

CREATING SAFE SCHOOLS FOR LGBTQ YOUTH

By

AVELINA RIVERO

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Approved by:

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Dr. James E. Hunt  
Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

Abstract

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBTQ) youth today face unique daily stressors that directly impact their ability to succeed in their academics. The purpose of this literature review was to analyze research that highlights and addresses LGBTQ-related issues and disparities across educational contexts. In hopes of creating a safer and more inclusive environment for LGBTQ-youth, I cross-examined factors that could help create a positive environment: Gay-Straight Alliance (GSAs), inclusive curriculum, policy and practice, teacher support, and teachers' ability to intervene. Overall, these factors did improve students' feelings of safety, school belongingness, and school climate. I discuss implications for future research.

## Introduction

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) youth today face unique daily challenges (i.e., discrimination, identity crisis, assault) across different contexts (i.e., home, school). For many, schools are a hostile environment. M.R<sup>1</sup>, a young high school student who attended a private Christian high school and identifies as a lesbian was prevented from running for the student body president position, due to her sexual orientation. No rule limiting her to run existed before her to attempt to run for student body president. M.R<sup>1</sup> is not alone in facing these barriers, much LGBTQ youth today, are discouraged from participating in extracurricular activities (i.e., sports, student council positions) in school and are forced to hide their identity. There is a growing body of research that highlights the impact of discrimination (due to sexual orientation) has on LGBTQ youths' academic belongingness and psychological well-being (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) is a United States-based education organization that is working to create inclusive and safe environments for youth in K-12 settings. According to the recent 2017, National School Climate Survey (n= 23,001 students) distributed by GLSEN, "59.5% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 98.5% heard 'gay' used in a negative way, 28.9% were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) due to their sexual orientation, and 62.2% reported experiencing LGBTQ-related discriminatory policies or practices at school" (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. XVIII). Despite the passage of a law ending discrimination against same-sex couples in 2015, little has been done to help LGBTQ students feel included and equal in schools. In all of the 50 states, California is the only state that passed a

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<sup>1</sup> A student I interacted with.

bill (FAIR Education Act) requiring all schools to implement classes that teach youth about the contributions of women, people of color, and other underrepresented groups. In addition, only 18 states have put anti-bullying laws in place to protect students from being harassed due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (State Maps, n.d). Further, only 14 have nondiscrimination laws protecting students based on sexual orientation and gender identity. On the other hand, one state (Wisconsin) only offers protection on the basis of sexual orientation. Despite the lack of support LGBTQ youth have from schools, there are factors that could help mitigate the effects of school-based victimization. These include creating Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), incorporating an inclusive curriculum, policy and practice, teacher support, and teachers' ability to intervene.

### GSAs

GSAs are a student-run club that provides LGBTQ youth and their allies a safe space to meet and discuss issues related to sexual orientation and gender in hopes of improving school climate. There are a variety of different types of GSAs: social, support, and activist GSAs (What is a GSA, n.d.). Kosciw et al. (2018) examined the differences between students that attend a school with an available GSA and students that do not have a GSA available at their school and found:

Students who had a GSA in their school:

- Were less likely to hear “gay” used in a negative way often or frequently (62.7% compared to 78.5% of other students);
- Were less likely to hear homophobic remarks such as ‘fag’ or ‘dyke’ often or frequently (53.4% vs. 68.1%);
- Were less likely to hear negative remarks often or frequently about gender expression (57.7% vs. 67.5%);
- Were less likely to hear negative remarks often or frequently about transgender people (40.7% vs. 51.3%);

- Were more likely to report that school personnel intervened when hearing homophobic remarks compared to students without a GSA — 18.2% vs. 11.3% said that staff intervene most of the time or always;
- Were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation than those without a GSA (51.7% vs. 67.3%);
- Were less likely to miss school because of safety concerns (28.7% vs. 41.8%)
- Experienced lower levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation and gender expression;
- Reported a greater number of supportive school staff and more accepting peers; and
- Felt greater belonging to their school community. (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. XXI)

Marx and Kettrey (2016) conducted a meta-analysis to look at the relationship between GSAs and students' reports of victimization. The meta-analysis used 15 studies with 62,923 participants. They discovered that GSAs were associated with significantly lower levels of homophobic victimization, lower levels of fear for safety, and reported hearing less homophobic remarks at school. Specifically, students who attended a school that had a GSA available "...reported a mean score of homophobic victimization that was one-fifth of a standard deviation lower than their peers without a GSA" (Marx & Kettrey, 2016, p. 1275) and "...reported hearing homophobic remarks almost half of a standard deviation less" (Marx & Kettrey, 2016, p. 1277).

