

6-2022

The Effects of “No Pro Homo” Policies on LGBTQ+ Perceptions in the American South

Isabella L. Brocato
The University of Southern Mississippi

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The Effects of “No Pro Homo” Policies on LGBTQ+ Perceptions in the American South

by

Isabella L. Brocato

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of Honors Requirements

May 2022

Approved by:

Susan Hrostowski

Dr. Susan Hrostowski, Ph.D., Thesis Advisor,
School of Social Work

Dr. Bridget Hayden, Ph.D., Director,
School of Social Science and Global Studies

Sabine Heinhorst, Ph.D., Dean
Honors College

ABSTRACT

Five states in the American South currently have “no pro homo” policies in place, while an increasing number of bills targeting discussions about sexuality and gender identity in public schools are being introduced to House floors around the country. Although there is extensive research on the ways in which these policies put the physical and mental well-being of LGBTQ+ students at risk, there is little to no research about how they shape public perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community collectively. With inspiration from Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s social science study cited in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), this study works to discover how “no pro homo” policies impact perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community around the country. Six personal interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of the lived, individualized experiences of each participant. An analysis of the findings from these interviews discovered four significant conclusions about how queerness is perceived and treated in the American South: these policies perpetuate the notion that queerness does not exist in the real world, they associate queerness with sexual deviancy and bad behavior, they cast queerness as “other,” and they negatively impact the ways in which LGBTQ+ students perceive themselves. Through this discovery, this study encourages the eradication of these policies in order to protect the safety and well-being of all individuals in public education settings while liberating LGBTQ+ students and teachers around the country.

Keywords: LGBTQ, public schools, sex education, policy, perceptions, American South

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to every LGBTQ+ person who grew up having to be their own advocate in the classroom.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am first especially grateful to Dr. Susan Hrostowski, professor of Social Work, for her immediate embrace of my thesis topic and for her continued support in both my research about LGBTQ+ issues and in my own journey with queerness. She continues to challenge me in the best ways. Furthermore, the progress she has made in LGBTQ+ research, particularly in the American South, has drastically changed the landscape of what is to be learned about the community and the continued ways her and her family advocate for the liberation of all LGBTQ+ persons. It has been a privilege learning from her and I am forever inspired by her knowledge, advocacy, and resiliency.

Dr. Kate Greene's Introduction to Law in American Society class was the first time I learned of Kenneth and Mamie Clark's social science study cited in *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), the study that ultimately became the inspiration for this research. She led me to pick up Richard Kluger's work published in 1975 titled, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality*, a work that you can now find cited in the References section of this thesis. Dr. Greene also pointed me in the direction of Dr. Hrostowski's office, a recommendation that led to her becoming my thesis advisor. I am incredibly grateful for her guidance, as these moments became pivotal in the discovery of this research and in my future endeavours.

On the first day of class in the Honors College as a freshman, Dr. Donald Yee had arranged small boxes before each student's seat around the long conference table before any of us had arrived. Our first assignment as Honors Scholars was to discover what was inside of our box before we were able to look inside and discover with our eyes. This

assignment shaped my knowledge of the discovery process and showed me that it is not fear that lies in the unknown, but opportunity. Dr. Yee, thank you for this opportunity and for the object I discovered inside of my box. I have been fearlessly diving head-first into the unknowns of my life ever since.

Finally, I want to express endless gratitude to the young people who participated in my research and were vulnerable in their experiences with me. You all have played a central role in the progression of LGBTQ+ research and I cannot thank you enough. Your resiliency continues to inspire me in my own identity and advocacy every single day.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and all other identities and orientations that are not cisgender and heterosexual in nature
NPH	No pro homo, short for “no promotion of homosexuality”

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Today, approximately five states have laws known as “no pro homo” policies enforced in their public schools: Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas. “No pro homo” policies – short for “no promotion of homosexuality” – are defined as “local or state educational policies which restrict or eliminate any school-based instruction or activity that could be interpreted as positive about homosexuality” (Rodriguez 2013, 30). As an example, Mississippi law states that abstinence-only education “[t]eaches the current state law related to sexual conduct, including forcible rape, statutory rape, paternity establishment, child support and homosexual activity” (Miss. Code § 37.13(171)). Similarly, Texas – a state with perhaps the most extreme language among these policies – states that course materials must emphasize “...in a factual manner and from a public health perspective, that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under Section 21.06, Penal Code” (Tex. Health & Safety Code § 163.002 1991). Although the language varies slightly amongst these five states, these policies are designed to prevent positive discussions about homosexuality in schools, to discourage students from participating in this “lifestyle,” and to even equate homosexuality with criminal or predatory behavior. These laws not only to restrict discussions and expressions of homosexuality, but also to condemn it as unacceptable societal behavior.

Extensive research shows that these policies negatively impact the physical and mental well-being of LGBTQ+ students (Rodriguez 2013, 31; GLSEN 2018). For students who attended public school in a state with a NPH – “no pro homo” – policy in place, 75.9% of all students “heard the word ‘gay’ used in a negative way ‘sometimes,’

‘often,’ or ‘frequently’ compared to 65.9% of students in other states” (GLSEN 2018). Additionally, LGBTQ+ students in states with these policies were more likely to experience in-school harassment or assault, with 35.1% of students experiencing “higher levels of harassment or assault compared to 26.0% of students in other states” (GLSEN 2018). In one instance where the Anoka-Hennepin School District in Minnesota implemented their own NPH policy, in the two years it was in place, nine students died by suicide (Bolt 2013, 279). One student in particular reached out to a staff member after facing extensive in-school bullying. The teacher recalls wanting to support him, but she could not offer any affirming statements out of fear of losing her job (Bolt 2013, 279). That student became one of the nine who died by suicide (Bolt 2013, 279).

Though growing research suggests how NPH policies negatively impact the lives of LGBTQ+ students, there is little to no evidence exploring how these policies shape and impact public perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community. Public perceptions are important because they serve as a guide for how we act upon them, whether it is when we are getting acclimated at a new school, supporting a peer through a difficult event, or making decisions in the voting booth. They are used to shape belief systems, are a testament to our knowledge, and define how we impact the lives of others. Our perceptions precede our actions and it is for this reason that this research is for everyone, regardless of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity. This research seeks to understand how education not only shapes the way we see others, but also how we view ourselves.

Because of this gap in literature and a rise in polarity over the effectiveness and need for these policies in America’s public schools, my research question asks the

following question: How have “no pro homo” policies enforced in American public school districts influenced public perceptions about the LGBTQ+ community in the American South? Through an inductive approach, I conclude that NPH policies create and perpetuate three sets of perceptions: 1) Queerness does not exist in the real world, and even when it becomes visible, LGBTQ+ individuals are deluded under a false reality; 2) Queerness is associated with bad behavior and the stereotype of hypersexuality, which works to justify adults and peers punishing and negatively treating LGBTQ+ students; and 3) Queerness is casted as “other” in American society, particularly in the American South. An additional conclusion made in this study is that the impacts NPH policies have on perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community are the same impacts these policies have on LGBTQ+ individuals’ perceptions of themselves.

I begin my research discussion in Chapter Two where I discuss the history of these policies, review the arguments for and against them, conduct an analytic discussion of the current NPH policies in place, and review the existing literature on these policies and their effects in the American South. In Chapter Three, I discuss the methodology used in my own research and why I chose a qualitative approach to research this issue and its observable impacts. In Chapter Four, I describe the findings gained from the lived, individualized experiences of six research participants through personal interviews. In Chapter Five I discuss and analyze each of these findings and commonalities found across all participant interviews. Lastly, in Chapter Six I conclude the findings of this study in order to answer the research question and how these policies compromise educational equity, equal treatment, and safety for all Americans.

Defining Key Terms Used in this Study

Sex: “(1) the traits that distinguish between males and females. Sex refers especially to physical and biological traits, whereas *GENDER* refers especially to social or cultural traits, although the distinction between the two terms is not regularly observed. (2) the physiological and psychological processes related to procreation and erotic pleasure (American Psychological Association 2015).

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

Gender Expression: “the presentation of an individual, including physical appearance, clothing choice and accessories, and behaviors that express aspects of gender identity or role. Gender expression may or may not conform to a person’s gender identity” (American Psychological Association 2015).

Sexual Orientation: “one’s enduring sexual attraction to male partners, female partners, or both. Sexual orientation may be heterosexual, same sex (gay or lesbian), or bisexual” (American Psychological Association 2015).

Queer: “an umbrella term that individuals may use to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to dominant societal norms. Historically, it has been considered a derogatory or pejorative term and the term may continue to be used by some individuals with negative intentions. Still, many LGBT

individuals today embrace the label in a neutral or positive manner (Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010). Some youth may adopt 'queer' as an identity term to avoid limiting themselves to the gender binaries of male and female or to the perceived restrictions imposed by lesbian, gay and bisexual sexual orientations (Rivers, 2010)” (American Psychological Association 2015).

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

Homosexuality: “sexual attraction or activity between members of the same sex. Although the term can refer to homosexual orientation in both men and women, current practice distinguishes between gay men and lesbians, and homosexuality itself is now commonly referred to as same-sex sexual orientation or activity” (American Psychological Association 2015).

Homophobia: “dread or fear of gay men and lesbians, associated with prejudice and anger toward them, that leads to discrimination in such areas as employment, housing, and legal rights and sometimes to violence (gay bashing). Extreme homophobia may lead to murder” (American Psychological Association 2015).

“Homosexuality:” An Insufficient Term

The questions distributed to participants during the personal interviews specifically reference homosexuality because that is the term used in the language of “no pro homo” policies. However, this term is not all-encompassing of the experiences of the participants, the scope of individuals these laws impact, or the concluding findings of this study. In the discussion and analysis of this study’s findings, the terms “queer” and “LGBTQ+” are used as more accurate replacements because they are more representative and all-encompassing when answering the research question. This use of inclusive language is necessary in understanding the ways in which NPH policies impact perceptions of all identities within the LGBTQ+ community.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

“No pro homo” policies have traditionally been defined as “local or state educational policies which restrict or eliminate any school-based instruction or activity that could be interpreted as positive about homosexuality” (Rodriguez 2013, 30). To understand these policies and their effects, this literature review will discuss three sections of these policies as a whole: their history and arguments for and against their implementation, the current NPH policies in place and an analytic discussion of their language, and lastly the known effects these policies have on the LGBTQ+ community and society. Additionally, this literature review will also discuss the Kenneth and Mamie Clark social science study cited in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the study that ultimately served as the inspiration for this research. This literature review works to provide a full understanding of the purpose of these policies and how the participants involved in this study were impacted through lived experiences of their application.

A History of Discourse: Why “No Pro Homo?”

In response to the many LGBTQ+ anti-discrimination laws being introduced around the country during the Civil Rights Movement, Anita Bryant introduced her Save Our Children campaign in 1977 (Barrett and Bounds 2015, 277). Her campaign worked to repeal Dade County in Miami, Florida’s LGBTQ+ antidiscrimination law to silence openly homosexual teachers, justifying this advocacy through a natural law argument claiming that God “condemns the act of homosexuality” (Barrett and Bounds 2015, 277). She argued that “homosexual teachers would ‘sexually molest children’ [and] serve as ‘dangerous role models’” in their roles (Rosky 2017). She also argued that antidiscrimination laws protecting LGBTQ+ individuals were an “infringement upon the

rights of parents,” specifically those who worked to raise their children under Biblical, traditional family morals and values. Additionally, she claimed that the inclusion and protection of LGBTQ+ individuals posed a risk to Dade County’s healthy community (Barrett and Bounds 2015, 277). One of her campaign advertisements explicitly read, “[t]his recruitment of our children is absolutely necessary for the survival and growth of homosexuality – for since homosexuals cannot reproduce, they must freshen their ranks” (Cummings 2021, 11). She promised to Dade County, “homosexuals... do not have the right to influence our children to choose their way of life. I will lead such a crusade to stop it as this country has not seen before” (Rosky 2017). However, in *Morrison v. Board of Education of Boyd County* (2006), the court was unable to find any evidence of indoctrination in mandatory anti-LGBTQ+ harassment and bullying training “and that the right of [districts] to develop such programming outweigh the objects of parents involving mere exposure to LGBTQ lives and histories” (Barrett and Bound 2015, 278).

Bryant’s promise was not only successful in Dade County, but it inspired similar anti-LGBTQ+ initiatives across the nation. One in particular was California Senator John Briggs’ “California Save Our Children Initiative,” later becoming known simply as the Briggs Initiative (Rosky 2017). The Briggs Initiative was more determined than Bryant’s in that it would result in a denial of employment for openly homosexual teachers as well as the termination any school employee “believed to be ‘advocating, soliciting, imposing, encouraging or promoting... private or public homosexual activity’” (Barrett and Bounds 2015, 269). While Senator Briggs was still working on his own initiative, the Oklahoma House of Representatives introduced and quickly passed their Teacher-Fitness Law allowing schools “to fire those who are afflicted with this degenerate problem – people

who are mentally deranged this way” (Rosky 2017). In the speech Bryant was invited to give following the passing of Oklahoma’s law, she was greeted with a round of applause when she famously recognized that, while they are unable to legislate morality, Americans wished to end the legislation of immorality (Rosky 2017).

Other initiatives mirrored this mission to end public funding of the “promotion” of homosexuality, such as the 1987 Helms Amendment to the Supplemental Appropriations Act restricting research and treatment funding for AIDS, in addition to the 1993 Oregon Ballot Initiative requiring the government to end funding of any initiative perceived to be promoting or encouraging homosexuality (Barrett and Bounds 2015, 269). Thus began a long-winded movement to end federal and state public funding of any promotion of homosexuality, even among initiatives that adopted neutral policies.

The widespread fear accompanying the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s did nothing to help NPH discourse or policy developments. Fear associated with the epidemic led to the implementation of sexual education and HIV-education in America’s public schools, largely as a form of protection as doctors and scientists learned more about the virus (Steinburg 2021). As a response, religious conservatives began lobbying for the prohibition of homosexuality in public school curricula, marking the beginning of NPH policies entering the public school system for students specifically (Steinburg 2021). In solidarity with religious conservatives, other supporters offered medical-utilitarian arguments associating disease with homosexuality and other sexually alternative lifestyles (Barrett and Bound 2015, 277). In addition to physical traits characterizing homosexuality with disease, homosexuality was suddenly introduced as a psychological condition. Psychology professor Dr. Gregory Herek, with expertise on

homophobia, wrote, “By the end of the 19th century, medicine and psychiatry were effectively competing with religion and the law for jurisdiction over sexuality” (Cummings 2021, 9). As a third-tiered blow to the LGBTQ+ community, the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act further legitimized NPH policies and discourse through the federal government’s definition of marriage occurring solely between a man and a woman (Steinburg 2021).

