

The Impact of Microaggressions and Microaffirmations on Safety, Acceptance, and Inclusion  
for LGBTQ+ Middle School Students: A School Counselor's Perspective

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Department of Community Care and Counseling, Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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Approved by:

Tracy N. Baker, Ph.D., Committee Chair

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### **Abstract**

Despite societal and cultural trends toward acceptance, the LGBTQ+ community continues to endure stressors related to their minority status, often in the form of microaggressions. As the average age of “coming out” is much younger than in years past, a greater number of adolescents are now subject to these same stressors. Accordingly, this qualitative phenomenological study sought to examine the experiences of school counselors who support LGBTQ+ students at the middle school level to determine their perceptions related to safety, acceptance, and inclusion for this vulnerable population. Additionally, the impact of microaggressions and microaffirmations on LGBTQ+ students was explored. This research was shaped by three fundamental research questions: 1) From the perspective of school counselors, what factors related to school climate are most impactful in creating a safe, accepting, and inclusive school community for LGBTQ+ middle school students, 2) what incidents of microaggression have been experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in middle school, as perceived by school counselors, and 3) what incidents of microaffirmation have been experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in middle school, as perceived by school counselors? The sample was comprised of 15 school counselors representing 12 states in the United States. Data was collected through a demographic survey and semi-structured individual interviews conducted via the Zoom virtual conference platform. From these interviews, seven foundational themes emerged, including emerging trends, safety, acceptance, inclusion, microaggressions, microaffirmations, and overcoming obstacles. As LGBTQ+ research historically focuses on individuals of high school age or older, the findings of this study addressed a gap in the literature by considering factors specific to a younger adolescent cohort. Furthermore, insight gained from this research may be used to improve school climate and, consequently, the mental health and well-being of this marginalized population.

*Keywords:* sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, adolescence, microaggressions, microaffirmations, school climate

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### **Dedication**

First and foremost, this work is humbly dedicated to my daughter, Mia. Wise and perceptive beyond her years, she is my daily reminder to live life in a manner that is unabashedly authentic. Secondly, I would like to dedicate this research to LGBTQ+ youth everywhere, whether out and proud, silent and struggling, or somewhere in between. You are seen, you are valued, and you are loved beyond measure.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks and appreciation for my chair, Dr. Tracy Baker, who has been steadfast in her support and kindness throughout this process. Her responses were prompt, and her feedback was always constructive and valuable. When I encountered obstacles, she was readily available to help me navigate my way through them in order to quickly get back on track. Above all, I am grateful that Dr. Baker made the courageous choice to advocate for a topic that others may have avoided. Because of her role in bringing this research to fruition, countless LGBTQ+ youth may experience a greater sense of safety, acceptance, and inclusion in their schools, which for some, may potentially be lifesaving.

Additionally, I would like to acknowledge my reader, Dr. Ralph Fox, for his unwavering support and sincere advice. He too encouraged me to believe in the innate value of my research, especially when encountering adversity from others. Dr. Fox reminded me to remain strong and assured me that I could reach out anytime, if and when I needed support.

I would also like to acknowledge the school counselors who took the time to meet with me, openly sharing the triumphs and struggles that accompany their efforts to support LGBTQ+ youth. Each of them demonstrated profound levels of respect, empathy, and acceptance for this population of students and their desire to help these young people feel safe and supported was undeniable. Speaking with these amazing counselors truly reinforced my belief in the inherent good in people, particularly at a time when there is so much hostility and negativity in the news surrounding LGBTQ+ issues. It is an honor and privilege to call them colleagues.

Throughout this lengthy process of research and writing, I have also been reminded of the meaning of friendship. Balancing the responsibilities of being a doctoral student, school counselor, wife, and mother, while also pursuing play therapy and sand tray therapy credentials

often meant that I was left with very little time for “fun.” However, I was grateful to learn that the love, support, and encouragement from my closest friends was unconditional. Although it became a running joke that we only emerged to socialize twice a year, I am truly thankful that I never once doubted the friendship of Angie, Kasey, Rebekah, Amanda, Amber, Sara, Katherine, Jonna, and Marni, who continued to check in, drop in, agree to last minute plans, or simply engage in some laughter and jokes via text. It is said that friends come into our lives for a reason, season, or a lifetime. Thank you to my lifetime friends.

I would also like to express my profound thanks and appreciation for my family, especially my parents, Herb and Becky, who were always looking for ways to help lighten the load. My parents are two of the most selfless and compassionate individuals I have ever known, and I could never repay them for all of their acts of kindness. The sole reason I chose to hyphenate my name was for this dissertation; they were instrumental in my success for more reasons than I can count and holding on to their (our) name is meant to represent each and every one of those reasons.

Although I dedicated to this work to my daughter, Mia, I also wish to acknowledge her here. Nearly 18 years ago, I was blessed to give birth to the most remarkable human being. Mia is kind, talented, creative, wise, and never fails to make me laugh. She has always been supportive and never complained during all these years of researching, writing, and re-writing. Mia inspires me every day to be the best and most authentic version of myself and hopefully I am empowering her with the confidence to do the same.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my wife, my partner, and my best friend, Nicole. This journey to a doctorate has been long and tedious, but Nicole has never wavered in her encouragement and patience. She was the first person to believe, without a doubt, that I could do



or become anything I wanted, and eventually persuaded me to believe it too. Nicole has gone above and beyond to ensure that I have had the time and resources (and hundreds of coffee drinks) to complete this enormous task. More than anyone, she knows my love for words and with her support I have had the opportunity write more than 60,000 of them! Beyond all of that, Nicole has inspired me to unapologetically live my truth with integrity, and for that I will forever be indebted to her.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Among lifespan theorists there is overwhelming agreement that the stage of adolescence is a time of great discovery. Between the ages of 10 and 19 enormous changes occur in the areas of cognitive, social, and physical development (World Health Organization, 2022). Psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1968) further described this phase of life as a period of identity versus role confusion, during which young people explore their personal beliefs and values within the context and confines of cultural and societal norms and expectations. They seek to examine and consider possible roles and identities in an effort to solidify their sense of self. Throughout these formative years, relationships and interactions with others can be quite impactful, therefore the school setting, where young people spend a large portion of their lives and engage in daily social encounters, can be highly influential. The public school in particular is a pivotal point at the intersection of politics, society, community, and family.

Unfortunately for many LGBTQ+ youth, the overarching heteronormative culture of the typical educational environment may lead to more negative experiences than positive. Heteronormativity, in general terms, refers to the belief that “heterosexuality, manliness, whiteness, and Christian beliefs are privileged” (Devís-Devís et al., 2018, p. 105). Concepts of heteronormativity are based on a social hierarchy (Toomey et al., 2012) and encompass binary categories declared to be in opposition with one another, such as male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, or white and black (Devís-Devís et al., 2018). Consequently, individuals that do not fit within the prevailing group are found to be less acceptable or believed to be abnormal. For LGBTQ+ students, a heteronormative school culture can contribute to increased incidents of bullying, harassment, and other forms of victimization, leading to a harmful school climate that

can negatively impact mental health, as well as academic success. Approximately 85% of LGBTQ+ youth report experiences of victimization at school related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression (SOGIE) (Kull et al., 2016). In addition to overt acts of bullying or harassment, LGBTQ+ students may also endure acts of microaggression perpetrated by both peers and adults, which may be deliberate or unintentional, and can contribute to minority stress (Nadal, 2019).

Many of the recommendations for establishing a safe, inclusive, and accepting climate for LGBTQ+ youth are based on broad concepts, such as the presence of supportive adults, inclusive curriculum material, access to a Gender and Sexualities Alliance (GSA), and protective policies, however there is less of an emphasis on microaffirmations, or small, positive gestures, especially on behalf of teachers, school counselors, and administrators, that can help LGBTQ+ students in the school community feel respected and protected, particularly at the middle level between 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. In fact, a Google search of the term microaggression produces more than 4 million results, whereas searching microaffirmation leads to a little more than 8,000. Correspondingly, a search of the Liberty University online library generates approximately 40,000 results in a search for microaggression and a mere 181 for microaffirmation.

Furthermore, the vast majority of research reflects the voices of high school students, but neglects the perspective of younger adolescents, such as those in middle school. As educators strive to support and affirm LGBTQ+ youth, creating an environment absent of microaggressions is not nearly enough. An emphasis on microaffirmations is imperative, especially during the stage of adolescence when young people are on a quest to examine their personal identity and discover where they fit into the world in which they live. The current study described in the pages to follow provided middle school counselors with the opportunity to share the collective

voice of their LGBTQ+ students through individual interviews, describing not only incidents of microaggression, but also microaffirmations they believe help this community to feel safe, accepted, and included at school.

