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RUNNING HEAD: “I guess somebody already told you”

“I guess somebody already told you”:  
LGBTQ+ Students’ Experiences in Secondary School Contexts

A Dissertation Presented to  
the Faculty of the  
Education Doctorate in Transformational Teaching and Learning Program of  
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Education Doctorate

By Emily A. Pisco

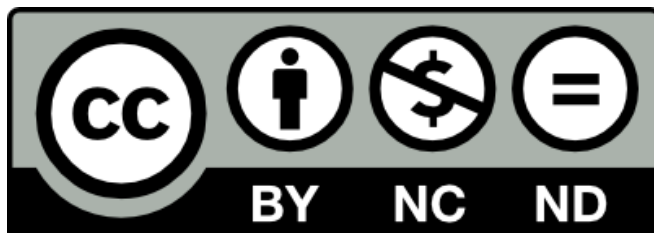
March 2020

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“I guess somebody already told you”

This Dissertation for the Education Doctorate in Transformational Teaching  
and Learning Degree

By Emily A. Pisco

as been approved on behalf of the College of Education

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Amber Jean-Marie Pabon, Committee Chair

Dr. Kathleen Stanfa, Committee Member

Dr. Mark Wolfmeyer, Committee Member

March 20, 2020

“I guess somebody already told you”

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

“I guess somebody already told you”:

LGBTQ+ Students’ Experiences in Secondary School Contexts

By

Emily Ann Pisco

Kutztown University of PA, 2020

Kutztown, Pennsylvania

Directed by Dr. Amber Jean-Marie Pabon, PhD

This qualitative study is focused on the secondary educational experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) youth. Based on the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network’s 2017 survey results, researchers asserted that the school climate remains hostile for LGBTQ+ youth (Kosciw et al., 2018). Three specific factors contributing to this adverse climate are: (a) students’ safety, (b) school policies, and (c) teacher inaction. Therefore, this qualitative study put forth the following research question: What can be learned from the secondary school experiences of genderqueer/gender nonbinary youth? This main question was followed with the following sub-questions: a) What did their experiences reveal about school connectedness?; b) How did they view their identity in relationship to their secondary school experiences?; and c) How did their school experiences inform how they view allies? The three participants included in this study self-identified as genderqueer or gender nonbinary and were 19 years old. These participants attended public middle and high school for some or all of their secondary schooling. The themes that emerged through both narrative analysis and multiple coding cycles include: 1) connections and disconnections to school; 2) positive teacher relationships; and 3) identity as

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a reflection of self. Based on my analysis of these themes using a queer theoretical framework, I propose to provide educators with professional development that will develop an awareness of heteronormative and gender normative cultures within schools. This professional development seeks to address how teachers have the opportunity to disrupt the heteronormative and gender normative culture.

*Keywords: LGBTQ+ Youth, Genderqueer Youth, Gender nonbinary youth, Secondary Schools, Heteronormative School Climate, Gender Normative School Climate*

Signature of Investigator  Date 3/20/20

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## **Chapter One**

### **Leadership Context and Purpose of the Action**

#### **Context**

The topic of this qualitative study concerns the secondary educational experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) youth. The absence and inconsistency of policies that validate LGBTQ+ youths' identities create an unbalanced educational climate for these students (Kosciw et al., 2018). Conversations surrounding LGBTQ+ students' rights are largely informed by those in places of power. With each new presidential, congressional, and senate election, politicians send a clear message about the visibility of LGBTQ+ youth in schools through which policies are changed and which legislation is considered (Samek, 2016). Educators and the sexual minority youth they teach are affected by these messages. On October 26, 2010, the Office of Civil Liberties in the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) sent a “Dear Colleague” letter that outlined how some anti-bullying policies connect to antidiscrimination laws with a specific reference to LGBTQ+ harassment being included under Title IX (The Office of Civil Liberties, 2010). Then in May of 2016, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) and U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) co-authored a “Dear Colleague Letter” that placed transgender students' rights under Title IX (2016). School administrators and educators were directed to allow students to use the bathroom that matched their gender identity (DOE & DOJ, 2016). In addition, the DOE put forth policies and practices to support transgender students (DOE & DOJ, 2016).

However, less than a year later, after a change in presidential leadership, the DOE and DOJ removed the policies put forth the previous May (U. S. Office of Civil Rights, 2017).

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As of 2019, only 17 of the 50 states have comprehensive laws that specifically protect LGBTQ+ youth from discrimination in schools (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). In addition, seven states still have “No Promo Homo<sup>1</sup>” laws in place (Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2018). Specifically here in Pennsylvania, the Department of Education does not have laws or policies that include sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in school settings; instead, each school has the option to include language that identifies LGBTQ+ youth as being protected from discrimination within their board policies (Pennsylvania Youth Congress, 2019).

These political and policy differences seep into the culture of school systems. Discriminatory and repressive policies likely contribute to upholding the heteronormative culture because the assumption is that students are heterosexual and cisgender. (GLSEN, 2018; HRC, 2018, Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). School officials and the greater community expect students to conform to the existing culture, even if it is at odds with their identity (Dinkins & Englert, 2015). However, administrators, educators, and other stakeholders can offer proactive support to LGBTQ+ youth to change the school climate despite the local and national political climate and policy-driven decisions (Kosciw et al., 2018). Those teachers who want to be an ally of LGBTQ+ students could benefit from a foundational understanding of what the schooling experiences of LGBTQ+ youth are like.

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<sup>1</sup> “‘No promo homo’ laws are designed to restrict instruction and limit school expressions of support for LGBTQ people or issues. Thus, schools in these states may provide fewer of the resources necessary for ensuring safe learning environments and equal access to education for LGBTQ youth, such as an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum.” (GLSEN, 2018, p. 4)

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The purpose of this study is to explore how LGBTQ+ youth experience secondary school contexts.

As a veteran middle school educator, I strive to be an ally to the LGBTQ+ youth that have been in my classroom. I have been aware of the recent political shifts, the discussions of policies, and have read the news stories about parents challenging local Gay-Straight Alliances. I have come to realize that being aware and recognizing the school climate that LGBTQ+ youth face is not synonymous with being a proactive ally. One specific moment that informed my thinking occurred when I received my class roster at the start of a school year and found the name of a transgender student on the list. On the first day of school, I typically conduct an activity individually and privately with each student to allow them to reveal things about themselves to me. Using this exercise, I share personal details first and then give the students time to respond in writing with information they want me to know. The aforementioned student started the message to me by stating, "I guess someone already told you." As I read the notecard, I felt uncomfortable because, in my effort to address the student with the proper pronoun and name, I had taken away the student's choice to express these facts to me. The experience prompted me to find better ways to understand the experiences and needs of the LGBTQ+ youth that I teach. Therefore, this qualitative study about the lived secondary school experiences of LGBTQ+ youth focused on how these youth view the school climate and the role of educators in providing support. The following section offers definitions of key terminology related to this study.

### **Definition of terms**

In this study, I used the following terms:

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- 1) Genderqueer- Mardell (2016) defines genderqueer as “someone whose gender exists outside of or beyond society’s binary concept of gender” (p.10).
- 2) Gender nonbinary- Mardell (2016) defines nonbinary as “existing or identifying outside the sex/gender binary, being neither a man nor woman, or being only partially or a combination of these things” (p. 12).
- 3) LGBTQIA+- Mardell (2016) states that LGBTQIA+ “stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic, and plus for other identities that are not straight and/or cisgender” (p. 11).
- 4) School climate– Loukas (2007) defined the school climate as the atmosphere created by the teachers, policies, and administrative decisions.
- 5) School connectedness– refers to how students view themselves as part of school culture and perceive their relationship with the teachers and peers within a school (Loukas, 2007).
- 6) Heteronormativity– Blackburn & Smith (2010) defined heteronormativity as the assumption that all students are heterosexual.
- 7) Gender Normativity- Butler (1990) asserted that gender normativity is a set definition of acceptable gender expressions as related to a set binary and the categories of masculinity and femininity.
- 8) Identity– Gee (2000) asserted that identity could be both fluid and imposed, but how individuals view themselves is their core identity.
- 9) Positioning– Dinkins & Englert (2015) defined positioning as an individual or group determining the identities of others based on normative standards.

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Positioning within a school suggests that teachers assume that all students are heterosexual.

10) Social justice– Alsup & Miller (2014) defined social justice in an educational context as perspectives that teachers use to provide an equitable classroom environment for students. For this study, it is a lens through which to view normative culture.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Every two years, GLSEN surveys the school experiences of LGBTQ+ students to assess and make recommendations for educators. Based on the 2017 survey results, researchers asserted that the school climate remains hostile for LGBTQ+ youth (Kosciw et al., 2018). Three specific factors contributing to this adverse climate are: (a) students’ safety, (b) school policies, and (c) teacher inaction. The results showed that about 60% of LGBTQ+ students reported that they feel unsafe at school, and over 70% of LGBTQ+ students avoided social events (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. xviii). Of those youths who completed the survey, over half reported verbal harassment, and a third reported being physically harassed (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. 24). This harassment is a significant contributing factor to students’ feeling unsafe at school.

Schools that employ generic bullying policies, i.e., those policies that did not specifically include sexual orientation and gender identity, had more LGBTQ+ student reports of harassment due to their sexual orientation and gender identity than those schools with explicit bullying policies for LGBTQ+ students (Kosciw et al., 2018). Students reported that schools with no policy or a generic policy had fewer staff interventions in response to negative comments about sexual orientation and gender expression (Kosciw et

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al., 2018). Among youths who completed the GLSEN survey, “56% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks and 71% of students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from their teachers or other school staff” (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. XIX). Kosciw et al. (2018) claimed that “school anti-bullying/harassment policies provide guidelines in addressing incidents of harassment and biased remarks” (p. 77). Therefore, teacher inaction based on policy perpetuates a school climate where LGBTQ+ youth feel unsupported, and therefore, disconnected.

Along with feeling disconnected and as positioned as other, LGBTQ+ youth struggle to find others who validate their personhood by recognizing their identity (Miller, 2015). As Blackburn & Smith (2010) asserted, “heteronormativity keeps people in their places” (p. 627), which typically means LGBTQ+ youth are outside of the norm in a school setting. Gender and sexual minority youth can experience devastating outcomes due to their social disconnection from school; these outcomes include higher rates of self-harm and truancy than other students who identify with the norms (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018).

These findings validate the investigation of how LGBTQ+ students perceive the school climate within their context. Investigating the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth could give educators insights into disrupting a heteronormative and gender normative school climate and creating connectedness for these gender and sexual minority students.

### **Significance**

The 2017 GLSEN survey showed that the majority of students had at least one supportive adult in the school, however, of the students who reported the harassment to a teacher “60.4% were told to ignore it or took no action” (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. 31). Kosciw



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et al. (2018) concluded that when LGBTQ+ youth feel supported by school staff, they are more likely to feel connected to school. The survey results also showed that LGBTQ+ youth more often feel connected to schools that have policies that include their identities and activities, such as school clubs, that promote inclusion and awareness of LGBTQ+ topics and issues.

Teachers can take the responsibility to create a climate of inclusivity, which could address students’ feelings of disconnection from school and their peers (Thing & Esposito, 2015). Stakeholders can create avenues and policies to bolster school climate that supports all students, including LGBTQ+ students, so they feel acknowledged and accepted. Based on the GLSEN 2017 survey results, researchers asserted that student-teacher relationships are a means to foster student connections with school. For example, when LGBTQ+ students felt supported by the teachers and administrators, then they were more likely to attend school and have higher academic success (Kosciw et al., 2018). Therefore, a poor school climate creates detachment among LGBTQ+ students and could negatively impact their futures.

To disrupt a hostile school climate, educators could acknowledge and validate LGBTQ+ students and encourage discussions about LGBTQ+ topics (Ellis & High, 2004; GLSEN, 2018). Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) asserted, “that we [individuals] have been socialized to participate in systems of oppression that we do not condone” (p. 185). Therefore, teachers and administrators could reflect on their roles in maintaining normative cultures and ways that they could affect a positive school climate. Because homophobic language goes unaddressed in the heteronormative school climate, this atmosphere can “eliminate the possibility for LGBTQ+ students to explore and express their identity” (Dinkins & Englert, 2015, p. 402). The role of the teacher is integral in creating an

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atmosphere of safety for LGBTQ+ students (Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Miller, 2015; Thing & Esposito, 2015).