Although NPH discourse has been present throughout a variety of societal institutions, the presence of these policies enforced in America’s public school curriculum remain the most historically impactful to date. Dr. Willian N. Eskridge Jr., a professor at Yale Law School, summarizes the standard argument for withholding LGBTQ+ inclusivity in public school districts in three parts: (1) “[i]f the state adopts a law giving rights to homosexuals or protecting homosexuality it is thereby promoting homosexuality;” (2) “the state ought to endorse and promote good lives and good conduct and ought not to endorse and promote less good lives and conduct;” and (3) “homosexuality and homosexual conduct are not as good as heterosexuality and heterosexual conduct” (Eskridge Jr. 2000, 1329). These policies are rooted in the long-held natural law argument and outdated misconceptions about homosexuality itself, including the indoctrination argument claiming that promotions of homosexuality in public schools will recruit students to adopt homosexual lifestyles themselves (Steinburg 2021; Barrett and Bound 2015, 278). This argument is engrained in the widespread misconception that sexual orientation is inherently a choice, as if people can change their romantic and sexual attractions at their own will. The indoctrination argument also claims that in-school promotions of homosexuality will give students the understanding that

homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle, to which I reply, why should they not believe so already?

While the religious natural law arguments used in Bryant’s campaign are no longer applicable and no longer have legal standing in United States courts, her campaign and its language has inspired further developments of NPH discourse, even that of which we see today. Today, five states – Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas – currently have NPH policies in place with the vast majority of them adopting a stance rooted in either a natural law or health and safety, with Texas utilizing both. Although these laws were first passed nearly forty years ago, the NPH discourse that began developing in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s are predominant in the language of these policies today. An additional four states – Alabama, South Carolina, Arizona, and Utah – have repealed their own NPH policies in the last fifteen years. The language of those policies, reasons for their repeal, as well as the dates in which they were officially no longer in effect are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Repealed “No Pro Homo” Policies

State	Policy in Question	Date & Reason for Repeal
Alabama	“(c) Course materials and instruction that relate to sexual education or sexually transmitted diseases should include...	Alabama House Bill 385 – which significantly amended the state’s sex education policy and removed the passage

	<p>(8) an emphasis, in a factual manner and from a public health perspective, that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under the laws of the state” (Ala. Code § 16.40A(2) 2020).</p>	<p>referencing homosexuality altogether in Section 16-40A-2, Code of Alabama 1975 – was passed on April 20th, 2021. It went into effect on July of 2021 (Education, public K-12 schools, sex education, revising the focus of content, course materials and instructions provided, Sec. 16-40A-2 am’d, AL H.B. 385, Regular Session (2021)).</p>
<p>South Carolina</p>	<p>“(5) The program of instruction provided for in this section may not include a discussion of alternate sexual lifestyles from heterosexual relationships including, but not limited to, homosexual</p>	<p><i>Gender and Sexuality Alliance v. Spearman</i> (2020) deemed South Carolina's law unconstitutional by violating the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of</p>

	relationships except in the context of instruction concerning sexually transmitted diseases” (S.C. Code § 59.32(30A) 2020).	the U.S. Constitution on March 11 th , 2020 (<i>GSA v. Spearman</i> , (2020)).
Arizona	<p>“C. No District shall include in its course of study instruction which:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Promotes a homosexual lifestyle. 2. Portrays homosexuality as a positive alternative life-style. 3. Suggests that some methods of sex are safe methods of homosexual sex” (ARS § 15.716 1996) 	Arizona Senate Bill 1019 repealed Arizona Revised Statute § 15.716. This repeal went into effect in July of 2019 (An Act Relating to Dependent Children, AZ S.B. 1019, 55 th Legislature (2019)).
Utah	“that the materials adopted by the local school board... shall be based upon... prohibiting instruction in:	Utah Senate Bill 196 repealed the language “prohibiting the advocacy of homosexuality in

	(II) the advocacy of homosexuality” (Utah Code § 53A.13(101) 2016).	healthy instruction, prohibits instruction that advocates premarital or extramarital sexual activity; and makes technical corrections.” It was signed into law on March 20 th , 2017 and went into effect in July of 2017 (Health Education Amendments, UT S.B. 196, General Session (2017)).
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In many ways, the language of these repealed policies reflects that of Anita Bryant and John Briggs’ initiatives from the late 1980’s. They condone homosexuality as an unacceptable societal lifestyle, claim that portraying neutral or positive representations of homosexuality is advocating for its “adoption,” and work to teach students false claims about homosexuality – such as that there is no “safe” homosexual sexual activity or that it is a criminal offense. Additionally, they also portray homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle from heterosexuality, as if it is secondary and lesser than. The language of these policies teach students false ideas about queerness and widely portray it in a negative light.

Although the language of the repealed policies is false and outdated, the current NPH policies in place are very similar – and in some places, replicated – in language to that of the repealed policies. The next section of this literature review will focus on the current policies in place in the American South in order to engage in an analytic discussion of their language and intent before continuing onto their known effects and lack of constitutionality.

Current “No Pro Homo” Policies

The language used in the current NPH policies in each of the five states focus primarily on disease prevention, the outdated and long-overturned sodomy law following *Lawrence et al. v. Texas* 539 U.S. 558 (2003) and the equivalence of homosexuality with sexual deviancy and a “lifestyle” that is not admissible to the general public (Tex. Health & Safety Code § 163.002 1991 and Tex. Health. & Safety Code § 85.007 1991). The policies actively enforced in the American South are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Current “No Pro Homo” Policies

State	“No Pro Homo” Policy
Florida*	“Classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students

	in accordance with state standards” (Fl. Stat. § 1001.42(3) 2022)
Louisiana	“(3) No sex education course offered in the public schools of the state shall utilize any sexually explicit materials depicting male or female homosexual activity” (La. R.S. 17.281A(3) 2006).
Mississippi	“(2) Abstinence-only education shall remain the state standard for any sex-related education taught in the public schools. For purposes of this section, abstinence-only education includes any type of instruction or program which, at an appropriate age and grade: ... (e) Teaches the current state law related to sexual conduct, including forcible rape, statutory rape, paternity establishment, child support and homosexual activity” (Miss. Code § 37.13(171)).
Oklahoma**	“D. AIDS prevention education shall specifically teach students that: 1. Engaging in homosexual activity,

	<p>promiscuous sexual activity, intravenous drug use or contact with contaminated blood products is now know to be primarily responsible for contact with the AIDS virus; 2. Avoiding the activities specified in paragraph 1 of this subsection is the only method of preventing the spread of the virus” (Okla. Stat. § 70.11(103.3) 2020).</p>
<p>Texas</p>	<p>“The materials in the education programs intended for persons younger than 18 years of age must: (1) emphasize sexual abstinence before marriage and fidelity in marriage as the expected standard... and (2) state that homosexual conduct is not an acceptable lifestyle and is a criminal offense under Section 21.06, Penal Code” (Tex. Health. & Safety Code § 85.007 1991).</p> <p>“Course materials and instruction relating to sexual education or sexually</p>

	<p>transmitted diseases should include: emphasis, provided in a factual manner and from a public health perspective, that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under Section 21.06, Penal Code” (Tex. Health & Safety Code § 163.002 1991).</p>
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*This act does not take effect until July 1, 2022.

**Senate Bill 89, known as the Health Education Act, was introduced to Oklahoma’s Senate floor in December of 2020 and will go into effect for teachers during the 2022 – 2023 academic year (“Bill Information for SB 89” 2021). Students will begin learning the new curriculum in the 2023 - 2024 academic year. This will repeal Oklahoma’s “no pro homo” policy to a neutral policy requiring schools to teach health education. The new law under Title 70 Section 11-103.13 does not mention AIDS, sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, or sex in any capacity (Okla. Stat. § 70.11(103.3) 2021).

Each of these laws inherently result in educational inequality between LGBTQ+ students and non-LGBTQ+ students. Under Louisiana state law, the prohibition of same-sex sexual health prevents queer students from gaining the tools needed to perform safe, consensual sex with a partner. However, this statute does not restrict materials related to heterosexual sexual encounters, making safety methods unavailable to queer students that could otherwise prevent life-altering diseases and infections. This policy sends the message that queer students are not worth protecting, as it prioritizes the safety of cisgender-heterosexual sexual encounters.

Simultaneously, both Texas and Oklahoma reinforce the idea that homosexuality is primarily responsible for and associated with disease, most notably HIV/AIDS. Even though HIV/AIDS and other diseases are increasingly affecting more non-LGBTQ+ people, these policies continue to reinforce “homosexual acts as synonymous with disease and death” (Cummings 2021, 10). Not to mention, these policies also “call on educators to describe homosexuality as unacceptable and a risk to health” (Cummings 2021, 12). These outdated notions portray queer sexual activity as dangerous, even though there are endless safety and preventative measures a person can take to ensure their sexual health, regardless of the gender of their partner.

Mississippi, on the other hand, introduces a different sort of argument referring back to natural law and sodomy law arguments. Their inclusion of homosexual activity as synonymous with criminalized types of sexual misconduct not only reinforces the notion that homosexuality is unnatural, but also that it is criminal behavior that can be used to indoctrinate others. These policies are not only self-contradictory, but they also reinforce the same negative stereotypes and misconceptions that were being used in the 1970s and 1980s. Gay rights opponents in the late 1970s were often successful due to them equating homosexuality with pedophilia in order to suggest that queerness is harmful to children, rhetoric that we still see today (Niedwiecki 2013, 127). This false narrative became “cemented into the nation’s collective psyche through the HIV/AIDS crisis, the rise of the Moral Majority, the Catholic Church molestation scandal, and the Boy Scouts’ ban on gay members” (Niedwiecki 2013, 128). On March 9, 2022, the Fox News headline following controversy surrounding Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill read, “LIBERALS ARE SEXUALLY GROOMING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS” (Media Matters Staff

2022). This harmful rhetoric suggesting LGBTQ+ persons as sexual predators is still vibrant today and is actively enforced through Mississippi's NPH law, among others.

In addition to their discriminatory language and enforced behavior, another problem with these policies is the vagueness of the laws themselves. Because these laws do not explicitly state what kind of language is and is not lawful, oftentimes teachers and staff are left "to determine whether interceding and stopping anti-gay bullying might be construed as promoting homosexuality as an acceptable alternative" (Rodriguez 2013, 29). Teachers and counselors are left unable to console LGBTQ+ students who may be facing verbal or physical forms of bullying on the basis of their identities. Additionally, because of their insufficient language, many educators are left to assume that these laws refer to gender identity topics as well (GLSEN 2018). Other misinterpretations of these laws cause school staff to justify the revocation of gender and sexuality alliances in public schools, places that are often the safest for queer students (Steinburg 2021). One teacher working in a school district that adopted a NPH policy stated in an interview, "[i]f you can't talk about it in any context, which is how teachers interpret district policies, kids internalize that to mean that being gay must be so shameful and wrong, and that has created a climate of fear and repression and harassment" (Rodriguez 2013, 31).

These policies are also wildly outdated. For example, despite *Lawrence et al. v. Texas* 539 U.S. 558 (2003) overturning sodomy laws almost twenty years ago, both Texas and Mississippi NPH laws allude to homosexuality as a criminal offense (Price-Livingston 2003). Additionally, Oklahoma's law states that avoiding homosexual sexual activity is a primary prevention method against stigmatized death-stricken diseases (Okla. Stat. § 70.11(103.3) 2020), even though HIV-1 transmissions are more prevalent in

heterosexual persons than gay males (James and Dixit 2022). Modern medicine also allows doctors to not only cure many patients of HIV, but to provide them with medicine that can prevent them from contracting the disease in the first place (Gupta and Saxena 2021). While it is one thing for research to be new and for changes in policy to slowly follow, these policies have remained behind science for many years and continue to reiterate false assumptions that contribute to the way others perceive marginalized communities as a whole.

Lastly, there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that these laws are widely unconstitutional. Since the Supreme Court rulings of *Lawrence et al. v. Texas* 539 U.S. 558 (2003) and *Obergefell v. Hodges* 135 S. Ct. 2584 (2015), many organizations and groups of students have begun to pursue lawsuits to repeal NPH laws since the Supreme Court has shown that “that most explicit anti-gay laws are unconstitutional under the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause” (Steinburg 2021). The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States states, “No state shall... deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws” (U.S. Const. am. XIV, § 1). One example is the overturning of South Carolina’s NPH policy when it was found unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment in the Supreme Court case *Genders and Sexualities Alliance v. Spearman* (2020). These low-risk, high-reward lawsuits have thus far been the most effective and efficient route of abolishing NPH policies and preventing any future anti-LGBTQ+ discourse in America’s public schools (Steinburg 2021).

Lastly, the Equal Access Act of 1984 protects discussions of LGBTQ+ topics among students themselves, even in the face of NPH policies. This act states, “a school

cannot deny equal access to student activities because of the ‘religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the speech at such meetings’” (Cianciotti and Cahill 45). Therefore, while those employed by a school under a NPH policy cannot lawfully discuss homosexuality in a positive way, they are not allowed to censor student-to-student speech in public schools, no matter what form of NPH policies are in place.

Despite their harm, discriminatory nature, and unconstitutionality, efforts to expand the implementation of these laws continue to multiply in states around the country (Jones and Franklin 2022). For example, following the passing of Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill that prohibits the discussion of gender identity and sexuality in kindergarden through third grade, around a dozen similar bills have popped up around the country that include limits on discussion, restrictions on classroom instruction, and book bans (Hernandez 2022; Jones and Franklin 2022). Kansas House Bill 2662 was introduced to the House floor on March 3, 2022 and would “make it a misdemeanor for any teacher who uses materials depicting homosexuality in any way, not just if the depiction is sexually explicit or celebratory” (Dahl 2022). Other states, such as Arkansas, Montana, and Tennessee have passed bills that share similar anti-LGBTQ+ values with both NPH policies and “Don’t Say Gay” bills (Rosky 2017).

By understanding the history of these policies, the current policies in place, and discussing their modern purpose and constitutionality, it is now necessary to address the impacts of NPH policies on queer lives and school culture. An understanding of existing research on individual impacts will serve as an effective tool in exploring how these policies affect public perceptions on the collective community.

Known “No Pro Homo” Policy Impacts on Queer Lives and School Culture

Environments that prioritize heterosexuality while silencing homosexuality and queer spaces create a culture of heterocentrism. Heterocentrism is defined as “a system of bias which regards heterosexuality as the ‘normative form of human sexuality and thereby connotes prejudice against anyone who falls outside of that norm’” (Rodriguez 2013, 31). Within heterocentric spaces there is often a consistent perpetuation of homophobia, which “includes negative beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes, and behaviors towards gays and lesbians,” often manifesting through behaviors such as “teasing, threats, harassment, and assault” (Espelage et al. 2008). This is largely because there is an absence of opportunity for students to learn accurate “information about LGBTQ people, history, or events that could potentially prevent prejudices, increase acceptance, and led to a decrease in biased incidents in school” (GLSEN 2018).

It should be no surprise, then, that approximately 83% of LGBTQ+ students have been verbally harassed, 65% have been sexually harassed, 42% have been physically harassed, and 69% felt overall unsafe in their school environment (Cianciotti and Cahill 2003, 35). However, only 18% of a 7,200 student study reported that there is a school policy in place protecting their safety (McGovern 2012, 467).

