.).

State Laws and Regulations

State legislators have taken steps to combat bullying and protect children. All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories combat bullying differently. Others have created model policies that schools and school districts can follow when creating their laws, policies, and regulations. Most state laws, policies, and regulations require districts and schools to develop a bullying policy and processes to investigate and respond to bullying incidents (Stopbullying.gov, 2017). For example, in 2006, the South Carolina legislature passed Article 2: Safe School Climate Act, which required school districts to adopt a policy prohibiting harassment, intimidation, or bullying (Stopbullying.gov, 2017).

Summary

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution, the 14th Amendment of

the United States Constitution, often known as the Equal Protection Clause, Title IX of the Education Amendments, and The Equal Access Act, support LGBTQ youth in schools and other public settings. These documents provide all students, including LGBTQ youth, the freedom to express themselves in the gender of their choice (First Amendment), protection from harassment and discrimination (14th Amendment), and provide access to school resources for extracurricular activities and events (The Equal Access Act). Despite legislation recognizing these civil rights, there is still a general lack of application of these standards in state and local school-based policies. Although South Carolina school districts have an anti-bullying policy, districts are not required to “provide safeguards or mental health supports for students involved with bullying” (Stopbullying.gov, 2017, sect. 9).

Heterosexism, which is reflected in public schools today, is rooted in American society. Both the official and hidden curriculum established that heterosexuality is dominant. School policies and practices encouraged heteronormativity and excluded those who did not fit into the stereotypical male/female categories. LGBTQ students were regularly subject to homophobic remarks and discriminatory language from both students and adults on campus, which resulted in verbal and physical violence. Because of these negative interactions, LGBTQ youth had lower academic performance and self-esteem but higher levels of depression, leading to an increased number of suicidal attempts compared to their heterosexual peers (Hill, 2019).

To improve their academic achievement and well-being, LGBTQ students need unique and tailored resources. Although the Resilience Theory provides them with support pathways and coping mechanisms to lead a productive life, educational leaders

must create a welcoming school environment for LGBTQ students (Zimmerman et al., 2013). By fostering GSAs, incorporating LGBTQ issues and topics into the curriculum, and embracing diversity and respect for all, school staff can improve the academic performance and well-being of LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Insufficient support for this oppressed group has been a persistent theme in the literature, with studies documenting the deficits faced by LGBTQ youth in the diverse spaces they inhabit. Unfortunately, in the current literature, comprehensive first-hand accounts of lived experiences are frequently missing. The majority of the literature focuses on the negative life experiences of LGBTQ youth while ignoring their perspectives and stories within the phenomenon. The failure to provide the lived experiences of these students perpetuates an educational environment based on heteronormativity, inequity, and risk (Kosciw et al., 2020). Moreover, LGBTQ student-specific studies are limited to research focusing on the obstacles and unfair struggles this community faces but not on the efficacy of tailored support and preparedness of administrators and organizations supporting them. The lack of research helps perpetuate the adverse experiences, prohibiting administrators and school staff from receiving adequate training (Hill, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2020).

Focusing on how LGBTQ students reacted to discrimination-related challenges, this study will begin to fill holes in the literature surrounding LGBTQ youth and the subgroups comprising this community. By deriving meaning from the lived experiences of LGBTQ high school graduates, this research will effectively reflect on their perceptions and resilience to inform those who can potentially affect the LGBTQ student population. Although research exists that recommends specific strategies to improve

LGBTQ lives at school, there is a gap in research related to schools that apply the suggested methods and the impact these strategies have on the experiences of LGBTQ students. This study intends to close the research gap by condensing detailed recollections into themes so educators can better understand what LGBTQ students experienced, how they experienced it, and how their coping mechanisms made a difference in their future (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stevenson & Zimmerman, 2005). As a final point, this phenomenological qualitative study answered the following research questions.

1. What were former LGBTQ high school student experiences with harassment and discrimination while attending high school?
2. How did school and district policies and practices affect LGBTQ high school student experiences?
3. What support do former LGBTQ high school students believe current LGBTQ high school students need from district and school educators and staff?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The views of educators and peers of LGBTQ students can impact the psychological, mental, social, and physical well-being and academic success of these adolescents. Furthermore, the lack of inclusionary school functions, LGBTQ-specific assistance, and LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum increases the risk of negative academic results (Kosciw et al., 2020). A first-hand account of their experiences and perceptions is required to portray LGBTQ students' school lives accurately. This study's findings may help South Carolina educators

- understand how their homophobic behaviors could affect LGBTQ students emotionally, socially, and academically;
- develop programs and professional development focused on altering homophobic views and actions of students, faculty, and staff; and
- create a safe and inclusive environment for all students.

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to analyze LGBTQ high school student experiences and perceptions of homophobic discrimination and harassment from their peers, school staff, and administrators. An open-ended online survey was developed and distributed to recent LGBTQ high school graduates between 18 and 24. Their responses on the survey helped this study fill in previous research gaps focused on school victimization and the lived experiences of LGBTQ students while in high school.

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive description of the chosen research design, methodology, recruitment procedures, participant selection, and the sample size used to

complete the analysis. It also discusses the methodological approaches of the present research, exploring the following research questions:

1. What were former LGBTQ high school student experiences with harassment and discrimination while attending high school?
2. How did school and district policies and practices affect LGBTQ high school student experiences?
3. What support do former LGBTQ high school students believe current LGBTQ high school students need from district and school educators and staff?

Research Design

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), phenomenological research is a “design of inquiry...in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by the participants” (p. 13). Thus, by examining how LGBTQ high school graduates viewed the environment around them, this study helped “to understand the meaning, structure, and essence of [their] lived experiences” (Ward, 2017, p. 41). Using a phenomenological qualitative approach was also essential because it revealed impressions of their psychological, mental, social, physical, and academic well-being (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participant descriptive experiences provided essential data to establish context and gain a thematic understanding of their encounters with harassment and discrimination (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These themes provided a better understanding of what LGBTQ students experienced and how their encounters affected their future aspirations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stevenson & Zimmerman, 2005). Through participants' unique experiences, educators and students may gain an improved understanding of the LGBTQ

community's strengths and needs.

Participants

It is an essential step in any research study to select a participant sample since it is rarely feasible, effective, or ethical to explore entire populations. In qualitative research, surveys are small and contribute to the way people behave and communicate in groups. Unfortunately, there are concerns about what constitutes an acceptable sample size in phenomenological qualitative research. For phenomenological studies, Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommended interviewing five to 25 individuals; however, according to Creswell and Creswell (2018), Guest et al. (2006), and Vasileiou et al. (2018), after interviewing 20 or more people who belong to one category, little new knowledge is created. When no new information is elicited by sampling more units, saturation is reached, and sampling can be stopped. For example, in a study conducted by Guest et al. (2006), the 12th interview reached a saturation of themes because their sample was relatively homogeneous, and their study goals were narrow. Experiments with more heterogeneous samples and a broader reach would likely need a larger sample size to achieve saturation (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Since this study focused on the lived experiences of LGBTQ high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 24, saturation was reached after nine participants completed the survey; however, additional responses were accepted until the survey was closed. Volunteers were not chosen if they were

- enrolled in high school,
- currently in treatment,
- diagnosed with psychosis or bipolar disorder,

- currently self-identified as suicidal or homicidal, and/or
- presently experiencing severe anxiety or depression symptoms.

This study also used a purposeful sampling method to recruit qualified participants. Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases when resources are limited. This process involved identifying and selecting incredibly knowledgeable or experienced individuals with a phenomenon of interest. In addition to knowledge and experience, candidates must have been available and willing to participate and communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. Because the LGBTQ community was a relatively closed population, recruitment was challenging, and snowballing was necessary (Palinkas et al., 2013).

Snowballing is a type of purposeful sampling strategy used “to identify cases of interest from sampling people who know people who generally have similar characteristics that, in turn, know people, also with similar characteristics” (Palinkas et al., 2013, Table 1). Recruitment flyers (see Appendix A) containing information about the study and the study's criteria were shared with GSA advisors and people known to access an LGBTQ individual, community, or organization. Study participants were also asked to share the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) with those they thought may be interested in the study, building a sense of trust and credibility that someone outside the organization would not have.

Confidentiality

Because this study collected participants' real-life stories and experiences, participant names were not collected, and their identities remained confidential and

secure. Sensitive information was not disclosed or published, written answers identifying names of school staff or peers were removed, and no participant was exposed to any other person outside or inside the study. At the end of the data collection period, all responses were uploaded to an external flash drive and stored in a locked safe. After the required number of years, the data will be deleted, and the flash drive will be reformatted, leaving no confidential information.

Informed Consent

The recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) included the study's purpose, qualifications for a prospective participant, privacy, and methods to participate or withdraw from the research. The dissertation chair's and my contact information, and a link to the survey were also included. When volunteers clicked on the link in the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A), they were sent to the Informed Consent (see Appendix B) section. This section reiterated the purpose and privacy of the study. Any volunteer willing to complete the survey was required to select "Yes," acknowledging they understood the confidentiality concerns, potential risks, and benefits of engaging in the research and affirming that participation was entirely voluntary. Any participant who did not complete the survey after the demographic section was not selected for the study.

Instrument

To generate information-rich results, this phenomenological study relied on surveys to elicit emotional accounts of lived experiences. Web-based surveys offer reduced response time, are reasonably priced, are easy to input data, have an adaptable design, are understandable due to advanced technology, and have the opportunity to obtain additional response-set data. They also offer anonymity, enabling participants to

include sensitive responses with honest details. Combining an email cover letter with a hyperlink to the survey was incredibly useful and efficient when requesting individuals complete an internet survey (Solomon, 2001).

Unfortunately, there are some disadvantages to using web-based surveys. First, including surveys on the Internet can cause bias due to coverage or people not having or choosing to access the Internet. Although using the web is growing exponentially, many people do not have Internet access. Because of the coronavirus pandemic in 2019, the world has experienced a digital divide. More than 6% of the United States and almost half of the world's population do not have high-speed access. According to Microsoft, there are "19 million unconnected homes...[and] more than 157 million Americans don't use the internet at broadband speeds" (Broom, 2020, para. 10); however, according to Solomon (2001), internet access is extremely high for individuals between the ages of 18 and 24.

Second, web-based surveys have low response rates, approximately 11% below mail and phone surveys. Monroe and Adams (2012) used the Dillman approach, which relied on "personalized, repeated contact to boost response rates" (p. 2) to increase response rates. To ensure adequate response rates, GSA sponsors, school counselors, and people connected to the LGBTQ community were asked to share the recruitment form and send a personal message to prospective volunteers.