In addition, Lapointe and Crooks (2018) examined how a structured Healthy Relationship Program (HRP) for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Two-Spirit and Queer/Questioning (LGBT2Q+) Youth, presented in a GSA, was perceived and experienced. Students enjoyed the structure of the program because it allowed them to be comfortable enough to explore topics diligently. For instance, HRP empowered the members to explore and come to terms with their identity (affirmation), which was beyond what they would discuss in a regular GSA meeting. Additionally, HRP helped youth build supportive networks (reassurance) by listening to coming out stories and learning about the methods they used to come out. This, in turn, motivated students to think about coming out to their friends and family. The members were able to build bonds with each other because they were able to relate and had a sense of belonging. Moreover,

the program helped participants learn coping mechanisms they could use when dealing with oppression; promotion of resiliency (Lapointe & Crooks, 2018).

Furthermore, Fetner and Elafros (2015) conducted a study to examine the differences between high schools with a GSA available and high schools without a GSA. Participants that attended a school with a GSA available, reported larger circles of friends across a variety of sexual identities compared to participants who didn't. Additionally, students with a GSA reported having supportive teachers and administrators available. This improved the students' high school experience (Fetner & Elafros, 2015). Participants who did not attend a school that had a GSA available, reported feelings of isolation and loneliness because they were unable to find friends that accepted them.

In addition, research has shown that a lack of GSA availability is associated with negative mental health outcomes and substance abuse. Specifically, in a study with 284 sexual minority youth, researchers Walls, Wisneski, and Kane (2013) examined the associations between school experience, GSA availability, and active membership. The researchers found a marginally significant relationship ( $p=.083$ ) between "seriously considering suicide in the past twelve months" and GSA availability; 45.8% (GSA not available at school) vs 35.5% (GSA available). Furthermore, researchers discovered a statistically significant ( $p =.002$ ) difference between "actually attempting suicide in the past year" and GSA accessibility; 33.1% (GSA not available at school) vs 16.9% (GSA available). As for substance abuse (daily marijuana usage in the past 30 days) and membership, researchers discovered a statistically significant difference ( $p= .013$ ), with 40.7% (non-members) and 22.4% (members) (Walls, Wisneski, Kane, 2013). This research suggested that social workers at schools can help encourage and initiate the

development of GSAs. The incorporation of GSAs can help create an inclusive school environment and provide students with additional support.

Furthermore, Toomey and Russel (2013) studied the linkage between students' perception of belongingness, active participation in a GSA-social justice activity, school-based well-being, and future political advocacy. Involvement in a GSA and the presence of a GSA created variability in the data. For instance, they found that participation in a "...GSA-related social justice activities was positively associated with school belongingness and GPA attainment but was not significantly associated with personal school safety or plans to vote in the future" and "...the presence of a GSA was positively related to school belongingness and GPA attainment but was not associated with personal school safety or plans to vote in the future" (Toomey & Russel, 2013, p. 510). Interestingly, students that reported low levels of school victimization but high levels of active GSA involvement reported higher levels of school belongingness. School victimization levels played an important role in determining the participant's school-based well-being. For example, if a student reported high levels of school victimization, the benefits from the GSA would not moderate the negative effects of school victimization. Unfortunately, membership in a GSA did not lessen the effects from school victimization and "...the negative association between school victimization and personal safety at school, GPA, school belongingness, or future plans to vote" (Toomey & Russel, 2013 p. 515). Nonetheless, they did find that participation in a GSA is positively correlated with school belongingness and GPA. In sum, the articles argued that GSA participation and presence positively impacted LGBTQ youth's school experience. However, despite the numerous benefits GSAs provide LGBTQ youth, "14.8% are restricted from forming or promoting a GSA" (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. XIX).

## Inclusive Curriculum

Incorporating LGBTQ history, themes, and important figures into the curriculum can help create a safer and more inclusive environment for the LGBTQ youth. As of today, there are no requirements forcing LGBTQ-inclusive frameworks into the curriculum. According to Kosciw et al. (2018) variability existed in the incorporation of LGBTQ-related topics in schools:

- Only 19.8% of LGBTQ students were taught positive representations about LGBTQ people, history, or events in their schools; 18.4% had been taught negative content about LGBTQ topics.
- Only 6.7% of students reported receiving LGBTQ-inclusive sex education. (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. XXII)

In addition, Kosciw et al. (2018) discovered positive associations with the inclusion of an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum:

Compared to students in schools without an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, LGBTQ students in schools with an LGBTQ- inclusive curriculum:

- Were less likely to hear ‘gay’ used in a negative way often or frequently (51.5% compared to 74.7%);
- Were less likely to hear homophobic remarks such as ‘fag’ or ‘dyke’ often or frequently (42.9% vs. 64.6%);
- Were less likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression often or frequently (51.1% vs. 65.1%);
- Were less likely to hear negative remarks about transgender people often or frequently (29.9% vs. 46.3%);
- Were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation (41.8% vs. 63.3%) and gender expression (34.6% vs. 47.0%);
- Experienced lower levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation and gender expression;
- Were less likely to miss school in the past month because they felt unsafe (23.6% vs. 37.7%);
- Performed better academically in school (3.3 vs. 3.2 GPAs) and were more likely to plan on pursuing post-secondary education;
- Were more likely to report that their classmates were somewhat or very accepting of LGBTQ people (67.6% vs. 36.0%); and
- Felt greater belonging to their school community. (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. XXII)

Batchelor, Ramos, and Neiswander (2018) conducted a study using 7 Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs). The PSTs were instructed to pick an LGBTQ literature book and read it in their book club. The books were centrally focused on an LGBTQ main character or theme. The book club was a place where they got to elaborate and discuss themes that surfaced in the LGBTQ-related book(s). The researchers discovered that LGBTQ literature could be used as a mirror, window, and help LGBTQ youth with identity formation. The researchers learned that the books were eye-opening and encouraged the PSTs to want to learn more about LGBTQ issues (Batchelor, Ramos, & Neiswander, 2018).

In another study, participants in Bellini's (2012) study perceived their pre-service as lacking any LGBTQ training; making it all but invisible. LGBTQ-specific training was not readily available during the pre-service training; it simply did not exist. Many participants also explained that they were the ones having to start the LGBTQ topics in their training. An important and distinctive theme developed in the study, "...the need for gay and lesbian educators to come out to their students" (Bellini, 2012, p. 390). LGBTQ-identified teachers could play an important role in LGBTQ students' lives. They could offer help, support, guidance, and become an ally for LGBTQ youth in schools. The participants mentioned that they felt "...there is a big gap between what exists on paper and resources of policy and law and what we are able to do in practice," (Bellini, 2012, p. 390). Many LGBTQ students are not receiving the support they need because policies are not being executed. There is too much hesitation from teachers and school staff in incorporating inclusive topics because they fear backlash from parents, students, and communities.

Expanding on this theme further, another study examined educators' ability to navigate and incorporate inclusive practices in their classrooms. The researchers discovered that educators felt they needed to:

...engage in three main practices in order to navigate their roles in these aspects of school practice and environment: defining the "rules" present in their school systems, evaluating the potential risk in violating these rules, and negotiating their perceived role in the midst of these rules and risks (Fredman, Schultz, & Hoffman, 2015, p. 64).

In addition, participants explained that there are guidelines set in place for the incorporation of LGBTQ related topics in the classroom:

1. ...teachers should simply not talk about LGBTQ topics
2. if teachers talk about LGBTQ topics, these topics must first be approved through appropriate channels
3. when teachers address LGBTQ issues, they must manage them in a way that does not induce negative feedback from parents or community members. (Fredman, Schultz, & Hoffman, 2015).

The educators' role in incorporating inclusive practices are extremely limited. The potential backlash from other school staff, families, and students prevent teachers from incorporating inclusive topics. Nevertheless, there are practical steps teachers can take to improve inclusion: be open-minded, understand current research, know the power of language, focus on behaviors (not identities), advocate for inclusive spaces, and continue to learn (Soule, 2017).

In 2008, a *Preventing School Harassment Survey* was administered to LGBTQ and straight middle and high school students from California (n= 1232). The researchers found differences in bullying and safety at the school and individual level. At the "...individual level, supportive curricula, much like inclusive curricula, were associated with safety, but also with more frequent bullying. At the school level, supportive curricula, again like inclusive curricula, were associated with more safety and less bullying across the school" (Snapp, McGuire, Sinclair, Gabrion, & Russel, 2015, p. 590). A possibility for the differences could be that more students

are able to receive LGBTQ-related education at the school level compared to the individual level. Their analyses suggest that courses such as sexuality and health education can help improve the students' school experience.