Another sample of LGBTQ+ students in 2011 found that “sixty-four percent reported feeling unsafe at school and thirty percent of them – in comparison to ten percent of their heterosexual classmates – considered completing suicide” (Barrett and Bound 2015, 269). A 2018 survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that “one in four students reported hearing antigay slurs from faculty or school staff” while 84% of LGBTQ+ students heard slurs such as “faggot” or

“dyke” from other students (Cianciotto and Cahill 2003, 2 and 35). When these faculty heard students make anti-gay remarks, “82% [of students] reported that faculty or staff either never intervened or only sometimes intervened when they heard other students make such remarks” (Cianciotti and Cahill 2003, 35). These statistics are inflated when LGBTQ+ students attend schools with NPH policies in place.

For LGBTQ+ students who attended schools with NPH policies, they are 39.4% likely to find accepting peers compared to 51.1% for a student at a non-NPH policy school, 75% likely to hear homophobic remarks compared to 65.9%, and 35.1% likely to face in-school harassment and assault compared to 26% (GLSEN 2018). Not only are LGBTQ+ students more at risk in NPH policy environments, but those harming them “are less likely to face punishment” (Steinburg 2021). Research shows a correlation between being an LGBTQ+ student and “poor school performance, truancy and dropping out of school, getting in fights at school or while en route, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and unsafe sex” (Cianciotto and Cahill 2003, 2). In light of significantly higher rates of suicides in the LGBTQ+ community, studies have identified factors for these disparities, such as “stigma and discrimination, especially acts such as rejection or abuse by peers, bullying, harassment, and denunciation from religious communities” (Rodriguez 31). At most risk within these environments, however, are perhaps those already targeted by homophobic language in addition to a lack of support at home or in their personal life (Barrett and Bound 2015, 269).

Because of the victimization and isolation from positive LGBTQ+-inclusive sources, those students “may engage in unprotected sex or other risky sexual behaviors, which increases their risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV”

(Cianciotti and Cahill 2003, 40). Furthermore, research on “no pro homo” policies described in this section have shown evidence to “...have a profound negative impact on the mental health of gay adults” (Rodriguez 2013, 31). Due to the hostile academic environments and lack of affirming resources “no pro homo” policies place on LGBTQ+ students, their mental health is detrimentally affected and lasts long after a student graduates.

Perhaps one of the most significant NPH policy cases took place in the Minnesota Anoka-Hennepin school district. In 1995, the Anoka-Hennepin school district adopted a NPH policy that stated, “[w]e recommend that while respect be maintained toward all people, homosexuality not be taught/addressed as a normal, valid lifestyle and that district staff and their resources not advocate the homosexual lifestyle” (Bolt 2013, 278-279). As a result, teachers could assist students in reporting bullying, but their hands were tied when it came to saying anything directly to the student about their sexual orientation.

This policy was overturned in 2009 and replaced with the Sexual Orientation Curriculum Policy (SOCP). While teachers no longer had to enforce negative perceptions of homosexuality, the neutral nature of the policy “prohibited school staff from countering anti-gay stereotypes or presenting basic factual information about LGBT people, even when necessary to address anti-gay hostility within the student body” (Bolt 2013, 280). This restriction became harmful to the lives of students and nine students died by suicide in less than two years, with at least four documenting the cause as anti-gay bullying (Bolt 2013, 265). One teacher stated, “I could not talk to [Erik, a gay student] about [his sexual orientation]... I would have lost my job. I could be polite, listen, and lend a sympathetic ear. But I could say nothing” (Bolt 2013, 279). The

interview revealed that Erik was one of the nine students who died by suicide in the school district that year (Bolt 2013, 279).

Some of the bullying these students faced included both verbal assault - being called names and told to kill themselves – and physical assault - being pushed into lockers, thrown down stairs, and urinated upon (Bolt 2013, 265). The victims’ grades suffered tremendously, as did their mental health (Bolt 2013, 265). In response, five students filed a civil rights law suit in July of 2011 for “inaction against anti-bullying and for maintaining discriminatory school policies” (Bolt 2013, 265). They were represented by the Southern Poverty Law Center and the National Center for Lesbian Rights against the Anoka-Hennepin school (Bolt 2013, 265). They claimed that SOCP “violated student rights under the Equal Protection Clause, the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution, Title IX, and the Minnesota Human Rights Act” (Rodriguez 2013, 33).

The lawsuit resulted in the Anoka-Hennepin school district settling for \$270,000 and agreeing to replace their “neutrality policy,” hire an Equity Consultant and Title IX Coordinator for the district, and give the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights the right to monitor these changes to the district (Bolt 2013, 265-266). The disastrous effects of a neutrality policy – which does not actively enforce negative perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community to be taught to students, as the policies of Texas and Oklahoma require – show that even the restriction of discussion in general can create hostile situations for LGBTQ+ students, the trauma from which can last a lifetime.

It is a purposeful, inherent goal of NPH policies to create schools lacking LGBTQ-related resources and material, including but not limited to harassment and assault policies, available counseling sessions for LGBTQ+ issues, Gay-Straight

Alliances, sexual education, and more. Due of the lack of resources, LGBTQ+ students are prevented from learning accurate information about their own community, identities, and bodies, all while heterosexual students have available educational opportunities to learn about their own relationships and sexual health. NPH policies cause students to be ostracized, stigmatized, and alienated from their peers, not to mention the influenced perceptions that heterosexual students may acquire during their time in a NPH and heterocentric environment. This study aims to fill in this literature gap in LGBTQ+ research and allow lawmakers, parents, teachers, and students to have a grasp on what the long-term impacts of these policies and educational environments have on the perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community.

The Kenneth and Mamie Clark Study

Although there are little to no studies exploring NPH policies' impacts on perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community, the inspiration for this study was Kenneth and Mamie Clark's social science study that investigated the ability for educational policies to shape public perceptions of communities of color.

In the *Brown v. Board of Education* 347 U.S. 483 (1954) Supreme Court case resulting in the desegregation of America's public schools, Chief Justice Earl Warren cited the social science research of psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark providing substantial evidence for segregation's effects on not just how white people perceived Black people, but how Black children perceived themselves (Wong and Nicotera 2004, 125). Through their infamous doll test, they were able to link Black children's low self-esteem to racial relations at the time, most notably due to segregation in America's public schools (Wong and Nicotera 2004, 125). Another team of psychologists, Marian J. Radke

and Helen G. Trager, worked to elaborate on these findings in what became known as the Philadelphia Early Childhood Project published in 1950 (Kluger 1975, 318). In their series of psychological tests with both white and Black children, they found that over 50% of the Black children and almost 90% of the white children had a preference for white skin (Kluger 1975, 319). Meanwhile, 80% of white children and two-thirds of Black children implicitly believed that Black skin is associated with poorer housing, unprofessional clothing, and other negative perceptions and stereotypes of the Black community as a whole (Kluger 1975, 319).

With the help of these studies and others, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) resulted in the integration of schools across the United States. This decision was not only a step in the right direction for civil rights, but “schools came to be regarded as institutions with potential to improve racial and ethnic group relations by diversifying students’ social networks and thereby reducing racism and prejudice” (Goldsmith 2004, 587). If America’s schools have the power to both reduce and influence the perpetuation of racism, then perhaps our educational institutions have the power to influence other kinds of prejudice and the perceptions of other marginalized communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community.

Although the Clark’s segregation study findings heavily influenced the following research, it is essential to note prior to discussing my research that LGBTQ+ individuals have the privilege of masking their queerness while Black individuals and people of color cannot so easily escape institution-based discrimination. Segregation and NPH are not equivalent in size or impact. The findings from the Clark’s study cited in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) support the claim that schools have the ability to shape student

perceptions and attitudes towards marginalized groups, both in ways that perpetuate and reduce prejudice and discrimination.

University of California Psychologist David Krech said, "... inadequate schooling may create a situation which will seem to 'justify' prejudice and segregation and inferior-status treatment... the state, then, through its practices, is deliberately creating less well-equipped citizens, minority groups, pre-conditions for prejudice" (Kluger 1975, 338). LGBTQ+ students in the American South face inferior-status every day as frequent victims of anti-gay bullying and harassment, individuals without equal access to sex education and support from faculty and staff, and as individuals forced to mask or closet their queerness as a method of survival. The purpose of this study is to test if the outdated, harmful language incorporated in NPH policies that actively restricts discussion of, misrepresents the accuracy of, and erases queer identities in America's public schools leaves an impact on people's perceptions of the collective LGBTQ+ community.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This research strives to understand not only the quality of these experiences, but also the possibility of learned perceptions perpetuated through NPH policies through the censorship of academic material relating to homosexuality. How does the censorship of a specific community from a young age impact the way we view that community as a whole? Moreover, how enforced are these policies in the schools themselves? How does the state-enforced erasure of topics relating to homosexuality in schools – whether that be same-sex sexual relations in sexual health class or queer history in social studies – impact the way we see queer identities and communities? For queer individuals, how does that impact the way they see themselves? In order to productively answer these questions, six qualitative interviews were conducted and analyzed in order to gain the individualized experiences of students and teachers who have lived and learned in NPH educational environments.

When recruiting participants, sexual orientation and gender identity were not factors relevant to the criteria for interviews. Previous research has already explored the known impacts of NPH policies on queer students. Rather, this research seeks to understand the learned perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community, if any, regardless of whether a participant identifies with that community.

Open criteria for potential participants in this study were split amongst two groups: A) students who have, in the past four years, attended a public high school in the American South or B) teachers who have, in the past four years, taught at a public high school in the American South. All participants were required to be over the age of eighteen. Individuals belonging to both or either category are qualified to speak on their

individualized academic experiences in reference to NPH policies enforced on campus. They were chosen based on how recent their academic experience in a public high school was from present day to explore the experiences of those who most recently endured them. .

Participant Recruitment & Interview Process

A Research Participation Interest Form was created to gain the relevant information of interested participants, to ensure that they met the required criteria, and to select those who would be the best fit for this study. The interest form asked interested participants to confirm that they were eighteen years or older, to self-identify as a student, active teacher, or retired teacher, and to provide their first name, pronouns, high school graduation year (optional), year of retirement (optional), state of academic experience, email address, and how they heard about the study. A copy of this interest form can be found in Appendix C of this study.

Over two thousand interview recruitment emails were sent out at The University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi State University, and The University of Mississippi with the Research Participation Interest Form linked. A copy of the Interview Recruitment Email can be found in Appendix B. Advertisements inviting individuals to complete the interest form were also showcased in newsletters across The University of Southern Mississippi as well as in student organization group chats. In the email advertisements, all individuals had the opportunity to visit the linked Research Participation Interest Form to learn more about the study and fill out the form as an interested potential participant. By filling it out, they were not committing to participating, but rather simply expressing their interest. Active teachers and those who

more recently graduated from high school were given priority to participate since their experience with NPH policies is more recent.

Approximately forty-one interested individuals completed the Research Participation Interest Form. Thirty-nine of those individuals self-identified as students on the form, while two of them self-identified as an active teacher. Figure 1 below shows the sources of where all interested participants came across the study and how to participate in it. Figure 2 explains what years the interest participants graduated high school. Figure 3 represents the interested participants' states of academic experience. These representations are significant because they exhibit the diversity of relevant participant criteria of those who showed interested across multiple college campuses, as well as how they heard of this opportunity. These figures also begin to explain the process of narrowing down which interested participants were eventually interviewed and, thus, used to conclude this study and its findings.