### **Research Question**

The research question and sub-questions for the study are:

- 1) What can be learned from the secondary school experiences of genderqueer/gender nonbinary youth?
  - a) What did their experiences reveal about school connectedness?
  - b) How did they view their identity in relationship to their secondary school experiences?
  - c) How did their school experiences inform how they view allies?

### **Theoretical Framework**

I employ queer theory as the theoretical framework for this qualitative study. The focus is on exploring the complex narratives about the participants’ school experiences related to school climate and heteronormative culture. Therefore, when using queer theory, educational researchers can move beyond gender and sexuality and examine how normative structures of institutions contribute to individuals’ experience and identity formation (Cohen, 2011; Mayo, 2007; Slagle, 2006). The results could inform educators and other stakeholders about the impacts of the heteronormative culture in schools and the potential for change of culture.

### **Queer Theory Overview**

Queer theory emerged after gender theory and was “as a distinct intervention to disrupt” the concept of how gender and sexuality are defined (M. Adams, personal communication, October 22, 2019). Researchers use queer theory to “question taken-for-

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granted assumptions about relationships, identity, gender, and sexual orientation. It seeks to explode rigid normalizing categories into possibilities that exist beyond the binaries of man/woman, masculine/feminine, student/teacher, and gay/straight” (Meyer, 2007, p. 15). Butler (1990) and Foucault (1990) posited that discourse creates and upholds society’s view of gender and sexuality. It is a language that was established by those that had the power to speak while others were pushed into silence (Foucault, 1990). The general language around gender and sexuality is based on historical hegemonic structures (Foucault, 1990). Although labels and definitions have been used to create a clear understanding of identity, individuals can be held in place by these terms (Butler, 1990). Butler (1990) has argued that ascribing to one set of terms limits how individuals see themselves. Butler (1990) also argued that fluidity in how people understand gender and sexuality disrupts the normative of social contexts. Foucault (1990) reasoned that discourse has the power to keep normative cultures in place, but language could also be used to bring different perspectives to the forefront. In addition, Foucault (1990) suggested that the act of silence keeps the powerful in power. Therefore, researchers employing queer theory examine the ways that gender and sexuality norms are kept in place through language and how this impacts individuals’ understanding of self.

### **Queer Theory & Educational Research**

Applying this framework, educational researchers can work toward understanding the school experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, including the pervasive heteronormative culture that exists in schools (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Sullivan, 2003). This framework can be a lens through which to ask questions about the ways school climate reinforces the normative ideas of feminine and masculine behaviors. Meyer (2007) asserted that “queer theory offers

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educators a lens through which educators can transform their praxis so as to explore and celebrate the tensions and new understandings created by teaching new ways of seeing the world” (p. 15)

Previous scholars described heteronormativity as a silent barrier to how LGBTQ+ youth positively experience educational settings (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Miller, 2015). Students within a heteronormative and gender normative school culture receive messages about gender, what it means to be masculine or feminine, as well as sexuality, to whom students can have physical attraction and express that attraction. Within heteronormative school environments, those in charge assume that all students are straight and feel empowered. Therefore, school personnel who support heteronormative and gender normative cultures establish a norm for how members of the community, and particularly students, are expected to act and interact. (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Butler, 1990; Cohen, 1997). These assumptions can marginalize LGBTQ+ students who express non-heterosexual behaviors (Cohen, 2011; Dinkins & Englert, 2015). Stakeholders who maintain a heteronormative school climate create an environment that affects LGBTQ+ youth because these teachers and administrators omit these students’ identities from the normative curriculum and social events, and perpetuate language that defines LGBTQ+ youth as other (Alsup & Miller, 2014; Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Miller, 2015; Omizo et al., 1998).

Heteronormativity and gender normativity are silent social pressures that are ingrained in the fabric of the school structure and can remain unnoticed by educators (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Butler, 1990; Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Miller, 2015). Therefore, the heteronormative school culture remains unchanged and unchallenged by those

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responsible for upholding or changing the school climate (Biegel, 2010; Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Cohen, 1997; Linville, 2017). The tenets of queer theory imply that in practice it is the responsibility of the educator to interrupt a heteronormative school climate (Miller, 2015); otherwise, “heteronormative performances include not only ‘talk as usual,’ but also silence as usual” (Blackburn & Smith, 2010, p. 629). Therefore, I employed queer theory to understand the secondary school experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. The emphasis was on a critical analysis of students’ experiences of school climate, the relationships they formed with teachers, and how they describe these influences on their self-identities. Furthermore, the narratives of these youth offer an understanding of how educators contribute to student experiences.

## **Conclusion**

In the second chapter, I offer a review of relevant literature to ground this qualitative study in previous research relevant to the secondary school experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. The third chapter contains a description of the methods and how the study was carried out, including data collection and data analysis. Chapter four contains relevant data in the form of the narratives provided by three of the participants, as well as findings derived from the analysis of these data. The final chapter includes a discussion and the implications of the findings.

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## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of Supporting Scholarship**

This chapter reviews literature from studies about the connection between school climate and school connectedness for LGBTQ+ youth. This section begins with an analysis of studies and scholarship that provide foundational concepts about school climate and culture. After establishing this foundation, I examine results from studies concerning LGBTQ+ youths' secondary school experiences. I then present scholarship that specifically covers teachers as allies of LGBTQ+ youth. The chapter concludes with reviews of LGBTQ+ youths' identity formation as related to school experiences, and researchers' calls for future studies on these related topics.

#### **School Climate and Culture**

A foundational understanding of who creates school climate and culture is essential to understanding the school experience of students. Loukas (2007) asserted that school climate has three essential components: 1) physical; 2) social; 3) and academic. Each of these three domains helps contribute to the broad view of school climate. Student perceptions of school climate can be positive or negative based upon how they [students] "align" with the majority viewpoint of the educators and those that surround them. Therefore, if the school climate does not attend to a child's basic need for physical and emotional safety, they may not be able to build an attachment to peers and faculty. While Loukas does not directly address heteronormativity, this literature describes the creation of normative culture through these elements.

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McGiboney (2016) asserted that a healthy connection to school is "more than just peer interactions; it must include interactions with peers, teachers, school activities, and events at the school" (p. 58). Furthermore, McGiboney supported that a positive school climate promotes a healthy connection to school. Students who feel connected to school perceive themselves as part of the school culture, whereas those who do not feel connected perceive they are living outside of the school culture. Therefore, the perception students have about this overall school culture influences how they see themselves as part of the community.

The physical and social structures of a school can also work against creating an inviting school climate. SooHoo (2004) contends that "educational institutions at their core are agencies of socialization. Unfortunately, they are often used to train students to be obedient and follow rules without question" (p. 203). The climate of obedience can lead some students to detach. School climate also hinges on standards of normalcy related to race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Brown, 2016; Dinkins & Englert, 2015). This standard of normalcy set by the administrators, teachers, and school board impacts the school climate. Therefore, students who are outside that established norm are likely to feel disconnected.

Loukas (2007) illustrates that "some researchers consider school connectedness a component of school climate, but others suggest that it is a factor that intervenes between school climate and student outcomes to explain their relationship" (p. 2). Although Soohoo (2004) did not explicitly refer to LGBTQ+ youth, findings showed a positive correlation between students' physical safety and their feelings of connection to school. Consistent with Soohoo's findings, other results showed that "59.5% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school

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because of their sexual orientation and 44.6% felt unsafe because of how they expressed their gender" (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. xvii). Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn that in comparison to their straight and cisgender peers, LGBTQ+ youths' needs are not met in a large number of school climates, and they are then less likely to connect to their school community.

Shochet, Dadds, Ham, and Montague (2006) examined connectedness to school and students' mental health. Shochet et al. studied middle and high school students' connectedness to school and whether the perception of connectedness was linked with depression and risky behaviors. The authors found that "individual school connectedness predicted future depression scores for boys and girls, future anxiety for girls, and general functioning scores for boys" (Shochet et al., 2006, p. 176). Based on these findings, students' mental health is related to their connection to school. These researchers stressed that students' existing mental health state did not prevent their forming connections to school, but that if students felt disconnected from school, they were more likely to experience depression and related negative outcomes than those who feel connected (Shochet et al., 2006). The results provided some understanding of how disconnection from school can affect students' mental health. Building upon the foundation of what school climate and culture are and how they intercede with school connectedness, it is essential to look at the existing research that examines the school experiences of LGBTQ+ youth.

### **LGBTQ+ Students and Education**

Thing and Esposito (2015) summarized research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth by stating that "researchers conclude that sexual minority youth (SMY)— those who do not identify as heterosexual— are at an increased risk for peer rejection, limited school



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support, and verbal and physical attacks within the school setting" (p. 47). Schools operate on a system of normalcy, and students' ability to establish connections is at risk when they view themselves as outside the norms. When LGBTQ+ students are subjected to bullying, they become less attached to school (Thing and Esposito, 2015). Demissie, Rasberry, Steiner, Brener, and McManus (2018) found that supportive school practices for LGBTQ+ students did not increase from 2008 to 2014 except in the area of actively employing safe space language. This study highlighted that even though awareness of LGBTQ+ topics has increased, that schools do not seem to be changing supportive practices. The researchers stated that this is due to the pressures from those in power, such as school board members and parents (Demissie et al., 2018). Therefore, a school's climate stays stagnant due to a lack of policy and political influences.

As established by Loukas (2007), McGiboney (2016), and Shochet et al. (2006), students must feel safe before they can feel connected to the school. Thing and Esposito suggested that LGBTQ+ students generally do not view school as a safe place. LGBTQ+ students are not only verbally bullied but also physically attacked; the lack of safety jeopardizes their ability to establish a feeling of connectedness (Kosciw et al., 2015; Thing & Esposito, 2015). As predicted by Shochet et al.'s (2006) study of mental health and school connectedness, "studies consistently show that LGBTQ+ youth are at greater risk for self-harm, suicide ideation, depression, and other mental health concerns" (Thing & Esposito, 2015, p. 49). Additionally, transgender students are less likely than their non-transgender peers to view school climate positively due to gender-based bullying by peers (Day et al., 2018). LGBTQ+ students may struggle academically due to the "bullying and harassment [that] put LGBTQ+ at an academic disadvantage as their number of hours, and sense of

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safety in school is diminished, which ultimately compromises SMY's opportunities to thrive in school" (Thing & Esposito, 2015, p. 48). A little over 40% of LGBTQ+ students who reported being a victim of harassment stated that they did not intend to graduate from high school (Kosciw et al., 2018).

The inequity of school policies can also add to the disconnection of students (Joseph & Dorothy, 2011). In a qualitative study conducted with transgender and gender non-conforming students in Wisconsin, Gattis and McKinnon (2015) interviewed several students who reported that the policies in place were unfair. These policies included things like playing sports, using bathroom facilities, and using a student's preferred name or pronoun. Kosciw et al. (2018) reported that only 10% of students completing the 2017 GLSEN survey were aware of a policy that specifically supported LGBTQ+ youth. (p. 62).

Some school policies meant to protect LGBTQ+ youth are sometimes unsuccessful (Robert & Marx, 2018; Mayo, 2014; Linville, 2017; Pennell, 2017). The intentions of policy are often to protect youth by requiring them to reveal their gender and sexual identities to school personnel. These policies can have unintended consequences; for example, the staff might closely monitor LGBTQ+ youth, placing them under a microscope (Mayo, 2014; Pritchard, 2013). As Gattis and McKinnon (2016) noted, "policy alone cannot create safer and affirming environments" (p. 16). Furthermore, the policies that encouraged close monitoring of these students can reinforce the normative and power structure of the school (Butler, 1990; Francis & Paechter, 2015; Mayo, 2004, 2014; Pritchard, 2013; Roberts & Marx, 2018; Slagle, 2006).

These policies often do not change the institutional structure because they only address harassing behaviors directed toward LGBTQ+ students with no direct attempt to

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change the existing power structure and heteronormative culture (Mayo, 2014; Pritchard, 2013; Roberts & Marx, 2018). Also, schools that focus on supportive practices instead of punitive punishments show a decrease in homophobic bullying and an increase in school connectedness (Day et al., 2016). This finding is essential to consider because LGBTQ+ students report getting in trouble in school due to bias (Day et al., 2016). Therefore, there is a link between the normative culture of schools and how policy keeps that culture in place (Mayo, 2004, 2014; Roberts & Marx, 2018).