### Policy and Practices

Research has shown that policies and limited resources can impact a students' overall well-being, adjustment, and sense of belongingness in schools. Kosciw et al. (2018) found differences within students that attended a school with available policies protecting them from discrimination and those who did not and found:

LGBTQ students in schools with a comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policy:

- Were less likely to hear “gay” used in a negative way often or frequently (55.6% compared to 72.5% of students with a generic policy and 74.5% of students with no policy);
- Were less likely to hear other homophobic remarks such as ‘fag’ or ‘dyke’ often or frequently (46.6% compared to 62.5% of students with a generic policy and 64.7% of students with no policy);
- Were less likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression often or frequently (51.0% compared to 63.7% of students with a generic policy and 66.3% of students with no policy);
- Were more likely to report that staff intervene when hearing anti-LGBTQ remarks;
- Experienced less anti-LGBTQ victimization; and
- Were more likely to report victimization incidents to school staff and were more likely to rate the school staff's response to such incidents as effective. (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. XXIV)

They also discovered that some students reported experiencing a discriminatory policy in school that negatively impacted them:

- Disciplined for public displays of affection that were not disciplined among non-LGBTQ students: 31.3%.
- Prevented from wearing clothes considered “inappropriate” based on their legal sex: 22.6%.
- Prohibited from discussing or writing about LGBTQ topics in school assignments: 18.2%.

- Prohibited from including LGBTQ topics in school extracurricular activities: 17.6%.
- Prevented from attending a dance or function with someone of the same gender: 11.7%.
- Restricted from forming or promoting a GSA: 14.8%.
- Prevented from wearing clothing or items supporting LGBTQ issues: 13.0%.
- Prevented or discouraged from participating in school sports because they were LGBTQ: 11.3%.
- Disciplined for simply identifying as LGBTQ: 3.5%. (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. XIX)

Discrimination due to heterosexism directly impacts LGBTQ students' psychological well-being. Woodford, Kulick, Garvey, Sinco, and Hong (2018) examined the relationship between active pro-LGBTQ campus-based structural initiatives (i.e., policies, one-credit LGBTQ courses), students' experiential heterosexism, and psychological well-being (i.e., psychological distress and self-acceptance). Heterosexism is "The assumption that all people are or should be heterosexual" (General Definitions, n.d.). Researchers found that offering a one-credit LGBTQ course was associated with "...fewer environmental microaggressions and greater self-esteem and pride" (Woodford, Kulick, Garvey, Sinco, and Hong, 2018, p. 450). The implementation of a for-credit LGBTQ course provides the public with the opportunity to learn about LGBTQ issues. For experiential heterosexism, students attending a college that offered an LGBTQ course, active anti-discrimination policies, and had a higher ratio of LGBTQ student-run clubs reported fewer experiences of experiential heterosexism. For psychological distress, the resources previously discussed had "significant negative indirect effects" and for self-acceptance, the resources had "significant positive indirect effects" (Woodford, Kulick, Garvey, Sinco, and Hong, 2018, p. 451). In other words, attending an institution with supportive resources can indirectly affect an individuals' psychological well-being; psychological distress and self-acceptance. Thus, available supportive resources can help minimize the detrimental repercussions of heterosexual discrimination.

In order for LGBTQ students to feel safe and supported there must be policies and practices in place. For instance, Poteat and Russel (2013), argues that there is a need for nondiscrimination policies (i.e., protection for sexual and gender identity), anti-bullying policies, anti-harassment policies, inclusive curriculum to discuss LGBTQ issues, allowing the development of LGBTQ clubs/resources (i.e., GSAs), and providing educators with resources to receive LGBTQ training. In addition, educators must be able to talk about LGBTQ-related issues in the classroom without the fear of repercussions or risks (Poteat & Russel, 2013). In another study (n = 116 middle school principals), the researchers examined the implementation of anti-bullying policies and the practices that were taking place to support LGBTQ students. The researchers suggest thirteen policies/practices that can help LGBTQ students:

1. Implement and enforce comprehensive anti-bullying policies that enumerate sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.
2. Provide a system that allows students or others to anonymously report bullying and/or discriminatory incidents.
3. Provide ongoing reminders of anti-bullying expectations to the school community and regularly communicate support for an inclusive and positive school environment.
4. Provide evidence-based education and training to school personnel and students on preventing LGBTQ bullying and discrimination.
5. Ensure that current school practices are not discriminatory against LGBTQ students.
6. Protect the privacy of LGBTQ students.
7. Expect school personnel to intervene in support of LGBTQ students.
8. Support the establishment of a GSA or similar student club.
9. Make sure that LGBTQ students know where to go for information and support, and that support staff and services are in place.
10. Implement inclusive curricula.
11. Support students' decisions regarding their gender identities.
12. Expect school personnel to use students' preferred names and pronouns.
13. Establish clear procedures for the logistics of handling and supervising susceptible areas. Boyland, Kirkeby, & Boyland, 2018, p. 116-119