Figure 1. Interested Participant Recruitment Sources

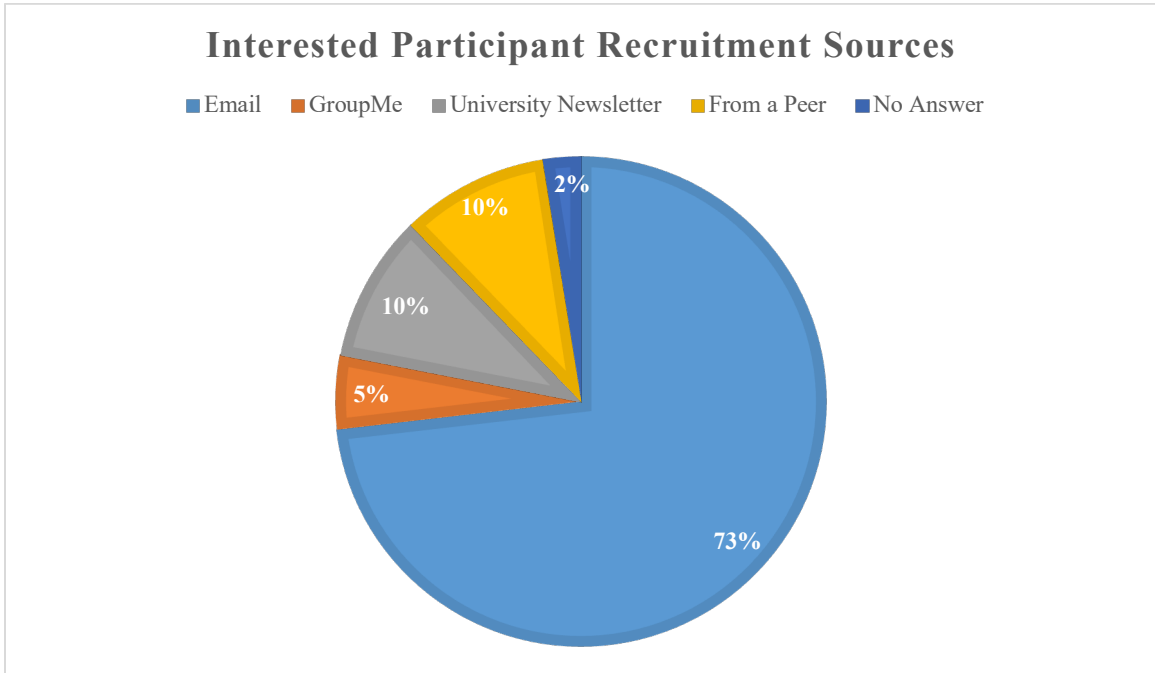


Figure 2. Interested Participant Graduation Years

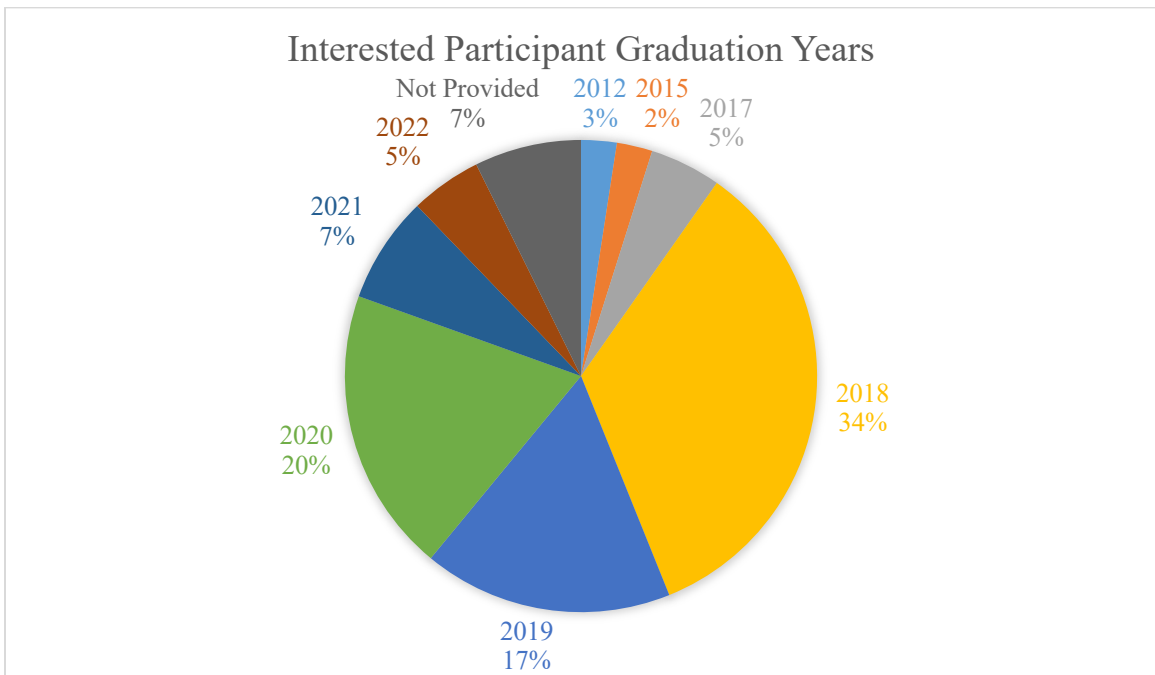
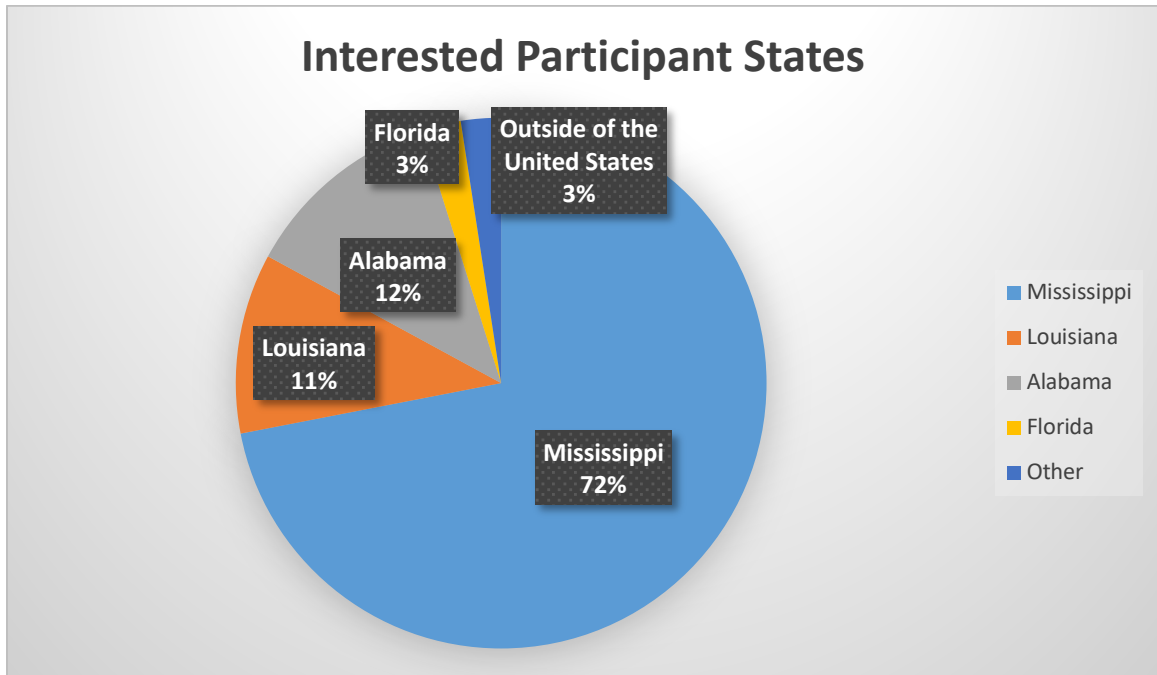


Figure 3. Interested Participant States of Academic Experience



After each interested participant filled out the form, they were then emailed a Signed Informed Consent form, found in Appendix C, and were asked to read through it, sign it, and return it through either email or in person before scheduling a time to conduct a virtual interview. All forty-one interested participants were sent these directions shortly after their completion of the interest form. Of the forty-one interested, four had to be removed from the pool since they attended a private or religious high school. One other interested participant was removed since their academic experience took place outside of the United States. Of the thirty-six interested participants that were eligible to participate giving the criteria, eight of them successfully returned to me both the Signed Informed Consent Form and offered available times to schedule an interview. Several interested participants returned the Signed Informed Consent Form but not the available times to interview and vice versa. All interested participants who did not send me the requested

materials or responded to my request were followed up with another email a week after its original send date.

Of the eight interviews that were able to successfully be scheduled, two of them informed me that they were unavailable the day of and failed to reschedule. Six in-depth interviews were successfully conducted and used in conjunction with the known literature to result in the findings of this study. Figures 4, 5, and 6 below collectively represent the gender identities, states of academic experiences, and graduation years of the six participants used in this study.

Figure 4. Research Participants' Gender Identities

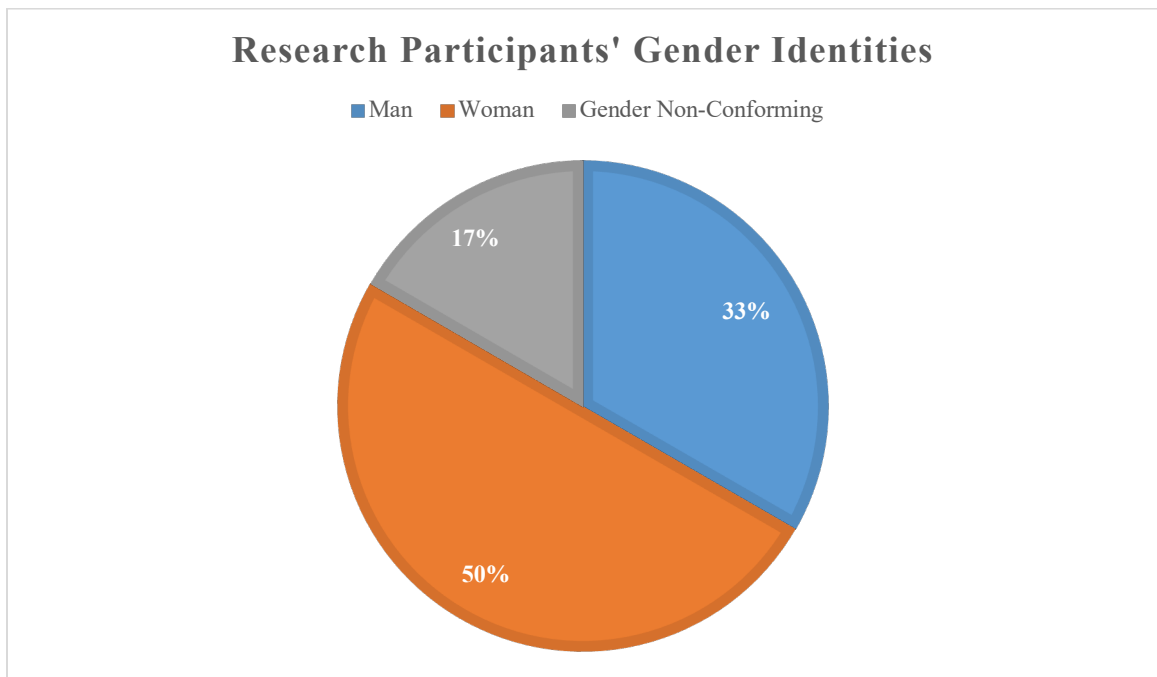


Figure 5. Research Participants' High School Graduation Years

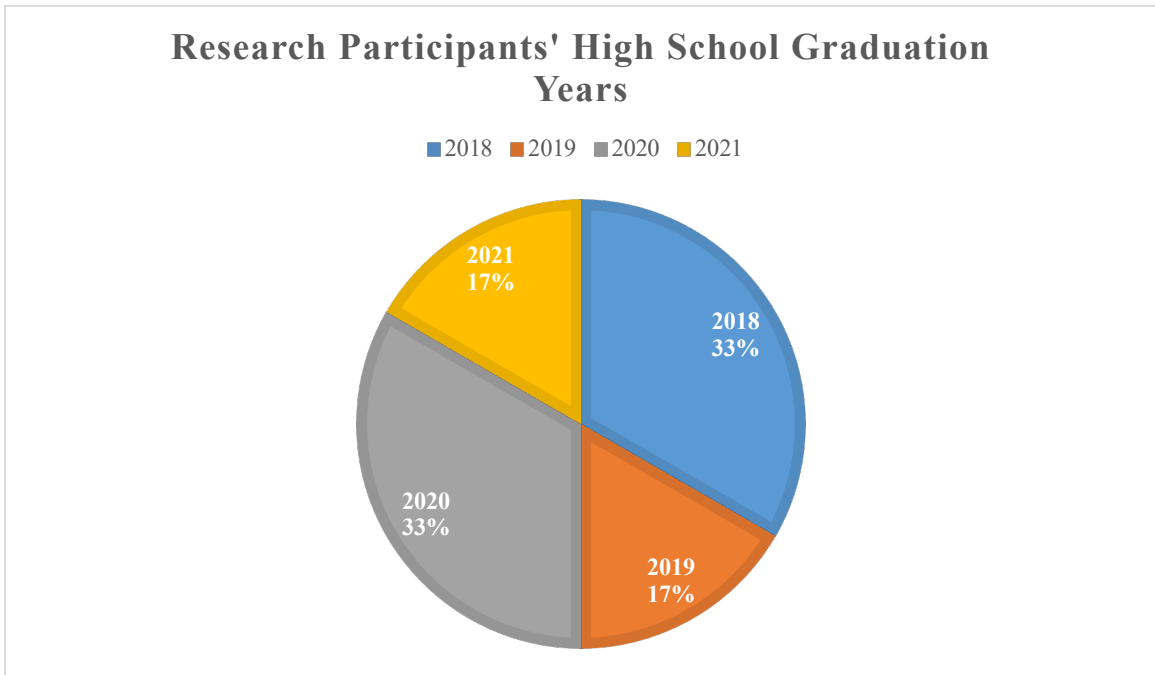
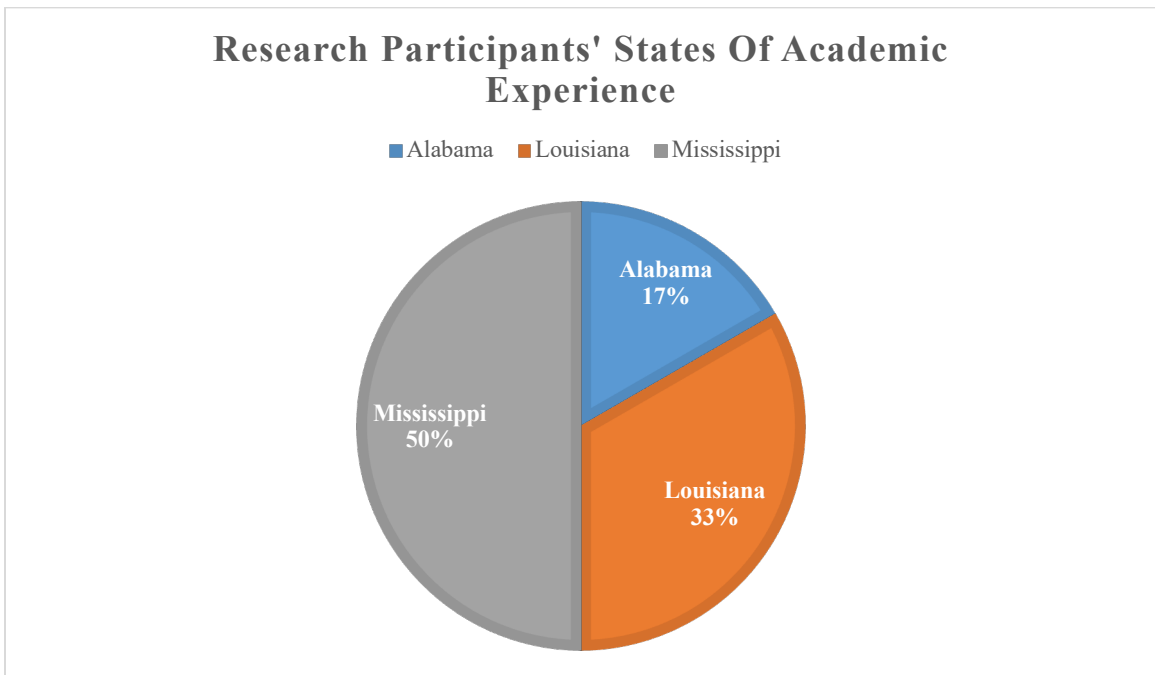


Figure 6. Research Participants' States of Academic Experience



All interviews were conducted via Zoom and were recorded with the participant's consent before being transcribed to compare repeating themes, findings, and experiences. Each participant was asked the General Guiding Interview Questions before being administered either the Guiding Interview Questions for Students or the Guiding Interview Questions for Educators, all of which are presented in the tables below. In one instance, a participant was asked the interview questions for both students and educators because she was student-teaching at the time of this study.

These questions were designed to explore a participant's knowledge of homosexuality prior to their entrance into NPH policy jurisdiction and to gain an understanding of how their knowledge and perceptions changed following the enforcement of those policies. The word "homosexuality" is referenced in the questions because that is the term that states have used in the law. However, it is important to recognize that this term does little to fully encompass queer identities and the entire LGBTQ+ community, as well as the needs for various identities within the community.

The interview questions also explore themes of school culture and attitudes to gain an understanding of the culture surrounding the participant during their academic experience. While these were the guiding interview questions, additional questions were asked during the interview to gain clarity on phrases, academic terms, and storylines to fully understand the communicated experiences of the participants. These guided questions were designed to be expansive in efforts to allow participants to use their own interpretations of the questions. The open-endedness of the questions may have stirred up memories and emotions that better convey what they have experienced in an environment guided by NPH policies.

Table 3. General Guiding Interview Questions

Question Number	Interview Question
(1)	Are you okay with this interview being recorded for research gathering purposes?
(2)	Although you've already signed and submitted the informed consent form, do you have any questions about anything pertaining to this study or your participation in it?
(3)	What are your pronouns?
(4)	What state did your academic experience take place?
(5)	Are you speaking from the perspective of a teacher or a student?
(6)	Did you know what "no pro homo" policies were prior to this study?
(7)	Is there any other information about your academic experience in regards to "no pro homo" policies that you'd like to include in this interview?

Table 4. Guiding Interview Questions for Students

Question Number	Interview Question
(1)	What year did you graduate high school?
(2)	What was the extent of your knowledge and understanding of homosexuality prior to your enrollment in high school? Where did you gain this understanding?