Procedure

Choosing a study methodology allowed me to consider structuring the study before identifying the method of research design. The problem statement and the overarching research issue introduced the study context and discussed the perspectives

and high school experiences of LGBTQ students. For this analysis, it was necessary to use the phenomenological approach to uncover their lived experiences with discrimination and harassment. Collecting data using qualitative approaches typically requires direct contact on an individual basis or in a group environment with participants. The benefits of using these approaches include data richness and a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation; however, the need to obtain detailed information from participants was one data collection challenge (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

After approval from Gardner-Webb University's Institutional Review Board was granted, the data collection process began. This study's data collection used an open-ended, web-based survey (see Appendix C) that allowed for anonymity. The data collection process included five sections. The first section of the online survey collected demographic information, such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Directions and information about the survey process were given to the participants, and they were asked to complete the survey within a specific period. Volunteers affirmed their commitment to participate before responding to the web-based survey by selecting "yes" to the consent statement.

The second portion of the data collection process included open-ended questions, revealing data about problems that this research did not consider exploring and help minimize unexplained predispositions (Ward, 2017). Focusing on the first research question, LGBTQ high school graduates expounded on their encounters with school administrators, school employees, and peers. Their open-ended responses also described the discriminatory school and district policies and practices that created an unhealthy and negative school climate, which addressed the second research question. The final

segment of the survey (see Appendix C) allowed participants to explain how they handled these experiences and if there existed support systems to help them deal with peer and educator victimization.

Because of homophobic experiences and encounters that occurred when students self-identified or were viewed as LGBTQ, the fourth section of the survey (see Appendix C) focused on participants' academic efforts in high school. This section aimed to determine whether educator attitudes about LGBTQ students influenced the future academic efforts of these students. LGBTQ students may withdraw from the classroom, become truant, and suffer from psychological problems such as depression. Participants explained how their expectations or experiences influenced their decisions after graduation to pursue higher education.

Participants suggested future improvements in public education to ensure a safe and inclusive school climate in this survey's final section (see Appendix C). They also proposed support structures and strategies to cope with discrimination and harassment. Participant recommendations can help educational leaders develop professional development to help staff identify discriminatory practices and policies. The results from this question may report essential data to school systems across the nation attempting to provide LGBTQ public school students with support and a safe school environment.

Data Analysis

A phenomenological study began with recognizing that there is a void in knowledge and that interpretation or enlightenment is advantageous. Typically, the analysis starts with descriptions of lived experiences, often in first-person and daily verbal communication. This research replicated and analyzed these images as accurately

as possible by providing a synthesized interpretation of the phenomenon's authentic nature that a person perceives or encounters. It also aimed to go beyond what emerges or candid phrases to access implied elements and expectations (Lloyd, 2012).

Qualtrics, an online program used by Gardner-Webb University students and staff, facilitated the survey's approach and data collection. Participants accessed online surveys by email, text message, and offline, allowing improved response rates. Because of data encryption, redundancy, and continuous network monitoring, all survey data stored in Qualtrics were secure. Reemerging patterns and themes were defined after the data were analyzed and definitions were created. After identifying significant trends and patterns, a review of those results was reported using descriptive text that candidly incorporates participant comments (Qualtrics XM, 2020).

Data Clustering and Themes

In qualitative phenomenological data analysis, data clustering and theme formation helped analyze an individual's open-ended responses. Each response was coded with one or more categories and prepared for data analysis. Data were checked, common components defined, reemerging patterns identified, and themes reported. This study incorporated the distinctive 7-step method by Colaizzi (Morrow et al., 2015), which provided a thorough and concise review and explanation of LGBTQ adolescent experiences and perceptions of victimization. This methodology also relied on rich first-person accounts of lived experiences and is outlined in Table 8.

Table 8*Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Method*

Step	Name	Description
1	Familiarization	Getting acquainted with the data by reading through all the participants' accounts several times
2	Identifying significant statements	Identify all statements in the responses that are of direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation
3	Formulating meanings	Identifying meanings relevant to the phenomenon that arise from careful consideration of the significant statements
4	Clustering themes	Cluster identified meanings into themes that are common across all responses
5	Developing an exhaustive description	Writing full and inclusive descriptions of the phenomenon, incorporating all themes from Step 4
6	Producing the fundamental structure	Condensing the exhaustive description to short, dense statements that capture only those aspects deemed to be essential to the structure of the phenomenon
7	Seeking verification of fundamental structure	Returns the fundamental structure statement to all participants to ask whether it captures their experiences.

By using Colaizzi's technique (Morrow et al., 2015), themes were established. An exhaustive overview was developed and refined into a fundamental framework of the lived experience of harassment and discrimination of LGBTQ high school graduates. Although the final step may cause controversy, a phenomenological quality study aims to create themes participants would be unable to recognize as their own experience (Morrow et al., 2015).

Validity and Reliability

Internal and external validity are essential in qualitative research. Qualitative research approaches require evaluative instruments to be valid to produce reliable, meaningful, and positive data from the participants. A study's results must be accurate and certain. Accurate means the study's outcomes genuinely reflect the circumstances. Certain indicates the evidence supports research findings. Terms such as trustworthiness and credibility are also characteristics of valid research. Transferability and dependability are associated with reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Internal Validity

In general, qualitative approaches offered comprehensive explanations for investigating context-specific interactions that present sound internal validity. This investigation was internally valid since it aimed to reveal and analyze the perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ high school graduates concerning victimization. The internally relevant findings came from specific conclusions drawn from the open-ended, online survey (see Appendix C). Participant written descriptions helped validate the conclusions drawn from the survey and established a more coherent picture of the common expectations and experiences of LGBTQ teens and the quality of institutional support (Lloyd, 2012).

External Validity

The degree to which the findings are generalizable to conditions or situations outside of the analysis is external validity. In qualitative methods, transferability is the researcher's responsibility and requires determining how fair the transfer is. By doing a thorough job of explaining the research background and assumptions critical to the

analysis, the transferability was enhanced. This research's degree of external validity was small because there are different LGBTQ populations in South Carolina and across the United States. However, the sample used in this study represented a target population that each participant had to meet to be eligible for the study. All participants were LGBTQ graduates between the ages of 18 and 24 who experienced harassment and discrimination in a South Carolina high school. The sample was also diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, and race and consisted of participants who self-identified as LGBTQ.

Reliability

The analysis instrument ensured reliability. Open-ended questions were relevant to the research question to assess the method's reliability and allowed participants to provide candid answers that explained a central phenomenon's impressions and experiences. For this research, three self-identified LGBTQ support mentors participated in a pilot study to ensure the online survey was reliable and addressed the study's research questions. Volunteers determined whether the web-based survey was too long and if questions were too vague, inadequately written, or difficult to understand. They also ascertained whether participants would understand the instrument's purpose, fluency, and relevance. Based on the expert panel's feedback, the online survey was modified to resolve any issues participants may have. After adjustments were made, five self-identified LGBTQ high school graduates took the survey to test for reliability and validity. Although these graduates did not participate in the research, their names and identities were kept strictly confidential. Any sensitive information collected from the study remained in a locked safe until discarded according to Gardner-Webb University's policy (Lloyd, 2012).

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the small sample size, which can affect the study's reliability; therefore, defining a valid sample size was essential and depended on the knowledge being researched and its credibility. Another limitation was that the results of the study were limited to the experiences of the students interviewed. High school graduates had different experiences, which could influence identifying emergent themes among the participants. The study also included individual experiences and participant perspectives on how well their schools created an inclusive environment for all students. Researching each question through each participant's lens and excluding others' views in the study was another limitation.

Several delimitations defined the scope of this study. First, the focus of this study was specifically on the experiences of LGBTQ high school graduates. Although non-LGBTQ students could comment on their experiences with discrimination and harassment, choosing to focus on the LGBTQ high school community's specific experiences was a requirement for this particular study. Second, the study only included graduates from high schools in South Carolina. Data from the CDC and National School Climate Survey showed that LGBTQ students vary significantly from state to state and region to region in the United States (Kosciw et al., 2018). Another delimitation was that participants were self-selected. Participants who felt strongly about their school experiences and were willing to share them were selected and asked to provide recommendations for others who may want to participate. Due to this self-selection, the sample did not represent the entire population and could be skewed toward a more vocal sample. The final delimitation is the sample size of the study. Although the sample size

was appropriate for a phenomenological study, it did not represent all LGBTQ student experiences in the United States.

Assumptions

This study was based on the following assumptions:

1. The participants understood the interview questions asked and freely answered without hesitation.
2. The participants answered the interview questions truthfully and candidly.
3. The inclusion criteria assured that the participants have all experienced the same or similar phenomenon of the study.
4. The participants had a sincere interest in participating in the study.

Summary

In Chapter 3, a qualitative phenomenological analysis was discussed and defined the framework for understanding how LGBTQ high school graduates viewed and encountered discrimination and harassment in public education. The phenomenological design was appropriate for this study since it described experiences and perceptions of LGBTQ adolescents and the effects of these encounters on academics and their well-being. The study described the experiences and perceptions of homophobia shared by all participants during their high school years. Chapter 3 also identified the population, sampling criteria, and protocols regarding confidentiality and informed consent. Additionally, a pilot study was designed to test for reliability and validity. After the online survey was modified based on suggestions from the pilot study volunteers, the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) was created and distributed to school counselors, social workers, and LGBTQ organizations. The survey was also shared on Facebook's

direct messenger site. At the end of the survey period, participant responses were examined and coded to identify themes using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method (Morrow et al., 2015). Chapter 4 presents and analyzes the findings of the web-based survey (see Appendix C).

Chapter 4: Results

This study was conducted to learn more about respondents' lived school experiences and give them a stronger voice in their journeys. Whether these experiences are described in the first or third person, the audience usually reacts more strongly to the stories. This research extended LGBTQ adolescents' first-hand encounters with harassment and discrimination from their high school peers and school staff. Since this study focuses on how young adult LGBTQ people made meaning from their experiences of homophobia and discrimination, a qualitative phenomenological design was the best method. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of each participant's perceptions and lived experiences with homophobic discrimination and harassment in high school. The sample population consisted of 17 South Carolinian LGBTQ high school graduates between 18 and 24. The primary purpose of this study was to explore the following research questions:

1. What were former LGBTQ high school student experiences with harassment and discrimination while attending high school?
2. How did school and district policies and practices affect LGBTQ high school student experiences?
3. What support do former LGBTQ high school students believe current LGBTQ high school students need from district and school educators and staff?

Data Collection

The research plan was to survey 10-15 LGBTQ high school graduates, ranging from 18 to 24. The reasoning was that people in this age category would have some emotional distance from their middle and high school experiences and would be able to

talk about their lived encounters without the risk of retraumatization or other damage. Hopefully, they also had some interpersonal learning and healing that would help them frame their interactions in ways they could not say when they were younger. Given the level of risk involved in asking young people to share their experiences with harassment, these considerations were critical. Therefore, a purposeful sampling strategy was utilized to identify and recruit qualified participants who could provide information-rich cases in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner.