Adopting policies that are equitable, supportive, and comprehensive is also crucial in creating a positive school environment for LGBTQ+ students. Comprehensive school policies provide students and parents with clear expectations about whom to speak with concerning the needs of their child. LGBTQ+ students who attended schools with comprehensive policies reported they heard homophobic terms used less often, found faculty were more likely to intervene and were less likely to be victims of harassment than students in schools without such policies (Kosciw et al., 2018). Seelman and Walker (2018) concluded that states with anti-bullying laws have a lower incidence of bullying of LGBTQ+ youth.

An inclusive curriculum can help LGBTQ+ students to feel more connected to their school (Kosciw et al., 2018). As Joseph and Dorothy (2011) pointed out, "incorporating discussions about sexual orientation and sexual identity in bullying prevention programs may contribute to safer environments and more positive outcomes for LGBTQ youth" (p. 326). Through open conversations about LGBTQ+ persons and issues, educators could create an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance.

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While it is crucial to examine the ways LGBTQ+ youth disconnect from school, it is also essential to maintain a balanced view of the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth (Mayo, 2014; Munoz-Paza et al., 2002). Researchers employing a balanced view also examine how LGBTQ+ youth can feel connected to their school communities. The presence of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) has a positive effect on LGBTQ+ students (Gattis & McKinnon, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2016; McCormick et al., 2015). In schools with a GSA, LGBTQ+ students reported hearing homophobic remarks less frequently, felt safer at school, and felt more supported by school personnel (Kosciw et al., 2018). When LGBTQ+ students feel supported within their school, then it "means, for these youth, that someone was watching, listening, and ready to take action when [it] was needed" (Gattis & McKinnon, 2015, p. 14). Therefore, a successfully implemented GSA is a step toward connecting LGBTQ+ youth to school that is complemented by having supportive adults within the school.

Miller (2015) stated that teachers are able to break the norms and change the school climate for LGBTQ+ youth (p. 39). The active role taken by faculty and staff to support LGBTQ+ youth in the classroom and throughout the school was essential to foster a positive school climate (Mayo, 2007; Munoz-Paza et al., 2002; Robinson, 2010). Teacher actions can include “maintaining sensitivity to the words we use and messages we convey, as well as testing our own assumptions as professionals, can ensure that future LGBT youth can be open about their sexuality” (Munoz-Paza et al., 2002, p. 62). Furthermore, when teachers witness bullying or hear homophobic remarks and intervene in support of LGBTQ+ youth, this creates safety and connectedness to school for those students (Dessel et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2016; Pritchard, 2013). Day et al. (2016) assert that "teachers' roles extend beyond instruction and exist at the heart of everyday interactions among students" (p. 418).

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### **Teacher Allies**

Several researchers have examined teacher allyship using various perspectives. Feldkamp (2016) researched LGBTQ+ college students' perceptions of the qualities of an ally. According to the participants in Feldkamp's focus group, an ally has four qualities, they: 1) respect queer spaces, 2) normalize LGBTQ+ identities, 3) educate themselves about LGBTQ+ identities, and 4) actively engage in social issues facing LGBTQ+ individuals (2016, p. 29). Smith (2015) found that teachers who described themselves as allies discussed how their classroom space is safe both physically and emotionally. Teachers tended to self-identify as an ally if they viewed themselves as caring because they acted in ways to monitor homophobic language, overtly show signs of support of LGBTQ+ youth, and justify that support to colleagues (Smith, 2015). Steck and Perry (2018) found that administrators recognized three actions that can support LGBTQ+ youth: 1) creating a safe space; 2) building awareness and acceptance; 3) challenging heteronormativity through policies and procedures. Broadhurst, Martin, Hoffshire, and Takewell (2018) found that educators who want to make institutional changes for LGBTQ+ students view education and awareness of LGBTQ+ topics as a critical component of change.

Unfortunately, not all teachers promote school connectedness for LGBTQ+ students. Due to teacher inaction, "[LGBTQ] students come to view bullying as acceptable and learn that staying silent in an oppressive situation is appropriate behavior" (Thing and Esposito, 2015, p. 50). Teachers may not react to homophobic comments because LGBTQ+ terminology is outside their frame of reference. Therefore, they do not know how to handle the situations of bullying or LGBTQ+ topics in classroom discussions (Thing & Esposito,

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2015, p. 50). Teacher inaction reinforced an adverse school climate and may leave LGBTQ+ students' feeling unsupported and disconnected from faculty (Joseph & Dorothy, 2011).

Soohoo (2004) asserted that "fear also immobilizes individuals from acting. The continuum of fear runs the gamut from physical threat to social alienation" (p. 205). Soohoo posits that educators could be reluctant to act for two reasons: first, they do not know how to handle conversations concerning LGBTQ+ topics, and secondly, they fear the alienation of the student and themselves. Soohoo also stated that "bystanders often plead ignorance and try to escape responsibility by hiding behind the banner of innocence-to be an innocent bystander means to be blameless or a mutual victim of a situation" (p. 206). Building awareness of the impact that their inaction has on students is one-way educators can support a positive school climate.

Teachers who strive to be allies change from quietly supporting LGBTQ+ youth to disrupting the normative structures of schools. Meyer (2007) asserts that “educational structures [and teachers] wield extraordinary ideological power due to their role in teaching what the culture has deemed as important and valuable to future generations” (p. 21). Teacher allyship does not come without barriers. Unfortunately, when educators attempt to shift the culture of the school, and they are not supported by policy and those in power, others may view these attempts as a promotion of a political agenda (Ullman, 2018). Shelton (2019) explored how one educator's view of allyship changed over four years. Shelton’s results supported other studies which showed that teacher allies see themselves as working against the normative culture of the schools when supporting LGBTQ+ youth. Shelton found that teacher allies feel like they are ineffective when they are unable to change the school culture. For teachers to change the heteronormative culture, they need to use core beliefs and

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actions that include creating spaces where LGBTQ+ youth feel safe and connect with the school culture (Miller, 2015; Sadowski, 2017).

### **LGBTQ+ Identities and School**

In a heteronormative culture, LGBTQ+ youth experience an unbalanced sense of reality; the norms imposed on them risk their emotional wellbeing (Miller, 2015, p. 38). Students need spaces that allow them safety; thus, educators and other stakeholders should create a school climate that emphasizes respect and positive aspects of being LGBTQ+ (Biegel, 2010; Pennell, 2017; Sadowski, 2017). At-risk labeling and protectionist policies do not usually offer educators an effective way to maintain a balanced view of LGBTQ+ youth (Mayo, 2004, 2014; Pennell, 2017).

Pennell (2017) developed the queer cultural capital theory based on Yosso’s (2005) extension of Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural capital. Pennell’s theory has “six elements: aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, resistant (as originally delineated by Yosso), and transgressive” (2017, p. 69). Therefore, educators should consider how queer youth add to the educational system through language and how they navigate and circumvent the systems that oppress them (Pennell, 2017). LGBTQ+ youth viewed by educators as at-risk because their gender and sexuality do not conform to heteronormative school culture creates a negative view of these students (Mayo, 2004; 2014; Pennell, 2017).

Gee (2000) offered a theory of identity formation to assert that our identities are constructed in multiple ways, including by the influence of discourse with others. The words used by others to describe persons’ identities influence how they interact with them and how they view themselves (Gee, 2000, p. 110), Klein, Holtby, Cook, and Travers, (2015) asserted that the identities of LGBTQ+ individuals have previously been theorized to form in a linear

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process, meaning they go from being in the closet to being out in a clean line; however, Klein et al. posit that LGBTQ+ identity formation is dynamic. The oversimplification of what it means for queer youth to come out does not adequately address the complex issues these youths face in schools as “out” individuals (Klein et al., 2015). When LGBTQ+ youth experience overt bullying and microaggressions, it becomes more difficult for these young people to feel connected to their school communities (Linville, 2018). LGBTQ+ youth who feel disconnected may have a harder time exploring their gender and sexual identities because they feel unaccepted and do not perceive their identities as reflected in the community (Linville, 2018). Therefore, educators and administrators must understand the importance of creating a school climate that is accepting of LGBTQ+ identities and address the harmful impacts on queer youths when they do not find their identities reflected in school culture (Klein et al., 2018; Linville, 2018).

### **Call for further research**

Scholars who have researched the school experiences of LGBTQ+ youth consistently urge other researchers to add to this body of work. Munoz-Plaza et al. (2002) suggested further research that will “both raise awareness to the issues LGBT youth face in our schools and help guide and inform future interventions aimed at promoting health within this population” (p. 53). Additionally, researchers have called for further examination of social justice education and teacher dispositions toward LGBTQ+ students’ educational experiences (Alsup & Miller, 2014; Dinkins & Englert, 2015). Dinkins and Englert (2015) suggest more research in the middle school setting to “examine different ways LGBTQ+ literature can challenge the heteronormative nature of schools in relation to possibilities for anti-oppressive education” (Dinkins & Englert, 2015, p. 403). Marine (2011) asserted that “change comes



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when we ask hard questions” of those who are in positions of power and make decisions that determine how LGBTQ+ youth experience school (p. 5). Also, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ perspectives is called for in defining allyship and experience with heteronormative school environments (Steck, 2018).

Others have suggested a need for qualitative research focused on specific sexual and gender minority youths’ school experience (Day et al., 2016; Steck, 2018). The aim of this study was to utilize qualitative research to explore the lived experiences of genderqueer and gender nonbinary students’ experiences in secondary schools. In the following chapter, the research design is detailed.

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## **Chapter Three**

### **Research Design**

In this chapter, I elaborate on the research design of this study. I explain why qualitative research was chosen, how participants were selected, and the choices that were made to collect and analyze data. In addition, I share what could be viewed as limitations of this study. Finally, I share my researcher positionality as it intersects with this work. The goal of this qualitative study is to understand how youth who identify as genderqueer or gender nonbinary experience the binary world in secondary schools.

#### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research methodologies focus on the lived experiences of the participant(s) in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell (2013) contended that qualitative research meets the intellectual and practical goals that keep participants at the center of the research. Therefore, I chose qualitative methodologies to examine the individual experiences and perspectives of each participant. The personal experiences and details of events revealed how these young people navigated their secondary schools and interpreted that time in their lives. The events that the participants shared showed how these students developed an understanding of school climate and school culture.

To gain insight into the participants' lived experience and show the worth of their stories, I used a modified version of Seidman's (2013) interview protocol to examine how genderqueer and gender nonbinary youth experienced and made meaning of their secondary school experiences. Additionally, the purpose of this study was to focus on how the participants perceived the gender normative culture in their setting because a “life story says

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as much about the culture within which a person lives as it does about the person living it” (McAdams, 2010, p. 179). I chose interviews for data collection because one intent in the study was for participants to express the ways they were aware of heteronormative and gender normative cultures within their secondary schools. The stories that these participants shared highlighted the context of their schools and the relationships they viewed as most influential in their schooling experience (McAdams, 1988, 2010).

The approach in this study was consistent with Plummer's (2011) view of critical humanism. Thus, I aimed to use these perspectives and values during data collection and analysis: 1) the belief that all humans have the right to life that offers equality in experiences and opportunities; 2) the ability to show compassion to others; 3) the acknowledgment that others' experiences are valuable; 4) the trust in other individuals (Plummer, 2011). Furthermore, Plummer recognized that qualitative research focused on participants' lived experience “is never neutral, value-free work because the core of the inquiry must be human values” (p. 198). Through this study, the goal was to understand how genderqueer and gender nonbinary students' perspectives on heteronormative school cultures influenced their connection to the school. Therefore, the use of an equitable methodology that allows participants' stories to be respected and the central to the goals was crucial (Seidman, 2013).

Part of the work when using critical humanism for this study was because the purpose concerned examining the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. In particular, the intention was to understand how individuals make sense of their lives by telling stories about their relationships with others. These life stories are “an internalized and evolving story of the reconstructed past and imagined future that aims to provide life with unity, coherence, and

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purpose” (McAdams, p. 179, 2010). According to McAdams, the gathering of these narratives reveals:

For both the self and others, the life story explains how I came to be, who I am today, where I am going in the future, and what I believe my life means within the psychosocial niche provided by family, friends, work, society, and the cultural and ideological resources of my environment. It is a story that distinguishes me from all others and yet shows how I am connected to others as well. It is a story that narrates the evolution of a particular self, but it is a self in a cultural context. (2010, p. 179)

Therefore, the lived experiences of genderqueer and gender nonbinary youth can inform researchers and practitioners about how they experienced their identity throughout their secondary school experience. Moreover, it is critical to understand that young adults can construct meaningful narratives and questions about their beliefs, attitudes, and futures (McAdams, 2010). Using a humanist lens to consider the importance of lived experiences, McAdams (1988) asserted that “the life story is a product of person and environment” (p. 18).