The upcoming chapter will consider background information relevant to the lived experience of LGBTQ+ youth, as well as the motivation for pursuing this particular topic of research. The problem statement will be shared, along with the purpose and significance of the study. Additionally, the questions that serve as the foundation for the research will be outlined. Lastly, uncommon terms that are referenced throughout the paper will be listed and explained.

### **Background**

Although issues of concern related to the LGBTQ+ population have been researched for decades, the focal concepts and content of these studies were developed through a variety of lenses. In order to fully understand this progression of change, it is necessary to examine the external factors or context, as outlined below, that have influenced this evolution of research (Given, 2008). The historical context considers events and characteristics of the past that impact the present (Given, 2008). The social context provides an awareness of the setting, which informs the experiences and perspectives of the population being studied (Given, 2008). Finally, the theoretical context establishes a guide for the research, as well as a framework from which to view and interpret the data (Given, 2008).

### **Historical Context**

Traditionally, the lived experience of LGBTQ+ individuals or communities has been overshadowed by stigma. Prior to the 1970s, homosexuality and gender nonconformity were diagnosable mental conditions, which were described using words such as deviant, disturbed, and distasteful (American Psychiatric Association, 1952; American Psychiatric Association, 1968).

Though advocacy efforts have contributed to positive change and an increase in acceptance, the persisting stigma continues to perpetuate a culture of heteronormativity that has been slow to change, particularly in the educational environment (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Currie et al., 2012; Griffin et al., 2004; Munro et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2011). The evolution of Title IX has served as an impetus for more inclusive protective policies (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2021), however discussions regarding support for LGBTQ+ youth continue to be accompanied by controversy and conflict between dissenting groups (Mayberry, 2012; Page, 2017).

### **Social Context**

Unlike any other age group, young people spend a predominate portion of their day in a school environment surrounded by peers. Therefore, the characteristics of this unique setting can greatly influence the meaning one finds in their experience as an LGBTQ+ youth. Despite the inclusion of protective policies and supports for sexual and gender minorities in school, the vast majority of LGBTQ+ students continue to endure discrimination, harassment, and bullying attributed to their minority status (Kosciw et al., 2020). However, for many students a dichotomy exists outside of school. An increase in LGBTQ+ visibility and representation in marketing campaigns, the media, and on the internet reflects a shift in societal norms toward inclusion and acceptance (Champlin & Li, 2020; GLAAD, 2022; GLSEN et al., 2013; Harper et al., 2016). Terms to describe one's identity continue to grow and evolve, and younger people are less likely to limit themselves to binary descriptors of who they are (Allen et al., 2022). Unfortunately, to the detriment of LGBTQ+ students, this progress is often lacking within the institution of education.

### **Theoretical Context**

The primary theoretical concepts of the minority stress model and microaggression theory provided the framework for this research study. Originally developed by Pierce (1970) in the late 1960s, microaggression theory describes a host of verbal or physical behaviors perceived as offensive or invalidating for a member of a minority or stigmatized group (Berk, 2017; Sue et al., 2007). These actions may be divided into three categories, including microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007). Although microaggressions may be unintended or unconscious, they are still experienced as antagonistic and disparaging (Nadal et al., 2016).

These negative experiences, which are attributed to one's identity within a minority group, are frequently continual and compounding and contribute to psychological and physical stress (Rich et al., 2020). As described in the minority stress model proposed by Meyer (1995; 2003), these stressors may range from distal experiences with others to proximal experiences within. Just like adults, LGBTQ+ youth endure a wide variety of microaggressions in their daily lives at school (Munro et al., 2019). The minority stress experienced by this vulnerable population elevates their risk for mental health issues, including self-harming or suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and can impede academic success (Johnson et al., 2020; Ream, 2019; Russell & Fish, 2016).

### **Situation to Self**

Taking the time to listen and understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents is of utmost significance to me, both professionally and personally. As a school counselor and the advisor for a middle school Gender and Sexualities Alliance (GSA), I have supported students through the heartache of feeling uncomfortable in their own skin, being bullied and harassed by

peers, and misunderstood and mistreated by the adults that surround them. However, I have also watched in awe as students have advocated for themselves, extended support to others, and developed the confidence to be exactly who they are. As a professional, I am ethically bound to create a safe, accepting, and inclusive environment absent of microaggressions in which all students can learn and grow. It is my duty to inform and educate others so that I never again hear of a teacher telling a student “I’ll start caring about your name when you start caring about your grades.” There is nothing more important in the world than extending kindness to others, no matter who they are, but these affirming words and actions can only come from awareness, empathy and understanding.

The philosophical assumption at the foundation of this research is ontological, as I sought to capture the nature of reality from the perspective of a diverse group of educators who fiercely support the LGBTQ+ youth in their school buildings (Creswell, 2018). Through open-ended interview questions, school counselors were encouraged to share their unique stories of triumphs and challenges as they endeavor to support this vulnerable population. Through this transformative framework, my hope is that the knowledge provided will serve to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals of all ages by increasing empathy and understanding.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem of concern in the current study is centered on the alarming statistics related to the countless incidents of microaggressions experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in school. These experiences can contribute to a negative school climate and perpetuate a culture of heteronormativity that can be damaging to mental health and serve as a barrier to academic success (Kosciw et al., 2020). However, when examining the LGBTQ+ youth experience, the perspective of middle school students is largely unknown (Kosciw et al., 2020). For most, the

exploration of sexual orientation and gender identity tends to begin during the identity versus role confusion stage of development, which commences at approximately age 10 (Erikson, 1968), therefore, in order to accurately understand the lived experience of LGBTQ+ youth, younger adolescents must be considered as well. It is impossible to meet the needs of this age group without truly comprehending what these needs might be. The target group of LGBTQ+ middle school counselors who were identified for this study will help fulfill that missing piece of the puzzle, as they are often the confidante with whom students share their struggles.

From a systems perspective based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth are impacted at various levels from proximal to distal. At the most proximal microsystem level, young people are influenced by experiences and perceptions of those within their immediate contact (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fantus & Newman, 2021). At the subsequent level, the nanosystem includes the systems within these microsystems, such as the classroom or peer groups (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fantus & Newman, 2021). Next, the mesosystem is the juncture where the various microsystems or influences intersect, for example the family of origin, school, church, and the neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fantus & Newman, 2021). The distal systems are those with which the adolescent may not be directly involved, but are nonetheless impactful (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These systems begin with the exosystem, which encompasses factors like school policy, and expands outward to the macrosystem (school division, policies at the state and federal level) and chronosystem (large scale life experiences, events, and social movements) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fantus & Newman, 2021).

LGBTQ+ youth are impacted by each and every one of these systems, some of which are in direct conflict with one another. Encounters and experiences within each system can range

from highly affirming and supportive to extremely detrimental and harmful. For those who endure the latter, their lives may be altered by mental health challenges, including depression and suicidality, as well as poor educational outcomes related to truancy, discipline issues, and a diminished sense of belonging (Kosciw et al., 2020). School divisions *must* do a better job of protecting and enhancing the school experience for this vulnerable group of youth. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to determine what obstacles stand in the way and identify strategies for their removal, which was the ultimate intention of this study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of middle school LGBTQ+ adolescents through the lens of the school counselors who support them, specifically with respect to microaggressions that can exacerbate minority stress, as well as microaffirmations, which can enhance minority coping and resilience. Factors related to safety, acceptance, and inclusion were explored from the perspective of school counselors from 12 different states throughout the nation.

Educational and political trends have begun to acknowledge the importance of protecting all students, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Relatedly, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has identified four primary factors that are believed to positively impact the educational experience for LGBTQ+ youth, including supportive staff, access to a Gender and Sexualities Alliance (GSA), inclusive curriculum content, and protective policies (Kosciw et al., 2020). Despite these strides toward greater safety and inclusivity, LGBTQ+ youth are at a much greater risk of enduring incidents of microaggression and victimization compared to their peers, with 86.3% of the population reporting experiences of verbal, physical, and sexual harassment or assault (Kosciw et al., 2020).



Moreover, although school staff express a desire to support the LGBTQ+ youth in their building, they often encounter barriers, such as parental concern, unsupportive administration, or their own personal fears.

### **Significance of the Study**

By examining factors related to microaggressions and minority stress, such as mental health, perceptions of school safety, and incidents of harassment and victimization, in addition to more positive and affirming supports, a wide body of research has created a portrait of the overall experience of LGBTQ+ youth. However, the majority of research reflects the experience of high school students. For instance, the most recent National School Climate Survey (NSCS) of LGBTQ+ youth was comprised of 77.3% high school students (Kosciw et al., 2020). Out of the 22.6% of middle school student included, a mere 1.2% were in 6<sup>th</sup> grade (Kosciw et al., 2020). Overlooking the viewpoint of LGBTQ+ students at the middle level, between 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, creates an enormous gap in understanding, especially considering that this is the age where most young people begin to explore their sexual or gender identity (Erikson, 1968).