Because the LGBTQ community is a relatively closed and cautious population, recruitment was challenging. The process began with an online, open-ended survey emailed to counselors and teachers who supported the LGBTQ community. The email included the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) and a request to share the flyer with high school graduates who would qualify to participate in the study. Unfortunately, sending emails resulted in low response rates. By the end of March, only three of five surveys were completed. Since this method of inquiry did not produce enough participants, snowball sampling was conducted.

Snowballing was used to identify people “who know people who generally have similar characteristics that, in turn, know people, also with similar characteristics” (Palinkas et al., 2013, Table 1). Private Facebook messages were sent to friends and families who knew of high school graduates who matched the study’s criteria. Facebook friends who were educators and young adults were also asked to share the survey information and link it to their Facebook friends. With assistance from Facebook friends, colleagues, and family, 17 participants completed the survey by the last week of April 2021.

During the recruitment process, it was discovered that while the prospective participants' experiences of harassment and discrimination were more distant due to their age, the memories and feelings surrounding the incident were not always kept at a safe distance. One of the respondents sent a direct message stating he would not have addressed this topic earlier in his life due to the treatment he received from family members. Based on his comment, it seemed that a participant's age may not always act as a buffer, and high school experiences can continue to affect their current lives. Furthermore, since this participant was unsure what he needed in high school and did not feel comfortable giving suggestions to others, he did not answer any of the questions in Section 5 of the survey.

Demographics of Participants

The first section of the survey, participant demographic information, is represented in Table 9.

Table 9

Demographics – Gender, Ethnicity, and Sexual Orientation

Gender	<i>N</i>	Age	<i>n</i>	Ethnicity	<i>n</i>	Sexual orientation	<i>n</i>
Male	2	18	1	American Indian	0	Bisexual	5
Female	12	19	5	Asian	0	Gay	3
Nonbinary	3	20	1	African American	11	Lesbian	2
Prefer not to say	0	21	3	Latino/Hispanic	0	Queer	4
		22	1	Pacific Islander	0	Questioning	0
		23	3	White	4	Transgender	0
		24	3	Other	2	Prefer not to say	1
						Other	2

Approximately 71% of participants were female, 29% were 19 years old, 65% were African American, and 29% were bisexual. One of the participants who chose an ethnicity of “Other” identified as African American and White. Another volunteer self-identified as pansexual, which is an attraction to people regardless of gender or sexual orientation (WebMD, 2020). Participants were also asked to describe their high school in terms of location, type (private, public, rural, or urban), and student enrollment, illustrated in Table 10.

Table 10

Demographics – High School Student Enrollment

High school type	<i>n</i>	Student enrollment	<i>n</i>
Rural, public	9	Less than 500	0
Rural, private	0	500-1,000	9
Urban, public	1	1,001-2,000	5
Urban, private	7	2,001-3,000	1
		More than 3,000	2

Nearly 59% of the participants attended a public high school. Of those participants, 90% of their schools were located in a rural community. Only one participant attended an urban, private high school. Approximately 53% of the participants' high schools had a student enrollment of 500 to 1,000. Among the other participants, 18% graduated from high schools with more than 2,001 students and 29% from high schools with a student enrollment between 1,001 and 2,000.

Data Analysis

After the demographic section of the survey, participants were asked to describe

their experiences and perceptions of homophobic behaviors of school staff and peers and discriminatory practices of school policies and events. The final section focused on resilience, support, and post-graduate aspirations. Because respondent descriptions were short and the sample size was less than 20, survey data were exported to Excel. After the responses to each question were exported to a different Excel tab, participant descriptions were reviewed carefully to identify categories that captured essential characteristics about the data, related to the research questions, and represented meanings within the dataset. Using Colaizzi's 7-step method (Morrow et al., 2015) to identify and code the data, key terms were grouped, and recurring themes were defined for each survey question.

Following the initial coding, each Excel tab was printed and separated into two categories – harassment and support systems. Sections 2, 3, and 4 of the survey focused on Research Questions 1 and 2 and were placed under the harassment category. The preliminary themes for this category were bullying, derogatory language, isolation, heteronormativity, concealment, antagonism, and validation. Since derogatory language is a form of bullying, it was grouped under bullying. According to Merriam-Webster (n.d), antagonism is defined as “actively expressed opposition or hostility” (para. 1a). Heteronormativity is “the attitude that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality” (Merriam-Webster, n.d., para. 1). It assumes that sex, gender identity, and gender roles fall into a male/female and masculine/feminine structure. Because antagonists strongly disagree with issues that contradict their belief system, this theme is aligned with heteronormativity (Prairie, 2018). Isolation and concealment were combined and renamed dissimulation, relating to hiding one’s true self from others; therefore, the resulting themes for Research Questions 1 and 2 were bullying, gender

nonconformity, unsupported schools, antagonism, heteronormativity, and validation.

Findings – Research Question 1

The third and fourth sections of the survey were solely dedicated to Research Question 1, “What were former LGBTQ high school student experiences with harassment and discrimination while attending high school?” To answer this question, Sections 3 and 4 were divided into three categories:

- actions and/or words from students made indirectly or directly towards the participants;
- actions and/or words from teachers, staff, and/or administrators made indirectly or directly towards the participant; and
- school activities and/or events that made them feel uneasy about being themselves or not members of the group.

The response rate for each category was less than 56%. On average, 50% of participants did not respond to one or more questions in the third and fourth sections of the survey.

Although nearly one-third of the participants stated they did not have any negative experiences with staff, peers, or school policies, this could have also been the reality of those who did not respond. The questions in Sections 3 and 4 asked respondents to describe encounters, events, and conversations that made them feel uncomfortable to be themselves. Because all the questions focused on negative experiences, the LGBTQ graduates who did not respond may have had positive encounters and did not feel it was necessary to include them. Table 11 depicts the categories of participant encounters and lived experiences with students, educators, and administrators.

Table 11*Comments from and Interactions with Students and School Staff*

Theme	Students	Teachers and staff	Administrators
Antagonism	21.11%	8.33%	22.22%
Bullying	74.44%	30.00%	11.11%
Gender conformity	42.22%	10.00%	0.00%
Heteronormativity	62.22%	30.00%	11.11%
Validation	0.00%	10.00%	22.22%
No negative experiences	21.11%	20.00%	33.33%
No Response	53.00%	44.44%	50.00%

Peers bullied over 74% of participants who responded. Participant 8, who self-identified as bisexual, stated, students “physically attacked me for looking at them the wrong way.” Participant 12 was called “faggot trash” and heard, “I don't want to catch your gay.” In addition to discriminatory comments, approximately 62% of LGBTQ participants heard heteronormative statements directly and indirectly. Participant 1 was told that she “should have sex with men so [she] wouldn't like girls.” Other participants were told they were weird or asked if they were transitioning because they wore male clothing and cut their hair. Participant 5 overheard a classmate talking about the girls' basketball team and that he would not allow his sister to be on the team because he believed “they would turn her gay.”

Because of direct and indirect derogatory statements, gender nonconformity was a clear theme that 42% of the participants revealed. Gender nonconformity is often interpreted as proof of one's sexual orientation based on one's appearance, mannerisms,

or activity norms. It is identified as a risk factor for peer victimization, resulting in the participants wanting to alter who they are to avoid being bullied or excluded (Ward, 2017). Many participants described how they altered their appearance and changed their sexual orientation by dating the opposite sex or wearing uncomfortable clothing. For example, Participant 11 stated, “I made myself not stand out. I wore a lot of black.” Another attended the prom with a boy but felt she would have enjoyed it more if she attended with her girlfriend.

Furthermore, due to the homophobic comments and acts, two participants concealed their true identity by isolating themselves. Participant 12 lost friends after coming out and was excluded from conversations and social events. According to Participant 12, students would pretend he did not exist by looking at him like he was “a disease” and refusing “to come anywhere near” him. Another would not interact with her peers unless her friends were present, especially when her classmates had homophobic conversations.

Although the non-response rate for school staff and administrators was comparable to that of peers, negative interactions and comments were drastically reduced. One-third of respondents stated they never experienced homophobic comments or behaviors from their teachers or the school staff. Participant 6 said, “I loved most of my teachers. They did absolutely their best with my depression and me coming out.” Approximately 56% of those who responded also had positive encounters with administrators. Of the nine who answered questions about their experiences with administrators, five never encountered discriminatory or homophobic acts or comments. Participant 11 stated, “I had a lovely time with the few administrators I crossed paths

with.”

Unfortunately, 30% of LGBTQ respondents had homophobic and heteronormative interactions with school staff. In one case, Participant 8, who identified as a girl, was “simply trying to give something to a female friend” and was told to sit with the boys in dance class. Participant 11 had regular encounters with one teacher, resulting in him not wanting to go to class or attend graduation. According to this Participant 11, the teacher “made me feel very badly about myself because I didn't fit into their ideal box.” Additionally, at least 23% of the participants were antagonized or bullied by administrators. Participant 6 was “accused of doing drugs and being assaulted.” Participant 12 was threatened by his administrator and told that his father would be informed of his sexual orientation. According to Participant 12, the administrator did not “like that [he] was openly dating other guys.”

Table 12 illustrates 14 LGBTQ graduates’ perceptions and encounters with students and school staff when participating in school extracurricular events and activities.

Table 12*Experiences With School Activities and Events*

Theme	School events
Antagonism	0.00%
Bullying	0.00%
Gender conformity	21.43%
Heteronormativity	50.00%
Validation	0.00%
No negative experiences	21.43%
No response	26.32%

Although three participants did not experience any discriminatory encounters when they attended school functions, they did not state they felt supported. Two respondents listed that they felt uncomfortable at football games and the prom but did not explain. Seven participants encountered homophobic acts and comments from students and staff when they attempted to participate in school functions. Participant 8 stated that “high school sports was always the hardest.” Participant 8 heard comments from athletes to other teammates such as “your boyfriend is cheering for you” to their teammates when showing school spirit. Participant 5 attended the school’s wrestling team tryout. Although she was never told that she could not be on the team, the looks she received made her feel uncomfortable, and no one would practice with her. Participant 11 also identified graduation as causing “the most scrutiny.” During her senior portrait session, she wore a tuxedo for her formal pictures. Because the photographer continued to place her in female poses, the respondent left her session abruptly and without explanation.

Half of the participants also experienced heteronormativity when attending their

high school prom. Participant 8 went to the prom with a boy to maintain the status quo but felt she “would have enjoyed [herself] more if [she] went with the girl [she] was talking to.” Participant 5 stated she heard a rumor that same-sex couples had to prove they were dating to purchase tickets at couple prices. On a similar note, one respondent was told he and his boyfriend could not go with each other to the prom.