(3)	Did you sit through or engage in any lessons or conversations in the classroom that pertained to homosexuality? If so, what did those lessons or conversations look like?
(4)	On a scale of one to ten, ten being extremely impacted and one not being impacted at all, how impactful were those lessons or conversations on your own perceptions of that topic prior to anything you may have learned after graduating?
(5)	How did they impact or not impact your perceptions?
(6)	On a scale of one to ten, ten being extremely impacted and one not being impacted at all, how impactful were those lessons or conversations on the attitudes of your school culture?
(7)	How do you believe that they did or did not impact your school culture?

Table 5. Guiding Interview Questions for Educators

Question Number	Interview Question
(1)	How long have you been a teacher?
(2)	Have you always taught in (state name)?
(3)	What subject(s) have you taught in a high school setting?
(4)	As an educator, did you go through any sort of training that involved the topic of homosexuality in any capacity (i.e. bullying procedures, LGBTQ+ history or literature, sex

	education, navigating conversations with students, etc)? If so, can you talk about what the purpose of that training was and what you were trained to do?
(5)	Did homosexuality ever become a topic of discussion in any of the classrooms you have taught in? If so, what did those conversations look/sound like?
(6)	After being an educator for X number of years, how important on a scale of one to ten, one being not important at all and ten being extremely important, is LGBTQ+ inclusivity in a student's academic experience?
(7)	After being an educator for X number of years, have you seen a pattern between what is taught in the classroom and what a school's culture is like?
(8)	On a scale of one to ten, one being no impact and ten being extreme impact, how impactful in your experience has education had on a student's personal perceptions of the world around them?
(9)	On a scale of one to ten, one being no impact and ten being extreme impact, how impactful has what you have been instructed to teach been on your perceptions of those topics?

Following the end of the interview, the virtual interview recording was manually transcribed into a Word document with the participant assigned a pseudonym in the style

of “Participant X.” After the collection of all six interviews, common themes and concepts throughout all interviews were picked out and analyzed throughout each of the narratives to produce the findings and conclusion of this study in conjunction with previous literature.

Limitations to this Research

This study seeks to understand how policies preventing discussion or enforcing negative discussions of a particular community in the classroom have created individualized experiences influencing perceptions of that community. This research is dependent on capturing accurate understandings of those individualized experiences for each participant. Because of those experiences, private information or experiences that the participant is uncomfortable remembering or sharing limits the findings that the researcher can report. Furthermore, aspects of a participant’s experience that did not stand out to them personally could prevent participants from sharing information that is significant to the researcher. Language that a participant would normally use in a more natural setting could be compromised if they are worried about what the researcher may think of their use of that language, particularly if they are not LGBTQ+ and believe that are speaking to an LGBTQ+ person or if they are LGBTQ+ and believe they are speaking with a non-LGBTQ+ person. The presence of the researcher could cause a participant to withhold information significant to the study and its research question.

Another possible limitation is the content of the research itself. Due to the title of the study, those who expressed interest in participating could approach the topic with a biased perspective. While this study may have easily reached those who feel compelled to discuss these policies, individuals who could care less about these policies or LGBTQ+

issues would be less likely to express interest. This could be a limitation on the scope of the research that was able to be captured in this study. Once a person did express interest, however, the process of completing an interview required multiple steps and consistency on behalf of the interested participant. In the discussion about methodology, the majority of interested participants were not consistent in completing every step required to complete an interview. Although each step was important to the integrity of the study, completing each one successfully required interested participants to be dedicated to their role, which also limits the scope of the research in what kinds of perceptions are being studied.

Other limitations include the geographic net of which states the Participation Interest Form reached. Only individuals from Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi participated, so further research on the impact on perceptions and school culture in Texas and Oklahoma can be pursued. Florida's NPH policy does not take effect until July 1, 2022, so the impacts of NPH policies on perceptions were unable to be measured with Florida participants. Additionally, this study focuses on six participants in order to get at the root of their individualized experiences, so a quantitative study with a larger participant pool can further aid this research and make way for future studies.

Lastly, a third limitation within the participant pool is the fact that only one of the participants was a person of color. This study did not ask interested participants to identify their race, so a person's race was unknown until the interview. LGBTQ+ identities intersect with other marginalized identities, whether it be race, ethnicity, religion, disability, or another identity. Racial diversity is imperative to research, especially LGBTQ+ subjects because people of color have played such a pivotal role in

LGBTQ+ history and the liberation of queer people. Future research could prevent this limitation by asking interested participants to identify their race prior to their interview in order to gain a diverse understanding of how participants are shaped by state policies.

Keeping the limitations in mind, research on LGBTQ+ subjects is expanding every single day. Future research may be discovered that further explain the findings of this study. The emergence of a new critical perspective could introduce another analysis of this study's findings. Regardless, the role this research plays at the point in time of its creation is dedicated to the expanding progress and understandings of LGBTQ+ subjects and issues in order to aid in the liberation of queer people everywhere.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS & PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Participant A (she/her) graduated from a Louisiana public high school in 2019 and, at the time of this interview, was student-teaching in Mississippi. Prior to participating in this study, she never heard of NPH policies. Most of her knowledge about homosexuality before high school was learned from representations on television shows. Her parents never talked to her about the LGBTQ+ community and she did not know anyone personally who identified as LGBTQ+, so the limited amount of representation available to her aided in shaping her knowledge of the community early on. She recognized that her knowledge of the community and LGBTQ+ issues was incredibly limited because of this. She could not recall any instructional lessons pertaining to homosexuality in her high school classrooms, though her peers would mention it in a nonserious manner. “[In school] it was an insult to call somebody gay or anything like that,” she recalled. Although mentions of the community in her school were few and far between, when it was referenced, it was always in a negative light. While reflecting on how the consistently negative references to the LGBTQ+ community in school may have impacted her school culture, Participant A shared:

We weren’t talking about it in the classroom in a positive way, so I do think it’s possible that other people were affected and their opinion was shaped by some of the negative comments that were made.

As a student-teacher in Mississippi, Participant A was teaching ninth grade U.S. government. LGBTQ+ subjects came up briefly in her own classroom, primarily during discussions of the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015 and conversations about bias in the media. Other than her classroom, the community was not mentioned much at all in

her school. She claimed that the lack of conversation, regardless of the state's policies, reflected the teachers' personal beliefs in her explanation:

Based on what I've seen, it really has not been mentioned at all and a lot of the teachers are very, very, very conservative and definitely have not been talking about that.

She explained that, after her experience as a student-teacher, she believes discussing LGBTQ+ topics is essential to a student's academic experience. The importance of these conversations is not only to providing students with a well-rounded education, but also for the mental and physical safety of her students.

There are a lot of kids in my class that I know of that identify as LGBT and I just feel like a lot of the students don't know what that means or don't know how they should be treating those people.

She referenced that this lack of student knowledge is often where harmful jokes, harassment, and even the denial of one's own identity takes root. Like Participant A, young people often only know what their parents believe about a particular subject and are likely to reflect that until they are presented with new information. When we were discussing the impact education has on a student's personal perceptions of the world around them, she stated the following:

What [the students] think and what they believe in their personal life is coming from what their teachers tell them at school. So yeah, I think their education is having a huge impact on what they think and what they believe.

Overall, Participant A's academic experience in Louisiana was not a source of educational information or positive references about the LGBTQ+ community. The perpetuation of harmful jokes in passing by her peers and silence by her teachers fostered misinformation at the expense of the community as a whole. In her experience as a

student-teacher in Mississippi, the level of enforcement of these policies is very much dependent on the personal beliefs of the school staff. In this regard, these policies contribute to a cycle of misinformation and silence, validate anti-LGBTQ+ beliefs of the school staff, and allow schools to become breeding grounds for harmful perceptions and stereotypes of the LGBTQ+ community (Participant A. 28 February 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom).

Participant B (he/him) graduated from a Louisiana public high school in 2018. He recognized that while he did not know what NPH policies were prior to this study, both himself and his peers knew it was not an acceptable topic to discuss in his school.

It wasn't really something that we knew about, but it was a conscious thing. We just figured it was something that happened, we didn't know it was a policy. We just thought that we didn't talk about it.

Before high school, he had little to no understanding of homosexuality other than a recognition that "some girls like girls, some guys like guys." From a young age, his parents enforced the belief that homosexuality is wrong, leading him to adopt these ideas as his own throughout high school. However, this changed for him after an English teacher explained to his class how individuals should not get judged or treated differently because of their sexual orientation. This brief conversation was significant in the progression of his beliefs about the LGBTQ+ community, even though he does not identify as a member of the community himself. He expands upon the progression of his beliefs in the following explanation:

At the time I guess you could say I was very Christian. With the way that I was raised, my parents always had an iron fist over everything I would do. It was just a thing where I was like, "Oh well if I shouldn't do it and my parents think it's wrong, then I guess it should be a wrong thing." But

having those conversations with my teacher and the whole class was very eye-opening, I guess you could say. I was like, “Oh, maybe I shouldn’t...” you know, I was more open-minded and thought, “Well maybe I shouldn’t be thinking about homosexual people in a negative light or that they shouldn’t be that way.” It was definitely more positive, like I was more open to being around them.

His teacher ended up getting reprimanded by the school board because of this conversation. The school labeled it as a religious-affiliated offense, though the Participant did not recognize any religious traits within the conversation. They threatened to take away her vacation days among other punishments. He claims that the reason she was still able to teach at that school was due to her being the only teacher in the school with a Masters-level degree. Regardless, that conversation held a significant positive impact on his beliefs in high school and how he would go on to treat his peers in the future, particularly though who were members of the community. When he was asked how he believed this conversation impacted his school culture, he went on to explain:

I grew up in, like, the sticks, so everybody was very country, God-fearing, and things like that. There was just a sense of, “You don’t talk about that unless you’re making a joke or something about it.” I think me being in that teacher’s class really set aside that. But everywhere else in the school, that’s kind of how it stayed the whole time. There was like [an understanding that], unless you’re making a joke or you’re actively being homophobic, you don’t talk about it, type of thing.

Because that conversation was isolated to his classroom and to that one class period, it held little positive impact on the school culture as a whole. Beyond that experience, the school’s culture fostered a negative attitude towards the subject. Homosexuality and LGBTQ+ issues were primarily an issue of laughter and ridicule at the expense of LGBTQ+ individuals. Overall, Participant B’s academic experience in

Louisiana fostered negative attitudes and perceptions towards the LGBTQ+ community and actively prevented school staff from any positive or affirming mentions about the community, even if that meant potentially preventing bullying, ridicule, or harassment towards other students (Participant B. 1 March 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom).

Participant C (he/him) graduated from a Mississippi public high school in 2018, however, he attended kindergarten to sixth grade in Louisiana. He did not know what NPH policies were prior to this study. Before high school, his knowledge of homosexuality primarily came from what he saw online, as he recognized that he did not learn anything in an educational capacity up to that point. When asked what in-class lessons or conversations he sat through in high school about the subject, he explained the following:

I would say that the only time that I have even an inkling of a memory from that sort of thing would have been my, I think the class was just called Health and Wellness, but it was the sexual education class in high school. And I mean, the teacher might have mentioned that subject in that sense once or twice, but honestly that entire sexual education thing, that whole kind of section was a bit of a joke in my opinion, academically. But back on topic here, as far as that exact subject coming up in high school, I think it was the only time it was ever mentioned even. And, even then, it was definitely not enough of one to spark a memory, a specific one at least.

Participant C went on to share that he identifies as gay, so the impact of the lack of positive or affirming conversations was unique for him because of his sexuality. Unlike the previous participants, he was not on the outside looking in, but rather inside of the community searching for affirmations from outside of it since his high school was

predominantly cisgender and heterosexual. When asked how the lack of these conversations impacted his own perceptions of the community at the time, he answered:

I would say the outright lack of that kind of thing being mentioned at all in an academic setting or even in a professional manner from a teacher or whoever would've certainly impacted my perception of that kind of thing at the time greatly.

Unlike the previous participant, there were no positive representations of his sexuality or the LGBTQ+ community. He goes on to elaborate on how the lack of representations and conversations impacted his perceptions in the following:

I would say that it fostered a large amount of denial on my part. When I say denial, I mean my own inner acceptance of who I was. I would say that I didn't fully accept my own sexuality until I was about nineteen years old, and this is past high school and public education, this is in community college when it happened. But going back to public education, I would say that the complete lack of that sort of stuff being mentioned in that capacity filled me with a lot of doubt, even if I wasn't conscious about it at the time. It made it a lot harder for me to fully accept who I was because it was... it's in a scenario where, if you feel a certain way about something, but you basically never see an example of this or your feelings towards it in real life... and now you can see everything about that sort of thing on the internet of course, but... when you are walking around, when you are amongst peers, or talking to professors, or learning about just stuff in general in public school which takes up a lot of your time, it made me not doubt that it existed, but it certainly didn't help my situation. I feel that if it were mentioned in a professional capacity, or in just a simple factual capacity, or just something that is just taught – or not even taught, just mentioned – that would've probably helped me or at least given me... I guess the best way I can think to put it would be evidence that it does exist and it's a real thing and I'm not just alone in my head. I would say that would be the major ways it impacted me.

The participant struggled to find the words to accurately communicate these experiences and the emotions they evoked, and as the researcher I consistently thanked

him for his explanations and reaffirmed that he did not have to share anything he was uncomfortable sharing. He found that this research was important and he wanted to share his experiences, regardless of the emotions they evoked, particularly because of the large impact it had on his life and journey with his sexuality.

When the subject was mentioned in his school, it was not in a positive way. He went on to further explain mentions of the subject that he did witness:

I do know that there were a lot of just jokes and comments made, and at the time I didn't realize it of course, but I guess they were at my expense thinking about it now.

Because of the internalization of his sexuality throughout high school, much of his experience with his sexuality and the negative remarks made by others at the expense of it are only now being realized and processed. However, he was not the only student who experienced negative events because of his sexuality, even though he did not recognize it at the time:

I do remember that I think there was maybe one, like, outwardly gay student in my grade that I remember. The main thing I remember is that one day he just got jumped by three people, four, I can't remember honestly. It was kind of one of those things that it happens where it was a flash in the pan and then it kind of goes away.

Although Participant C was not out as LGBTQ+ at the time, the school did not foster a culture that would have made it safe for him to do so openly. Furthermore, he had zero access to positive representations until after his high school graduation. He frequently mentioned the desire of not necessarily having comprehensive conversations of LGBTQ+ topics in school, but the desire of there being simple factual statements made validating the fact that LGBTQ+ people exist. He explained:

I was starting to question if that kind of thing even existed. I wouldn't say that from high school and such that it put the community in a bad light, it just wasn't a thing. It wasn't even mentioned, such a thing was never brought up. To someone like me at the time, and looking back on it of course, it made it where I had severe doubts and suppression in myself because it was just not talked about at all. You could never find people in your class or in any class that were a part of thing kind of thing. It sucks, but I mean it's just how it was at the time. I feel that if that kind of thing was brought up, if that kind of thing was taught I guess is the way to put it, or just mentioned at least, I feel that it would have probably helped me figure stuff out a lot early than I did, rather than waiting until I'm nineteen years old and in a community college.