### **Research Question**

The research question and sub-questions for the study were:

- 1) What can be learned from the secondary school experiences of genderqueer/gender nonbinary youth?
  - a) What did their experiences reveal about school connectedness?
  - b) How did they view their identity in relationship to their secondary school experiences?
  - c) How did their school experiences inform how they view allies?

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## **Participants & Participant Selection**

I recruited participants by two means: 1) purposeful sampling (Pabon, 2016), and 2) snowball sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The initial participant recruitment using purposeful sampling included contacting colleagues and persons I know who identify as LGBTQ+. I provided information about the study for these individuals to pass on to potential participants (Appendix one). The potential participants were then directed to contact me directly. Some of the initial contacts introduced the potential participants via email, but only after they had spoken with these potential respondents to ensure that the recruits agreed to share their contact information. After contacting potential recruits, I shared information about the study and answered questions (Appendix two)

The second stage of the recruitment process was snowball sampling to “identify cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 115). Participants that I interviewed connected me with other LGBTQ+ youth who were interested in participating in the study. As with purposeful sampling, the identified participants shared the study information with others and suggested they contact me directly or introduced me via email after getting permission from the potential participant.

I interviewed seven self-identified LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 18-23 who attended secondary schools in the US. For this analysis, I chose to carefully examine the lived experiences of three participants who self-identified as genderqueer or gender nonbinary youth and were 19 years old at the time of the interviews. These participants attended public middle and high school for some or all of their secondary schooling. To

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show reciprocity, participants received an Amazon gift certificate by email within a week of the last interview.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

I used in-depth interviews to collect data for understanding the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in the US. The interviews provided an opportunity for the participants to express their experiences as self-identified LGBTQ+ youth and how these students' educational experiences affected their identities. Through interviews, participants can disclose personal experiences that might be otherwise unheard or misunderstood. Interviewing is a way to reveal “other individuals' stories because they are of worth” (Seidman, 2013, p. 9). In this case, the interviews of LGBTQ+ youth are a way to value their secondary school experience.

I adapted Seidman's (2013) in-depth interview protocol with consideration of the age of my participants. Each respondent participated in two interviews, and each interview lasted 30 and 60 minutes. To ensure that the participants were comfortable, and the information they shared remained confidential, I met with each participant in locations that were convenient and preferred by them or via Zoom. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. These narratives could inform educators and school district administrators about how to create an atmosphere of connectedness for genderqueer and gender nonbinary students.

The interview began by encouraging participants to reflect upon their relationships with teachers and peers and how they connected with the school. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions to allow the participants to express their perceptions and experiences and reduce bias created by the interviewer. The purpose of the first interview

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was to gain knowledge about the participants' middle school and high school experiences. I asked the following questions to learn about the participants' secondary school experiences, specifically the ways in which they felt connected to the school community, the ways they saw the roles of their teachers in that experience, such as:

Can you tell me about your first memory of middle school?

1. What was your middle school like (i.e., climate, the structure of the day, curriculum)?
  - a. What was your middle school experience like (i.e., safe)?
  - b. Tell me about your best friend(s) in middle school.
  - c. Tell me about the adults you felt closest to when you were in middle school.
  - d. Tell me about how you saw yourself as part of your middle school.

Can you tell me about your first memory of high school?

1. What was your high school like (i.e., climate, the structure of the day, curriculum)?
  - a. What was your high school experience like (i.e., safe)?
  - b. Tell me about your best friend(s) in high school.
  - c. Tell me about the adults you felt closest to when you were in high school
  - d. Tell me about how you saw yourself as part of your high school

Per Seidman's protocol, I used follow-up questions to seek clarification of participant's responses occurring at the moment. For example, I used questions such as, can

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you tell me more about that? Can you tell me what you mean by that? You mentioned “this,” do you mind elaborating?

In the second interview, the aim was to gain insight into how the participants viewed their secondary school experiences in hindsight. During this interview, participants reflected on their identities as young adults by focusing on how school experiences influenced their views of their gender and sexuality. Furthermore, the participants considered how they felt schools could create an inclusive environment and what advice they might offer students and teachers concerning relationships with the LGBTQ+ community. In the second interview, participants responded to questions such as:

1. Is there anything that came to mind about middle school or high school since the last time we spoke?
2. How do you feel your middle school/high school experiences influence you past the secondary school experience?
3. Tell me about how you view your middle school/high school experience now.
  - a. What advice would you give to school leaders?
  - b. What advice would you give to students?
  - c. What advice would you give to teachers?
4. How do you define an ally?
5. Tell me about your experience after graduation/ secondary school experience.

As described above, I used a similar process to formulate follow-up questions as described above. I also formulated follow-up questions based on a close listening of the first interview and reviewing the notes I took (Seidman, 2013). These questions followed up on specific moments participants shared about their schooling experiences in the first interview. Some



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participants did not address some questions due to the direction that they took in the discussion.

### **Data Analysis**

Through in-depth interviews, I asked participants to share personal experiences, which emphasized how they made sense of their secondary school experiences. As consistent with the qualitative nature of the study, I examined the data for themes that emerged from participants' experiences in secondary schools. Although these themes may not be generalizable to other contexts (Creswell, 2014), there is value in understanding how individuals who attended different schools might have similar experiences.

Using narrative analysis, I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews to gain a better understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences (Saldana, 2016; Riessman, 1993). I completed all transcriptions within one week, which allowed time to assimilate concepts and ideas repeated across the interviews. I engaged in close and repeated listening of each interview and took notes of ideas that stood out concerning as related to the research questions, and I began to compare the school experiences across participants (Riessman, 1993). This process led to the coding of the responses in the transcripts.

I began the coding process with the first interview, and I manually applied in-vivo coding in the first round and descriptive coding as second-round of coding (Saldana (2016)). From this first coding session, I created a codebook that I applied to the two subsequent participants' interviews. As part of applying the codebook to other transcripts, I reduced each interview into smaller sections. I placed these sections within a chart which contained the code (category) associated with specific sections of data.

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After applying codes to each interview dataset, I examined the codes across interviews and took notes with the goal of comparing and contrasting the participants' responses. I noted what each participant decided to share in their interviews and how their school experiences were alike or different from one another. I used a notebook to take handwritten notes of “description of participants' concepts and beliefs” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 108) on the right side of the notebook pages. On the left side of the notebook pages, I considered the relationships between the theoretical framework and the responses; as I reflected on content, I developed questions that motivated the comparisons. This process led to apparent links among the substantive categories and broader connections to theory. Themes emerged that were undergirded by queer theory. Once the coding and thematic analysis were initially completed, I returned to the entire content of the interviews to identify excerpts for careful examination.

I used member checking to show the reliability and validity of the findings. I initiated contact with participants via email. I asked participants to participate in member checking through their choice of email, or through a follow-up conversation in-person or on the phone. I asked participants to engage in member checking by providing them with the themes that emerged after the coding process, their narratives constructed using their own words, and the excerpts of transcripts used in chapter four of this paper. I asked participants to respond to the following questions: 1) Do you have any comments or thoughts about the brief overview of themes?; 2) Based on what you shared with me, do you feel I portrayed your school experience accurately? Koelsch (2013) and Brit, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter's (2016) research completed about member checking informed this method of member checking. Brit et al. (2016) and Koelsch (2013) found value in having participants offer

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thoughts about the themes and findings that emerged from the combination of all of the participants.

### **Security of Participants**

To maintain the security of the participants, I secured the audio-recorded interviews by keeping the digital audio device password protected. I stored the transcribed interviews in a password-protected file. Both the audio recording device and the computer were only accessible to me. I de-identified the participants by creating pseudonyms for them and the schools that they attended. I created a key for the pseudonyms and stored it in a password-protected file on the computer. If presented or published, I will mask any potentially identifying information to protect the participants. After the study, I will destroy the files by permanently deleting them from the computer and shred hard copies of the data to ensure the participants' identities are protected.

### **Validity**

As part of this qualitative research, the validity of the findings presented emerged from data collection methods and data analysis methods. First, through the method of data collection employed, I conducted interviews over a span of one or two weeks with each participant. This gap of time allowed a check on consistency in the participants' experiences and allowed participants to reflect and add to the original data collected (Seidman, 2006). As a final step to this step of data collection, I employed member checking to seek out internal validity and confirm the interpretations of the data with the participants (Saldana, 2016).

The second way I addressed issues of validity was through the data analysis. I completed the narrative analysis with all interviews conducted, and there was no data that explicitly contradicted one participant's experience over another. Through transcribing the

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interviews personally and within a condensed point of time, I was adequately engaged in a rich data set, which allowed for in-depth analysis (Maxwell, 2013; Meriam & Tisdale, 2016). Further, the coding analysis of three participants was done through multiple coding rounds in which a codebook was created (Saldana, 2016). I participated in inter-rater reliability with the initial codebook, which was created from an excerpt of the data. Finally, the analysis of the data was consistent with the reviewed literature.

### **Limitations**

The qualitative approach in this study was used to collect and analyze the details of the lived experiences of the participants. Qualitative research with a small sample size allows investigators an opportunity to examine the details and the richness of the narratives given by participants; however, the responses from a small sample may not transfer to other study contexts. Therefore, the experiences of these LGBTQ+ youth do not encompass and capture the experiences of all LGBTQ+ youth. In the context of this study, the youths attended different secondary schools, and therefore, focused on select LGBTQ+ youths' school experience. In addition, LGBTQ+ youth of color were not intentionally excluded from the sample, but none of the participants are people of color. This is a noted limitation in the population under study.

Another limitation is the use of the in-depth interview as the only element of data collection. Although the interview questions were aimed to obtain personal details of school experiences, not all participants were entirely comfortable sharing intimate details. The participants had no prior experience with me prior to the study. The lack of knowledge, as well as the fact that I do not identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, contributed to participants' hesitancy to openly share school experiences. Finally, although I asked

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participants to engage in member checking, only one of the participants responded.

Therefore, only one of the participants reviewed the themes and offered comments on accuracy.

### **Researcher Positionality**

I am a white, heterosexual, cisgender female educator. This positionality means that the secondary school experiences that I had as a student and teacher may be in contrast to the participants’ experiences. To address this identity difference, I maintained self-awareness of how I interpreted the participants’ narratives provided about their school experiences (Peshkin, 1988). I paid close attention to how I interacted with the participants and how I could ensure that their stories were represented clearly without distortion from me (Milner, 2007). To be held accountable for my research and to present conclusive findings, it was vital for me to acknowledge why I might see the world from my perspective and reflect upon how the world might exist for others. I have reflected on my positionality using personal experiences and those relayed to me by fellow teachers.

In the past, I did not recognize heteronormative or gender normative cultures. Over the past several years, I have become uncomfortably aware of these normative cultures. The unease of these cultures and how my students are impacted by them have become of great concern to me. I have become aware of research showing the negative mental health impacts on LGBTQ+ youth when they are disconnected from school. I believe that I am an ally to LGBTQ+ youth, but I realize that I cannot simply declare that I am. As someone who does not identify as LGBTQ+, I needed to do member checking as I coded interviews and located themes.

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## **Chapter Four**

### **Analysis and Results**

This chapter presents the narratives of Linden, Drew, and Grey and follows with a discussion of the themes that emerged. These three narratives explore various secondary school experiences. In particular, these narratives feature how the participants’ gender identities influenced those school experiences.

In the section immediately following, the participants' own words construct how they each described who they are and how they viewed their school experience. In some places, I added phrases inside brackets to bridge the gaps in information and create a clear narrative. The brackets denote that those are not the participants’ direct statements. The intention of the following narratives used the participants' own words to maintain the integrity of the participants' stories and to avoid skewing their experience through my researcher lens.