Summary

Overall, these results show that most LGBTQ students reported widespread homophobic and heteronormative remarks and interactions. Of the 44 statements received, approximately 39% were about gender and expectations of females and males. Separating students by gender or imposing different standards and expectations based on gender sent a message that LGBTQ students should not participate in certain extracurricular activities, especially sports. Although such discriminatory procedures were never expressed in writing, some sporting and social events were labeled as non-LGBTQ, perpetrated a heteronormative atmosphere, and discouraged LGBTQ students from fully engaging in school organizations and events.

Additionally, hearing discriminatory language at school accounted for 25% of the comments and resulted in over 20% of the respondents experiencing gender nonconformity. Participants felt they had to conceal their true identity or isolate themselves from others because most negative comments and actions went unchallenged by educators or peers. They believed the school staff was very conservative and lacked the understanding and communication skills needed to support LGBTQ students. Participant 9 stated, “Teachers in particular never said anything. If they didn't know how to speak on something, they stated their beliefs. Two participants believed school staff

made it evident that they were not allowed to participate. For example, Participant 11 “felt like the teacher just didn't want to deal with” them.

Findings – Research Question 2

The second section of the survey focused on Research Question 2, “How did school and district policies and practices affect LGBTQ high school student experiences?” This section contained the following questions:

- What experiences/activities inside and/or outside the classroom made you feel excluded, not part of the school community, or made you feel uncomfortable to be yourself?
- What assignments/projects made you feel like you were not part of the school community or made you feel uncomfortable to be yourself?
- What school rules/practices made you feel like you were not part of the school community or made you feel uncomfortable to be yourself?

Interestingly, none of the participants were given class assignments or projects that made them feel uncomfortable with being themselves. Participant 5 believed it was “because there was little discussion about alternative lifestyles.” However, 75% concealed their sexual orientation or isolated themselves when participating in class activities. Participant 5 also stated that “female students would not want to work with me because they felt uncomfortable and felt like I would try to get with them or make inappropriate comments.” Another graduate did not feel comfortable around friends because they would comment on people who identified as LGBTQ.

As seen in Table 13, other than heteronormativity, there were no other homophobic experiences with school rules and policies.

Table 13*Experiences With Classroom Activities and School Policies*

Theme	Classroom activities	School rules and procedures
Antagonism	0.00%	0.00%
Bullying	37.50%	0.00%
Gender conformity	75.00%	0.00%
Heteronormativity	25.00%	57.14%
Validation	0.00%	0.00%
No negative experiences	25.00%	28.57%
No response	55.56%	63.16%

When asked the following question, “What school rules/practices made you feel like you were not part of the school community or made you feel uncomfortable to be yourself,” only seven participants responded. Nearly 57% encountered heteronormative opinions and actions from school staff and administrators. Participant 8 said, “there were times when guys were required to sit together during an assembly” Two other respondents felt that LGBTQ students were prohibited from participating in public displays of affection (PDA) that non-LGBTQ students could do. Participant 17 stated, “The PDA rule says you can't display your affection to your lover with a hug or kiss or even hand-holding. [But] it seemed like it was FORBIDDEN when it came to an LGBTQ.”

Summary

Most participants did not respond to the questions related to classroom assignments (47.4%) and school policies (63.2%). One possible reason could be that they

did not have any positive or negative experiences regarding these topics. Some participants stated they could not remember any particular event or class assignment that made them feel uncomfortable. Participant 11 said, “I was involved with things I wanted to be a part of and had no issues with them”; however, the lack of LGBTQ topics included in instruction could be another reason why validation was nonexistent in course assignments or activities. Participant 5 stated that classroom assignments were not an issue “because there was little discussion about alternative lifestyles.” Some participants felt that teachers' lack of contact with the LGBTQ community resulted in many homophobic comments and behaviors from teachers. According to Participant 10, her “biggest exclusion...was being judged by teachers.” Participant 17 felt like “LGBTQ people weren't respected, [and] didn't feel comfortable being myself.”

Findings – Research Question 3

Section 5 aligned with support systems and would provide answers to Research Question 3, “What support do former LGBTQ high school students believe current LGBTQ high school students need from district and school educators and staff?” This section highlighted three categories – LGBTQ support systems, coping mechanisms, and academic performance and aspirations. The wide variety and lack of responses made it difficult to code these sections. Unfortunately, no more than 44% of participants responded to the questions in this section.

Table 14 represents the findings based on the responses from the question, “What did high school peers say/do that made you feel supported? Teachers/School Staff? Administrators?”

Table 14*Support from Peers and Educators*

Types of support	% of Responses
Encouragement	37.50%
Validation	25.00%
No experiences	37.50%
No response	55.56%

As seen in Table 14, over 62% of LGBTQ graduates were encouraged and validated by peers, teachers, and administrators. Even though one graduate stated that teachers did not necessarily support the LGBTQ lifestyle, they were encouraging, stopped students from making heteronormative comments, and were available when needed. Of the three students who did not experience any support from staff, they also did not describe any negative encounters. When asked why they felt LGBTQ students were not supported, 100% of the responses stated that staff was fearful of negative repercussions from their colleagues or the community.

According to their statements, adults and students do not want people to think they are “gay” or a member of the LGBTQ community, have same-sex individuals “hit on them,” or be harassed. Participant 11 stated that “people are scared of...side looks and talk from peers and staff. Lots of times, schools are not a safe space for students. Kids are mean and quick to attack what deviates from their comfort and knowledge.” Participant 8 felt supporting LGBTQ students is “a topic no one wants to talk about, but it should be had. It’s not always about supporting it but just educating people about it.”

In data in Table 15 asked participants to suggest changes needed in public

education regarding support for high school students self-identified or perceived as LGBTQ.

Table 15

Recommendations for LGBTQ Support Systems

Support systems	% of Responses
Advisory clubs	25.00%
Discipline	12.50%
Education	37.50%
Inclusiveness	25.00%
No response	55.56%

Three participants believe students and adults needed to be educated about various lifestyles and the LGBTQ community. They felt students should be encouraged to stand up for themselves, accept people who are different, and feel comfortable discussing various lifestyles. Participant 11 wrote, “I think having more inclusiveness around the campus helps too, just knowing they are welcomed and not hidden or ashamed.” Furthermore, Participant 11 stated that inclusiveness included having gender-neutral facilities such as restrooms that “do not require sneaking off to the nurse's office.” Two participants wanted to see more clubs and organizations focused on supporting and including the LGBTQ community; however, Participant 12 was the only graduate who felt students “who act ignorant towards LGBTQ students” should be reprimanded.

The last three survey questions focused on coping mechanisms and academics. Unfortunately, the response rate for these questions decreased to approximately 39%, with two graduates submitting the survey without answering any questions about

education. The first question asked participants to describe the coping mechanisms used when encountering homophobic language and acts. Their responses are illustrated in Table 16.

Table 16

LGBTQ Graduates' Coping Mechanisms

Coping mechanism	% of Responses
Concealment	28.57%
Ignored	14.29%
Emotional or physical acts	28.57%
Outspoken	28.57%
No response	61.11%

Based on the findings in Table 16, Participant 5 ignored homophobic comments because he did not experience or see anyone harassed. He also stated that non-LGBTQ students “talked about it, but they [were] not talking or making nasty or mean comments to someone they felt was LGBTQ.” The other responses were equally divided in that participants either concealed their true identity, spoke up for themselves and others, or resorted to emotional or harmful acts. The two participants who concealed their sexual orientation laughed when derogatory comments were made or did not interact with students they felt were judgmental. Participant 11, one of the outspoken respondents, described himself as “not known for keeping quiet.” Additionally, Participant 17 was “comfortable being” himself; however, Participant 8 stated that as she got older, people are more accepting, and friends are “comfortable in their own skin and with their sexuality,” which was not acceptable in high school. Only two graduates never coped

with homophobic harassment and either cried or participated in cutting.

As shown in Table 17, their inability to handle their experiences with derogatory acts and language also affected their academics and aspirations to continue their education after high school graduation.

Table 17

Effect of Homophobic Harassment on LGBTQ Graduates' Academics

Effect	Academic performance	Postsecondary aspirations
Positive	0.00%	28.57%
Negative	42.86%	57.14%
No effect	57.14%	14.28%
No response	61.11%	61.11%

While the academic performance did not increase for any participant, approximately 57% did not experience a decrease in grades. Two graduates, who were more reserved in high school, did not consider what others thought. Participant 9 said, “being by myself made me realize that I didn't need validation.” On the other hand, three graduates struggled academically as a result of an unsupportive school climate. The harassment they encountered resulted in depression and a dislike for school. Participant 12 did “not to continue [his] education any further due to [homophobic harassment] being all [he] could think of in regards to school.” Participant 11, who admits that he was “never a great student,” believed his experiences “made [him] depressed and suppressed, which made motivation harder.” Regrettably, an unsupportive school climate resulted in over 57% of the participants disliking high school and not continuing their education after high school graduation. Participant 13 dropped out of high school and got a General

Education Development (GED) certificate. Participant 1's sexual encounters increased due to gender conformity, which resulted in pregnancy and the inability to attend a postsecondary school. On the other hand, two participants were excited to attend college because of the support they received from their teachers and friends. Participant 9 believed that "things [would be] slightly different in that realm."

Summary

The findings in this section show how peer victimization can result in less accepting schools and poor educational outcomes for LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students who had been harassed or discriminated against had lower educational expectations and lower grades. These results also revealed that an unsupportive school environment could negatively affect an LGBTQ student's sense of identity and mental health. Participants who were harassed at school responded by dropping out or avoiding all forms of formal education, including college. LGBTQ graduates supported by educators and friends overcame obstacles, completed high school, and looked forward to postsecondary education.

Participants in this study who had negative high school experiences had difficulty seeking advice and assistance from school staff and administrators. One participant withdrew from high school and enrolled in a GED program because he felt the need to remove himself from the homophobic school climate. They also did not participate or have access to a GSA or an LGBTQ club in their school. Three participants felt GSAs help ensure that everyone in the school is valued and respected regardless of their sexual orientation or gender expression. For example, Participant 8 said, GSAs can teach that "you don't necessarily have to agree with the lifestyle, but you should respect the person

because they are a person.”

Summary

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to learn about LGBTQ high school student attitudes and lived experiences and their interactions with school staff to promote a healthy and inclusive school climate. The exploration of the lived experiences of 17 former high school students between the ages of 18 and 24 who self-identified as LGBTQ was crucial to the research. Data were gathered to address three research questions focused on participants’ lived experiences and perceptions of homophobic harassment, their expectations for institutional support for LGBTQ students in high school, and the recommendations required to enhance institutional support for current LGBTQ students.

An online survey containing demographic and open-ended questions was developed in Qualtrics XM. The first section of the survey collected demographic information about the participants. The rest of the survey allowed participants to describe homophobic experiences with peers and school staff inside and outside the classroom and with school rules and procedures. Participants were also asked to describe their coping mechanisms, academic performance and aspirations, and recommendations for enhancing the level of institutional support for LGBTQ students in high schools.