When he did eventually come out to his parents, he said his parents had been expecting it for a long time and had always fostered an accepting household, so they were confused about why it took him so long to share that part of him with them. He again referenced the lack of representation in the classroom and shared the following:

I kept having to explain to them that the reason it took me so long was because I was literally doubting myself, not doubting their acceptance. I was just doubting the whole thing in myself for a long time, a couple of years probably. That was just another one of those experiences where, even if the parents make an accepting household, it doesn't necessarily mean that the child is going to be comfortable coming out with it. At least, that's how it happened for me.

Overall, Participant C did not have a positive academic experience and did not gain anything educational about the LGBTQ+ community. The combination of the lack of conversations and the perpetuation of harassment, bullying, and – in one noted case – assault did not only influence his perceptions of the community, but it also influenced his perceptions of himself. He recognized that his academic experience was the sole reason why it took him so long to accept himself and be open in his environment. None of the representations available to him were positive and it not only made him think negatively

of himself, but it also made him doubt that the LGBTQ+ community exists in the real world (Participant C. 2 March 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom).

Participant D (she/her) graduated from an Alabama public high school in 2020. When asked her knowledge about NPH policies, she knew that schools were forced to censor knowledge and education about homosexuality to the point where it is not a part of the curriculum at all. Before attending high school, she recognized that she was very knowledgeable about homosexuality and the community primarily because of the fact her uncle was gay, so it became normalized in her family life early on. Additionally, in her middle school there were a number of students who were “exploring their sexualities and getting to know who they really were.” She goes on to explain her experiences in middle school that led up to her experiences in high school with the following:

Going into middle school, the idea of people being homosexual was already something that I knew of. What I had to learn during that time was bisexuality, pansexuality, and I was kind of knowledgeable about trans people but of course, once again, not as knowledgeable as I am now. I knew the basic ideas of what those were and now looking back on it, those definitions that I understood are very outdated, but it was based off of my peers. A lot of the people around me were coming out to one another or, sadly, being outed by other kids because they were afraid for them and they thought that telling another adult would help, when in reality it just made the matters worse. So that’s when I really saw a queer environment, just watching other queer people listening to people’s experiences, watching other people’s experiences and just kind of like, I don’t know, just being in that moment where everyone around me is going or shifting in their sexuality.

Participant D went on to explain how other identities intersect with a student’s queerness and the experiences they had because of those intersecting identities. Still reflecting on middle school, she goes on to explain:

A lot of people were kind of struggling with their sexuality as well. I know that I saw that a lot, especially in Black gay men. A lot of the people that were suspected of being homosexual, they were still kind of, like, coming to terms with it themselves and you could see them struggling with that. Because it wasn't just their peers knowing, it was their parents knowing. What are they supposed to do now? Because they are supposed to be the role models, especially if they were being raised by single mothers. There was a lot of pressure on them and you could definitely see it on their face.

Shifting to high school, the participant had a very different experience in high school than that of middle school. She self-identified as queer in the personal interview, so like Participant C, Participant D had a unique perspective on the impacts of these policies on the perceptions of students. When she was asked if she sat through or engaged in any lessons or conversations pertaining to homosexuality in the classroom, she responded:

Absolutely not. Which is crazy because we went through a lot of Greek literature and Greek literature is literally just covered in queer-coded ideals, but we kind of just strayed away from those and put all of our eggs into heterosexual ideals, sadly.

The participant went on to elaborate on the day-to-day culture of the school in reference to its staff and the support they offered for students who expressed distress while struggling with their sexuality. According to the participant, their struggles were particularly enhanced due to their immersion in an environment with no representation on behalf of the school. She explains this further in the following:

There was literally no talking about it. The closest we got was people talking about how non-judgmental they were, which we were like, we don't care. That doesn't show that you're an ally. I think that people, teachers, and the school in general were impactful in a secretive way, to individuals rather than the whole school. The school as a whole and the school board [were] not impactful at all. They could care less. Counselors

[were] terrible in every way because no one told us or no one likes to tell students that their school counselors in high school are strictly academic counselors. They're not meant to help you through your sexuality or your mental health. They don't have the qualifications for that so therefore I think that, whenever a child or a student goes to them about struggling with their sexuality, they didn't have anything else to say besides, "Talk to your parents about it," or "Would you like to set up a meeting with your parents?" without even realizing how dangerous that could be for that student or child. So I'm going to say that yeah, the school? Not impactful. They probably did more harm than good when it came to these conversations because they didn't know how to address them.

As far as conversations that took place outside of the classroom or on behalf of her peers, due to the sexual and gender diversity of the school's students, school staff were more hesitant to directly shut down any conversations that came up about the LGBTQ+ community. She explains this further in the following:

I think that our teachers, as much as they tried to be progressive, they didn't know how to respond. I know that a lot of my classmates had a lot of outlets for talking about their queerness with their teachers, but I think from even that sort of standpoint, those teachers really didn't necessarily understand. They knew that they wanted to support them, but they didn't really know how to. So, in terms of [conversations] being shut down, not necessarily, and if it was, it was kind of geared in a way of it being, "Hey, this is not what we're talking about today, we have a project due today." They would try to gear it towards what we have to do academically instead of blatantly saying, "I don't want you talking about this in my classroom."

A finding that I was not expecting to find in these personal interviews is the following explanation given by Participant D when discussing how the lack of educational conversations and neglect on behalf of the school's staff had on her personal perceptions of the community, even in light of there being a diverse student body. She referenced being side-eyed by staff members for her open-queerness in high school and

other acts that made her feel like a specimen of interest and judgement by staff members of that school. When reflecting on how these experiences in high school impacted her personal perceptions, even with the knowledge she had prior to high school, she explained the following:

It gave me, even though I didn't notice it then, now looking back on it, it kind of helped me see how people in the real world are going to react to these things. Of course, we hear about people being outspoken about it and like verbally telling people that they don't accept them in the street, but I think in that environment I kind of learned that people are going to silently judge you and they're not going to be too afraid to say something to you. You're going to feel the tension in that room and that's something I'm probably going to have to deal with as a Black woman and a queer woman whenever I decide to tell people whenever I walk into a room. That's kind of the environment I'm probably going to have to deal with for the rest of my life. And I think I'm okay with that.

Participant D closed out her personal interview with a powerful statement about the significance of high school as a space in our society, regardless of the laws or policies that are enforced within them. She explained following the reflection of her own experience:

The schoolgrounds is always going to be a melting pot for culture and identity and sexuality, not matter how far they go with [the laws]. They can say that we can't talk about it in the hallways and that, hypothetically, it's hate speech or something that's derogatory. But students will still find ways to express themselves and let people know who they are and what they stand for and the pronouns they stand by.

Overall, Participant D's academic experience was interesting due to the stark contrast between the student body and the school staff. While the student body consisted of sexual and gender diversity, the school staff maintained an attitude of silence and students were left to figure out their struggles on their own. Luckily, and unlike that of

other participants, there were a large number of students who were a part of the LGBTQ+ community, so they were able to be safe havens and areas of education and validation for one another. They persisted even when they faced silent judgement on behalf of the school staff. The participant and her peers widely accepted that this behavior was a normalized aspect of their future due to their identities, rather than acknowledging that they were not deserving of that kind of harmful behavior. The school had zero positive impact on their lives or perceptions of the community. Queer students faced continued adversity that they were luckily able to overcome together, even if they are still struggling and processing those effects today (Participant D. 2 April 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom).

Participant E (she/her) graduated from a Mississippi public high school in 2021. She attended one Mississippi high school her freshman year and then switched to a much larger school, almost doubled in size, beginning her sophomore year. She did not know what NPH policies were prior to this study. Before high school, she had little to no knowledge about homosexuality until she attended a math and science summer camp. She reflects on this experience and how it first introduced her to the LGBTQ+ community in the following response:

Everybody was out and open because it was a really safe space, so that was where I kind of started to meet people and learn about it.

When the participant was asked if she sat through any lessons or conversations in high school that pertained to homosexuality, she immediately recalled experiences where her sexuality and relationship at the time were directly referenced by the school staff. She began to explain:

We had several teachers who would... so at that point I already had my first girlfriend and we weren't really out, but we also didn't really hide it. So, there were a lot of teachers who would make little quippy remarks in their lessons. If they could find something to say, they would say it, but it was never a part of the lesson.

I invited the participant to elaborate further on what she labeled as “quippy remarks” in order to get a full idea of what that looked like. I reaffirmed that she did not have to divulge further information and could stop at any point if she felt uncomfortable, as the personal interview was a safe space where she was welcome to share any information she was comfortable sharing. She decided to elaborate further in the following:

The two that I remember the most weren't actually ones that happened in class. This one teacher had pulled aside two of my former classmates and she had asked them, “Is [name removed] gay? Is [name removed] gay now? Is she dating a girl?” At that school, to be out was... you did not want to be. It was such a backwards community. They started talking about it and other people started talking about it, and socially it was very bad for me. Then, the principal saw me hug my girlfriend in the hallway one time and literally called us into her office and was like, “Yeah you can't be doing this, this isn't okay.” And I was like, “We were in between bells, what's wrong with it?” She said, “That's PDA.” And I said, “It was a hug.” She replied, “Well it's wrong and it's immoral.” And it's like... it was a hug. I wasn't out to my parents or anyone so I couldn't go to anyone to try to rectify the situation, but I mean I still remember that because that was just crazy for her to think she could get away with doing that.

Participant E clarified during her interview that students could get in trouble if they kissed one another, but casual affections such as holding hands, hugging, sitting close to one another, or having one arm around the other were ignored by the staff and didn't classify as public displays of affection. Straight-passing couples at the school were

not addressed in nearly the same manner, as the same kind of affection displayed between the participant and her girlfriend were ignored if it occurred between a straight-passing couple.

Another aspect of her academic experience had to do with a friend group at the school who were all a member of the LGBTQ+ community in some form. The participant was not a member of this friend group, however, following the resistance she faced by the school staff she began drifting towards them out of common interests and safety. The participant recognized that while every member of this friend group excelled academically, never got in trouble, and had perfect conduct records, they were spoken by the school staff as “bad kids” and were frequently withheld opportunities that would have been recommended on their behalf by teachers and guidance counselors. The opportunities students had to be hand-picked for were always withheld by students who “were not controversial.” She references this friend group and the further resistance she faced from the school staff in the following response:

Everybody would say stuff about [my girlfriend], about me hanging out with her, because to be any type of queer there meant that you were just this bad person. Even teachers would be like, “Are you running with that friend group now? That’s really not good for you.” Because I was always a good, quiet kid, so that’s how they regarded me. They were like, “That’s really not where you need to be, you don’t need to be hanging out with them.” I did have some teachers and my guidance counselor say that to me.

The Participant switched high schools beginning her sophomore year to get out of that environment and deliberately attempted to disconnect from anyone she met at her previous school. Even after getting involved in a more accepting and diverse environment – a result of her new school having much larger student body, she claimed – the

Participant recognized that the impacts of the first school stayed with her. “It did kind of put this idea in my head that to be attracted to women was to be this horrible and morally wrong thing,” she stated in the interview. “I now have a lot of problems with myself because I thought I was just inherently a bad person for it.”

Overall, this participant’s academic experience did not positively contribute to their learned understandings of the LGBTQ+ community and, on many accounts, the school associated “bad behavior” with queerness. On several occasions, this participant faced backlash and stigmatization from the school staff because of her sexuality, other LGBTQ+ students were withheld opportunities that could have left a lasting impact on their academic and professional careers, and queerness overall was portrayed as negative behavior that others should not participate in or endorse. This school’s culture on behalf of the staff did not only foster negative perceptions of the community, but for LGBTQ+ students, it also fostered internal negative perceptions of themselves (Participant E. 29 March 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom).

Participant F (he/they) graduated from a Mississippi public high school in 2021. They went to one high school his freshman year, and then switched to a larger school the following year that he stayed at for the remainder of high school. They knew what NPH policies were prior to this study from the media in months leading up to the interview, particularly in reference to Florida’s recent implementation of a NPH policy. Before high school, they learned most of their knowledge from what he gathered from peers in middle school. Even in high school, the subject of homosexuality rarely if ever came up in classes and, if it was, it was not intentionally done so by the teacher. He provides an example of this in the following response:

I don't remember any full-out, like, class discussions pertaining to the lessons or anything, but the only times I remember having discussions about it was more in the typical English class where we're just kind of in discussion. The teacher is kind of the one who attracts everyone and was openly talking about it. Sometimes it was related to what we were reading, but it definitely wasn't something with the teacher's intention of bringing it up. That was usually the only times it was allowed, the only times it really came up. And that was the same in both schools.

I asked if they could elaborate on what exactly he meant by the term "allowed," as that could be interpreted to mean very different things for a listener who is not familiar with the school's culture. He further explained the meaning behind the word in this context:

I didn't necessarily feel that I wasn't allowed to. I didn't feel like I would get in trouble if I brought it up. But I also knew that we didn't really bring it up. So it was more of like, something that was an unspoken rule that not many people went against.

Although mentions of LGBTQ+ topics were isolated to their English classroom, and even those in-class mentions were few and far between, the participant went on to discuss how even that minor representation impacted their experience and perceptions of not only the community, but of himself as a member of it:

It was very impactful to just have that little bit of representation, especially because my family... I grew up with a Christian family and no one really talked about it at all, so just to see that it was an actual thing that's been around was really big for me.

However, when it came to the impacts of the same instances on their school culture, the participant had a different answer similar to that of Participant B:

I definitely think it was impactful as well [on my school culture], but less so... because it wasn't really done across the board in classes. Typically, it honestly was more of the honors students that had those types of

conversations, which is kind of what my understanding was. The teachers would typically be different from honors to regular, and I'm not sure how it ended up like this, but in my experience, it was usually the one with honors that would kind of allow those kinds of conversations, or really would not disagree just because they want to disagree or because they want to, like, put it down. With my group of people and with the classes I was in, I think we were all very impacted by it because we were all a lot more accepting and understanding of new and different representations in the community.

Unlike other participants in this study, Participant F's academic experience was much more relaxed in the sense that the school staff typically ignored any representations of queerness within the student body. "It felt just kind of ignored and just kind of like, not really talked about," they explained. Even after transferring to a new school beginning his sophomore year, he found that while the school was more accepting than the last, there was still very much a culture of neglect and silence:

Overall, both of the schools didn't talk about it that much. They just kind of had it going on, but they weren't really against it, and they also didn't really address it.

One of the most impactful aspects of the Participant's academic experience was having a band director who was openly gay. As the participant reflected on this in-school representation that other participants did not seem to have, he discussed the shock of how normalized the band director's sexuality and personal life was in an academic environment that adopted a blind stance on the issue. Their reflection indirectly elaborated further on the erasure of queerness in public education and how, even for a queer person, viewing an LGBTQ+ person in their real life in a happy, steady relationship made a huge impact. They go on to explain the following:

I was a band kid, so I was in the band [at the second school]. One of the band directors – we had three since it was a very large group of people – one of the band directors was actually openly gay. He has a husband and it was, he was... there was no difference in respect for anyone to him. That was a really big thing as well, especially if that had happened in middle school for me, that would have been even more of an impact. But even seeing it in high school, there wasn't any sense that it mattered, which was just really good to see. If I would have saw him being treated differently in his job, it would have impacted a lot of kids because I mean, with band, a lot of them are kind of in the community so I do think that was amazing to see. Everyone loved him. He was great. He recently moved up to the head band director, so it's good to see that representation and the school district supporting it, especially since in [first school name removed], I remember that no one really knew for the teachers. I know that we found out the choir director ended up being homosexual, and I do remember us finding out a few of the teachers, but it was very just like, no one talked about it there. I think that was the biggest difference in the schools from that perspective.