The current study sought to reduce that gap in the research literature through the important addition of this traditionally ignored perspective. Middle school counselors who support LGBTQ+ students were presented with the opportunity to share their unique point of view regarding the microaggressions they have observed or learned about within the school building each day. Additionally, the researcher considered whether these incidents align with the original framework of microaggressions created by Nadal et al. (2011) or if there is new information to contribute to this theory. Conceptualizing the impact of microaggressions endured by this very specific population will serve to promote a better understanding of minority stressors for this age group.

Most importantly, this study also focused on the positive, affirming factors that middle school counselors believe to enhance perceptions of safety, acceptance, and inclusion for LGBTQ+ students in school. Considering various elements of school climate and culture through a comparison of reality versus the ideal allowed the researcher to assess both areas of strength and areas for growth. Although it is helpful to identify the negative experiences that should be removed, it is also imperative to identify the factors that could be added. Ultimately, the discoveries from this research can be used to improve the school experience for LGBTQ+ youth and in turn, potentially alter their overall mental health and well-being.

### **Research Questions**

RQ 1: From the perspective of school counselors, what factors related to school climate are most impactful in creating a safe, accepting, and inclusive school community for LGBTQ+ middle school students?

RQ 2: What incidents of microaggression have been experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in middle school, as perceived by school counselors?

RQ 3: What incidents of microaffirmation have been experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in middle school, as perceived by school counselors?

### **Definitions**

Several terms and acronyms significant to this study are listed alphabetically and defined below:

1. *Cisgender*: An individual who is cisgender has a gender identity that aligns with their sex assigned at birth (GLAAD, n.d.).

2. *Coming out*: The act of coming out describes the acknowledgement of one's sexual orientation and the process of informing others, which can be a lifelong process (GLAAD, n.d.).
3. *Gender*: Gender is a social construct that is created by a culture, assigning expected feelings and behaviors to an individual, typically based on the sex assigned to them at birth (American Psychological Association, 2020).
4. *Gender dysphoria*: Gender dysphoria is a diagnosable psychiatric condition characterized by a pronounced incongruence between the gender an individual experiences or expresses and their assigned gender (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
5. *Gender expression*: Gender expression describes an individual's outward presentation of gender through their name, pronouns, physical attributes, style, and behaviors (GLAAD, n.d.).
6. *Gender identity*: Gender identity refers to an individual's internal sense of the gender with which they feel they align. This identity may or may not coincide with their sex assigned at birth (American Psychological Association, 2020).
7. *Gender nonconforming*: Gender nonconforming describes any individual whose gender identity or gender expression does not adhere to the norms and expectations of society (American Psychological Association, 2020). Similar or related terms may include gender fluid, gender queer, or gender diverse (GLAAD, n.d.).
8. *Heteronormativity*: Heteronormativity describes the cultural belief that being attracted to the opposite gender is the only natural and acceptable sexual orientation (Devís-Devís et al., 2018). This concept is also rooted in the belief that only the binary genders of male and female exist (Toomey et al., 2012).

9. *Heterosexism*: Heterosexism perpetuates the belief that all individuals are or should be heterosexual and gender conforming. Homophobia or transphobia are related terms that signify a fear of or disdain for homosexual or transgender individuals (Murray, 2011).
10. *Inclusion*: Inclusion in schools means that all students are completely accepted, treated equitably, and are able to fully participate in the educational experience without encountering obstacles (Sage, 2007).
11. *Internalized homophobia*: Internalized homophobia describes negative feelings one experiences about their own sexual identity, which can result in denial, shame, self-hatred, and anger that may be directed toward other sexual minorities as well (Kanbur, 2020).
12. *LGBTQ+*: The letters in this acronym stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning. The plus sign acknowledges the vast number of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities that are not specifically referenced (GLAAD, n.d.).
13. *Microaffirmation*: A microaffirmation encompasses any small, affirming, inclusive act that communicates care and concern (Rowe, 2008).
14. *Microaggression*: Originally developed by Pierce (1970), the term microaggression describes “subtle and stunning” (p. 266) slights and insults endured by members of oppressed, stigmatized, or marginalized population groups. Although the verbal or physical acts may be unintended, they are experienced as derogatory or hostile (Nadal et al., 2016).
15. *Microassault*: A microassault is a category of microaggression that describes intentional verbal or non-verbal attacks (Sue et al., 2007).

16. *Microinsult*: A microinsult is the most common category of microaggression and includes subtle verbal or physical acts that are perceived as insensitive or rude, however they may be unintended (Sue et al., 2007).
17. *Microinvalidation*: A microinvalidation is a category of microaggression that serves to undermine an individual's experience, treating it as false or insignificant (Sue et al., 2007).
18. *Minority coping*: Minority coping, as described in the minority stress model, is a protective factor that create a sense of resilience through social support, affirming behaviors, and validation of one's minority culture and values, thereby decreasing the impact of stigma and oppression (Meyer, 1995).
19. *Minority stress*: Minority stress refers to the unique social and cultural stressors experienced by sexual minorities that can negatively impact their mental and physical health, as well as their opportunities for success (Meyer, 1995; Rich et al., 2020).
20. *Non-binary*: Non-binary is a term used by individuals who do not believe that they identify solely with a binary gender label of male or female. Instead, they may identify with both genders, neither gender, or somewhere else along the spectrum of gender (Johnson et al., 2020).
21. *Pronouns*: A pronoun is used to refer to an individual in the third person and implies their gender. Avoiding assumptions regarding a person's pronouns and using their correct pronouns, as indicated by the individual, signifies inclusion and respect (Pronouns.org, 2022).
22. *Queer*: Queer is a term most often used by younger individuals to describe an identity that is not exclusively heterosexual (GLAAD, n.d.). The word should be used with

caution, however. Until recent decades it was considered to be a derogatory slur, but younger generations have chosen to reclaim it (GLAAD, n.d.).

23. *Questioning*: Questioning describes individuals who are exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity, or both (GLAAD, n.d.).
24. *Sexual orientation*: Sexual orientation describes the emotional, physical, or sexual attraction that an individual experiences toward another (American Psychological Association, 2020).
25. *Surplus visibility*: Surplus visibility refers to the phenomenon of minority groups challenging the ideology that they should remain “invisible and silent” within society (Patai, 1992, p. 35).
26. *Transgender*: Transgender describes a wide category of individuals whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth (GLAAD, n.d.).

### **Summary**

Adolescence is a stage of identity exploration, and during the middle school years young people may begin to examine their sexual orientation and gender identity. However, the heteronormative atmosphere found in the vast majority of public schools can create a climate and culture that is unsafe for and unaccepting of LGBTQ+ youth (Johnson et al., 2020; Munro et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2011), thereby perpetuating the negative stigma that this community has endured for decades (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). Although the presence of supportive staff, organizations such as GSAs, inclusive curriculum material, and protective policies are believed to improve the educational experience for this minority group, there is less available research detailing the microaggressions and microaffirmations experienced by LGBTQ+ students at the middle school level (Kosciw et al., 2020). Including this overlooked

voice, shared by the counselors who know them well, will contribute valuable information that can be used to improve school climate and positively impact the mental health and well-being of all students.

The upcoming chapter will provide in-depth information contained in the large body of existing literature regarding what is known and unknown about the LGBTQ+ experience, especially with respect to youth. The subsequent chapter will outline a detailed study designed to expand this knowledge and elicit a deeper understanding of the population of concern. Finally, in the remaining chapters, school counselors will serve as the proxy to give voice to this unique population that has been silent for so long.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

For the average young person, the developmental stage of adolescence is often characterized as tumultuous, awkward, and uncomfortable. However, for the adolescent who has begun to discover that their sexual orientation or gender identity falls within the minority, this uneasy time may also be compounded by a sense of isolation and fear. While navigating the everyday turbulence of growing up, LGBTQ+ youth are simultaneously seeking a sense of security and affirmation, which may be challenging to find. Experiences at school, where young people spend a predominate portion of their day, can either contribute to their distress or provide them with a refuge where they feel safe, accepted, and included.

This chapter provides a thorough overview of literature related to the minority stress model and microaggression theory. Additionally, fundamental concepts pertaining the LGBTQ+ population will be explained, including sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, and gender expression. The societal evolution of these topics will also be examined, along with their impact on cultural norms and expectations.