Each open-ended answer was analyzed using Colaizzi’s descriptive phenomenological method (Morrow et al., 2015) and yielded several thematic categories for each research question. For Research Questions 1 and 2, the themes were antagonism, bullying, gender nonconformity, heteronormativity, and validation. Research Question 3 focused on three areas – LGBTQ support systems, coping mechanisms, and academic

performance and aspirations. The themes for each category were

- Support systems: advisory clubs, discipline, education, inclusiveness
- Coping mechanisms: concealment, ignored, emotional or physical acts, outspoken
- Academic performance and aspirations: positive, negative, no effect

Overall, the results in Chapter 4 show that most LGBTQ students reported widespread homophobic and heteronormative remarks and interactions. Approximately 39% aligned with heteronormativity and the expectations of females and males. Graduates were separated by perceived gender or felt required to follow different standards than their non-LGBTQ peers. Many athletic organizations and social events perpetrated a heteronormative atmosphere and discouraged LGBTQ students from fully engaging in school organizations and events. Additionally, gender conformity was encountered in extracurricular events (21%), with derogatory comments (25%), and in classroom activities (75%). Participants felt they had to conceal their sexual identity or isolate themselves from others because most negative comments and actions went unchallenged by educators or peers. They believed school staff lacked the understanding and communication skills needed to support LGBTQ students.

The most dramatic increase in participant non-response occurred in Section 5 of the survey – coping mechanisms and academic endeavors. Over 61% of the respondents submitted the online survey at the end of Section 4; however, the responses described how victimization affected academic performance, psychological well-being, and postsecondary goals. LGBTQ students who had been harassed or discriminated against had lower educational expectations and lower grades. They responded to their negative

experiences by dropping out of high school or avoiding all forms of formal education, including college. When educators and friends support LGBTQ graduates, these students look forward to postsecondary education.

Chapter 5 elaborates on the findings in this chapter and interprets them related to the following research questions:

1. What were former LGBTQ high school student experiences with harassment and discrimination while attending high school?
2. How did school and district policies and practices affect LGBTQ high school student experiences?
3. What support do former LGBTQ high school students believe current LGBTQ high school students need from district and school educators and staff?

Implications of the findings will be discussed, followed by the limitations of this study and conclusions of the present study for theory and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Phenomenology explains the meaning of a human phenomenon, identifies a particular type of existence, and reveals the significance of everyday events. This study utilized phenomenological qualitative methods to deeper understand the perceptions and lived experiences of LGBTQ adolescents by collecting their opinions, preconceptions, conjectors, and candid responses. Reading participant narratives was critical in assessing how positive and negative experiences in high school were impacted by their gender identity or sexual orientation. While some of the participants in this study did not provide the level of detail required for a phenomenological methodology, their comments contributed to a deeper understanding of what it means to be an LGBTQ high school student in South Carolina.

Chapter 4 presented the study findings, an analysis of the data, and the emergent themes derived from participant responses. Chapter 5 interprets the findings presented in Chapter 4 and includes the perspectives of LGBTQ graduates on the actions of educators and peers, school policy, inclusive curriculum, and resilience. This chapter also includes a discussion of the themes that emerged from the open-ended online survey. An interpretation of the findings, limitations, implications of the study, and recommendations for future research are also presented in this chapter.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of homophobia and discrimination among LGBTQ graduates during their high school years. Although there is research on youth and their experiences as young adults on college campuses, few studies focused on LGBTQ

students and their experiences in secondary schools after graduation when they can safely reflect on their experiences. Moreover, statistics, census, and quantitative reports were available, but qualitative data were scarce; thus, this study's purpose was intended to close the research gap in the literature by condensing detailed recollections into themes so educators can better understand what LGBTQ students experienced, how they experienced it, and how their coping mechanisms made a difference in their future (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stevenson & Zimmerman, 2005).

This phenomenological qualitative study answered the following research questions, focusing on LGBTQ individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 who self-identified as LGBTQ and graduated from a high school in South Carolina.

1. What were former LGBTQ high school student experiences with harassment and discrimination while attending high school?
2. How did school and district policies and practices affect LGBTQ high school student experiences?
3. What support do former LGBTQ high school students believe current LGBTQ high school students need from district and school educators and staff?

A Qualtrics open-ended, web-based survey was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Participants responded to demographical information in the first section of the survey. Then, in Sections 2-5, the open-ended questions, participants were asked to describe their experiences and encounters with homophobia and discrimination and recommend enhancing institutional support for LGBTQ high school students.

In order to classify and code the data obtained from participant responses, this research used Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method (Morrow et al., 2015).

Colaizzi's 7-step method provided a thorough and concise review and explanation of LGBTQ adolescent experiences and perceptions of victimization (Morrow et al., 2015). As a result, six thematic groups emerged during the coding and grouping process and mirrored LGBTQ participant attitudes and lived experiences of victimization and discrimination while in high school. The resulting themes for Research Questions 1 and 2 were bullying, gender conformity, unsupported schools, antagonism, heteronormativity, and validation. For Research Question 3, the themes were coping mechanisms, academic endeavors, and institutional support in South Carolina high schools.

Findings and Interpretations

Research Question 1

To answer Research Question 1, participants were asked to describe derogatory words or actions received from peers and school staff and any school activities or events that made them feel uneasy about being themselves. As described in Chapter 4, they documented a wide range of homophobic experiences while attending high school and felt as though they were outsiders. Over 78% refused to participate in school events or were kept out of activities because they could make others nervous or cause more problems. High school sports seemed to be the hardest for approximately 29% of participants. Participant 8 stated that showing school spirit was challenging because there were always comments from athletes, such as “your boyfriend is cheering for you.” Participant 11 was excluded from some clubs because “it felt more like the teacher just didn't want to deal with me.” Sadly, the message the LGBTQ graduates received was that some school events are distinctly non-LGBTQ, discouraging them from fully engaging in the school culture.

Actions and Words of Peers. Physical and verbal bullying affected approximately 74% of LGBTQ graduates for various reasons, including gender identity and sexual orientation. Two participants in the study confirmed cases of physical bullying. Participant 8 was assaulted in ninth grade, and the other was “physically attacked...for looking at [non-LGBTQ students] the wrong way.” In addition, although no one had been subjected to cyberbullying, all participants experienced verbal bullying and homophobic slurs. For example, Participant 1 heard words, such as being called “gay” or “faggot,” and Participant 17 was told that “gay people are going to hell.” The National Association of School Psychologists defined verbal harassment as “the most common form of bullying and...includes insults,...racial, sexist, or homophobic jokes, remarks, or teasing” (Ward, 2017, p. 103). In many situations, these comments were sexually explicit, abusive, threatening, or offensive.

In addition to verbal harassment, approximately 62% of LGBTQ participants heard heteronormative statements directly or indirectly. Heteronormativity is “the attitude that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b, para. 1). It assumes that sexual orientation and gender identity fall into a male/female and masculine/feminine structure. When these norms are imposed by society, criticism, abuse, and even aggression can be directed at those who expressed themselves in an atypical manner. For example, Participant 1 was told that she “should have sex with men so [she] wouldn’t like girls.” Other participants were asked if they were transitioning because they wore male clothing and cut their hair. Participant 5 overheard a classmate describing the girls' basketball team as lesbians and prohibited his sister from joining because “they would turn her gay.”

Unfortunately, participants in this study attempted to reduce or lessen their verbal and physical harassment by exploring gender conformity. Approximately 42% tried to conform to appear less flamboyant, be discreet, or appear more masculine or feminine to fit into the gender position of a heterosexual male or female. These habits involved changing their appearance from form-fitting to loose-fitting and masculine clothes, changing their voice to a deep bass sound, and even changing their sexual orientation and dating females or males. Because of the stigma and prejudice associated with being gay, many participants believed conforming to heteronormative ideals was essential to survive in high school. Conforming was also required to maintain friendships with their heterosexual peers. One participant commented that he lost many friends when he came out. Participant 12 stated that students would “look at me like I am a disease, refuse to come anywhere near me, [or] ignore I existed.”

According to Watson et al. (2015, as cited in Ward, 2017), “There is reason to believe that youth can encounter different outcomes depending on how they have disclosed their sexual identities” (p. 100). Many young people who suppress their sexual identity wanted to come out but were afraid of their backlash from those who hold heteronormative views. Not only did they have to be constantly aware of whom they disclosed themselves to, but they had to handle the consequences once they exposed their sexual orientation or gender identity (Ward, 2017). Two participants, who were uncomfortable hiding their sexual orientation, struggled with mental health issues ranging from depression to anxiety to self-harm. Other participants had difficulty trusting people in relationships or feeling safe with others, including educators.

Actions and Words of School Staff. Most teachers and other school officials did

not regularly interfere when these derogatory or biased comments were made in their presence, especially when these remarks were about gender identity or sexual orientation. Participants felt school teachers (90%) and administrators (88%) passively or aggressively enforced an unhealthy and noninclusive school environment in this study. They stated that school staff had a negative view of alternative lifestyles, and there was a lack of communication that addressed the needs of LGBTQ students. For example, Participant 2 wrote, “one teacher [liked] to single you out or make jokes...to make a point.” Participant 11 had a teacher who made him “not...want to go to class or...graduation...because [he] didn’t fit into their ideal box.” According to Kosciw et al. (2020), bias comments accepted in school create an unwelcoming atmosphere for all students, especially those with marginalized identities; therefore, teachers and other school staff must intervene when LGBTQ-biased remarks are made in their presence and make it clear to students that such biased remarks will not be accepted.

Inside the Classroom. According to research, educators may have contributed to the oppression of LGBTQ students in the classroom (Hill, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2018). In addition, 80% of the participants mentioned adults at their high schools whom they believed were not supportive of LGBTQ students even though the teachers felt they supported them. When it came to identifying these teachers, the actions seen were both unintentional and intentional. In classrooms where teachers had poor classroom management abilities, the absence of support could be unintended. Due to a lack of organization and supervision over student behavior, inappropriate behavior occurred and went unnoticed. According to studies by Hill (2019), Kann et al. (2018), and Kosciw et al. (2020), silence is one of the most common forms of oppression. For example,

Participant 9 stated that staff did not say anything discriminatory, but when they did not “know how to speak on something, they stated their beliefs.” Participant 8, who identified as a female, wrote, “my dance teacher told me to sit with the guys and...even though I thought I was a girl, I was...trying to give something to a female friend and was not trying to sit with the girls in the class.”

Summary. Participant positive remarks told of high school memories that favorably influenced their gender or sexual identity development. Participants mentioned supportive friends and school staff who intervened and challenged homophobic beliefs and conduct. Two respondents loved their teachers and administrators. Participant 6 wrote, “[they] did...their best with my depression and me coming out.” In another statement, Participant 5’s teachers and friends “encouraged [him] to go to college.” According to research, giving LGBTQ teens resources can boost their connection and engagement in school and provide safe spaces for them (Kosciw et al., 2020). Allowing them to express themselves authentically, whether with acts or words, their happiness, academic success, and sense of safety are increased.