Overall, while Participant F's academic experience did not provide any education about the LGBTQ+ community or topics within it, the school's way of turning a blind eye to community representation in the student body brought less harm on this participant's experience than that of other participants. It allowed students to express themselves without having to fear retaliation from the school, even though they did not provide any active support. The fact that there were no active conversations or education by either school did send the message that queerness is rare or a "taboo" issue, although that changed greatly for this participant after he learned that their band director was openly gay and in a happy relationship with his husband. For this participant, seeing an LGBTQ+ relationship in their "real" life was perhaps the most impactful aspect of validating their own queer identity in high school. It showed them that queer relationships exist in the real world, and though there was immense amounts of education lacking in

their education, it left a positive impact on their perceptions of the community and of themselves, no matter how small those moments may have seemed at the time (Participant F. 1 April 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom).

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study sought to understand the lived, individualized experiences of young people who attended public high schools in states with NPH policies, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. This understanding can then be used to analyze how the enforcement of these policies shape public perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community. In this section, I will first discuss the commonalities across all research interviews in this study, analyze those commonalities, and the role NPH policies played in creating them. Next, I will give recommendations for future research that could be pursued to elaborate on this study's findings and provide further insight into how NPH policies impact perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community.

An Analysis of Common Findings and Themes

Culture of Silence. The very nature of NPH policies is that they restrict positive or “promotional” discussions about queerness, specifically homosexuality, in the classrooms of America’s public schools. This restriction on classroom discussions inherently fosters a culture of silence where students feel they cannot openly discuss LGBTQ+ topics and issues without retaliation, teachers are reprimanded by the school for not shutting down discussions of the subject in class, and LGBTQ+ students face retaliation for visible expressions of their sexuality or gender identity. Furthermore, students are not provided education on LGBTQ+ history and other knowledge about the community, given access to safe sex for non-heterosexual, cisgender encounters, or provided with the proper tools and understanding necessary to treat their peers with respect across varying sexualities and gender identities. This culture of silence not only

perpetuates negative ideas about queerness, but it moreover sends the message that queerness simply does not exist in the real world.

Participants C, E, and F discussed how the lack of any representation or conversations about the community led to them doubting that it existed in the real world, even though all three participants self-identified as queer themselves. Participant D repeated their questions of doubt, although the fact that there were so many LGBTQ+ students close to her coupled with her growing up with an openly queer family member led to a lack of doubt about her own identity and the community's existence. Participants A and B stated that the only representations of the community in school were when there was a derogatory joke or comment made. When talking about the "real world," the participants referred to the day-to-day life accessible to them in person on a regular basis. Social media and the internet were not a part of this "real world." While there were frequent and active positive representations of the community accessible at their fingertips, it was never thought of as the "real world" and was instead treated as a false reality, though one still with the ability to create an impact. Nothing, however, was more important than real world representation, discussion, and education available to them in their day-to-day life. Across all experiences, visible and verbal confirmation that the community exists and that it is a perfectly normalized aspect of society, were significant factors in shaping the participants' perceptions.

Queerness is an invisible identity in the sense that, when a person walks into a room, there is no true way of knowing what their sexual orientation or gender identity is. Their belonging to the community does not become known until it is spoken or expressed in some sort of physical way, such as with a flag, a relationship with someone of the

same sex, or in another way. It is for this reason that LGBTQ+ people are expected to “come out of the closet” to announce that they are queer. Even LGBTQ+ individuals do not consider another person to be a member of the community until they say or signal so. Therefore, by restricting conversations about the LGBTQ+ community through policies that quite literally enforce “no promotion of homosexuality” and “don’t say gay” language, lawmakers are preventing it from existing in the “real world” for young people. This is visible in several of the participants’ personal interviews, though Participant C stated it the strongest in the following:

It’s in a scenario where, if you feel a certain way about something, but you basically never see an example of this or your feelings towards it in real life... I guess the best way I can think to put it would be evidence that it does exist and it’s a real thing and I’m not just alone in my head (Participant C. 2 March 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom).

Not only does this culture of silence perpetuate the idea that queerness does not exist in the real world, it goes on to say that even when it becomes visible, it is an unreachable reality. For example, for Participant F who self-identified as queer, seeing their band director as a close adult figure be openly gay, happy, and accomplished held such a significant impact on them because it was so difficult to digest as real. It was not only that it was the first time they saw a positive representation of an LGBTQ+ relationship, but they also gained confirmation that it was real and attainable. States with NPH policies perpetuate through this culture of silence that LGBTQ+ relationships are unattainable realities.

To go further, these policies not only perpetuate that queerness does not exist in the real world and that it is an unreachable reality, but they go on to say that even when a person believes they have reached a queer reality, they are under a false reality. Because

of a lack of education about LGBTQ+ subjects, after a person comes out as queer, there are many misconceptions that they are confused, deluded, or in a phase. Even when one queer person sees another person come out, they delegitimize that person's newly-embraced identity in the same way that heterosexual people do. They might say, "They're not actually bisexual, they're just gay," or another statement that infantilizes LGBTQ+ identities by adopting the assumption that LGBTQ+ people do not understand their own identities and that they are deluded under a false reality. Participant D made a comment that resonated with this phenomenon when discussing her school's attitude towards openly LGBTQ+ students.

The culture was very much, in terms of what we were talking about, it was very much homophobic. And it was very much geared towards homophobia because of religious beliefs as well as really neglecting or underestimating the child's mind and only seeing us a children who don't know what we're doing (Participant D. 2 April 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom).

This infantilization of young LGBTQ+ people perpetuates the assumption that they are unable to understand their own identities, feelings, and expressions – an ironic assumption in a society that has little to no understanding about LGBTQ+ subjects due to the prevention of education.

NPH policies take advantage of queerness as an invisible identity through enforcing a culture of silence that prevents queerness from appearing to exist in the real world. This culture of silence fostered through NPH policies withhold available education and erase representation about the LGBTQ+ community and subjects intersecting with other topics that are already being taught in school. They perpetuate to young people that queerness does not exist in the real world, it is an unreachable reality, and even when it

appears to be accomplished, it is only under false pretenses. Silence enforced in the lives of young people not only erase critical understandings and shape perceptions of the lives of others, but it also shapes their understandings and perceptions of their own.

Impact of Representation. Both positive and negative representations of the LGBTQ+ community within school grounds played a significant role across all participant interviews. Opportunities of positive representation – such as Participant D’s interactions with queer culture in middle school, Participant E’s openly gay band director, and Participant F’s short representation of LGBTQ+ undertones during an English class – left a lasting positive impact on the participants’ perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community and on their journeys as queer individuals. It validated to them that not only does the LGBTQ+ community exist, but it is perfectly normal to identify as a member of it. LGBTQ+ individuals of all ages deeply benefit from affirmation and liberation in their identities, especially after being consistently shown that their “lifestyle” is unacceptable, abnormal, or unnatural. Affirmation plays a critical role on not only a person’s journey with sexual orientation and gender identity, but also on their perceptions of themselves through that journey. The positive representations found throughout the participant interviews filled this role and corrected some, yet not enough of the misconceptions construed through the enforced culture of silence.

Negative representations in school had the exact opposite effect. Participant A and B’s frequent witnessing of negative jokes and comments being made at the expense of queer individuals and identities created the perception that LGBTQ+ subjects are only to be discussed with peers if they are in a negative manner. This language also portrays and treats queerness as “other.” The LGBTQ+ friend group referenced by Participant E was

an example of this in how school staff regarded them as bad students who the participant should avoid, while actively withholding opportunities for those students on the sole basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. This sends students a message that something is inherently wrong about being queer, which is a finding that will be discussed in the next subsection. Participant C reflected on his memory of the only openly gay student in his class who was jumped one day by several students. Not only was anything done to hold the perpetrators accountable, but the instance was forgotten by the school soon after as though it never happened. In instances where LGBTQ+ students were victims and were forced to stand up for themselves and their identities, schools turned a blind eye.

Across all participant interviews, representation played a significant role in the shaping of their perceptions about the community and of themselves. Positive representation validated the experiences of LGBTQ+ students and was eye-opening for others, inviting them to reshape their perceptions with the new knowledge and confirmation they gained from that representation. Negative representations reiterate the ideas introduced through the culture of silence that queerness is taboo, an impossible reality, equivalent to bad behavior, and shapes public perceptions to be reflective of those ideas. Representation has the ability to play an improving role between the relationships of students and schools as well as between those of all sexual orientations and gender identities. If the American education system seeks to provide students with a well-rounded education that aids in the future of their safety and relationships with others, representation would serve as a productive tool to do so.

Assumption of Bad Behavior. The enforcement of these policies in America's public schools associates queerness with bad behavior. Going back to the LGBTQ+ friend group that Participant E discussed in her interview, she explained that they all excelled academically, held consistently spotless conduct records, and never got in trouble at school. However, they were frequently labeled as the "bad" kids that the participant was warned by school staff to stay away from out of her own best interest. Opportunities that students had to be hand-picked for by teachers and guidance counselors were frequently withheld from this group. The participant claimed that it could have only been their queer identities that led to such associations, as every other aspect of their presence at the school showed they were exemplary role-model students.

Additionally, the principal at this participant's school pulled her into the office for her own behavior, stated as simply giving a hug to her girlfriend in the hallway in between classes. Even though their behavior did not violate the school's public displays of affection policy, the principal conceded in her argument and instead said, "Well it's wrong and it's immoral" (Participant E. 29 March 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom). The participant elaborated on how this was a common idea in her school by both staff members and students. She stated, "... to be any type of queer there meant that you were just this bad person" (Participant E. 29 March 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom). She even admitted that she considered herself to be a bad person for a while because of her sexual orientation, even though she was able to recognize that it was not in her control.

Participant B's interview also revealed associations of queerness and bad behavior. Following his English teacher for simply sharing with her students that they

should not judge others because of their sexual orientation, the school board reprimanded her for those statements by threatening certain aspects of her job, such as her vacation days. When students watch their teacher get reprimanded by their school board for talking about a particular subject, that sends a clear message that not only should they avoid discussing it in school, but that is also not a subject permissible to discuss with peers in general. It associates bad behavior and queerness as two sides of the same coin, sending a dangerous message to students who are already bullying, harassing, and assaulting LGBTQ+ students for their “otherness” that their intention behind those harmful actions are warranted. Their “otherness” due to their queerness, according to the perceptions of perpetrators, is behavior necessary to punish, no matter if that person is a student or a teacher.

There is a question to be asked within this subsection that is necessary to the subject at hand and could prompt room for further research: if a young person easily recognizes that a trusted adult figure in their life is so vehemently wrong about the morality of a characteristic as intrinsic to the young person’s identity as sexual orientation or gender identity, then what is stopping that young person from questioning the extent of that trusted adult figure’s ideas of right and wrong? What is stopping them from pursuing behavior that could bring them harm, such as drug abuse, extensive alcohol abuse, running away from home, or other types of harmful behavior? What is stopping them from cutting off access to a trusted adult figure or role model in their life because of their attempt to associate their identity with bad behavior? I believe that these questions suggest further research into the role validation and support from a trusted adult figure plays in a young LGBTQ+ person’s life, as well as a possible pipeline to

criminalization that may come into play when a person's identity is associated with bad behavior and punished accordingly.

Stereotype of Sexual Deviancy. NPH policies typically begin with sex education first and then deviate outwards to other areas of the curriculum. This policy model suggests that there is something inherently sexual about being queer or that LGBTQ+ issues are inherently sexual issues.

Hypersexuality is a common stereotype associated with the LGBTQ+ community and it has a long history in the United States. At the very beginning of the late 1970s Save Our Children campaign led by Anita Bryant and John Briggs, "anti-gay rhetoric had relied primarily on the rhetoric of predation and disgust, invoking the specter of the 'homosexual child molester'" (Rosky 2017). Over forty years later on March 9th, 2022, Fox News channel headlines in conversation about Florida's proposed "Don't Say Gay" bill read, "LIBERALS ARE SEXUALLY GROOMING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS" (Media Matters Staff 2022). The language that is being used today with NPH policies mirrors that of when the implementations of these policies originally began over forty years ago. The stereotypes and misconceptions perpetuated then are the same being perpetuated now, even with the significant rise in representation, inclusion, and promotion of diversity in the media and in everyday life for many Americans. The idea of hypersexuality casts increasingly harmful falsehoods and expectations upon the nature of an LGBTQ+ person, as well as an openness to understanding the community and the subjects that intersect with it.

When the principal pulled Participant E and her girlfriend into the office for a hug, their hug felt different to the principal than a hug shared between a straight-passing

couple because there was something inherently sexual about it, or a curiosity about sex that made her uncomfortable as an uneducated bystander. The association of sex alone with bad or immoral behavior aids in why LGBTQ+ individuals are perceived this way. The stereotype of sexual deviancy coupled with queerness sends a message, particularly in the American South, that queer identities and expressions are immoral and wrong for more reasons than one. Further research into associations of hypersexuality with the LGBTQ+ community is an entire research area within itself that is worth further pursuing, particularly in reference to how they impact perceptions of the community from outside of it.

Impacts of Self-Perceptions for LGBTQ+ Persons. One of the most powerful findings in this study is that the impacts these policies have on public perceptions of the community are the same impacts that these policies have on LGBTQ+ individuals' perceptions of themselves. It is worth recognizing that, while race and sexual orientation operate in very different ways and are treated differently in the United States, Kenneth and Mamie Clark's social science study cited in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) found a similar conclusion in perceptions of communities of color due to racial relations at the time, most notably segregation. Not only did they find that segregation fostered negative perceptions of communities of color, but they also found that segregation influenced low self-esteem and perceptions of the self for Black children (Kluger 1975, 319). Similar conclusions have been made within this study.

Following the accumulation of all of Participant E's negative experiences in public education, including but not limited to the retaliation and shame she faced from the school staff, the language used behind her back by both peers and adult figures, the

labeling of other LGBTQ+ students as “bad kids,” and other events caused her to eventually accept the following:

It did kind of put this idea in my head that to be attracted to women was to be this horrible and morally wrong thing. So I was like, “Well I like them so I guess I’m just a bad person.” It did make me feel like I was just this bad person for it. I now have a lot of problems with myself because I thought I was just inherently a bad person for it (Participant E. 29 March 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom).