Boyland, Kirkeby, and Boyland (2018), found that 97% of principals reported having anti-bullying policies, however, 14 principals also reported inconsistency in their anti-bullying policies implementation. In other words, just because there are policies established that do not

mean they are being practiced. In addition, the principals also reported that they do provide their students with anti-bullying/anti-harassment training, however they have not implemented inclusive curricula, have not provided school personnel with proper LGBTQ training, and do not have clubs such as, GSAs available for their LGBTQ students (Boyland, Kirkeby, & Boyland, 2018). What is the purpose of providing students with training if the teachers are not receiving the same training? How will the teachers be able to intervene appropriately when a student is being harassed?

Another area that needs more attention is the athletic department in schools. Specifically, LGBTQ youth face unique stressors in school athletic environments, for instance, many experience discrimination or exclusionary behaviors (i.e., name-calling, restricting joining a specific team). Discriminatory actions may range from peers to school staff (i.e., PE instructors, coaches). According to Kosciw et al. (2018), “one-quarter of LGBTQ students avoided the school athletic fields or facilities (24.7%) because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable” (p. 14) and “over one-tenth of students (11.3%) indicated that school staff or coaches had prevented or discouraged them from playing sports because they were LGBTQ” (p. 38). Greenspan, Whitcomb, and Griffith (2019) propose incorporating a School Athletics for Everyone (SAFE) model to help support LGBTQ students in school athletic environments. The SAFE model consists of a multi-part workshop: “(a) stigma and risk; (b) connections among positive PE climate, academic success, and social-emotional success; (c) sites of stigma; (d) gender normativity and heteronormativity; (e) youth narratives; and (f) tools for change” and a one-on-one consultation with the school mental health professional (Greenspan, Whitcomb, & Griffith, 2019, p. 74). The purpose of the model is to help create inclusive and safe PE environments for LGBTQ students. The workshop will help educate, prepare, and provide PE teachers with skills

to prevent negative behaviors that directly affect LGBTQ students (i.e., discrimination, abuse). The authors emphasize the importance of teachers establishing consequences when expectations are not met. This is essential because although there are rules and practices in place implementation and consistency is rather important.

Furthermore, there is little to no research that focuses specifically on transgender youth. As a matter of fact, according to Kosciw et al. (2018) transgender and gender nonconforming students (T.G.N.S) face exclusive acts of discrimination: “42.1% of T.G.N.S had been prevented from using their preferred name or pronoun, 46.5% had been required to use a bathroom of their legal sex, and 43.6% had been required to use a locker room of their legal sex” (p. 42). In addition, “only 10.6% of LGBTQ students reported that their school or district had official policies or guidelines to support transgender or gender nonconforming students” (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. XXIII). Golberg, Beemyn, and Smith (2019), conducted a school climate study on 507 T.G.N.S to examine factors that are associated with the availability of trans-inclusive policies and supports across colleges, explore policies and supports that were most rewarding for the trans students, and examine students sense of belongingness and campus climate. They also asked the students about the changes they want to see and what policies/practices they wished were available for T.G.N.S at their school. The researchers argue that consultants can facilitate systems-level change to help enhance school climate for all students. For instance, coordinating an “...intervention in one domain (e.g., university policies) may have implications for others (e.g., classroom or residential life practice), thus impacting school climate and student outcomes” (Golberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2019, p. 30). The researchers did not find an association between colleges (i.e., community college, private college, university) and the prevalence of trans-inclusive policies and supports. All colleges differed in their types of support and policies

available to their students (Golberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2019). On average, all of the policies/practices were perceived as important, however, gender inclusive restrooms, nondiscrimination policy that includes gender identity/expression protection, LGBTQ student-run organization, and name change without legal documentation restrictions were reported as most important to the students. When asked about their needs and wants students reported a desire for:

...incorporation of an inclusive curricula, educating other students/faculty/ and staff about gender diversity, nondiscrimination policies that protect against gender identity/expression, name change without legal documentation restriction(s), inclusive language for gender on documentations, pronoun(s) usage, gender inclusive campus restrooms, private changing areas/showers, housing accommodations, trans-inclusive/sensitive counseling and health care, health insurance coverage and availability for T.G.N.S, trans-specific spaces, hiring more sexually diverse faculty/staff members, more LGBTQ resource centers, trans-inclusive athletic policy, and providing students with trans-specific career and graduate school counseling. (Golberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2019, p. 49).