While positive change for LGBTQ students is attainable, it is vital to understand that schools can replicate and reaffirm gender and sexuality norms if adequate support and interventions are not provided (Prairie, 2018). Overall, over 89% of participants reported widespread use of anti-LGBTQ remarks and harassment at their schools, including bullying, sexual harassment, and physical harassment. When school officials do not intervene, it may indicate that homophobic language and acts are permitted, thus contributing to an unsafe learning environment for this group (Lloyd, 2012). Even if the derogatory comment is not personally applicable to the individual student who hears it, it

may signal to LGBTQ students that they are unwelcome in their school communities. Participant 2 wrote, “some teachers like to single you out or make jokes...to make a point.” Participant 12 had administrators threaten to tell his “father [because] they didn't like that [he] was openly dating other guys.” Teachers and administrators are the first line of defense against harassment and discriminatory acts. How they act sets the tone for the rest of the school. They need the proper training and assistance to notice and intervene in bullying situations and assign the appropriate interventions.

Research Question 2

When asked about school and district policies and practices that affected participant high school experiences, approximately 35% stated that school personnel negatively perceived alternative lifestyles. Their general perceptions prevented them from addressing the needs of LGBTQ students and hindered the formation of institutional support. According to the participants, validation of LGBTQ ideals at school functions or on class assignments was nonexistent. Although school personnel was expected to address the needs of all students, including LGBTQ teenagers, participants experienced a heightened level of anxiety when they were at school.

Inclusive Classrooms. With classroom activities and assignments, 60% of participants hid their gender identity or sexual orientation, felt excluded, or isolated themselves from others. Participant 12 wrote, “I didn't attend anything after school. I never felt like I fit in with the others.” Participant 5 stated, “Many times female students would not want to work with me because they felt uncomfortable and felt like I would try to get with them or make inappropriate comments”; however, this graduate did not have any issues with his teachers’ lessons because “there was little discussion about alternative

lifestyles.” According to research, making the curriculum inclusive of LGBTQ subjects and issues is one way to improve LGBTQ student experiences in schools (Kann et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2020). According to the 2019 National School Climate Survey, the lack of information about LGBTQ people’s contributions to society can stifle student expressions and silence LGBTQ people and the issues that could further stigmatize them (Kosciw et al., 2020). Furthermore, many multicultural education experts feel that a curriculum that includes various cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations instills a belief in the fundamental worth of all people and the value of a diverse society (Gay, 2018). Incorporating LGBTQ historical events and positive role models into the curriculum may help LGBTQ students become more involved in their schools, create more favorable feelings about LGBTQ issues and people, and lead to a more pleasant school climate (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Although it was not stated in the survey, the two participants who did not experience homophobic encounters may have considered their classrooms safe spaces. Teachers must develop relationships with every student in order for students to feel supported. Finding time to have personal conversations with students builds mutual respect. It shows that school staff is equally enthusiastic about their students, content, and job. Conversations flow freely and spontaneously and are not stopped abruptly because it is inappropriate or off-topic. Allowing students to choose their topics for an assignment also can boost their comfort level in the classroom.

School Policies and Practices. According to Kosciw et al. (2020), school policies and practices that divide students by gender or impose different standards and expectations based on gender inhibit student expression and contribute to a culture of

silence around LGBTQ individuals and concerns.

School ceremonies, extracurricular activities, and traditions that support binary roles create deeply homophobic school cultures and reinforce heterosexism (Hill, 2019). When students who do not fit into the male/female category are denied access to gendered spaces, events, or laws, they may feel as if they have no place in school at all. These activities can also place undue pressure on LGBTQ students by requiring them to reveal their gender identity before they are ready or making it more difficult for them to campaign for their right to be grouped in a way that affirms their gender identity. For example, Participant 1 was told to “change because the outfit worn was not appropriate for males.” Participant 13 stated that she was told to pose in female positions for senior portraits even though she chose to wear a tuxedo in her pictures. Because she “felt like she could not be herself,” she abruptly left the session without saying a word.

Of the seven graduates who responded, approximately 57% experienced heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is defined as reinforcing standards that categorized people into binary roles – male/female, masculine/feminine. These biased ideas also shape heterosexism, which believes that heterosexuality is the only acceptable form of sexual orientation and those attracted to the same sex should be feared or hated (Steele et al., 2018).

Athletics. Another challenge that caused anxiety for LGBTQ graduates was athletics. Whether the participants were athletes or spectators, they recognized that some sporting organizations presented multiple examples of embedded heteronormativity, making them uncomfortable. For example, Participant 8 would hear comments such as “Your boyfriend is cheering for you,” when he would show school spirit or cheer on a

team. Participant 13, a female graduate, quit her high school wrestling team because they made her feel uncomfortable. She stated, “They never told me that I could not be on the team, but they definitely did not treat or look at me the same. No one really wanted to practice with me.”

Summary. Based on this study’s findings, some South Carolina high schools sent a message that LGBTQ issues should not be discussed in extracurricular activities and that LGBTQ students should not participate. Discriminatory rules and practices that label official school events as clearly non-LGBTQ hindered LGBTQ students from fully engaging in the school community. Non-LGBTQ policies and practices negatively impacted LGBTQ students by suppressing their behavior, separating them by gender, or imposing different standards and expectations based on gender. Some examples included prohibiting same-sex couples at dances, wearing clothes that represented their gender at birth, refusing to call a student by their chosen name, and denying access to toilets or locker rooms corresponding to their gender. Such practices may also put undue pressure on LGBTQ students, making it more difficult for them to reveal their sexual orientation or advocating for the right to be grouped in a way that validates their gender identity. Ending these policies will provide a more inclusive school environment for LGBTQ students. Unfortunately, in this study, only two participants wrote about positive memories of teachers supporting their views on sexuality. This number doubled for administrators.

According to global reports, there is a definite link between homophobic oppression, having unfavorable mental consequences, and indulging in self-destructive activities (CDC, 2018; GLAAD, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018). According to the CDC

(2018) high school YRBS report, 23% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual teenagers attempted suicide; 7.5% of those attempts resulted in injury, poisoning, or overdose. According to the findings, participants in this study engaged in various strategies to cope with homophobia in high school, including self-destructive activities such as sexual promiscuity, cutting, and drinking. Participants also mentioned feeling isolated from peers, experiencing depression, dropping out of high school, focusing on their studies and the future by participating in extracurricular activities, and becoming a high school dropout.

Research Question 3

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience. Due to social beliefs surrounding gender and sexual minority status and cultural pressures to change, LGBTQ teens are usually presented as being at risk (McCormick, 2016); thus, it was crucial to this study to look at how these young people dealt with victimization and discrimination to understand how they survived and remained resilient. According to Schmitz and Tyler (2019), resilience is defined as the ability of adolescents to adapt effectively to conflict by incorporating coping mechanisms in the face of adversity. These strategies can also help LGBTQ students understand and overcome discrimination and victimization and characterize sexuality and gender as more than males or females (Beeson, 2017). There are five types of coping mechanisms used by LGBTQ people – situation selection, situation modification, attention deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation (McCormick, 2016). Although less than 39% of participants answered questions in the last section of the survey, they described experiences with situation modification or response modulation in other sections. Only two participants ignored negative encounters

(attention deployment) or kept to themselves (cognitive change). None of the participants sought emotional and material support from family, friends, the internet, or organizations, also known as situation selection.

Situation Modification. There are two types of strategies for situation modification. The first is known as “self-assertion,” and it involves methods such as avoiding the topic of sexual orientation, telling half-truths, keeping a low profile, and concealing one's sexual orientation. In this study, approximately 29% of participants maintained a low profile or passed as heterosexuals by laughing with those making discriminatory comments about LGBTQ students, avoiding class activities when their friends were not present, or keeping their life private. For example, Participant 1 stated, “I don't share my happiness with others who may be judgmental.” Participant 17 wrote, “I didn't feel comfortable being myself without my friends as they would make comments regarding people who identified as LGBTQ.”

The second type of approach in this category is called problem-solving attempts. People who use this technique try to confront harassers and become politically active in LGBTQ matters. In this research, nearly 29% of LGBTQ graduates spoke out about victimization and discrimination. Participant 11 stated, “I was quick to speak on it. I am not known for keeping quiet. I also went in front of the state senate one time.”

On the other hand, refusing to accept the messages others sent to LGBTQ graduates about themselves was another coping strategy. This technique might be interpreted as challenging harassers or denying the stigmatizing beliefs. Participant 8, for example, took control of his identity and refused to be bullied by his classmates because of it. He was so comfortable with the life he was living that he did not acknowledge the

harassment. He had many friends outside of school who were “comfortable in their own skin and with their sexuality that they weren’t afraid to be seen with me.”

Response Modulation. This category includes emotional suppression techniques as well as substance abuse. Individuals strengthen their resilience by alleviating emotional stress, reducing unpleasant emotions, and experiencing emotional release. An “effort to modify the quality of an emotional reaction after it has been formed” (McCormick, 2016, p. 142) is also used to describe response modification. For example, one LGBTQ graduate experienced depression and participated in cutting. Another stated that he did not cope with his encounters with harassment and victimization.

Academics Performance and Aspirations. A hostile school climate can cause LGBTQ students to struggle academically. According to the 2019 National School Climate Survey, students who encountered higher degrees of victimization because of their sexual orientation or gender expression had considerably lower reported GPAs than students who experienced less harassment and assault (Kosciw et al., 2020). Although participants in this study were not asked to provide their high school GPAs, three did experience a drop in their grades. For example, one LGBTQ graduate stated his grades dropped when he began receiving hate messages. Participant 11 wrote, “homophobic harassment made me depressed and suppressed, which made motivation harder.” On a positive note, approximately 57% of the respondents’ grades were not affected by homophobic encounters. They either did not experience harassment or did not let it affect them. According to Participant 9, “It actually didn't affect anything. Being by myself made me realize that I didn't need validation.”

However, 57% of participants said they had no plans to pursue post-secondary

education. According to Kosciw et al. (2020), LGBTQ students who experienced more victimization because of their sexual orientation or gender expression had lower educational aspirations than LGBTQ students who experienced less victimization. Four of seven LGBTQ graduates in this research study encountered harassment and victimization also wanted to avoid all forms of formal education. One volunteer stated that the harassment he experienced in high school caused him to drop out and not return to school. Another did not enjoy high school and therefore did not want to attend college. Moreover, another's self-destructive behaviors resulted in her having a sexual relationship before she was ready, becoming pregnant, and not attending college.