#### **Narratives**

##### **Linden**

Linden attended both a public middle school and high school in Pennsylvania. She also attended her freshman through junior year of high school out of state before returning to Pennsylvania and the same school district. The school experiences that Linden shared differed from middle school to high school and from one state to another. Linden started the interview by introducing herself:

*I'm Linden. My pronouns are she/her, and he/him work as well, I guess. I'm figuring it out. I'm 19. I graduated from Cascade Valley High School in Pennsylvania. Middle School is just the time when I looked confused, and I was probably in that phase where*

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*everyone just looked at me and was like she's gonna be a lesbian or something because I dressed as a tomboy. I remember meeting this one friend of mine who now goes by Jordan. When we first met in sixth grade, he had walked up to me and introduced himself and asked: "Are you a boy or a girl?" Because at the time, I dressed quite tomboyish in sweats in stuff, [and] had a ponytail. I didn't act very girly at all; I was just relaxing and being me in middle school. I felt fine.*

*After freshman year, I cut off all my hair. So I had collarbone length brown hair that I had always kept in a ponytail for my whole life because I didn't want to have to maintain such long hair, I didn't look good with it, and I just got sick of it, so I cut it all off and dyed it blue, and that was a look. My directors made me grow it out a little bit for Beauty and the Beast, so I could at least wear a wig, that was terrible. Oh, my God, I never want to be in a wig again. I guess cutting my hair was a big part of me being more comfortable [with] who I am in my body and such. Since then, I've just been trying to figure out what sense of style I like and trying to figure out what's going on with my sexuality and gender, and so on. I'm getting there after years of pondering, the closest I have come to, I believe at this point that I am asexual, nonbinary, genderqueer somewhere around there.*

*[In one theater production], we lost our Ophelia, so I had to step in and in like two weeks memorize all of her lines and be a very feminine<sup>2</sup> role, which I was extremely uncomfortable with, so since then I have decided that I am not going to lie to myself or anything. I'm not going to force myself to be more feminine than I have to be. I'll just do my best to feel comfortable in my own skin and express myself how I want to be. The last couple*

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the terms feminine and masculine in this chapter are used by the participants through their perspectives on what those terms mean. They are recognized as troubling terms that reinforce a gender binary.

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*of years have been a lot with me trying to just figure out who I am and what I'm going to be later on. I'm just trying to be comfortable with myself.*

### **Drew**

Drew attended public school for both middle and high school in Pennsylvania. He remained in the same school district through his entire schooling experience and shared how he saw a transition in the school climate when he moved from middle school to high school. Drew introduced himself and then shared:

*I go by he/him or they/them pronouns, I am 19 years old, and I am a communications studies major here at SFCC- South Fork Community College. I was forced out of the closet in middle school. In seventh grade, I was kind of confused about my sexuality and stuff like that. I had a little bit of a crush on my friend at the time, and I was like I don't know how to go about this, so I'm just going to tell her— no harm, no foul. Apparently, she got really freaked out. I ended up getting a stomach bug, so I wasn't at school the whole next day. She ended up talking about how I felt about her to one of her friends, which then spread to the whole school. I came in the next day, and it was kind of like one of those movies where all eyes are on you. Everyone kept asking me in every class, "are you gay?" I was like, "no, I am as straight as can be." I was like fuck. Then finally, after a week of that and being bullied for everything— I was really the first person in my grade and really at the school who was like openly LGBT— I just said: "yeah, so be it."*

*When I wore a button-down shirt, and I decided to wear a little bow tie with it, and I was complimented by someone. I was just like so flabbergasted that someone was complimenting me. I think that was the first moment that I started kind of like teasing the idea, I could present more masculine and who's to say I couldn't. It was also very scary*



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*because middle school [did not have] the best people. Where I grew up, they didn't really accept people of the LGBT community. We just got the LGBT club in high school when I was in seventh grade. They're just very hard, and they just didn't know how to go about a lot of things. Everyone knew who I was, so it was even harder. Students were definitely very judgmental. I'm not entirely sure about faculty because they're their own subgroup, I guess. They didn't like something new coming in if they didn't understand it. They were essentially afraid of it and me being open about everything. They were like, "What are you doing?"*

*High school was a lot more accepting because there were already people who were out. Especially now we have a GSA there were people who were like me in that club, and we all bonded over it and stuff like that- it was the first time I ever felt okay to be gay, and I felt accepted. My mom said you're not allowed to make a decision until high school, because she thought I was too young to decide my sexuality and stuff like that. I know who I am. I've known this for a while, I just never had a word for it, but now I'm finally able to express who I am.*

## **Grey**

Grey attended a public middle school and then transferred to a charter school for freshman through senior year. They share how they viewed their middle school experience in contrast with how they viewed their high school experience. Grey started out by sharing which pronouns they used and how they identify:

*I'm Grey. I use they/them pronouns, and I identify as nonbinary genderqueer. I am 19 I didn't really feel like I existed much in sixth grade; you're kind of like little fish in a big pond. When I was working at the high school in the other [theater] show, I felt more at home at the high school than I did at the middle school, and I think [that] got me through feeling*

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*invisible. I was not happy in sixth grade. I would go to rehearsal in tears every single day, and the high school students would just embrace me. They were so sweet, but I did not like middle school in sixth grade. Seventh grade was just... seventh grade is just a bad year... seventh grade is never a good year for anyone. I almost transferred out of my middle school in seventh grade because bullying was very bad. I was just kind of there. I didn't feel like I had much of a purpose. Then in eighth grade, I got one of the leads in the show. I felt more included, but I had always felt like I was second best to someone. I was always the second option. When I look back on it now, I realize that I didn't feel like I was fitting what people wanted me to be enough. The girl who was the main lead [of the theater production] was this very feminine person. She had the long curly hair everyone— all the boys— had a crush on her. I didn't feel like I fit the female box that I should've been in.*

*So, I went to the charter arts high school. It used to be known as SVCA, or we called SVCgay because everyone was queer. It was a very artsy place. It was beautiful— visually, a beautiful school. It was like a big family. Since the school was so small, you walked through the hallways, and you knew almost everyone. The high school was known for being a loving place; you walked in, knowing you were in a safe space that there were going to be people who were unconditionally there for you. In the high school, if you reported someone being nasty to you, it was taken care of— they didn't tolerate anyone's crap there. There was this individuality that was encouraged, but it was also like you belong here, and even if you don't, that's okay. We will still love you, and we will encourage you, and we will love you from afar, but we also love you here too.*

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### **Summary**

The selected narratives shared above present the secondary school experiences of three genderqueer or gender nonbinary youth. Linden shared how she viewed herself as a “tomboy” and reflected on how her school experience informed her identity. While she is still figuring out how to label herself, she noted the instances of how her peers and teachers influenced how she navigated her gender. Drew's school experience was different in that he was aware of his gender and sexuality early in middle school. He shared how he saw his gender was in contrast with what others expected of him and how he maneuvered through middle school as being one of the only out students. Grey shared the contrast between their middle school and high school experience. In Grey's reflection, they were bullied in middle school and went to a high school where they felt accepted. This transition of schools had a significant impact on how Grey expressed themselves and came to understand their identity. While Linden, Drew, and Grey all attended different schools and shared different experiences, common themes emerged throughout their narratives. These include: 1) connections and disconnections to school; 2) positive teacher relationships; and 3) identity as a reflection of self. In the following section, these themes are examined in connection to queer theory and extant literature.

### **Discussion**

The participant narratives consist of personal experiences. Linden, Drew, and Grey all offered personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences that they had in their secondary school environment. Each of the participants included some unique experiences; however, there were similarities as well. The following discussion focuses on the commonalities

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between their secondary school experiences as genderqueer or gender nonbinary youth. The three major themes that emerged are:

- Connections and disconnections to the school;
- Positive teacher relationships; and
- Identity as a reflection of self.

The memories of Linden, Drew, and Grey highlighted how they viewed their relationship with the school as a broader community. These relationships influenced their view of teachers and how they viewed their own identity.

### *Connections and Disconnections to the School*

Results from research in education support that school climate and school connectedness are interrelated. Students' perceptions of the school climate are positively related to how connected they feel to the broader community, including teachers and peers (McGiboney, 2016). Linden, Drew, and Grey each described the schools that they attended and how they saw themselves as both connected and disconnected from the school environments of their secondary schools. Loukas (2007) posited that the physical, social, and academic qualities of an institution all contribute to a school's climate. Through employing a queer theoretical lens, the participants' description of how gender was presented in the school climate aligns with the scholarship that places heteronormativity and gender normativity at the center of school cultures (Butler, 1990; Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Sullivan, 2003). As each participant discussed the ways they felt connected to school, they included descriptions of the: 1) physical spaces; 2) attitudes about gender and sexuality; and 3) social spaces.

**Connection to school and physical spaces.** Heteronormativity and gender normativity are relayed to students through language and visual messaging (Dinkins &

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Englert, 2015). Each participant explained how they viewed the school’s physical spaces and how it made them feel. The physical space of the school, including how students perceive that space, is a component of students’ connections to their school environment (Loukas, 2007). The depiction of gender in schools has often been out of balance and unrecognized by faculty and staff (Pennell, 2017).

An example of the influences of physical space is found in Grey’s remarks and descriptions of high school. They recognized how the visual appearance of the high school influenced the climate of the school and how they felt in this environment. Grey stated:

There were murals on every wall- you walked in, and it was a freaking rainbow. Every hallway was brightly painted the floors were all fun; it was visually a beautiful school. Everyone was like a big family, and since the school was so small, you walked through the hallways, and you knew almost everyone. Everyone was so loving, and we were known as the school that didn't have bullying.

Grey highlighted how much the physical space affected them. Grey's use of the description of "a freaking rainbow" is indicative not only of the art on the walls but also expresses a connection to a welcoming school that is known as "SVCgay." Their use of the term rainbow and the nickname of the school represented the variety of student identities among those who attended that school. Grey directly connected the description of the school to the climate, i.e., familial feelings among those at the school. Their description of the physical space was linked to how they felt about the social aspects of the school climate. School spaces can address genderqueer students’ need to feel represented; thus, supporting a positive connection with the broader school community (Loukas, 2007; Soohoo, 2004).

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Their positive view of the physical school environments was a way that Linden, Drew, and Grey felt connected to the broader school environment.

**Connection to school and attitudes about gender and sexuality.** The participants also shared a variety of ways they perceived attitudes about gender and sexuality portrayed in their schools. How they seemingly relayed their perceptions of these attitudes showed that they were aware of school norms based on the dominant cultural attitudes toward sexual orientation, and gender rules related to the dominant culture. The results are consistent with findings from studies showing that heteronormativity and gender normativity impact the school climate for LGBTQ+ youth (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Butler, 1993; Dinkins & Englert, 2015). Both Drew and Grey contrasted the culture of the middle schools they attended with high school experiences.

Drew noted the cultural shift between middle and high school. His middle school culture and the surrounding community were more conservative than the more liberal high school. Drew remarked that:

Definitely like middle school and the town of Central were very conservative, but the high school was very liberal- that's the best way I can describe it. People already knew what being LGBT [was] - it wasn't the first time that they had ever heard that word. High school was a lot more accepting because there were already people who were out. Especially now, we have [a] GSA; there were people who were like me in that club, and we all bonded. It was the first time I ever felt okay to be gay, and I felt accepted. The GSA just being there, it was definitely a safe haven for a lot of people. It was for me for a while because I didn't think I would ever find someplace I could call—

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I guess home for lack of a better expression– and just having a vast support system that was the biggest thing for me.

Drew used the terms conservative and liberal to denote how he saw the overall attitudes of his peers and educators within his middle school and high school. When he used the term conservative, there is an implied understanding of a lack of knowledge and acceptance from both his peers and his teachers. He shared that the presence of the GSA at the high school helped in creating an atmosphere that was more accepting because LGBTQ+ identities were openly acknowledged.

**Connection to school and social spaces.** Drew's descriptions of the positive influence of the GSA on the school climate and his school experience as an LGBTQ+ youth relates to previous research that has shown that the presence of a GSA has a positive effect on the LGBTQ+ youth in the school (Gattis & McKinnon, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2018; McCormick et al., 2015).

Each of the participants shared stories and experiences that conveyed how they felt connected to their school at specific times throughout middle school or high school. Their connection to the school was conveyed through the descriptions of the peer groups to whom they felt closest and the support they felt when being themselves. The existence of clubs and spaces where LGBTQ+ youth feel supported by peers and faculty can promote feelings of connection to the school environment (Gattis & McKinnon, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2016; Mayo, 2007; McCormick et al., 2015, Robinson, 2010). Each of these participants found these spaces and individuals in their high schools.

The participants' expressions of connection showed the importance of spaces where students are acknowledged and accepted for their individuality. Likewise, these spaces offer

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safety for students to explore who they are through conversation and connection. The presence of spaces that offer emotional safety and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities creates an atmosphere where students feel connected to school environments (McGiboney, 2016; Loukas, 2007; Shochet et al., 2005; Thing & Esposito, 2015). When these spaces are absent, or the general school culture is overtly homophobic, LGBTQ+ students have difficulty feeling connected to their school environment.