The needs and desires of the T.G.N.S. vary greatly. Students “openness” was perceived in the positive light because it was positively related to school belongingnessr. A possible explanation could be that the participant attends a more inclusive college that incorporates more policies, practices, and resources that allows the student to feel heard and safe to “come out.” According to Kosciw et al. (2018), T.G.N.S. that attend schools with active trans-student policies and practices reported that they “were less likely to miss school because they felt unsafe (54.7% vs. 67.0%)” and also reported that they “felt greater belonging to their school community” (p. XXIV).

#### Teachers Intervening and Providing Support

What influence (if any) do teachers have in counteracting homophobic behavior?

According to Kosciw et al. (2018), available supportive educators can impact a student's academic experience and environment. They examined the differences between students with available supportive teachers and those without and found:

Compared to LGBTQ students with no supportive school staff, students with many (11 or more) supportive staff at their school:

- Were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation (43.4% vs. 79.2%) and less likely to feel unsafe because of their gender expression (34.8% vs. 51.0%);
- Were less likely to miss school because they felt unsafe (20.1% vs. 48.8%);
- Had higher GPAs (3.3 vs. 3.0);
- Were less likely to say they might not graduate high school and more likely to plan on pursuing post-secondary education, and Felt greater belonging to their school community. (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. XXIII)

Wernick, Kulick, and Inglehart (2013) conducted a study to examine factors that predict a students' willingness to intervene when witnessing homophobic behaviors. The researchers found a statistically significant association between witnessing a teacher intervening and the students' self-report intervention. This is important because this demonstrates the power of positive role modeling behavior. The researchers argue that teachers can use their "...positions of authority and power to model constructive behaviors that create safer and more respectful schools for LGBTQ youth" (Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2013, p. 299). If teachers receive proper training to recognize homophobic behaviors this can in turn help prevent countless incidents from occurring. Teachers must be able to develop skills that will help them prevent and address LGBTQ issues and needs in the classroom (Poteat and Russel, 2013). A student reported that a teacher quickly addressed an incident (slurs) in class and ever since then, jokes about sexuality stopped. "One of my teachers, she is this huge advocate. Some guy made some comments, and she was like, 'I have to say something about this.' And like ever since then, no one has ever said a gay remark. And that was like the third week of school" –GSA high school

student (Hillard, Love, Franks, Laris, & Coyle, 2014, p. 6). This is a prime example of how teachers could use their power to correct an incident when it occurs. This can prevent future homophobic incidents from happening in the classroom.

To further expand on this topic, a study took place in Norway, to assess the factors that are associated with the teacher's willingness to discuss and intervene against homophobic language. Poteat, Slaaten, & Breivik (2019) found that there are specific factors that are associated with a teacher's decision to engage in the intervention. Specifically, "...teachers who reported more consistently intervening against homophobic language more strongly believed that using homophobic language should not be allowed, believed that homophobic language was harmful to lesbian and gay students, perceived more support from their colleagues in intervening, and reported greater self-efficacy to intervene (Poteat, Slaaten, & Breivik, 2019, p. 33). In addition, gender differences in the decision to intervene against homophobic language were discovered. Consistent rates of intervening against homophobic language were associated with the strong beliefs that homophobic language is extremely harmful to women but not men. This means, more women felt obligated to intervene against homophobic language because they strongly felt that it had a strong negative impact on the LGBTQ students (Poteat, Slaaten, & Breivik, 2019). In addition, there were also associations between strong beliefs that homophobic language should not be implemented and consistency in intervening for women but not for men. Additionally, participants who reported "...strongly believing that using homophobic language should not be allowed" and those that reported "...greater self-efficacy to intervene" are the ones who have been regularly acting against homophobic language use (Poteat, Slaaten, & Breivik, 2019, p. 35). This gender gap raises concerns. Why are male teachers not intervening as much? Is there a stigma associated with intervening?

There are several factors that could determine why a teacher will not intervene. For instance, the teacher could be conflicted with the fear of being seen as “uncool,” they are unaware when the harassment occurs (perpetrator attacking when teachers are not around), or improper intervention could be taking place; the teacher intervening ineffectively (Poteat, Slaaten, & Breivik, 2019). In addition, teachers could feel uncomfortable to intervene against bullying (specific to sexual orientation) because of the possible backlash that can result from students, parents, and/or other staff members, possible job loss, or their own prejudices (Bellini, 2012). Students provided a list of effective methods teachers could use when dealing with homophobic behaviors that directly impact LGBTQ students:

1. Address the problem immediately;
2. Using consistent and strong responses;
3. Taking time to explain why the words or actions were an offense;
4. Involving parents;
5. Involving the principal; and
6. Having stricter consequences for inappropriate behavior. (Poteat, Slaaten, & Breivik, 2019, p. 7)

All of these steps could promote a positive school climate for the students who identify in the LGBTQ community.