Experiences specific to LGBTQ+ adolescents will then be explored, considering the influence of minority stress and microaggressions on risk factors for this population. School climate will also be discussed, along with its impact on mental health and academic success. Four specific elements that are suggested to positively enhance school culture and climate will be reviewed in depth, including the role of educators as allies, the impact of GSA organizations, the integration of LGBTQ+ topics into the curriculum, and the implementation of protective policies. Lastly, the importance of microaffirmations will be emphasized as a tool to enhance resilience and improve the educational experience for LGBTQ+ youth.



## Conceptual Framework

### Minority Stress Model

Although the conception of the minority stress model is most frequently attributed to the work of Ilan H. Meyer (1995, 2003), the original theory can be traced back to a dissertation completed by Virginia Rae Brooks (later known as Dr. Winn Kelly Brooks) in 1977 (Rich et al., 2020). Dr. Brooks explained that social and cultural stressors experienced by sexual minorities contribute to both psychological and biophysical stressors (Rich et al., 2020). She maintained that these factors were further compounded by interpersonal stressors and limited opportunities for economic equality (Rich et al., 2020). Additionally, Dr. Brooks iterated that, although sexual minorities will certainly endure stress related to their marginalized status, the impacts on members within the group may differ based on the various types of stress experienced, individual perceptions, and access to coping resources or other sources of support (Rich et al., 2020).

Meyer (1995) expanded on Brooks' theory by testing his hypothesis that each of the three primary minority stressors for gay men, identified as internalized homophobia, perceived stigma, and prejudicial acts of discrimination and violence, contribute to psychological distress. Meyer (1995) also anticipated that a combination of stressors would lead to a more pronounced negative outcome. Specifically, he stated that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals were more likely to suffer from mental disorders as a result of enduring a "hostile and stressful social environment" (Meyer, 2003, p. 674). The study confirmed that experiences of minority stress were predictive of psychological distress for gay men, however Meyer (1995) indicated that the findings could apply to other minority groups as well. Minority stress may also be compounded by intersectionality, or the combination of multiple minority identities, which Meyer (2010) described as double or triple jeopardy.

In more recent years, the transgender or gender nonconforming population has experienced increased visibility beneath the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Accordingly, the original minority stress model has been adapted to incorporate individuals whose gender identity or gender expression is different from their gender assigned at birth (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Gender nonconforming individuals are more likely to experience greater incidents of rejection, discrimination, harassment, and physical and sexual violence compared to those whose gender presentation aligns with their gender assigned at birth, placing them at a higher risk for suicide and substance abuse (Hendricks & Testa, 2012).

Minority stress is perceived as a detriment to mental health, however factors related to resilience have also been examined. The concept of “minority coping” was discussed by Meyer (1995, p. 52) as a protective factor offering social support, providing affirmation and validation of one’s minority culture and system of values, and lessening the effects of stigma proffered by the dominant culture. It is important to recognize that possibilities for minority coping are found at the community level. Although individuals may vary in the degree by which they access or utilize minority coping, the options must first be available to them. Meyer (1995) strongly believed that feelings of connection to one’s minority community could greatly reduce the negative effects of minority stress and oppression. He stressed the profound need for affirming and protective programs, education, and legislation (Meyer, 1995).

### **Microaggression Theory**

Aligned with minority stress is the concept of microaggressions, which originated in the late 1960s, specifically related to the topic of race. The term was created by Dr. Charles Pierce, an African American psychiatrist and Harvard professor, to describe “subtle and stunning” slights and insults frequently experienced by members of racial minority groups during

interactions with white individuals (Pierce, 1970, p. 266). In more recent years, the definition of a microaggression has evolved to include any marginalized, oppressed, or stigmatized group. Microaggressions may be targeted toward a person's race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, religion, disability, mental illness, socioeconomic status, and age generation, or any combination of the aforementioned groups (Berk, 2017).

As a general definition, an act of aggression includes behaviors that are injurious, hostile, or destructive, often with the intent of establishing dominance (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), which is an accurate description of a microaggression, however, the use of the prefix "micro" can be misleading. Micro often refers to that which is small in size or quantity, but in the context of microaggressions, the term micro characterizes the subtlety of the act, not the significance of the impact (Nadal et al., 2016). Consequently, microaggressions can be challenging to detect. Microaggressions, whether verbal or physical, are frequently unconscious and lacking in malicious intent, but the message received by the victim is perceived as hostile or derogatory (Nadal et al., 2016). As stated by Berk (2017, p. 68), "microaggressions are constant, continual, cumulative, and corrosive."

Microaggressions may be divided into three separate categories: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007). Sue et al. (2007) explained microassaults as deliberate verbal or nonverbal attacks, such as name-calling and intentional avoidance or discrimination. Within the context of the LGBTQ+ population, using the phrase "that's so gay" to describe a situation or individual as bad or odd, refusing to sit next to a transgender individual, or calling someone a "faggot" or "dyke" are all incidents of microassault. Microinsults are subtle words or acts that are often unconscious and unintentional but can be characterized as rude or insensitive (Sue et al., 2007). A microinsult is the most common form of microaggression. With

respect to LGBTQ+ individuals, examples of a microinsult may include asking a transgender person a question about their genitals, stating that a person does not look gay, or asking a lesbian couple which of them fulfills the role of the man. Lastly, microinvalidations, which are also typically unconscious, serve to undermine the thoughts, emotions, or experiences of marginalized groups (Sue et al., 2007). For instance, dismissing the need for a GSA on a school campus, stating that an LGBTQ+ individual is overreacting to a comment, or declaring that a young person's gender identity is simply a phase are incidents that fall into the category of microinvalidations.

Nadal et al. (2011) developed a thematic list of eight common microaggressions frequently endured by members of the LGBTQ+ community. They include: 1) heterosexist or transphobic language used to degrade an individual or communicate a message that heterosexuality is the expected norm, 2) endorsing gender norms and heteronormative behaviors, thereby creating an expectation of heterosexuality or adherence to heterosexual and gender norms, 3) making assumptions regarding the LGBTQ+ experience by insinuating that all LGBTQ+ individuals are the same and that their experiences are not unique, 4) exoticization or treating LGBTQ+ individuals as objects with no regard for their feelings, 5) demonstrating discomfort or disapproval related to the LGBTQ+ experience, 6) denying the existence of homophobia or transphobia within society, 7) presuming that LGBTQ+ individuals are abnormal, sexual deviants, or potential predators, and 8) denying one's own prejudices or biases related to the LGBTQ+ experience or community (Nadal et al., 2011).

In an effort to further understand the experience of microaggressions specific to the LGBTQ+ population, Nadal et al. (2011) conducted focus groups to ascertain the types of microaggressions experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as the manner in which they

reacted to such acts. Seven of the themes that emerged during the focus groups coincided with the original taxonomy previously introduced by Nadal et al. (2011) with respect to LGBTQ+ microaggressions, including the use of heterosexist terms, the endorsement of heteronormativity, assumptions that the LGBTQ+ experience is universal, exoticization, discomfort or disapproval, denial of the existence of heterosexism, and beliefs about sexual abnormality or deviancy. An additional theme, being a victim of threatening behavior or assault, was also discovered (Nadal et al., 2011). Participants felt that some incidents of microaggression were unintentional, but others were perceived as deliberate (Nadal et al., 2011), a perspective that aligns with the three categories of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations as originally outlined by Sue et al. (2007).

## **Related Literature**

### **Foundational Concepts of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

#### *Sexual Orientation*

Despite their inclusion under the umbrella of the LGBTQ+ acronym, sexual orientation and gender identity can be completely separate and unrelated concepts. Sexual orientation refers to the emotional and sexual attraction one experiences toward another individual and may be categorized by degree and direction (American Psychological Association, 2020). Individuals are believed to exist along a spectrum ranging from those who have little to no sexual attraction or interest in sexual activity to those with a high degree of attraction to many people (American Psychological Association, 2020). Additionally, one may be attracted to a person of the same gender, opposite gender, or any other gender identity. Common terms related to sexual orientation include heterosexual, straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual, but the list is by no means inclusive as the lexicon continues to expand.

One of the original models describing the stages of sexual orientation development was created by Cass (1979). This model identifies six consecutive stages comprised of identity confusion, identify comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. Other models have proposed a lifespan approach as demonstrated by the work of D'Augelli and Patterson (1995), which outlines six phases or processes that may occur in any order. These processes encompass exiting heterosexuality, developing a sexual minority identity, developing a social identity, coming out to parents, engaging in intimacy, and joining a community. This model has also been adapted to align with the transgender identity development experience (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

In a more recent quest to examine the formation of sexual identity, Robertson (2014) conducted qualitative interviews to solicit insight from LGBTQ+ youth regarding sexual orientation, identity, and behavior. From the words of participants four primary themes emerged, as young people described the processes of rejecting “compulsory heterosexuality” (p. 390), searching for an explanation as to why they felt different, exploring sexuality and intimacy, and negotiating an identity through education and experiences within the LGBTQ+ community (Robertson, 2014).