Additionally, as Participant D reflected on her academic experience and how the retaliation she faced as a queer person – similar to that of Participant E – prepared her for after her high school graduation, she came to the following conclusion:

It gave me, even though I didn’t notice it then, now looking back on it, it kind of helped me see how people in the real world are going to react to these things. Of course, we hear about people being outspoken about it and like verbally telling people that they don’t accept them in the street, but I think in that environment I kind of learned that people are going to silently judge you and they’re not going to be too afraid to say something to you. You’re going to feel the tension in that room and that’s something I’m probably going to have to deal with as a Black woman and a queer woman whenever I decide to tell people whenever I walk into a room. That’s kind of the environment I’m probably going to have to deal with for the rest of my life. And I think I’m okay with that (Participant D. 2 April 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom).

There is something to be said about the casual acceptance of “immoral” responsibility in these quotes that many LGBTQ+ individuals have been forced to normalize as an aspect of their life. Their identities have consistently been viewed as controversial, uncomfortable for others, inappropriate in academic spaces, and accompany other “inconveniences” with LGBTQ+ individuals whenever they walk into a room. NPH policies not only make these inconveniences known, but they enforce their

existence to reside outside of public education, isolating and erasing them all at once. In this way, these policies influence the self-perceptions of LGBTQ+ individuals in that they are participating in bad behavior, their identities are controversial, and stigmatization and discrimination is a normal and accepted aspect of their life. They also place the burden of responsibility onto LGBTQ+ individuals and normalize their casual acceptance of this responsibility, a role that no one should ever have to play, especially a young person.

Level of Enforcement. While these policies were universally enforced in each of the academic experiences of this study's participants, that does not mean that they are universally enforced in other states and school districts. The results of this study found that teachers were more inclined to enforce NPH policies if their personal beliefs sided with state policy. While they may immediately shut down a conversation or issue a negative remark in the self-interests of their personal beliefs, those actions were soon backed up by the state's NPH policy. In this way, these policies validate and reinforce the anti-LGBTQ+ beliefs of school staff, leading to the ultimate decrease in overall quality of a student's school life.

In the instance where a teacher was personally pro-LGBTQ+ and desired to actively support students, they were still prevented from doing so and felt forced to shut down conversations out of the interest in their job and following policy. The biggest factor that protected students from school staff enforcing their personal beliefs was the size of the school, since in both instances in this study where two participants switched to larger schools, there were larger numbers of LGBTQ+ students at the bigger school. The fact that there were more LGBTQ+ students influenced school staff to be more hesitant in

outright verbally saying something negative, although silent gestures indicating judgement were still distributed. There were larger amounts of neglect of LGBTQ+ conversations or expressions at schools with larger student populations, though at smaller schools, teachers felt more comfortable directly using harmful language and preventing educational and inclusive discussions amongst peers.

Conflict Between School Staff and Student Body. Overall, NPH policies create immense amounts of conflict between a school's staff members and the student body. Adult figures who were supposed to be places of trust and consolation invalidate LGBTQ+ students' identities and perpetuate the misconception that they are participating in bad behavior and do not fully understand their own identities. One participant transferred immediately following her freshman year to a new high school because of how her school made her feel. Another stated that, "... the schoolgrounds is always going to be a melting pot for culture and identity and sexuality" (Participant D. 2 April 2022. Interviewed by Isabella Brocato. Zoom). These policies do not prevent anyone from belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Through the fostering of denial, they may prolong when a young person decides to fully embrace their identity and share it with the world, as seen in this study through Participant C. But overall, these policies create a school culture that prevent students from having the desire to confide in who should be trusted adult figures, especially during such formative years. They put students at risk not only to harassment, bullying, and severe mental health effects, but also to a lack of adult guidance throughout high school.

Suggestions for Future Research

The first suggestion for future researchers who wish to elaborate on this study's findings is to conduct a similar study with more racial diversity and state of academic experience. Both factors will create research with a wider scope of the research question at hand and could discover further findings about how perceptions change over state lines and with more diversity in intersecting identities. More specifically, a possible study could compare the impacts on Florida's school culture by comparing the time periods before their "Don't Say Gay" law and several years after students have begun to experience the impact of this newly-instituted law. Because Florida's law specifically focuses on kindergarten through third grade, one could also compare the differing impacts on the development of perceptions by comparing NPH policies enforced in high school compared to NPH policies that are enforced in earlier years.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

A review of existing literature coupled with this research on the lived, individualized experiences of young people in NPH environments allows the research question to be answered fully: How have “no pro homo” policies enforced in American public school districts influenced public perceptions about the LGBTQ+ community in the American South?

The first set of perceptions influenced through these policies is that queerness does not exist in the real world. Even when it becomes visible, it remains an unreachable reality nonexistent in the real world for young people and unacknowledged by elder figures. Going further, even when a queer identity feels attainable in society, the culture of silence perpetuated by NPH policies have created the perception that LGBTQ+ individuals exist in a false reality, one in which queerness is a delusion and delegitimized by a culture of silence.

The second set of perceptions influenced through these policies is that queerness is highly associated with bad behavior and hypersexuality. Not only are students and teachers punished for discussing LGBTQ+ subjects, but LGBTQ+ students are retaliated against simply because of their identity, even if they are complying with policy. The stereotype of hypersexuality and association with bad behavior aid one another in how the LGBTQ+ community is perceived because of these policies. The origins of the policies themselves circle back to this stereotype of hypersexuality and portraying queerness as overtly sexual or predatory in nature.

The third set of perceptions influenced through these policies is that NPH policies cast queerness as the “other.” It is what lawmakers desire to remain removed from

schools as to ensure that, in the example of Alabama's NPH policy before it was repealed, "all students are or should be heterosexual, that all students will and shall marry someone of the other sex, and that all students should engage in heterosexual relationships only within the context of marriage" (Barrett and Bound 2015). It is not only about keeping queerness out of schools, but also about keeping queerness out of society. The perceptions created and perpetuated on behalf of NPH policies work to do exactly that in order to separate society from the LGBTQ+ community and foster environments free of it altogether.

Lastly, the fourth overarching conclusion of this study is that the impacts these policies have had on perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community are the same impacts they have had on LGBTQ+ individuals' perceptions of themselves. They propel associations of bad or immoral behavior, as well as hypersexuality, onto young LGBTQ+ people's self-perceptions. They enforce LGBTQ+ individuals' existence as controversial and taboo, mainly due to the misconception that because queerness does not exist in the real world, LGBTQ+ people are under a delusion. They create, perpetuate, and excuse homophobia both internally and externally. They coerce LGBTQ+ individuals into accepting judgement and discrimination as a normalized aspect of their daily life. Lastly, they prevent both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ individuals from learning and speaking about the community with peers in an educated fashion.

Research on community issues, especially within education and policy, do not only have a lasting impact on the community level, but they also leave lasting impacts on the personal level. Kenneth and Mamie Clark's social science study cited in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) may have utilized different methodology, language, and

participant criteria all while focusing on a different marginalized group entirely, but the findings in both of our research studies are hauntingly similar. While prior to this study, schools were regarded as institutions capable of influencing racial and ethnic relations because of the Clark study, it can now be concluded that schools also have the ability to influence relationships, ideas, and perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community as well.

There is still much to learn about LGBTQ+ issues and how public policy should be shaped around that research. However, this study will help researchers understand how critical learned perceptions are to the political process in terms of what or who a person votes for, how involved they are in the process, and how they speak to their peers about policy issues. Further research capitalizing on this study and others will also allow community members to better understand the LGBTQ+ community in general, especially since much of the hesitance for progress from outside of the community simply comes down to a lack of education or misconceptions by another. By discovering how “no pro homo” policies shape false perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community, we can advocate for and implement solutions that protect the safety of all students and liberate the LGBTQ+ community in the American South.

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH PARTICIPATION INTEREST FORM

Undergraduate Research Study Participation Interest Form

4/16/22, 10:21 AM

Undergraduate Research Study Participation Interest Form

Study Title: "The Effects of 'No Pro Homo' Policies on LGBTQ+ Perceptions in the American South"

Principal Investigator: Isabella Brocato, The University of Southern Mississippi

Research Advisor: Dr. Susan Hrostowski, The University of Southern Mississippi

Thank you so much for being interested in participating in this study! The following information is included so that you can gain a better understanding of the goals of this project and what your participation would look like. All participants will be required to read through and sign a signed informed consent form prior to being interviewed, which includes the information below. By filling out this form, you are not committing to participating in this study.

Purpose of Study:

State and local educational policies identified largely as "no pro homo" policies are designed to restrict school-based discussion, instruction, or activity that includes any positive representation of homosexuality in America's public schools. The current states that have these laws in place include Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas. The goal of this project is to gain an understanding of individuals' experiences with these policies as they are applied in the classroom in order to explore the following research question: How have "no pro homo" policies enforced in American public school districts influenced perceptions about the LGBTQ+ community at large?

Description of Study:

This is a qualitative study looking to gain an understanding of individuals' academic experiences in American public high schools and how it may or may not have been impacted by "no pro homo" policies. More specifically, this study looks to understand how either a lack of education or instructive negative representations of the community have impacted an individual's perceptions today. All participants must be eighteen or older and have either attended or taught at a public school. Each participant will be interviewed virtually via Zoom by the Principal Investigator and only one participant will be interviewed at a time, lasting no longer than one hour. All statements said in the interview, as well as the participant's identity, will be kept confidential to the fullest extent provided by law.

For any questions or inquiries about this study, please don't hesitate to contact the Principal

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf8oAZFDNhry7U1zvCR2IA0S27AK-hWJCizWodMalsopfDjWQ/viewform>

Page 1 of 4

Investigator, Bella Brocato, via email at Isabella.Brocato@usm.edu . This study has been approved by USM's IRB (21-166).

 brocatobella@gmail.com (not shared) [Switch account](#)



* Required

Are you 18 years of age or older? *

Yes

No

What is your first name? (Disclosure: This is only so that the Principal Investigator knows how to refer to you personally. Your first name will not be used in the published study.) *

Your answer

What are your pronouns? *

Your answer

Are you interested in participating in this study as a: *

- A student
- An active teacher
- A retired teacher

If you selected "a student", what year did you graduate from high school?

Your answer

If you selected "a retired teacher," what year did you retire?

Your answer

What state did your academic experience take place? *

Your answer

What is your email address so that the Principal Investigator can reach out and schedule a virtual interview with you? *

Your answer

How did you hear about this study?

Your answer

Submit

Clear form

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Google Forms



APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Saturday, April 16, 2022 at 10:27:22 Central Daylight Time

Subject: IRB-21-266 - Initial: Sacco Committee Letter - Expedited and Full
Date: Thursday, August 19, 2021 at 7:40:36 AM Central Daylight Time
From: do-not-reply@cayuse.com
To: Isabella Brocato, Susan Hrostowski, HC Keystone
Attachments: ATT00001.png, ATT00002.png

Office of
Research Integrity



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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-21-266

PROJECT TITLE: The Effects of "No Pro Homo" Policies on LGBTQ+ Perceptions in the American South

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Social Work, Political Science and Legal St

RESEARCHER(S): Isabella Brocato, Susan Hrostowski

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved

CATEGORY: Expedited

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: August 18, 2021

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Donald Sacco".

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

APPENDIX C: SIGNED INFORMED CONSENT FORM



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STANDARD (SIGNED) INFORMED CONSENT

STANDARD (SIGNED) INFORMED CONSENT PROCEDURES
<p>This completed document must be signed by each consenting research participant.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Project Information and Research Description sections of this form should be completed by the Principal Investigator before submitting this form for IRB approval. Signed copies of the consent form should be provided to all participants. <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Last Edited Feb. 3rd 2021</p>

Today's date:		
PROJECT INFORMATION		
Project Title: "The Effects of "No Pro Homo" Policies on LGBTQ+ Perceptions in the American South"		
Principal Investigator: Isabella Brocato	Phone: (504) 952 - 8747	Email: Isabella.Brocato@usm.edu
College: Arts and Sciences	School and Program: The University of Southern Mississippi - Political Science B.A. Program	
RESEARCH DESCRIPTION		
<p>1. Purpose:</p> <p>State and local educational policies identified largely as "no pro homo" policies are designed to restrict school-based discussion, instruction, or activity that includes any positive representation of homosexuality in America's public schools. The current states that have these laws in place include Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas. The goal of this project is to gain an understanding of individuals' experiences with these policies as they are applied in the classroom in order to explore the following research question: How have "no pro homo" policies enforced in American public school districts influenced perceptions about the LGBTQ+ community at large?</p> <p>2. Description of Study:</p> <p>This study focuses on two groups: states that currently have "no pro homo" policies in place and states that do not have these policies. All participants must be in one of these two groups, eighteen years or older, and have either attended or taught at a public school. Each participant will be interviewed virtually through Zoom by the Principal Investigator in order to cut out travel time and allow the participant to be in a space that they are comfortable and familiar with. Only one participant will be interviewed at a time. They will be asked a series of questions in order for the Principal Investigator to gain an understanding of how the participant's experience in the classroom was impacted by "no pro homo" policies and, more specifically, how either a lack of education or instructive negative representations of the community have impacted the participant's perceptions today. Interviews do not have to occur for a certain length of time but will not exceed one hour.</p> <p>3. Benefits:</p> <p>Participating in this study not only allows for participants to share their experiences with how "no pro homo" policies have been applied in the classroom, but it also gives participants an opportunity to contribute to research in an area that has had little to no exploration prior to this study. This study does not compensate participants for participating.</p> <p>4. Risks:</p>		

Because it is important to this study to include the state of which the participant's academic experience took place, the participant will be publicly reflecting on their academic experience in the respective state and may give opinions that socially harm the state's education system as a side effect. In order to minimize this risk, the institution name or geographic location within the state will not be included in the published study. Information that could be used to identify the participant will not be included in this study other than their pronouns. Pseudonyms will be used to identify participants with a number in the style of "Participant X."

5. Confidentiality:

Virtual interviews will be recorded and will only be accessible to the Principal Investigator and Research Advisor. After the recorded interviews are transcribed by the Principal Investigator, they will be destroyed. The interviews and their transcribed counterparts will be saved onto a private USB port that will only be shared between the Principal Investigator and Research Advisor. Participants are not required to participate in the interview with their camera on but are more than welcome to do so. As stated, only the participant's pronouns and state of academic experience will be included in the published study. No visual or aural piece from the recorded interview will be included in the published study.

6. Alternative Procedures:

If for any reason a participant is uncomfortable or unable to participate in this study with verbal responses to the interview questions, but wants to participate nonetheless, that participant has the option to respond to the interview questions in writing. They can be sent the questions via email and can return with their answers using the same method.

7. Participant's Assurance:

This project and this consent form have been reviewed by USM's Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5125, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, 601-266-5997.

Any questions about this research project should be directed to the Principal Investigator using the contact information provided above.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Participant's Name: _____

I hereby consent to participate in this research project. All research procedures and their purpose were explained to me, and I had the opportunity to ask questions about both the procedures and their purpose. I received information about all expected benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomforts, and I had the opportunity to ask questions about them. I understand my participation in the project is completely voluntary and that I may withdraw from the project at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. I understand the extent to which my personal information will be kept confidential. As the research proceeds, I understand that any new information that emerges and that might be relevant to my willingness to continue my participation will be provided to me.

Research Participant

Person Explaining the Study

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