Another study documented teachers’ opinions on the available support that is provided to LGBTQ students who experience bullying within schools. The researchers found that although the participants were reporting that the school is supportive of LGBTQ students the participants were also likely to report that LGBTQ students were still experiencing higher levels of victimization than their peers (Kolbert et al., 2015). Specifically, “...teachers’ perceptions of a higher level of staff supportiveness was associated with higher reported frequencies of students’ use of derogatory language about LGBTQ individuals, teachers’ use of derogatory language about LGBTQ, and cyberbullying, as well as increased frequencies of an overall bullying

experience for LGBTQ students” (Kolbert et al., 2015, p. 254). In addition, the researchers asked the participants if their schools offered an explicit anti-bullying statement or policy to protect their students. Of the 200 teachers that participated, 29 (14.5%) of the teachers reported having no recollection of an anti-bullying statement or policy even though by law every school is required to have one (Kolbert et al., 2015). There seems to be a disconnection between awareness of policy and implementation within teachers. This is an issue because teachers are responsible to implement policy, however this is impossible if they are unaware of the policies existence and/or information that pertains to the policies. Kolbert et al., discovered a connection between teachers’ perception of the school doing “enough” to protect students from bullying and policy existence. The teachers that reported no policy also reported their school to have lower levels of proactivity against bullying. Simply not knowing the existence of a policy can jeopardize the safety of many students.

### Parental Perceptions

Parents, schools, and communities can work together to create a supportive and safe environment for LGBTQ youth. According to Human Rights Campaign, “4 in 10 LGBT youth (42%) say the community in which they live in is not accepting of LGBT people” and “26% of LGBT youth say their biggest problems are not feeling accepted by their family, trouble at school/bullying, and a fear to be out/open” (Growing Up LGBT in America, n.d.). LGBTQ youth face unique stressors and are at a heightened risk for delinquent behaviors (increased alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking, marijuana use) because of the lack of support and discrimination they face in schools (Kosciw et al., 2018). Parental perceptions are extremely

important for LGBTQ youth because a meaningful relationship can encourage positive self-worth (Roe, 2017). Roe (2017), conducted a study with 7 LGBTQ adolescents to examine their opinions on parental support. In response to parental support, four themes emerged; “(a) coming out was necessary, (b) initial reactions of parents are most often not positive, (c) LGBTQ youth view religion as a barrier to support from parents, and (d) LGBTQ youth want explicit support from parents and family members” (p. 56). Across all participants, the idea of coming out was emphasized as extremely important and crucial for their mental well-being (coming out was necessary). In addition, across all participants, the reactions to their “coming out” varied. None of the participants described a positive reaction from their parents or family members and many explained having to ignore backlash and/or lack of acceptance. A negative reaction can occur because becoming a parent of an LGBTQ individual is a complex process; there is a lot of change (i.e., new family roles, etc.) (Grafsky, 2014). LGBTQ youth viewed religion as restricting because many believed that it is inhibiting the development of a positive relationship (with parents) and it is used to criticize their sexual orientation (Roe, 2017). Lastly, LGBTQ youth want explicit support from parents and family members; students emphasized the importance of explicit verbal support and support provided from extended family members. Students want to feel accepted and loved unconditionally from their parents and family members. Students seek acceptance from their parents and fear objection. Coming out is such an important and life-changing event for the LGBTQ individual (Roe, 2017). Although there are parents that will disapprove of their child’s decision to “come out,” there are practices that can promote increased parental acceptance, such as “...adolescent-initiated conversation about sexual orientation, parents’ exposure to LGB individuals and information, psychological processes such as working

through feelings of shame and loss, and parents focus on love and continued connection” (Samarova, Shilo, and Diamond, 2014, p. 687).