An evaluation of existing literature by Hall et al. (2021) discovered several milestones that commonly exist in the development of sexual orientation, regardless of theoretical model. Although slight variations may be found in the timeline, the most common sequence of events commences with an awareness of same-sex attraction, followed by the questioning of one’s sexual orientation. This is most often preceded by adopting a personal identity as LGBTQ+, taking part in sexual activity, coming out to other individuals, and engaging in a romantic relationship.

### *Gender Identity*

Gender, according to the American Psychological Association (2020), is a social construct comprised of the expected “attitudes, feelings, and behaviors” (p. 138) that a culture ascribes to an individual’s biological sex, or the sex assigned to them at birth, which is typically based on an observation of external genitalia and/or chromosomal testing. The term gender identity was first introduced in the original publication of *Sex and Gender: The Development of Masculinity and Femininity* in the 1960s (Stoller, 1968/1974). Stoller (1968/1974) believed that gender identity begins with “the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not the other” (p. 10). Interestingly, he suggested that a person’s gender identity is not stagnant but continues to develop over time and may become more complex (Stoller, 1968/1974). For instance, instead of simply identifying as male or female, individuals may also characterize themselves on a spectrum ranging from masculine to feminine. This early assessment of gender identity generally aligns with the current definition proposed by the American Psychological Association (2020), which states that gender identity refers to one’s internal sense of their own gender and may or may not align with the sex assigned at birth. The lexicon is constantly growing and evolving with respect to gender identity, however transgender and gender-nonconforming people (TGNP) is a widely accepted term embracing an array of individuals whose gender identity and/or gender expression does not follow the societal expectations of the majority within their culture (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Bockting (2013) proposed a non-linear process of transgender identity development whereby tasks are not completed in a specific order and may be cycled through more than once. Pre-coming out often takes place in early years when children may display gender nonconforming behaviors or feel that they do not fit into expected gender norms, however, pre-

coming out may occur at any period throughout the lifespan (Bockting, 2013). During the coming out stage, an individual acknowledges their feelings about their gender to themselves and others (Bockting, 2013). Exploration is the stage where feelings of isolation may dissipate, but the individual may struggle with turning shame into pride as they strive to feel attractive, comfortable with their body, and sexually competent (Bockting, 2013). Intimacy is the stage during which individuals work to overcome the belief that they are unlovable and, finally, integration is the culminating stage of self-acceptance (Bockting, 2013).

In recent years, the use of the term non-binary as a gender designation has become quite prevalent, especially in contemporary generations. The word binary implies the existence of two things, such as male and female, but there are numerous people who feel that they do not completely fit into one distinct category or the other. Instead, non-binary individuals may express that they identify with both male and female genders, neither gender, or they may fall somewhere in between (Johnson et al., 2020). According to Matsuno and Budge (2017) a person's gender identity may fluctuate from day to day as they feel more masculine on one occasion and more feminine on another. However, participants in a study by Losty and O'Connor (2018) shared that their feelings about their gender identity could actually change throughout the course of day. At times their gender felt more "fixed" and at others more "fluid" (Losty & O'Connor, 2018, p. 48). Individuals who consider themselves to be non-binary may or may not also identify as transgender. Common terms that refer to a non-binary identity may include gender fluid, gender queer, bigender, agender, and two-spirit, among others.

Because of the fairly recent emergence of the term non-binary, limited research exists regarding long-term outcomes for those who identify as gender diverse during childhood or adolescence. Steensma et al. (2011) developed the terms "persisters" and "desisters" (p. 499) to



distinguish between individuals with persisting gender dysphoria and those who eventually revert to the gender corresponding to their sex assigned at birth. Steensma et al. (2011) found that, during childhood, persisters and desisters shared common characteristics of gender expression with respect to friendships, clothing, toys, and activities, however one difference stood out: desisters often expressed that they *wished* they were the opposite sex, whereas persisters communicated that they *were* the opposite sex. Desisters shared that their discomfort with their gender began to decrease around puberty, as their bodies started to change and they developed feelings of attraction to others, but many also expressed that their interests and clothing choices remained more gender atypical or neutral (Steensma et al., 2011). Conversely, persisters discovered that their sense of gender dysphoria increased when puberty began and they began to experience feelings of aversion and disgust related to their changing body (Steensma et al., 2011). Furthermore, all persisters in the study found that they were attracted to their own biological sex, which they believed to be a heterosexual attraction as they identified as the opposite gender (Steensma et al., 2011).

With the understanding that gender identity exploration may be a fluid and fluctuating process, numerous mental health practitioners advocate for a gender affirming approach, which allows a child to freely choose a name, clothes, toys, activities, and friends that align with their sense of gender, but no label is placed on the child's identity (Giordano, 2019). Supporters of this model emphasize that it promotes gender health, by allowing the child to "live in the gender that feels most real or comfortable to that child and to express that gender with freedom from restriction, aspersion, or rejection" (Hidalgo et al., 2013, p. 286). Proponents also suggest that affording this opportunity for authentic expression may reduce the risks of isolation, depression, posttraumatic stress, self-harm, suicide attempts, homelessness, and incarceration (Hidalgo et al.,

2013). Adherence to this model allows for exploration as the child gains a better sense of self while supported by the surrounding adults. In contrast, the “live in your skin” (Giordano, 2019, p. 656) approach sets forth an expectation of gender conformity, rewarding such behavior and clearly discouraging nonconformity. Finally, the “watch and wait” approach lies somewhere in between. Advocates of this model do not attempt to change a child’s gender expression but strive to limit any public presentation of gender diversity until after puberty.

Although the future trajectory of gender diverse children and adolescents is yet unknown, there is a growing sense of acceptance that the development of gender identity is a “dynamic, nuanced, and fluid process” that may go through “pauses, advances, and retreats” (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020, p. 317). Whereas gender diversity was once strictly pathologized, current movements now consider gender to be a “continuous variable” and a normal “developmental variation” (Olezeski et al., 2020, p. 299). Similarly, Fiani and Han (2019) describe the concept of gender as a “multiplicity rather than a dichotomy” (p. 183) encompassing a spectrum of identities that span beyond the binary of male and female. This trend is also evident in an examination of research publications. Matsuno and Budge (2017) discovered that more than half of all scholarly articles focusing on gender identity were published in 2010 or later and with very little research addressing non-binary identities.

The trend toward embracing and accepting diverse gender labels has been shown to be more common in younger generations as reflected in statements by youth participants in a study by Allen et al. (2022). During focus group interviews, teen participants expressed that younger generations are “like, you are who you are” and that recent generations tend to be more “pro gender neutral, let them be what they want to be” (Allen et al., 2022, p. 654). The young participants also appeared to show understanding for older generations who were less receptive

to diverse gender identities, stating that their “old-fashioned” (Allen et al., 2022, p. 655) beliefs may be attributed to “naivety and limited experience” (p. 654). Younger cohorts of the population are also increasingly likely to use emerging identity labels over the more traditional. For example, Watson et al. (2020) indicated that in a sample of 4,462 youth, 26% opted for emerging labels, such as nonbinary, pansexual, and asexual. Still others provided a response in the category of “other,” writing in their own descriptors of sexually ambiguous, omnisexual, and flexible, among others (Watson et al., 2020). These shifting perceptions of the LGBTQ+ population, along with a more expansive and continually growing vocabulary, mirror the changes that have occurred in society as a whole throughout the last several decades.

### **The Societal Evolution of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Norms**

Throughout history, the topics of sexual orientation and gender nonconformity have consistently been associated with social stigma. In fact, within the discipline of the social sciences, the foundation for this negative trend can be discovered in the initial publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) (American Psychiatric Association, 1952). In this first edition, homosexuality was diagnosed as sexual deviation, along with transvestism, pedophilia, fetishism, and sexual sadism, a category that incorporated sexual assault, rape, and mutilation. The manual indicated that the sexual deviation label encompassed cases that were previously identified as “psychopathic personality with pathologic sexuality” (American Psychiatric Association, 1952, p. 39).

The subsequent publication of the DSM-2 (American Psychiatric Association, 1968) continued to include homosexuality in the category of sexual deviation. Within the description of the disorder, the manual stated that at “even though many find their practices distasteful, they remain unable to substitute normal sexual behavior for them” (American Psychiatric Association,

1968, p. 44). Following the publication of this second edition, but prior to the third, the American Psychiatric Association (1980) Board of Trustees did vote to remove homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973, prompted by gay rights activists (Baughey-Gill, 2017). However, a new category, termed sexual orientation disturbance, was then created, which encompassed “homosexuals who are disturbed by, in conflict with, or wish to change their sexual orientation” and was included in later printings of the second edition (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 40).