Although each of the participants experienced powerful feelings of connection, they also shared the experiences that made them feel disconnected from their schools. These experiences included disconnection from peer groups and a lack of support from school personnel. When considering the ways that students feel connected to schools, it is also essential to explore how students feel disconnected. Feelings of disconnection for LGBTQ+ youth can stem from a variety of factors in the school, including curriculum (explicit and hidden), policies, and peer and faculty attitudes (Joseph & Dorothy, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2015; Mayo, 2007; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). While Linden did not share factors that disconnected her from school, both Drew and Grey experienced moments that separated them from their school community, including 1) an awareness of being outside of the normative school culture; 2) teacher inaction; and 3) peer and teacher relationships.

**Disconnection to school and normative school culture.** A culture of heteronormativity and gender normativity that includes discriminatory language from peers and teachers creates students’ disconnection from school due to the feelings of being other and feeling physically and emotionally unsafe (Kosciw et al., 2015; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Thing & Esposito, 2015). For example, Drew did not feel emotionally safe at his middle school due to feelings of isolation. Drew’s acknowledgment of the gender norms and



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the heteronormative culture is expressed in his description of how peers and teachers responded to him.

Additionally, Grey shared how they perceived their middle school to be based on a culture that reinforced normative gender roles. Grey reflected on how gender roles were presented in their middle school when they shared:

Things were always very gendered in middle school– like men were always the gym teachers. We had one female gym teacher to do the health classes with us, but things were always very gendered. You're a girl you do this– you're a boy you do this. Even as an adult, that's what you did. Even just positions of faculty– it was always women in the office and teaching, while men had the higher power positions or, the more control positions. I think I was very ingrained with gender roles, and I had to really struggle to shake that...

Grey's perception of the power dynamics that accompanied gender roles reinforced the expectations of what it meant to be male or female or masculine or feminine. The lack of fluidity in gender roles relayed messages of what was expected of Grey as a middle school student. These messages placed limits on how Grey viewed gender; it becomes clear how rigid normal can limit a genderqueer or gender nonbinary student's view of themselves. These statements are consistent with other findings and interpretations of queer theory (Butler, 1990; Meyer, 2007).

Grey goes on to share an overt example of how gender was discussed among their peers and teachers in middle school:

...there was one other girl in my middle school, she was always the stage manager, and she was always called [a] lesbian even though she wasn't. [She was called a lesbian

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because] you’re in power, you must be more manly. I think that even some teachers were like, “what do you mean you are the stage manager? Was there no boy [available] to do that for you?” Everything was very gendered.

Both teachers and peers can make negative comments about students’ expressing masculine or feminine behaviors according to norms; these comments maintain that discourse around gender keeps norms in place (Foucault, 1990; Kosciw et al., 2018). Specifically, when teachers uphold the heteronormative and gender normative culture of the school, it causes a sense of disconnection for LGBTQ+ youth (Joseph & Dorothy, 2011; Thing & Esposito, 2015;).

**Disconnection to school and teacher inaction.** Part of the hidden curriculum is displayed when teachers do not respond to homophobic or transphobic behaviors. Almost half of the students who hear homophobic remarks at school do not have teachers who intervene or address these behaviors (Kosciw et al., 2018). When teachers remain uninvolved in recognizing and correcting this harassment, LGBTQ+ youth receive a message about how their identities are undervalued (Things & Esposito, 2015). Drew shared an example of how school faculty sent a clear message about whose voice was valued. He described that the school’s GSA was silenced during LGBT awareness week:

We had an awareness week every year in April or March, whenever we could have it. I was on the morning announcements, so I would [read from] a teleprompter with all these facts– just bringing awareness– just open the eyes to people. It wasn't until my senior year that we got silenced. Apparently, the school had to approve the script that I had written by their lawyers. We don't know why that had to happen, but I think in my head because the year prior on the final day– LGBT awareness day– the guys on

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my news team who were on the panels wore Chik-Fil-A shirts on TV. That made a lot of people upset. People went to twitter and were harassing them [news team] because we knew why they did it. They weren't getting in trouble. The people who were tweeting during school were getting in trouble, so it was like you're [school administration] not upset with them [news team] for doing this and silently saying, "Oh, yeah, fuck you guys" essentially. The people who were trying to stand up and trying to figure out what the heck just happened– they're getting in trouble for being on their phones during school even though everyone does, including the pro staff.

While he described the GSA as being a home for him, this story illustrated the challenges that GSAs faced in the school community. Not only was there an administrative shift in support toward the GSA, Drew recalled peers intentionally displaying homophobic behavior. This scenario illustrated the sense of disconnection because Drew did not know if there were consequences for those that wore the Chik-fil-A shirts, and the following year Drew was unclear about why their scripts had to be approved. This lack of education and silence surrounding LGBTQ+ topics sends an unmistakable message to youth about who will be visible and heard, and how the heteronormative culture is maintained (Thing & Esposito, 2015; Joseph & Dorothy, 2011; Blackburn & Smith, 2010).

**Disconnection to school and peer and teacher relationships.** Grey associated feelings of disconnection with peer relationships. When Grey stated, "seventh grade is never a good year for anyone," they implied the view that all students feel disconnected in middle school. However, they followed up the statement by explaining that their feelings were stronger than other students because they wanted to leave the school due to the severity of the bullying related to other students' perceptions of their sexuality. While Grey's overall

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description of high school was positive, they did recall one particularly negative experience with a part-time math support teacher who had been rude to Grey on many occasions. Grey explained that:

One day I called him [a teacher] out on it. He made some nasty comments "Oh, but she's a real girl, so we have to be nice to her. You-you're just something in the middle. God knows what- you're just-" and [he] called me an it. It was a very eye-opening experience- this is what some high school teachers can be like.

In this retelling, Grey noted how the teacher compared them to a real girl. This moment for Grey showed them what teachers in other schools might be like because this teacher was an exception in this charter arts school. Grey shared that they reported the incident to the principal and later found that the teacher was no longer in that building. Although this moment could have been a significant source of disconnection, the way Grey perceived the administrators' response made them feel more connected to the school.

The theme of school connection and disconnection emerged among these participants' responses. The stories they relayed illustrated how they viewed the school climate of the institution they attended. As shown in previous studies, their perceptions of the school climate were tied to how connected they felt to the broader school community. Each of the participants emphasized examples of how spaces, such as formalized GSA's or teacher-created spaces, where LGBTQ+ students feel safe and accepted, made a big difference in the school climate. Linden, Drew, and Grey's experiences aligned with previous evidence focused on people (faculty and peers) and spaces (clubs and classrooms) that openly support LGBTQ+ youth (Alsup & Miller, 2014; Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Thing & Esposito, 2015).

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### *Positive Teacher Relationships*

As the participants talked about the school environments, they emphasized the relationship between the teachers' actions and their experiences of different aspects of the school. The second theme that emerged concerned how the participants described their teachers and how these teachers influenced their experiences in school. As evidenced in the literature, teachers can perpetuate or create a shift in school climate (Alsup & Miller, 2014; Miller, 2015). Through awareness of heteronormative culture and gender norms, teachers have the potential to disrupt those norms through discourse and action (Foucault, 1990; Miller, 2015; Pennell, 2017). Each participant recognized the ways that their teachers conveyed gender and sexuality through action, inaction, and language. As each participant talked about their secondary school experiences, they included the roles of teachers their overall experiences as students, as well as how their teachers reinforced or disrupted the broader school climate.

The student-teacher relationships that Linden, Drew, and Grey spoke about revealed how each participant saw teachers as an integral part of their secondary education and the growth of their identities. These participants offered similar descriptions of the qualities of teachers whom they felt were supportive. These qualities were (a) openness to individual identities, (b) connectedness to students, (c) respect for LGBTQ+ identities, and (d) feelings of safety. These qualities echoed previous results about how teachers view themselves as allies (Smith, 2015; Steck & Perry, 2018). Although these qualities were described differently by each participant, they all told stories about teachers who shifted the school climates for them. These participants described teachers whom they relied on and could talk

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with about most anything. Supportive faculty members increased the feelings of safety for LGBTQ+ youth and the likelihood that these youths felt connected to their school environments (Kosciw et al., 2018; Miller, 2015; Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002; Robinson, 2010). For example, Drew explained that part of his connection to high school started with support from the principal,

I even emailed her [the principal] asking if I could wear a tux to prom my sophomore and senior, and she was like, "yeah, I don't have a problem with it," and I was like "Yes! Nice!" I was the first person to do that– a really big thing that happened at my school.

From the experiences that Drew shared, his connection stemmed from feeling supported by the administration and have a space where he felt at home. He shared this story with an excited tone. Wearing a tux to prom validated his identity. The school administrators' acceptance of his gender expression left Drew feeling connected and supported by the school. Previous studies show that administrators who support LGBTQ+ youth realize the importance of challenging the existing heteronormative cultures (Steck & Perry, 2018). Students who have reported discriminatory policies concerning gender expression to avoid public spaces at school (Kosciw et al., 2018). Drew's experience of being allowed to express his gender at a formal school event disrupted the gender normative school culture.

Grey shared a specific example of how they witnessed a teacher's attempt to change the school climate,

the head of my theater department was always there for me [...] every now and then she would check in on me [...] ‘Are your teachers being respectful of you? Is everything going okay? Are you doing all right?’ [...], my assistant principal

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checked in on me all the time [...] she addressed the professor who wasn't using my correct name and pronouns several times.

Grey relayed how having both a teacher and an administrator that went beyond just trying to get their pronoun right to being concerned about others respecting them gave them the feeling of support. The participants made a delineation between how they saw teachers as allies versus supportive, and this was one of the primary distinctions. According to previous research, one component of a teacher ally is to “actively engage” in the support they show LGBTQ+ youth through addressing colleagues and peers (Feldkamp, 2016). Grey's shared experience illustrates this active engagement.

Drew shared an example of how he viewed a teacher's ability to alter the school climate. He emphasized that “normalizing these conversations, especially with pronouns [and] learn proper etiquette with that...”. According to Kosciw et al. (2018), about 40% of transgender or gender nonconforming students were not allowed to use their preferred pronouns or name at school. Schools often lacked policies concerning pronoun use, and transgender and gender-nonconforming students viewed the lack of specific policy as unfair (Gattis & McKinnon, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2018).

Furthermore, some researchers considered normalizing LGBTQ+ identities as a quality of a teacher ally (Feldkamp, 2016). Linden shared that the GSA advisor was an educator who impacted school culture. She shares,

She was very vocal about her opinions, as well as giving us ideas as to be like more comfortable with ourselves and trying to get us to put out more representation around school that [the GSA] club exists spreading the word [about] trans rights [...]

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Linden brought up two attributes of supportive faculty members, which are similar to those shown in other studies. The first is that these teachers create a space where LGBTQ+ students feel accepted and safe to express their identities (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002). The second is that these teachers take an active role in establishing a GSA that is more than just a safe space; these teachers work to create awareness that extends to the school community so that they might impact the school culture (McCormick et al., 2015; Miller, 2015).

The participants’ suggested that respect and support were at the primary qualities of teachers with whom they had positive relationships. These teacher relationships supported each of these young people in feeling connected to their schools. The support that these LGBTQ+ youth felt from teachers fostered an environment that disrupted the heteronormative and gender normative climate of the school. These results are consistent with those from the literature that showed the critical impact of teachers to change school climates and supporting LGBTQ+ youth (Joseph & Dorothy, 2011; Miller, 2015; Thing & Esposito, 2015).

### ***Identity as a Reflection of Self***

As each participant shared their secondary school experiences, the theme of identity emerged from their stories. Not unexpectedly, their sense of identity evolved partly from interactions and relationships with peers and teachers in ways that depended on school climate. Researchers have explored the idea that the culture around LGBTQ+ youth influences their identity development, including the ability to express identity overtly. The process is shaped by how others acknowledge and use language related to LGBTQ+ identity (Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Gee, 2000). This heteronormative and gender normative discourse resides in the binary expression of sexuality and gender terms and is controlled by



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those in power (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1990). Although Linden, Drew, and Grey came to understand their self-identities over time, they were influenced continuously by the gender normative and heteronormative lens of school.

One of the ways that all of the participants discussed their own identity was through the lens of how they believed others saw them. This lens is rooted in a distinct gender binary with definitive qualities about what it means to be masculine or feminine (Butler, 1990). The very first memory that Linden shared about middle school was the following:

I remember meeting this one friend of mine who now goes by Jordan. When we first met in sixth grade, he walked up to me and introduced himself and asked: "Are you a boy or a girl?" At the time, I dressed quite tomboyish in sweats, [and I] had a ponytail. Now ironically enough, he's a trans boy, and I'm also genderqueer in someway. Like I said, I'm figuring it out.