Although with this study, the number of graduates wanting to pursue a post-secondary education was equal to those who did not, this was not a fact for the vast majority of participants (93%) in the 2019 National School Climate Survey. Ensuring the future educational success of LGBTQ students requires concerted measures to eradicate anti-LGBTQ bias in schools and build welcoming academic settings at all grade levels. Unfortunately, only seven participants responded to questions related to academic performance and postsecondary education. Their statements revealed that discriminatory and homophobic encounters affected their academic performance and educational aspirations. Participants in this study stated that continuing education beyond high school was an essential aspect of their lives and a means of socializing with other LGBTQ people.

Participant Recommendations. The final section of the online survey asked for recommendations needed to improve institutional support for LGBTQ adolescents in public education. Although only 44% of participants responded, the major themes were

advisory clubs, education, and inclusiveness; 37.5% of participants felt strongly about developing educational programs for students focused on various LGBTQ issues and concerns. According to Participant 9, programs should encourage students “to stand up for others who are being teased.” He also felt that “there should be a comfortable level...to discuss LGBTQ issues without making it excessive.” Participant 1 felt students and teachers should “be open and...accept people because everybody is different.” Participant 8 wanted students to be taught that they do not “necessarily have to agree with the [LGBTQ] lifestyle, but [they] should respect the person because they are a person.”

For all students, including LGBTQ adolescents, extracurricular activities are linked to a range of excellent outcomes, including academic progress and increased school involvement. Supportive LGBTQ student groups, often known as GSAs, can provide LGBTQ students with a safe and affirming space within a school climate that could otherwise be unwelcoming or hostile. GSAs may also give students leadership opportunities and potential channels for constructive school change. Similar to 25% of respondents, Participant 5 wanted more advisory “clubs and organizations supporting LGBTQ students because they did not have any social functions at school.”

In the 2019 National School Climate Survey, LGBTQ students may be inspired to join their GSAs due to school harassment and discrimination or desire to seek emotional support or participate in advocacy (Kosciw et al., 2020). However, according to some studies on LGBTQ students of color, some racial/ethnic groups may be discouraged from attending because they do not believe their school’s GSAs are inclusive of or valuable to adolescents of color. In contrast, Kosciw et al. (2020) discovered that GSA membership allowed LGBTQ students of color to feel more comfortable bringing up LGBTQ issues in

class and participating in activism. GSA leaders and advisers should also identify barriers to club attendance at their school and take steps to make GSA meetings accessible to a broader range of LGBTQ students.

Summary. In order to avoid discriminatory encounters at their schools, the coping mechanisms used by all participants were situation modification or response modulation. With situation modification, LGBTQ teens will conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity or speak out about it. Students who cope by using response modulation usually physically or emotionally harm themselves. Although only two graduates wrote about emotional and physical acts, they did not recommend these strategies as positive methods to cope with harassment. Six participants felt that educational programs, support organizations, and inclusiveness were necessary institutional supports and resources, played a significant role in making schools safer and promoted better educational outcomes and healthy youth development for LGBTQ students.

One popular support organization is the GSA. GSAs and similar clubs contribute significantly to the improvement of the school climate for LGBTQ students. According to Kosciw et al. (2020), students who attended schools with GSAs or similar clubs felt safe at school, heard fewer homophobic or derogatory remarks, and experienced less anti-LGBTQ victimization; thus, GSAs can demonstrate to the entire school community that anti-LGBTQ behaviors are unacceptable and must be addressed when they occur. Additionally, students who participated in a GSA at their school reported that their peers were more accepting of LGBTQ people and aware of their issues. Interestingly, only one participant stated there was a GSA at his school. Unfortunately, the organization was not

respected by students or the staff, so 71% of participants did not want to pursue post-secondary education.

In conclusion, what became apparent during this study was that resilience is a critical concept to grasp when considering the lives of young people. Many of the participants lacked the resources necessary to thrive. When resources were scarce, some of the young people in this study resorted to desperate measures to survive. Others were able to connect with school staff and peers. Others were focused on themselves, and despite their encounters with discrimination and victimization, they survived. Unfortunately, the few who lack support and access to resources could not cope with their life experiences.

Implication of Findings

School Climate

Supporting LGBTQ adolescents requires a supportive school climate. The school climate played a role in the comfort of all the participants at school. Bullying and harassment of any form should not be tolerated and should be addressed immediately. In addition, administrators should focus on fostering a sense of community within the school. One method to accomplish this is to have a single lunch period. Students can use this time to organize events and functions that involve the entire student population. All students are welcome to join lunch activities such as games, contests, tutoring, and other activities hosted by extracurricular organizations. Furthermore, having a single lunch period allows clubs to meet during the day, encouraging more participation than if they met before or after school. Finally, allowing students to eat in numerous places at lunch allows them to be in a location where they feel comfortable rather than being forced to

eat in the cafeteria (Kann et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2020).

Students should also be able to participate in various organizations, programs, and sports at their schools. When pupils participate in an extracurricular activity, they can meet new people, do something they enjoy while at school, get a sense of belonging, and build confidence to be themselves. Encouraging teachers and school staff to sponsor at least one extracurricular activity can help with creating multiple opportunities. As a result, students may find a new interest or focus on their specialty and, most importantly, interact with other students who share their interests. Students also have an opportunity to form a relationship with an adult on campus and connect with them on a more personal level.

Supportive School Personnel

School staff, teachers, and administrators play an essential role in making the educational atmosphere more inclusive. According to Colvin et al. (2019), the principal has the power to influence the school's students and staff, both directly and indirectly, to make the school atmosphere more welcoming to LGBTQ students. Principals must maintain the expectation that all adults on campus are student-centered and invested in their success. Participants in this study, who had positive comments about their experiences, were linked to the school personnel who built a relationship. The hiring process is the easiest method to ensure staff members are student-centered, care about students, and get to know them. Unfortunately, this is not always achievable. The more difficult problem is dealing with teachers who do not create a sense of community in their classrooms, perform only their duties, or have a different philosophy about education. When teachers or staff members act or say something to pupils that is inappropriate or

potentially harmful, administrators must remain student-centered and address the situation immediately. As a result, a standard is established, and both students and teachers are aware that such behavior will not be condoned.

Teachers also must be held accountable for creating a sense of community in their classrooms. During the first week of school, teachers can develop relationships with their students by planning activities that allow students to get to know each other.

Administrators should make sure the curriculum is not so restrictive that assignments are not flexible. Providing assignments that allow for student choice allows pupils to focus on a topic of interest while still learning the required content. Administrators should also offer in-service workshops on classroom management that focuses on respecting students at all times and avoiding power struggles. When staff members employ practices that do not embarrass or single out students, mutual respect is formed, and a better relationship between the student and the staff member is developed.

Creating trust is the most crucial component in making LGBTQ students feel at ease in classrooms. Because LGBTQ students are usually fearful and anxious, they must be cautious in their interactions with other students and staff. In order to alleviate the fears and anxieties of LGBTQ teens, teachers must establish trust with students, which can be achieved by showing aspects of their personal side and engaging in discussions with LGBTQ pupils. Being accessible to students through extracurricular activities, having an open-door policy, or implementing an advisory program can build a deeper relationship between school employees and students and establish a safe space for LGBTQ adolescents to discuss sensitive details about their lives. According to Hill (2019), disengaged students need and appreciate teachers willing to spend time with

them.

GSA Clubs

GSA clubs are student-run organizations that bring LGBTQ and allied adolescents together to build and organize communities around issues that impact them at school and in their communities. GSAs have progressed beyond their original purpose of providing safe spaces for LGBTQ students to becoming vehicles for significant social change in the areas of racial, gender, and educational justice. It allows all students to share their experiences with others, interact with like-minded people, and find a sense of belonging. They have been shown to improve school atmosphere, individual well-being, and educational outcomes for LGBTQ adolescents. According to Participant 8, “students are encouraged to stand up for others who are being teased...and...taught that you don't necessarily have to agree with the lifestyle, but you should respect the person because they are, a person.” Whether or not LGBTQ students engage in their school’s GSA, simply having one in place can help establish a more inclusive school atmosphere for LGBTQ students (Kann et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2018).

However, it is not enough to allow a GSA group to exist. Administrators must actively assist the club and treat them as any other student organization on campus, allowing them to distribute flyers and make announcements about their events. They should also make an effort to attend club meetings to introduce themselves, let GSA members know they are supported, and, if necessary, urge students to speak with them about any problems they are having. If these types of relationships were formed from the beginning, maybe Participant 17 would not have written, “There were LGBT clubs, but they weren’t respected. I didn’t feel comfortable being myself because my friends made

comments about LGBT.” Students must observe the efforts of administrators and recognize them as allies. Their involvement in GSA events serves as an example to the rest of the school’s students and staff.

It is also crucial for the principal to give the club members a voice. The principal should use their suggestions, challenges, and criticisms to develop new and creative methods to improve the school’s atmosphere. For example, school administrators could include a yearly workshop where teachers and a GSA student panel could engage in in-depth discussions that present solutions. Giving LGBTQ students a platform to speak out about their daily experiences and problems as nonbinary students will allow them to see that they are valued and essential to the school community. Hearing student stories also provides teachers with an understanding of student experiences and allows them to reflect on and improve their teaching practices by hearing these stories.

Academic Endeavors

According to the findings, approximately 29% of LGBTQ participants found that preparing or continuing education beyond high school was a way to overcome homophobia. They believed that continuing education after high school was necessary to engage with individuals similar to them and support alternative lifestyles. These graduates refused to let homophobic behaviors and attitudes displayed by school staff or peers deter them from pursuing their academic goals. Their self-esteem, outspoken personality, and positive outlook on the future were factors that led to them extending their education beyond high school.

Limitations of Findings

Several limitations hampered the results of this qualitative phenomenological

study. First, the study's participants were LGBTQ high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 24 who attended high school in South Carolina. Much effort was put into recruitment efforts, but only one participant completed the survey during the first round of surveys. During the second round, coworkers, prior students, friends, and family were sent the survey via Facebook messenger, resulting in a sample of 17. Another limitation is the difficulty of the topic. Twenty-four graduates opened the online survey, but only 17 submitted it. Based on the literature, although many participants had some distance from the topic, it may continue to be a sensitive subject. Respondents who did not submit the survey stated that the topic was too painful to discuss; therefore, there may be experiences of harassment and victimization that were not addressed in this study.

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to learn about former LGBTQ high school student opinions and lived experiences fostering a safe and inclusive school environment and their interactions with school employees. However, it is a qualitative study, is limited in scope, and cannot be generalized to others. Because not all LGBTQ teenagers view or experience homophobia in the same way as the participants in the study, the study's findings cannot be applied to the entire LGBTQ student community. The study's findings could have been different if it had considered the lived experiences of pupils now in high school and under the age of 18. Unfortunately, individuals under the age of 18 may be too immature to complete the survey independently and know the potential benefits and dangers; thus, only LGBTQ people between the ages of 18 and 24 were included in the study.