Despite the fact that homosexuality was no longer considered to be a disorder in the DSM-3, it was mentioned numerous times within the context of other sexual or gender disorders. Additionally, this edition also introduced the category of gender identity disorders found under the umbrella of psychosexual disorders. The DSM-3 claimed that gender identity issues, characterized by a “profound disturbance of the normal sense of maleness or femaleness,” were rare and uncommon (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 264). The category of gender identity issues was upheld in the DSM-4, but the current publication of the DSM-5 updated the term to gender dysphoria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The classification of homosexuality and gender identity issues as mental disorders and the use of words such as disturbance, abnormal, pathologic, and deviant to explain them has had a profound impact on the LGBTQ+ community. This lasting negative perception has been difficult to dispute and has perpetuated the notion that LGBTQ+ individuals require psychological treatment. Fortunately, the LGBTQ+ community has gained support in recent years through advocacy efforts, protective policies, and an increase in mainstream visibility.

Within the last several years, both the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association have released several position statements advocating for the

normalization of sexual orientation and gender identity diversity. The American Psychiatric Association (2020, para. 1) stated that “diverse sexual orientations and gender identities exist as part of the human condition” and acknowledges the pronounced stigma prevalent in society that contributes to negative mental health outcomes. The organization also emphasizes that an atmosphere of inclusion and support can positively influence psychological health and well-being. Additionally, the American Psychological Association (2015) released a detailed resolution specifically addressing sexual orientation and gender diversity for youth in schools. Within the publication, the association recognized that the developmental process may begin in childhood or adolescence and that experiences of stigma and minority stress can be profound. They also expanded on possible challenges and risk factors for young people and stressed the importance of policies, practices, programs, interventions, training, and education intended to increase protection and support for LGBTQ+ youth (American Psychological Association, 2015).

The vernacular to describe identities in the LGBTQ+ community has also evolved and greatly expanded, particularly within the last decade. For instance, the Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) currently includes “Mx” as a gender-neutral title of courtesy. Likewise, countless websites ranging from social media platforms to medical offices now offer a selection of gender options aside from male and female when creating an account. Through this increase in vocabulary, more young people have discovered words and concepts that align with their personal interpretation of their identity, which may explain why it appears that a growing number of adolescents claim to identify somewhere along the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Furthermore, a survey of young people born between 1995 and 2003, termed Generation Z, revealed that 81%

of participants felt that individuals are no longer defined by gender as they were in the past (Young, 2017).

Labels that signify identity continue to grow and change, providing individuals with more choices to define and describe who they are. White et al. (2018) surveyed the gender identity of approximately 19,000 high school students, offering a selection of predetermined labels for gender identity (male, trans male, female, trans female, or different) and for sexual orientation (heterosexual or straight, lesbian or gay, bisexual, or other). Alternatively, participants were given the option to use an open-ended field to enter their own label. Although most utilized the predefined label options, many entered a self-generated label, including genderfluid, genderqueer, nonbinary, questioning, agender, pansexual, asexual, and demisexual, among others (White et al, 2018). Researchers further found that some participants used multiple labels to describe their gender or sexual identity (White et al., 2018). They also expressed the importance of educators becoming aware of the labels young people use to describe themselves, maintaining the position that self-selected labels can be significant factors in the process of identity development as adolescents gain a greater understanding of who they are and attempt to communicate this identity to others (White et al., 2018). An awareness of the labels available to them can also lead to “aha!” moments as young people discover the words that best describe them and validate their personal identity (Conlin et al., 2019, p. 122).

The concept of “surplus visibility,” a term introduced by Patai (1992, p. 35) has also influenced a societal shift toward the mainstreaming of LGBTQ+ identities and culture. Surplus visibility occurs when members of minority groups begin to challenge the persistent ideology that they should remain “invisible and silent” (Patai, 1992, p. 35). This social and cultural shift of the last two decades has been clearly reflected in the meaningful triumphs experienced by the

LGBTQ+ community in their fight for equal rights, treatment, and protection. Legislative rulings repealed the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, expanded hate crime laws to include sexual orientation and gender identity, and solidified the right to marriage equality (PBS, n.d.).

As this climate of acceptance has become more pervasive, LGBTQ+ individuals and issues have continued to gain surplus visibility through marketing campaigns (Champlin & Li, 2020; James, 2011; Nölke, 2018), television (GLAAD, 2022), and on the Internet (GLSEN et al., 2013; Harper et al., 2016; Rideout, et al, 2022), all of which are commonly accessible to young people and can help form their beliefs and opinions. Whether they are learning current terminology on a website, noticing a gender affirming clothing line in a store, reading a coming out statement from a gay professional athlete, watching a video of a non-binary popular musician, or spotting a rainbow flag hanging at their church, adolescents are observing greater support and acceptance for the LGBTQ+ population. However, despite these positive changes, there is still a strong likelihood that this group of young people will experience minority stress as they encounter challenges and adversity in the form of microaggressions, especially in educational settings where the pervasive culture tends to prioritize heteronormativity, along with an adherence to gender norms.

### **Minority Stress and LGBTQ+ Youth**

Presently there is a scarcity of research regarding the experience of minority stress as it directly pertains to adolescents. However, a qualitative study conducted by Johnson et al. (2020) revealed the common occurrence of identity invalidation, or microinvalidation, as a unique minority stressor among non-binary youth. Within the data four primary themes were discovered, outlining different forms of invalidation (Johnson et al., 2020). The first type of invalidation was experienced during interpersonal interactions with others. When participants shared their non-

binary identity, they were frequently met with reactions of laughter, confusion, and disbelief, and were told that they were seeking attention or that this was a stage they would outgrow (Johnson et al., 2020). The young people also stated that they felt a lack of respect and a sense of invisibility when others refused to use pronouns that were gender-neutral (Johnson et al., 2020).

The second form of invalidation took place within the LGBTQ+ community itself, particularly for non-binary individuals who did not want to officially transition, as they were viewed as not truly transgender (Johnson et al., 2020). Other participants felt that many LGBTQ+ spaces were primarily overshadowed by cisgender gay males who did not demonstrate acceptance toward them (Johnson et al., 2020). Non-binary participants further discussed institutional invalidation, especially in school. These adolescents shared that they did not feel support from the school administration and were frequently misgendered by teachers (Johnson et al., 2020). Additionally, they expressed a sense of invalidation or exclusion by a heteronormative curriculum, lack of gender-neutral spaces, and an absence of policies to assist with name or pronoun changes (Johnson et al., 2020). Lastly, the adolescents in the study reflected on the absence of non-binary identities in the media, as well as in literature (Johnson et al., 2020). Existing media portrayals typically offer a singular narrative of what it means to be transgender, which in no way depicts the true diversity and richness of individual stories and experiences (Johnson et al., 2020).

Minority stress attributed to gender identity can negatively impact an individual's thoughts, feelings, and mental well-being. For instance, the non-binary participants in the study conducted by Johnson et al. (2020) revealed that their interactions with others resulted in thoughts of self-doubt. As they struggled to process and understand their own identity, the invalidating responses of others, paired with limited resources for information, often lead them to



greater confusion and distress (Johnson et al., 2020). After moving beyond this stage of doubt and confusion, the young people were then tasked with the never-ending challenge of informing others about their identity, enduring the shame and discomfort of being misgendered, and deciding if and when they should correct and educate people, knowing that this could intensify their own feelings of unease (Johnson et al., 2020). Many of the participants experienced feelings of depression and anxiety, as well as thoughts and behaviors related to self-harm and suicide, which they attributed to the collective effects of minority stress.

### **Microaggressions Experienced by LGBTQ+ Youth**

In order to better appreciate the experiences of young people and understand the factors contributing to their minority stress, Munro et al. (2019) conducted a study of adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 to explore the types, nature, and impact of microaggressions endured by LGBTQ+ youth in their daily lives at school and within their families. Findings generally aligned with the previously referenced taxonomy of microaggressions created by Nadal et al. (2011). Focus group participants shared that the cultures of their respective schools were overwhelmingly heteronormative and focused on the gender binary. Participants provided examples, such as the frequent use of the phrase “ladies and gentlemen” or “boys and girls” and class assignments that asked students to divide into groups of males and females (Munro et al., 2019, p. 1451).

The youth in the study further shared that an emphasis on gender as a label communicated the perception that male and female are the only acceptable genders (Munro et al., 2019). Heteronormative expectations were expressed through casual conversations that conveyed assumptions about young people’s involvement in opposite gender relationships (Munro et al., 2019). The misuse of pronouns, either deliberately or unintentionally, was also discussed as a

concern. Most disturbingly, some students referred to transgender students as “it” (Munro et al., 2019, p. 1452). Focus group participants overwhelmingly agreed that people tend to make assumptions about LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly related to gender expression (Munro et al., 2019). For instance, presumptions were likely to be made that a boy wearing makeup was transgender or a girl with short hair was a lesbian.