Linden was quick to address that Jordan's question about her gender likely derived from her outward appearance. She mentioned several times throughout the interviews that she classified herself as a tomboy. She recognized the gender norms that existed in her school. The acknowledgment was similar to findings from the literature concerning the connection of identity with the standards of normalcy that surrounds students (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Gee, 2000). A heteronormative culture supports the idea that gender and sexuality are linked, and if an individual does not present as distinctly masculine or feminine, then it must be related to their sexuality (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Butler, 1990; Dinkins & Englert, 2015).

Drew shared that he often wore a bowtie, and that was the first way that he started to experiment with presenting in a more masculine way. He did not anticipate that he would be

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openly accepted when he presented in masculine ways due to the way gender was represented in his school. Linville (2018) found that when students feel safe and connected, they are more likely to express their gender and sexual identities. For Drew, he started with a positive experience with gender expression but was quickly pushed into a negative response to his sexuality. He shared that,

I was forced out of the closet in middle school. In seventh grade, I was kind of confused about my sexuality and stuff like that. I had a little bit of a crush on my friend at the time, and I was like I don't know how to go about this, so I'm just going to tell her— no harm, no foul. Apparently, she got really freaked out. I ended up getting a stomach bug, so I wasn't at school the whole next day. She ended up talking about how I felt about her to one of her friends, which then spread to the whole school. I came in the next day, and it was kind of like one of those movies where all eyes are on you. Everyone kept asking me in every class, "are you gay?" I was like no I am as straight as can be. I was like fuck. Then finally, after a week of that and being bullied for everything— I was really the first person in my grade and really at the school who was like openly LGBT— I just said: "yeah, so be it."

Drew's experience of being "forced out of the closet" speaks to how others reacted to Drew's identity as outside of the heteronormative culture. His peers bullied him when his sexuality was revealed. Drew later recounted that middle school was difficult, and the way others treated him took a toll on his mental health. Previous scholars have shown that youth who are treated as other for their gender expression or sexuality become disconnected from school, and their mental health wellness becomes at risk (Thing & Esposito, 2015; Shochet et al., 2006; CDC, 2014; Kosciw et al., 2015).

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Grey reflected on middle school and how other people viewed them connected to their outward appearance. They shared that:

When I look back on it now, I kind of realize that I didn't feel like I was fitting what people wanted me to be enough. I didn't feel like I fit the female box that I should've been in or that I thought I should have been in. I was a very masculine kid who tried to be very feminine.

Grey compared how they felt with how other people viewed other girls. They use the phrase "female box," which indicated that the notion of what constitutes how a female should look and act was communicated through the gender normative culture of the school and Grey's peers.

Linden, Drew, and Grey all reflected on how they discovered their identities as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Each of them had a different path, and each reflected on how their school environment, peers, and teachers helped them discover who they are as well as how they are most comfortable expressing their identities. When LGBTQ+ youth feel supported, they are more likely to be open about their gender and sexuality (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002; Robinson, 2010; Thing & Esposito, 2015). As each participant reflected on their secondary school experiences, they offered thoughts on their identities now and how they came to those conclusions throughout middle and high school. Linden spoke about cutting her hair and how that was something she had considered doing for a while. She shared that

How I express myself and how I dress and behave, I think that's a big part of my identity. The more comfortable I get with a person, the more I show my personality—be annoying and loud and such. I guess I see it as me cutting my hair and willing to take a risk to change my appearance and change the way I've been expressing myself.

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I see that as a confidence thing. Like accepting the possibility this might not completely work out, but it's me, and I like it.

Linden recognized that cutting her hair was a risk. She considered the risk of whether she would like it, and crucially about risks related to how others might respond. When Linden described that she viewed it as a "confidence thing," she was sharing her self-confidence in who she is and how she sees herself. Although she often mentioned that she is still "figuring it out," she also discussed what it means to be comfortable in her skin. An essential part of being comfortable for her has been recognizing external gender norms and how she physically expresses herself outside of the norms.

Drew began presenting in a more masculine way in middle school and that although his middle school was gender normative and heteronormative, he had experiences expressing himself at a younger age than Linden. While reflecting on his journey, he shared that,

I mean, with me being forced out of the closet and never really having the opportunity to properly come out to people till I started I going by Drew my senior of high school, it really showed me how important it is to have the representation. Without me, officially knowing was kind of the start of me being able to just openly express my story and experiences. I can be that person that I wish I could have [had] when I was younger.

Drew did not have other LGBTQ+ peers or adults as models and did not have the opportunity to learn about gender and sexuality in a safe space. Drew's experiences are supported in the literature relating to the lack of conversation within the school, the reinforcement of heteronormative culture, and negative experiences with the way that others treated him (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002). Although he became confident with his identity in high school

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and later in college, Drew did regret he did not have an opportunity to be himself when he was younger.

As Grey reflected on their identities, they felt that moving to the charter arts high school was the way they were able to find themselves. Grey explained,

If I hadn't gone to the arts high school, I think I would have been a very unhappy person. I would be very uneducated, but I probably would also still be closeted. I think that [high] school has completely impacted my life from then to the rest of my life. I learned something new every day about myself. I was shown the acceptance in the high school that I would have never been shown anywhere else- I might have been accepted, but I don't think I would have been educated and accepted.

Grey came to these conclusions based on the experience they had in middle school. Grey attended a high school that was accepting of all individuals and broke the gender stereotypes and norms that existed from middle school. The climate allowed Grey to feel safe in exploring who they are. The experience that Grey had in middle school led them to believe that genderqueer or gender nonbinary youth need tough skin to express publicly who they are. Grey presumed that they would still be in the closet if they had not transferred to a different high school. This illustrates that a heteronormative culture can lead to a climate where individuals choose to be in the closet to escape the negative consequences of being open.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the themes that emerged through multiple coding cycles of the participants' interviews. Through aligning these themes to previously reviewed literature and employing a queer theoretical lens, I was able to analyze how each theme answered the

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research question and sub-questions put forth in this study. The following sections assert the answers to these questions.

**Genderqueer and gender nonbinary youths’ school experiences and school connectedness.** Participants’ experiences revealed the importance they placed on feeling connected to their school communities. The positive experiences that Linden, Drew, and Grey relayed about how they perceived school climate supports that when students positively see the climate, they feel more connected to the school community (McGiboney, 2016; SooHoo, 2004). In addition, the experiences that disconnected Drew and Grey from school were directly related to their sexual and gender identities and the normative cultures at their schools. The experiences they describe expressed that they felt unsupported and harassed by peers. Those experiences caused Drew to consider leaving his middle school and prompted Grey to seek out a different high school. Their emotional safety was placed in jeopardy, and as previous researchers have found, this can cause LGBTQ+ youth to disconnect from school (Kosciw et al., 2018; Thing & Esposito, 2015).

**Genderqueer and gender nonbinary youths’ identity in relation to their secondary school experiences.** Each participant shared the ways that others viewed them and how they viewed themselves in relation to their secondary school experience. Linden, Drew, and Grey talked about how they came to understand their identity relative to how the school community conveyed heteronormativity and gender normativity. They shared language that peers and teachers used to put their identities into question or placed them as other. This discourse about gender and sexuality intersects with queer theory (Foucault, 1990) and how identity becomes acknowledged (Gee, 2000). They each told stories about how others defined their gender and sexuality based on their outward appearance. These

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definitions were a reflection of the heteronormative and gender normative school cultures that they experienced.

**Genderqueer and gender nonbinary youths’ school experiences inform how they view allies.** Linden, Drew, and Grey went into detail about the ways that they felt supported in their secondary school experiences. Each of the participants recognized teachers as a critical factor in feeling accepted and safe. They described the ways that teachers communicated openly with them and created spaces that acknowledged their identities. They used similar words to describe the teachers that they felt fully supported them. The qualities that each participant described supports previous literature about how allyship is present in schools. Primarily, teacher allies are supportive of LGBTQ+ individuals and spaces (Feldkemp, 2016; Smith, 2015; Steck & Perry, 2018).

**The secondary school experiences of genderqueer and gender nonbinary youth can inform educators.** These participants deeply considered the connection between their identities and the climates of the institutions they attended. Their narratives revealed that teachers could positively influence LGBTQ+ youths’ school experiences. Linden, Drew, and Grey noted the important roles that teachers played in creating an alternative space outside of the gender norms for LGBTQ+ youth. In the following chapter, I offer how the findings in this study can provide implications for practice.

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## **Chapter Five**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the secondary school experiences of genderqueer and gender nonbinary youth by focusing on the following specifics of their perspectives on (a) school climate and influence on their connectedness to school, (b) relationships between teachers and school climate, and (c) identities as related to school climate. Through interviewing three participants that identified as genderqueer or gender nonbinary, I wanted to understand how teachers positively influenced school climate for these LGBTQ+ youth. This aim of using a qualitative design was to study with detail the specific secondary school experiences of genderqueer and gender nonbinary youth, Understanding these students’ experiences could provide insights for schools and teachers into normative school culture so they may support LGBTQ+ youth.

The data and discussion in chapter four supported how the participants’ experiences can be interpreted using the existing literature concerning the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in secondary schools. In this chapter, I offer the findings and implications from the results that are based on the analysis. I also present implications for practice. These implications suggest the ways that educators can use the findings to understand and support these students, as well as consider the possibilities for disrupting the heteronormative and gender normative culture in schools. I also discuss the implications for future research.

The problem of practice presented in this dissertation is that LGBTQ+ youth continue to face hostile school climates (Kosciw et al., 2018). As evidenced by previous studies, these hostile environments can lead LGBTQ+ students to disconnect from school; furthermore,



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disconnection from school can interfere with their academic success (Kosciw et al., 2018; Thing & Esposito, 2015). Consistent with other results, I posited that teachers have the ability to influence this hostile school climate through action and support, culminating in disruption and change in school climate. The majority of literature that I located was quantitative and focused on the adult stakeholders in the school. Therefore, I focused the research question on exploring how LGBTQ+ youth viewed the school climate at their secondary schools. I used a qualitative approach employed in this study to obtain and interpret the secondary school experiences specific to three genderqueer and gender nonbinary students. I engaged in the theoretical lens of queer theory to understand these participants’ experiences because the theory includes an awareness of the impacts of heteronormative and gender normative cultures in schools.

I started this study with seven participants but only focused on three of the participants’ secondary school experiences. I chose these three participants because they all identified as genderqueer or gender nonbinary, and they graduated from high school the same year, which oriented their school experiences in the same period and culture. The timeframe of their secondary school experience was an important factor to consider in understanding the broader political climate surrounding LGBTQ+ youth. At the time of the interviews, all three of the participants were 19, two of them were attending a higher education institution, and one was working full-time. Data collection began in April of 2019 and ended about a month later. A modified version of Seidman’s (2013) in-depth interview protocol was used to collect the participants’ responses so that they could share their stories and reflect on secondary school experiences in detail.

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Through multiple coding cycles, three major themes emerged from the participants’ interviews. These themes and details of participants’ experiences were consistent with the findings of the primarily quantitative studies about the school experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. First, LGBTQ+ youth become connected to schools when they perceive they are a part of the larger community. These students can perceive connections from how they view the physical space, attitudes about gender and sexuality norms, and social spaces (Loukas, 2007; Soohoo, 2004; Thing & Esposito, 2015). Secondly, LGBTQ+ youth perceived that educators who actively support them could play a critical role in their secondary school experiences (Miller, 2015; Pennell, 2017; Soohoo, 2004). Finally, LGBTQ+ youth view their identity based upon heteronormative and gender normative culture of schools.

### **Findings**

The participants in this study offered personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences that they had in secondary school. The first theme that emerged was connection to the school. The ways participants viewed the school was closely related to how they viewed their teachers as players in creating the school climate. Both of these external factors influenced the participants’ views of their gender identities. Each of the participants illustrated how heteronormative and gender normative cultures created their need for spaces that are accepting of LGBTQ+ identities. Based on these student narratives, all aspects of the institution are important for connectedness, including the political undercurrents that pervade overt policies and the spoken as well as unspoken support of norms and curriculum.