While a majority of research focuses on the struggles parents go through when they discover their child identifies in the LGBTQ community, Gonzales, Rostosky, Odom, and Riggle (2013) took a different approach and examined the positive experiences that arise from parenting (n= 142; parents) an LGBTQ individual. From the open-ended survey, 5 positive themes emerged; “personal growth (becoming more open-minded, adopting new perspectives, awareness of discrimination, and deepening compassion), positive emotions (pride and unconditional love), social connection, and closer family relationships (closer to child and family closeness)” (Gonzales, Rostosky, Odom, & Riggle, 2013, p. 328). Overall, on average (95%) of participants reported at least one positive aspect, however, 7 of the participants reported that they could not identify a positive experience with being an LGBTQ parent. A possible explanation for this could be strong parental views (positive or negative) or beliefs (i.e., heteronormativity) of LGBTQ communities, stigma, comfort zones, restrictive traditional and/or cultural views. For instance, a study with 140 Israeli LGB adolescents took place to examine the parental acceptance of their sexual orientation over time. They found that the parents of bisexual daughters were less accepting of their decision over time (less increased levels of acceptance) compared to Lesbian and Gay individuals (Samarova, Shilo, and Diamond, 2014). Nevertheless, having an LGBTQ child enhanced personal growth (i.e., advocacy, support other parents, networking) and provided psychosocial benefits (Gonzales, Rostosky, Odom, & Riggle, 2013).

Do parental influences impact LGBTQ inclusivity in schools (K-12 setting)? Ullman and Ferfolja (2016) conducted a study to examine Australian parental (n= 22) views on LGBTQ-inclusive education and other topics related to helping LGBTQ students (i.e., teacher training).

The researchers discovered four themes from the focus group interviews; “(a) start early; LGBTQ-inclusive education should match students’ knowledge and exposure, (b) LGBTQ-inclusive education is a right of all students, (c) engage with parents around LGBTQ-inclusions, and (d) teachers must be supported in this work” (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2016, p. 19). Many argued that the schools should be obligated to incorporate such lessons in the early primary years. However, in order for the implementation of LGBTQ-inclusive education. Support must be provided from “...the school leaders and departmental authorities, rather than forcing individual principals and teachers to be the sole arbiters of whether or not such topics are included and how/when/why parents may or may not be informed” (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2016, p. 25). A parent explains, “what can happen in schools and what needs to go on, it really has to happen at the policy level” (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2016, p. 25). Despite the push back from the school districts, participants reported in favor of incorporating LGBTQ-inclusive education.

### Future Research

Based on all the findings, there is a disconnect between teachers receiving LGBTQ-related training and students receiving LGBTQ-related training. Majority of the time students were able to receive some form of training but teachers were not. Future research should look at effective strategies that will allow teachers accessibility to LGBTQ-related training. In addition, future research should examine effective strategies and protective factors to cut LGBTQ-related stigma and high levels of LGBTQ-related victimization. High levels of LGBTQ-related victimization dissipate all benefits that students can receive from GSAs and other beneficial resources (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russel, 2011; Toomey & Russel, 2013, Walls, Wisneski, &

Kane, 2013). This would, in turn, promote a positive school environment for LGBTQ students. Furthermore, future research should test factors that can help promote and improve parent-child relationships. A supportive and accepting parent is extremely important especially for LGBTQ youth (Grafsky, 2014). In addition, researchers should do a better job in including a diverse socio-economic status and ethnically and racially diverse parents in their samples. There is a lack of generalizability in multiple articles; the majority of samples are White non-Hispanic upper-class parents. Lastly, future research should examine the effectiveness of strategies in religious schools. A student from the 2017 *National School Climate Survey* reported, “Going to a Christian private school, it is often very difficult for me to feel as though it is okay to be the way I am. I am indeed religious, and I am happy the way I am, but I sometimes find myself being ridiculed by my peers,” (Kosciw et al., p. 110). Religion is a barrier for many because of the stigma and discrimination that is associated with certain traditions and beliefs about LGBTQ people (Rostosky, Abreu, & Mahoney, 2017). According to Kosciw et al. (2018), “Students in religious schools reported the most anti-LGBTQ related discrimination at school compared to students in other schools” and they also “had less access to most LGBTQ-related resources” (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. XXVII).

### Conclusion

There is a growing body of research that highlights the impact discrimination and hostile school climates have on LGBTQ youths’ academic performance and psychological well-being (Kosciw et al., 2018; Batchelor, Ramos, & Neiswander, 2018). In that being said, schools need to do a better job in promoting positive school climates for ALL students. There are

recommendations schools can do to help mitigate the effects of school-based victimization. These can include creating GSAs, incorporating policy (i.e., enumerated school policies) and practices that support and keep LGBTQ students safe, intervention and support from teachers, and incorporating an inclusive curriculum. Incorporating an inclusive curriculum such that, LGBTQ history, themes, and important figures are incorporated into the curriculum can help create an all-around safer environment for the LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al., 2018). However, in order for teachers, administrators, and school psychologists to help LGBTQ youth, they must receive proper training on LGBTQ issues. “I hope one day, I am able to attend a school where I am free to express myself (identity), feel safe, loved, and welcomed by my peers and community” – M.R.<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> A student I interacted with.

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