Participants described various situations in which discomfort with or disapproval of the LGBTQ+ experience was displayed, reflecting on “good” teachers who integrated LGBTQ+ content into the curriculum and “bad” teachers who verbalized that LGBTQ+ identities and experiences were wrong (Munro et al., 2019, p. 1455). The young people in the study discussed the ways in which other’s denial of transphobia or homophobia had minimized or attempted to invalidate the LGBTQ+ experience by their claims that, in present day society, it is not “a big deal” to be gay, even venturing to say that celebrating Pride month is a form of reverse discrimination (Munro et al., 2019, p. 1456). Participants also recounted uncomfortable scenarios involving highly personal and intrusive questions and assumptions. Finally, the identity of participants was regularly invalidated by others who stated that they were just going through a phase or should choose to present in manner that adhered to gender norms (Munro et al., 2019).

The resounding consensus agreed upon by the adolescent participants was that the experience of microaggressions led them to feel “invisible and overlooked” (Munro et al., 2019, p. 1458). Quite a few of the young people disclosed feelings of anger and one shared that he felt unworthy of love (Munro et al., 2019). Furthermore, many were greatly bothered by the lack of representation in the educational environment (Munro et al., 2019). They also shared their worries about their peers who may be lacking in support, as well as the LGBTQ+ community as a whole (Munro et al., 2019).

In an effort to document the experiences of and perceptions about LGBTQ+ youth, a comprehensive list of 84 specific microaggressions and prominent stereotypes, referred to as the Queer Q Sort, was developed in cooperation with a group of LGBTQ+ high school students (Linville, 2017). The list was created based on personal anecdotes, as well as information found in news articles, agency and educational reports, and popular culture (Linville, 2017). Finally, the elements of the sort were considered within the context of the combined microaggression taxonomies developed by Nadal et al. (2011), revealing the following: 1) Heterosexist language: Students reported hearing frequent name-calling, such as “fag” or “gay” and comments like “that’s so gay” (Linville, 2017, p. 4). At times the words were used as an insult, at others they were intended as a joke. 2) Endorsement of heteronormativity/gender norms: Students believed that teachers were generally embarrassed to talk about LGBTQ+ issues. Additionally, many students preferred for their LGBTQ+ peers to present as more heteronormative or gender normative. 3) Assumptions regarding a universal experience: Students were also aware of numerous stereotypes that generalized the LGBTQ+ experience, including perceptions that girls who play certain sports are lesbians, boys who play football must not be gay, gay boys appear feminine, lesbians appear masculine, partners in same-sex relationships fulfill heteronormative male and female roles, and LGBTQ+ youth are likely to suffer from depression and be suicidal (Linville, 2017). 4) Exoticization: Bisexual girls were seen as experimenting and perceived as sexual objects, available to anyone. Transgender individuals endured intrusive questions about genitalia or comments about being born in the wrong body (Linville, 2017). 5) Discomfort and disapproval: Behaviors in this category were often overt, based on beliefs that the LGBTQ+ experience is immoral, dangerous, and repulsive (Linville, 2017). These responses also had the potential to escalate toward violence (Linville, 2017). 6) Denial of societal homophobia or

transphobia: Within this category lies the claim that safety measures designed to protect LGBTQ+ youth are discriminatory toward heterosexual and cisgender students, ignoring the realistic imbalance of power between the majority and marginalized groups (Linville, 2017). 7) Assumption of pathology/deviance: Negative stereotypes regarding the LGBTQ+ population included assertions that only gay people are responsible for AIDS, they are only interested in sex and unable to engage in monogamous, long-term relationships, and that their sexuality is contagious (Linville, 2017). 8) Denial of individual homophobia/transphobia: Individuals may deny their own personal bias by stating that they have a gay friend. Furthermore, a common assumption, both within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community, is the belief that being transgender is more difficult than being lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Linville, 2017). 9) Threatening behaviors: Lastly, incidents of threats and victimization are perceived to be common in the school environment, especially in the gym and locker room. Unfortunately, school staff may ignore the behaviors or even blame the LGBTQ+ student for creating the situation (Linville, 2017).

According to Linville (2017), microaggressions and stereotypical assumptions can impact a LGBTQ+ student's sense of belonging in the school environment. Moreover, inaccurate perceptions about LGBTQ+ youth may cause them to feel misunderstood and oppressed by negative expectations. For example, the belief that all LGBTQ+ individuals are vulnerable and frequently victimized may limit or deny one's individual potential (Linville, 2017). In order to reduce acts of microaggression in schools, Linville (2017) encourages further research that considers the positive experiences of LGBTQ+ youth and the supportive measures that counteract incidents of microaggression, shifting the focus toward potential microaffirmations.

### **Risk Factors for LGBTQ+ Youth**

Despite positive societal trends related to cultural acceptance and protective policies, LGBTQ+ youth continue to be greatly impacted by experiences of minority stress and microaggressions, compounded by polyvictimization, which is described as the phenomenon of enduring a multitude of victimizations, such as physical assault, bullying, intimate partner violence, or childhood abuse (Sterzing et al., 2019). A nationwide study of 1,177 adolescents between the ages of 14 and 19 examined incidents of victimization in six separate domains (physical, sexual, bullying, property, childhood maltreatment, and indirect or witnessed) with subtypes in each as related to gender identity and sexual orientation (Sterzing et al., 2019).

Incidents of physical victimization included threats or attempts of assault, assault with or without a weapon, attacks by multiple peers, assaults by siblings, dating violence, and assault motivated by bias (Sterzing et al., 2019). Sexual victimization encompassed various perpetrators, such as known adults, adult strangers, and minors, who committed acts of attempted assault, sexual exposure, or sexual harassment (Sterzing et al., 2019). The category of bullying included physical, verbal, relational, and cyber bullying (Sterzing et al., 2019). Maltreatment in childhood considered physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, along with neglect and custodial interference (Sterzing et al., 2019). The category of property victimization involved robbery, vandalism, and theft by general offenders or siblings (Sterzing et al., 2019). The final category was comprised of participants who indirectly experienced or witnessed domestic violence, sibling abuse, assault with or without a weapon, theft, the murder of someone close to them, or community incidents of shootings, bombs, or riots (Sterzing et al., 2019).

When considering the variable of gender identity, results indicated that a large disparity exists when comparing the rates of polyvictimization for genderqueer and transgender youth with

that of their cisgender peers. The lifetime incidence of polyvictimization was 65.4% for genderqueer (AMAB) youth, 63.2% for transgender females, 57.4% for transgender males, and 55% for genderqueer (AFAB) youth (Sterzing et al., 2019). In contrast, the overall rate of polyvictimization was 39.3% for cisgender females and 31.1% for cisgender males (Sterzing et al., 2019). With respect to sexual orientation, lifetime polyvictimization was endured by 56.8% of pansexual participants, 52% of queer participants, 47% of questioning participants, and 45.8% of bisexual participants in comparison with 32.7% of their gay or lesbian-identified peers, suggesting that those who are questioning or more fluid in their sexual orientation may be at an even greater risk of polyvictimization (Sterzing et al., 2019).

Each of these incidents of victimization increases the likelihood for LGBTQ+ youth to experience elevated levels of emotional distress, mood disorders, and anxiety disorders, and engage in self-harming acts when compared with their heterosexual, cisgender peers (Russell & Fish, 2016). Connolly et al. (2016) further discovered that young people who identify as transgender are at an increased risk for eating disorders. The most concerning statistics, however, are related to suicide risk for LGBTQ+ youth. The alarming reality of the “normalization” of a “school-to-coffin pipeline” was described by Wozolek et al. (2017, p. 392) in their attempt to explain the seriousness of the experiences of homophobia and victimization that are often endured by LGBTQ+ students on a daily basis. Wozolek et al. (2017) emphasized that educators play a significant role in perpetuating homophobia in schools, either knowingly or unknowingly, and thereby contribute to the suicidal risk for LGBTQ+ students.

An analysis of data from the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) between the years 2013 and 2015 revealed that 24% of the 12- to 14-year-olds who died by completed suicide were confirmed or believed to identify as LGBTQ+ (Ream, 2019). By

comparison, 8% of the individuals between the ages of 25 and 29 who completed suicide were LGBTQ+ (Ream, 2019). This disparity suggests that adolescence is a time of elevated risk for sexual and gender minority youth, possibly attributed to inadequate or less developed coping skills and reduced options for support outside of the home environment (Ream, 2019).