As the participants talked about their school environments, they associated teachers’ actions with school climate, policies, and physical spaces. Therefore, the second theme that emerged concerned how the participants described their teachers and discussed how these

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teachers influenced their school experiences. Each description of the teachers that Linden, Drew, and Grey gave related the type of relationship the teacher was willing to have with them and the other students. Respect and support were at the primary qualities of the positive teacher relationships that each participant experienced.

The teacher relationships the participants described were consistent in that each of these youths felt connected to their schools because the teachers were supportive. The participant responses suggested that these teachers fostered an environment that was counter to the heteronormative climate by creating safe spaces. Each participant talked about the importance of feeling supported, acknowledged, and accepted as part of having a positive school experience.

As each participant shared their middle school and high school experiences, the theme of identity emerged. While Linden, Drew, and Grey came to understand their identities in different contexts and times in their lives, they were each influenced by how others viewed them. In addition, they shared how they came to discover their identities in contrast to the heteronormative lens of school.

### **Implications for practice**

The implications of these themes could provide educators with valuable knowledge about the secondary school experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. Therefore, teachers could find professional development that provides them with the knowledge of how to address and have conversations surrounding issues facing LGBTQ+ youth. The lack of teacher awareness of heteronormative and gender normative cultures within schools and the under-preparedness to open dialogues within classroom spaces are two issues that need to be addressed by school district personnel. Teachers' ability to hold these conversations will result in LGBTQ+

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youth feeling seen and will normalize the conversation around being LGBTQ+, which will ultimately disrupt the heteronormative culture.

### ***Professional development based on the findings***

Through analyzing the interviews and examining how the participants view their gendered school experiences, there was a connection to the relationships they had with teachers, how they saw themselves as part of the school community, and how they saw the school environment informing their identities.

As an educator in this program, I have become aware of heteronormativity and gender normativity. I am now able to label and think critically about how different facets of the school structure reinforce the binary setting up an expectation for how one should act to fit the role of a male or a female and not opening spaces for gender fluidity. Through the shared experiences of the participants in this research study, I have learned that how students view themselves is closely tied to the norms set within the school climate. With the foundation of the extant literature background and the findings from this research, I have become aware of how this type of reification of gender identity affects adolescents and their connection to the school environment. Therefore, adding professional development opportunities about heteronormativity within school structures and having a socially just teaching disposition would be adding to an understanding of school connectedness and LGBTQ+ students in our building. As outlined by the action plan in Appendix three, my goal is to work with others to seek out ways that educators can alter the school climate for the benefit of our LGBTQ+ students. Through the education of faculty and administrators, awareness of normative cultures can lead to shifting the school climate.

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**The mission of a Professional Learning Community.** The mission of the proposed Professional Learning Community (PLC) will be to learn about cultural norms that take place within a school with an emphasis on heteronormativity and gender normativity. In addition, this PLC will ask individuals to reflect on the school culture and actively seek out ways that inequities are present. Also, teachers participating in this PLC will consider what it means to take on a Socially Just teaching disposition. Finally, the mission of this five-hour PLC will be to build a community of educators that will continue conversations with each other beyond the 5-hour formal commitment.

**Implementation Reasoning.** This PLC intends to start a cultural shift within my context by starting with a small group of faculty members. DuFour, Dufour, & Eaker (2010) ask us to consider that “while it is true that educators shape their school cultures, it is probably more accurate to say that their school cultures shape them” (p. 90). If teachers don’t see how they can impact the school culture (for a variety of reasons from high-stakes testing to administration), then they continue to perpetuate the culture that exists. By starting with readings from Sensoy & DiAngelo (2017) and exploring what the culture of our building looks like, I intend that space for reflection and conversation about how educators play a part in changing the school culture for the benefit of our students.

### **Implications for future research**

In response to the limitations of the study, future researchers could intentionally include LGBTQ+ youth of color in studies. Educators need to use a multidimensional framework to acknowledge students’ identities across race, class, gender, and sexuality. Most educators focus on race and class, and this often leaves students who identify as LGBTQ+ and as students of color out of conversations (McCready, 2004). By recognizing

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how secondary school experiences may differ for queer youth of color, educational researchers can examine the intersectionality of these students’ identities (Brokenbrough, 2016; Cohen, 1997; 2011; McCready, 2004).

In addition to addressing the limitations of this study, some areas of further investigation emerged for me. First, examining teachers' awareness of heteronormative and gender normative school climates is an important area of further investigation based on the findings of this study. Also, I feel that an in-depth investigation into school board policies affecting LGBTQ+ youth alongside interviewing LGBTQ+ students that are affected by these policies or, in some cases, the lack of policies supporting LGBTQ+ youth. This investigation is important based on how the participants in this study spoke about attitudes and policies from their secondary school experiences.

## **Conclusion**

As a veteran educator in this Educational Doctorate program, I have become aware of how heteronormativity and gender normativity is reinforced in school contexts. I can identify behaviors, attitudes, and policies that are the foundational parts of school climate. I can think critically about how facets of the school structure reinforce setting up the binary roles and behavioral expectations of students’ gender expression. In other words, the actions associated with the roles of males and females are more obvious, as is how these ridged roles can leave no space for fluid gender expression. Through the shared experiences of the participants in this research study, I learned that how students view themselves is closely tied to how norms are set in a school’s climate. Other previous research, as well as this study, have addressed how this type of reification of gender identity affects adolescents and their connection to the school environment. Therefore, adding professional development

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opportunities for teachers so that they can learn about heteronormativity within schools and develop a socially just teaching disposition might contribute to teachers’ skills to support LGBTQ+ students in feeling connectedness in school.

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## Appendix One

### Purposeful Sampling Communication

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Hello, my name is Emily Pisco. I am a middle school educator and doctoral student at Kutztown University. As part of my dissertation, I am focusing my study on the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth who attended a public secondary school in the United States. I am looking for youth from the ages of 18-23 who identify as LGBTQ+ youth who would be interested in sharing their middle and high school background. I will be conducting interviews that can be done over video conferences or in person. I would plan to have 2 separate interview times with approximately an hour each in length.

I would appreciate your ability to put me in contact with any individuals that you feel would be interested in participating in this study. Any potential participants may contact me directly or you if they would prefer you can share their contact information with me. My contact information is Emily Pisco, [REDACTED], [REDACTED]@live.kutztown.edu

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## Appendix Two

### Communication with Potential Participants

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Hi!

Thank you so much for considering to be a participant in my dissertation study. I am looking for participants that are between the ages of 18-23, identify as LGBTQ+, and attended public school for part of or all of middle and high school.

There will be two different interviews that will be about an hour in length each. I would like to try to do the interviews within a week or so of each other if possible. I am more than willing to drive to you and/or meet you at your preferred location. We would also be able to do the interviews via zoom.

Please let me know if you have any other questions about participating in the study. If you would still like to participate please respond to this email and we will work on setting up the first interview.

I would love to know who told you about my study, so that I can thank them for putting you in touch with me.

Thanks in advance,  
Emily

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### Appendix Three

#### Professional Learning Community (PLC) Action Plan

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**Course: Exploring Heteronormative School Climates in Education**

Mtg.	Objective & Pre-Reading	Activity
1	Framing our conversation- Culture & Norms  Chapter 3: pages 35-47 from Sensoy & DiAngelo (2017)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Restorative Circle: Introductions, why did you choose this PLC</li> <li>2. Norm setting as a group</li> <li>3. Explain objectives of this PLC</li> <li>4. Guideline 1 (Sensoy &amp; DiAngelo, 2017)</li> <li>5. Discuss definitions of culture &amp; norms from the reading</li> <li>6. Journal reflection on reading: Create Cultural Map of school (Wood &amp; Leamy, 2015) * with consideration of your lens</li> <li>7. Pair-Share reflection- journals</li> <li>8. Whole Group Discussion</li> <li>9. Reflection on what you are walking away with today- journals</li> <li>10. Restorative Circle- taking the pulse of the group</li> <li>11. Handout reading for next meeting</li> </ol>
2	Defining Heteronormativity  Pages 73-79 from Sensoy & DiAngelo (2017) “Hegemony, Ideology, & Power”	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Restorative Circle: High &amp; lows and Review of norms</li> <li>2. Guideline 2 (Sensoy &amp; DiAngelo, 2017)</li> <li>3. Construction of Gender Activity (Pennell, 2017)</li> <li>4. Whole Group Discussion</li> <li>5. Reflection on ways you see heteronormativity in our school</li> <li>6. Restorative Circle- taking the pulse of the group</li> <li>7. Handout reading for next meeting</li> </ol>
3	Discuss/Define Social Justice teaching Disposition  Pages 199-203 from Alsup & Miller (2014) “Social Justice as a Disposition”	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Restorative Circle: Highs &amp; lows and Review of Norms</li> <li>2. Guideline 3 (Sensoy &amp; DiAngelo, 2017)</li> <li>3. Journal reflection on reading: 3, 2, 1(3- things I learned or struck me, 2- ways I see a connection between the reading &amp; my teaching practice, 1- question I have for the group)</li> <li>4. Pair-Share reflection- journals</li> <li>5. Whole Group Discussion</li> <li>6. Reflection on what you are walking away with today- journals</li> <li>7. Restorative Circle- taking the pulse of the group</li> <li>8. Handout reading for next meeting</li> </ol>
4	Recognizing Injustice  Pages 83-87 from Groenke (2010) “Seeing, Inquiring, Witnessing...”  Equity Audit (Appendix Four)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Restorative Circle: Highs &amp; lows and Review of Norms</li> <li>2. Guideline 4 (Sensoy &amp; DiAngelo, 2017)</li> <li>3. Journal reflection on reading: Select a quote or passage that stood out to you the most and write it in the middle of the journal page- and surround it with connections, thoughts, lingering questions, or epiphanies- try to write for 10 minutes- if you slow down select another passage or quote and respond</li> <li>4. Select one of your connections, thoughts, lingering questions, or epiphanies and write it on the board</li> <li>5. Whole Group Discussion</li> <li>6. Review the Equity Audit and select two or three questions that are of interest to you to and reflect on the questions being asked</li> <li>7. Restorative Circle- discussion about equity audit- pulse of the group</li> <li>8. Activity for next meeting: answer one section of the Equity Audit</li> </ol>
5	Intersection of Social Justice Disposition & “Seeing, Inquiring, & witnessing...”  Answer one section of the equity audit	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Restorative Circle: Highs &amp; lows and Review of norms</li> <li>2. Guideline 5 (Sensoy &amp; DiAngelo, 2017)</li> <li>3. Journal reflection on reading: Looking at the questions you answered did anything stand out to you, did you have any questions, connections, concerns</li> <li>4. Pair-Share</li> <li>5. What is one possible way to address what you are “seeing, inquiring, &amp; witnessing” based on the questions you answered, or your partner brought up in the discussion- lesson plan, policy, etc.</li> <li>6. Whole Group Discussion</li> <li>7. Restorative Circle- pulse of the group- what are you walking away with; what would like to examine more</li> </ol>



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#### Appendix Four

#### Adaptation of Equity Audit for PLC Week 4

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Equity Audit

Number of students in your district:	
Number of students in your school:	
<b>General Teacher Data</b>	
How many teachers in your school teach outside of their content/expertise area?	
How many teachers in your school hold (a) bachelor's degrees; (b) master's degrees; (c) doctoral degrees?	(a) (b) (c)
How many teachers in your school have been teaching (a) 1-5 years; (b) 6-15 years; (c) 15-20 years; (d) more than 20 years?	(a) (b) (c) (d)
What is the teacher mobility/attrition rate at your school?	
<b>Gender Data</b>	
Females on the teaching staff at your school:	
Females teaching science/math classes:	
Females teaching English:	
Females teaching history:	
Females teaching at the highest level of math:	
Out-of-school suspensions/expulsions by gender:	
Females/males on administrative team:	
Report two pieces of academic achievement data (reading and math) as they relate to this area of gender:	
<b>Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity</b>	
Does your district have any active policies that address sexual orientation and gender identity?	
How and to what extent does your district's curriculum provide instruction related to sexual orientation and gender identity?	
Does your school have a Gay/Straight Alliance? If not, why not?	
Assess your school's library/media holdings related to sexual orientation and gender identity.	
To what extent has professional development addressed sexual orientation and gender identity?	
To what extent are students teased or called names because of their gender identity or sexual orientation at your school? How do you know?	

Adapted from: Groenke, S. L. (2010). Seeing, Inquiring, Witnessing: Using the Equity Audit in Practitioner Inquiry to Rethink Inequity in Public Schools. *English Education*, 43(1), 83–96. Retrieved from <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=508185831&site=eds-live&scope=site>