The opinions of school personnel and classmates toward LGBTQ teenagers and their daily encounters with them were not investigated. If they were included, the

responses to questions about the quality of institutional support for LGBTQ people might have been more appropriate or socially acceptable. Furthermore, administrators may not have revealed the exact nature of the institutional support provided in their schools, and they may not have been honest about the degree to which they did or did not support LGBTQ students, especially if their behaviors did not align with the district mission statements or state and federal regulations such as Title IX. The survey did not cover peer perceptions of homophobia. Including peers of the self-identified LGBTQ, participants could have shown the underlying reasons why their friends supported or opposed the treatment of students viewed or self-identified as LGBTQ.

Although the study methodology was kept as transparent and consistent as possible, the significance and scope of the questions in the online survey reduced the validity. The study's validity was affected by the accuracy of interpreting the responses of LGBTQ participants. The truthfulness of the interpretations of the data collected determined if participant responses from the survey were significant and would draw sound conclusions. Another disadvantage of using an anonymous online survey is the inability to ask participants to elaborate on their responses. Because some of the remarks were brief, eliciting more information from participants would have enriched the conversation.

Last but not least, this is qualitative research. On the other hand, some of the narrative descriptions were detailed, and the subjects explored in this study may be of interest to other LGBTQ adolescents. In addition, this study explored the lived realities of self-identified LGBTQ young adults in South Carolina, including bullying, resilience, and consequences. In the spirit of encouraging posttraumatic growth, these stories should

perhaps provide some comfort and support to those who read them.

Recommendations for Future Research

The majority of studies on LGBTQ adolescents are focused on the negative experiences they had while in high school; however, there is very little research relating to LGBTQ adolescents who had great high school experiences. The strategies that promote LGBTQ students in high school can be determined by researching positive LGBTQ student experiences. One suggestion for future research is to replicate this study by surveying current LGBTQ students. By replicating the study with LGBTQ students currently in high school, the results of this study could be compared to those of the other to see if similar or comparable solutions for supporting LGBTQ student experiences in high schools were discovered.

Furthermore, many study participants were high school graduates who continued their studies after graduation, despite homophobic attitudes and acts by school personnel and peers. Another suggestion for future research is to study the internal motivations of graduates that enabled them to persevere in the face of adversity. Understanding the impact of intrinsic motivation and how it affects the capacity of students to continue their education after high school could help students avoid problems like dropping out or engaging in self-destructive activities. Such data would add to the corpus of knowledge about how to provide institutional support for LGBTQ students.

Future research could focus on high schools rather than LGBTQ high school graduates. Schools in the study should be known for adopting research-based practices that provide a welcoming environment for all students. By interviewing teachers, staff, and students and examining the school climate and culture, the study may provide a

better understanding of what supports LGBTQ student experiences and what hinders them. Furthermore, presenting information about how outside forces working against inclusivity may affect the school's efforts to create a safe and supportive environment. This study would also identify the subcultures of underclassmen and upperclassmen and the factors that differentiate them.

Finally, future research could look into the relationship between the local community and school authorities. A study of this nature could disclose essential factors that could help all stakeholders provide the necessary tools for maintaining a healthy school climate. Every school community member is affected by a homophobic school climate, and everyone must work together to combat it (Kosciw et al., 2020). Researchers may look into how establishing GSAs and Safe Spaces on school campuses affects the school's culture. Furthermore, in-service training and professional development for school administrators and educators on issues affecting LGBTQ students should be provided throughout the school year. Other areas to consider would be to analyze data related to attendance, grade point averages, and the importance of building relationships with peers and school staff. It is documented that when students feel supported and connected to their learning environment, they are happier and more productive (Hill, 2019).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand LGBTQ high school student perceptions and lived experiences and their interactions with school personnel regarding fostering a safe and inclusive school environment. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What were former LGBTQ high school student experiences with harassment and discrimination while attending high school?
2. How did school and district policies and practices affect LGBTQ high school student experiences?
3. What support do former LGBTQ high school students believe current LGBTQ high school students need from district and school educators and staff?

The data revealed several overarching themes by utilizing an open-ended, online survey to collect and validate participant perceptions and lived experiences. The resulting themes related to perceived or actual lack of support from school administrators, staff, and peers and school policies and practices were bullying, gender conformity, unsupported schools, antagonism, heteronormativity, and validation. Themes related to LGBTQ student perceptions and experiences with a safe school environment included coping mechanisms, academic endeavors, and institutional support in South Carolina high schools. The final section of the survey allowed participants to make recommendations on improving the quality of institutional support available to LGBTQ students in public education.

The effects of homophobia on public education continue to be a source of concern for educational leaders throughout the United States. Understanding the perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ students and the impact of homophobic behaviors and actions in the school setting may assist school administrators and educators in providing institutional support for this population. The study's recommendations may aid in developing teacher professional development and student programs focused on increasing awareness and preventing homophobia in public schools. The findings of this study may

provide useful information to all stakeholders in public education in the United States, who are attempting to provide institutional support for LGBTQ students in the school setting and lay the groundwork for future research.

This study contributed to the existing body of knowledge by addressing any gaps in the current literature regarding assessing the quality of institutional support for LGBTQ students and the feasibility of instituting a public educational support system for LGBTQ students. Based on participant responses, the study also examined the most effective strategies for altering the heteronormativity aspect of public schools, educated school leaders about homophobia, which equipped them with the tools necessary to address the needs of LGBTQ students in public education more effectively.

Unfortunately, some participants are still dealing with their trauma and believe that if teachers and schools had a better understanding of what LGBTQ students need in high school, it would be easier for the next generation of students to feel safe at school. While the available research on the larger LGBTQ community is beneficial, additional research is needed to provide insight into the needs of LGBTQ youth. It is necessary to ensure that all school staff develop trust with students and foster a positive school climate to maximize student learning. As a result, all students become successful members of our society in the future, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

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Appendix A
Recruitment Flyer



PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR STUDY ON

LGBTQ High School Experiences

PURPOSE

- To determine the types of interactions LGBTQ high school graduates' encountered with peers, school staff, and administrators.
- To identify the degree of safety LGBTQ high school graduates experienced while in high school
- To identify support mechanisms LGBTQ graduates needed that will create an inclusive, supportive, and safe school environment

ELIGIBILITY

- Age 18 - 24
- Identify as LGBTQ
- Graduated from a high school in South Carolina

WHAT WILL YOU DO

- Click here to review the Informed Consent form
- Complete an online survey about your perceptions and experiences with high school peers, school staff, and administrators and the support mechanisms you received and/or needed while in high school (40 minutes)

CONTACT

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 Gardner Webb University

Appendix B**Informed Consent Form for Online Survey**

*The Experiences and Perceptions of Harassment
and Discrimination of LGBTQ Youth in South Carolina High Schools*

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences former LGBTQ high school students had with homophobic behaviors and actions from school staff and peers. As a participant in the study, you will be asked to complete an online survey containing five demographic questions and 15 open-ended questions. The open-ended questions will ask you to reflect on the people and experiences that made you feel excluded or uncomfortable to be yourself.

It is anticipated that the study will require about 40 minutes of your time. Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be anonymous, which means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data. There are no anticipated risks in this study. You will receive no payment for participating in the study. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by exiting the survey. Data from this study will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

If you have questions about the study, contact:

Melissa L. Myers

Email: XXXXX

Phone: XXXXX

Dr. William Stone

Email: wstone1@gardner-webb.edu

Phone: XXXXX

Dr. Sydney K. Brown, IRB Institutional Administrator

Telephone: 704-406-3019

Email: skbrown@gardner-webb.edu

Selecting "YES" to continue to the survey indicates your consent to participate in the study. If you are not 18 – 24 years of age or do not consent to participate, please select "NO".

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences former LGBTQ high s... = No

Appendix C
Online Survey

LGBTQ Adolescents' Perceptions & Experiences High School Survey
 PLEASE DO **NOT** INCLUDE ANY NAMES OR IDENTIFYING INFORMATION
 OF PERSONS OR SCHOOLS WHEN COMPLETING THIS SURVEY.

Section 1: Background Information

1. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Transgender
☐ I do not identify with a gender.
☐ I choose not to answer the question.
☐ Other (please specify) _____

2. How old are you?

- ☐ 18 ☐ 19 ☐ 20 ☐ 21
☐ 22 ☐ 23 ☐ 24

3. How would you describe your race or ethnicity?

- ☐ **American** Indian ☐ **Alaskan** Native
☐ **Asian** ☐ **African** American
☐ Middle Eastern ☐ Latino/Hispanic
☐ **White** ☐ **Native** Hawaiian
☐ **Pacific** Islander
☐ Other (please specify) _____
☐ I choose not to answer this question.

4. Describe your high school. Select either urban or rural

- a. Choose one. ☐ Urban ☐ Rural
 b. Choose one. ☐ Private ☐ Public

5. Student population

- ☐ less than 500 ☐ 500 – 1000 ☐ 1001 – 2000
☐ 2001 – 3000 ☐ more than 3000

6. How would you describe your sexual orientation?

- ☐ Lesbian ☐ Gay
☐ Bisexual ☐ Transgender
☐ Queer ☐ Questioning
☐ Other (please specify) _____
☐ I choose not to answer the question.

Section 2: School Practices and Policies

1. What experiences/activities inside and/or outside the classroom made you feel excluded, not part of the school community, or made you feel uncomfortable to be yourself?
2. What assignments/projects made you feel like you were not part of the school community or made you feel uncomfortable to be yourself?
3. What school rules/practices made you feel like you were not part of the school community or made you feel uncomfortable to be yourself?

Section 3: Experiences with Peers

1. What types of interactions did you see and/or hear from other high school students made you feel like you were not part of the school community or made you feel uncomfortable to be yourself?
2. What school activities/events did you see other high school students doing made you feel like you were not part of the school community or made you feel uncomfortable to be yourself?
3. What did high school students say/do directly to you to make you uncomfortable to be yourself?

Section 4: Experiences with School Staff

1. What did high school teachers/school staff say/do that made you feel uncomfortable to be yourself in class?
2. What did high school administrators say/do that made you feel uncomfortable to be yourself in class?

Section 5: Coping Mechanisms & Academic Endeavors

1. What did high school peers staff say/do that made you feel supported?
2. What did high school teachers/school staff say/do that made you feel supported?
3. What did high school administrators say/do that made you feel supported?
4. Why do you think a lack of support exists for LGBTQ students in public education?
5. What changes would you like to see in public education regarding support for high school students self-identified or perceived as LGBTQ?
6. How did you cope with perceived or experienced homophobic harassment?
7. How did your perceptions or experiences regarding possible homophobic harassment affect your potential academic endeavors/performance?
8. How did your perceptions and experiences affect your decision to attend college?

END OF SURVEY

Thank you for your participation.