In a study by Rivers et al. (2018), interviews with participants who identify as LGBTQ+ and had previously attempted suicide uncovered several common themes. Stressors related to the first disclosure of one's sexual orientation or gender identity, or coming out, were identified as major factors in suicidal ideation and attempts, especially for those who were influenced by rigid religious beliefs regarding sexuality or gender norms (Rivers et al., 2018). Other issues correlated with coming out included a sense of loneliness, isolation, and social disconnect, as well as internalized homophobia (Rivers et al., 2018). Although the two remaining themes, mental health issues and grieving lost relationships, were not directly related to LGBTQ+ status, participants shared that their identity exacerbated these stressors. Participants shared that attempting to cope with societal norms and expectations, social exclusion, physical harassment, or family hostility, while simultaneously navigating mental health challenges or struggling through the loss of loved one, proved to be an overwhelming task for many young people (Rivers et al., 2018).

### **Perceptions of School Climate by LGBTQ+ Youth**

Adolescents spend approximately 35-40 hours per week in a school setting where the pervasive atmosphere can be enormously impactful in either positive or negative ways. For LGBTQ+ youth in particular, the quality of the climate is of great concern, as the prevailing culture of most schools can be characterized as heteronormative in nature. Since 1990, The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has played a prominent role in research,

education, and advocacy efforts in an endeavor to “ensure that LGBTQ students are able to learn and grow in a school environment free from bullying and harassment” (GLSEN, 2022, para. 8). Over the years, the organization has conducted 11 anonymous school climate surveys to learn about the experiences and perspectives of youth in the United States.

The first National School Climate Survey (NSCS) was administered in 1999, as researchers and advocates for LGBTQ+ youth came to the realization that there was very little information available to capture the life experiences of this vulnerable population (Kosciw et al., 2020). The NSCS has been conducted every two years following its initial launch and the most current report from data gathered in 2019 offers a great deal of insight regarding issues related to school climate, from incidents of harassment and discrimination to sources of inclusion and support (Kosciw et al., 2020). The most recent survey was completed by 16,713 participants ranging in ages from 13 to 21 and representing each state in the nation, the District of Columbia, and the territories of Guam, American Samoa, and Puerto Rico (Kosciw et al., 2020).

With respect to perceptions of school safety, the most recent NSCS revealed that a high percentage of LGBTQ+ youth did not feel safe at school. 59.1% of the students indicated that they felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation and 42.5% lacked a sense of safety based on their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2020). Consequently, students reported absences directly related to school climate, missing out on school activities and events, and a tendency to avoid spaces segregated by gender, such as bathrooms and locker rooms (Kosciw et al., 2020). Anti-LGBTQ+ comments were regularly overheard by almost all study participants. 98.8% reported that the word “gay” was often used in a negative context and more than 95% were aware that the phrase “no homo” and terms like “dyke” and “faggot” were frequently expressed (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. xviii). Hostile remarks related to gender expression were also common (Kosciw et al.,



2020).

Alarming, the verbal assaults were not only initiated by peers. According to more than 50% of the survey responders, staff members reportedly communicated homophobic and transphobic comments as well. (Kosciw et al, 2020). In a study conducted by Formby (2015) to examine school experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, students recounted instances of teachers making comments such as “no wonder you get bullied because you act so gay” and “if my son or daughter was ever gay I’d...shoot them with a shotgun” (p. 631). Other students reported the use of offensive language by teachers, referring to students as “trannie” or “it” (Formby, 2015, p. 631).

As reflected in the NSCS results, 86.3% of LGBTQ+ students overall recounted incidents of verbal and physical harassment and assault, 44.9% had endured cyber bullying primarily through text messages and social media, and 58.3% had experienced sexual harassment (Kosciw et al., 2020). Some interactions were particularly callous and cruel. For instance, a bisexual female revealed that during her 7<sup>th</sup> grade year, peers had told her to cut or kill herself, suggested that she drink bleach, and offered her a rope for a noose (Wozolek et al., 2017). Approximately half of the victims of harassment or assault did not report the incident because they believed that nothing would or could be done, or that it would increase their risk for future victimization (Kosciw et al., 2020). Of the students who did bring the incident to the attention of school staff, 60.5% conveyed that either nothing was done, or they were told to ignore the behaviors (Kosciw et al., 2020). The bisexual female student interviewed by Wozolek et al. (2017) shared that she had been called a “carpet muncher” (p. 395) by another student and when she reported the incident to her principal nothing was done.

Garaigordobil and Larrain (2020) further examined differences in acts of bullying and

cyber bullying directed toward heterosexual and non-heterosexual adolescents. The four types of bullying included physical, verbal, psychological, and social (Garaigordobil & Larrain, 2020). The screening tool also incorporated 15 specific behaviors characterized as cyber bullying, such as threatening or offensive messages and phone calls, sharing videos of aggressive or embarrassing acts, and using social networks to exclude peers (Garaigordobil & Larrain, 2020). The findings revealed that a higher percentage of non-heterosexual youth were victims of both general and cyber bullying when compared to heterosexual peers (Garaigordobil & Larrain, 2020). Moreover, the incidents of bullying experienced by non-heterosexual victims were perceived to be more aggressive. Participants were also administered instruments to assess rates of depression, anxiety, and other psychological symptoms and concerns. Non-heterosexual victims reported higher levels of depression and social anxiety in addition to other psychological issues, such as hostility, somatization, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors (Garaigordobil & Larrain, 2020).

NSCS participants also confirmed specific acts of discrimination directly related to their LGBTQ+ identity. Between 20-30% of students were prohibited from using restroom and locker room facilities that aligned with their gender identity and were not supported in their use of chosen name or pronouns (Kosciw et al., 2020). Students also shared that they were prevented from establishing GSAs, were unable to incorporate LGBTQ+ topics in class assignments or school activities, were not allowed to attend a dance with a date of the same gender and were admonished for wearing clothing that did not adhere to gender norms (Kosciw et al., 2020).

An earlier survey conducted by Kosciw et al. (2009) of 5,420 LGBTQ+ youth between the ages of 13 and 21 also contributed to the statistical portrait of climate in schools. Researchers found that participants of an older age were less likely to hear homophobic or transphobic

language compared to those of a younger age (Kosciw et al., 2009). This finding indicates that acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals may increase with maturity (Kosciw et al., 2009). The data also suggested that older youth were less likely to experience school victimization related to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Kosciw et al., 2009). In a comparison of genders, transgender youth were most likely to endure victimization, followed by male LGBTQ+ youth (Kosciw et al., 2009). Based on these findings, it is imperative to consider the experiences and perspectives of younger students regarding school climate in order to provide more effective protections and systems of support.

The impact of school climate on the success and well-being of students can be quite significant. LGBTQ+ students navigating a hostile or unsafe school climate were found to be more likely to experience negative impacts related to their mental well-being and academic success (Kosciw et al., 2020; Kull et al., 2016). Students who experienced higher levels of victimization based on either sexual orientation or gender expression reportedly had more frequent absences, lower grade point averages (GPA), less interest in pursuing post-secondary educational opportunities, more disciplinary incidents, lower self-esteem, less sense of school belonging, and increased symptoms of depression when compared with their peers who experienced lower levels of harassment (Kosciw et al., 2020). Nearly half of the NSCS participants who considered dropping out of school stated that the decision was based on adverse experiences in the educational environment (Kosciw et al., 2020). In the simplest of terms, LGBTQ+ students who endure a hostile school atmosphere are limited in their ability to fully participate in educational opportunities and experiences. Essentially, they may be deprived of the right to an inclusive education.

Based on a comparison of prior national climate survey results, it is important to mention

that a few positive trends have emerged. Reported incidents of homophobic comments and slurs were lower in 2019 than in all of the previous surveys, however the phrase “that’s so gay” consistently remained the most common anti-LGBTQ+ remark (Kosciw et al., 2020, p. xxv). Negative assertions related to gender expression and transgender individuals also decreased between the 2017 and 2019 surveys (Kosciw et al., 2020). Incidents of both verbal harassment and physical harassment and assault related to gender expression have begun to show a pattern of decline, as reflected in the most recent survey (Kosciw et al., 2020). Unfortunately, verbal harassment related to sexual orientation has remained unchanged, but occurrences of physical harassment and assault have slightly diminished (Kosciw et al., 2020). Furthermore, positive trends are evolving with respect to discrimination. In 2013, when questions about discrimination were added to the survey, more than half of the respondents reported experiencing such acts, however, the 2019 NSCS results revealed less experiences of discrimination than in earlier years (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Although a large body of evidence describes the various challenges commonly faced by LGBTQ+ students in the school environment, several protective measures have been proposed to effectively contribute to safe and welcoming climates. Findings from all climate surveys indicate four primary factors that GLSEN suggests are most effective in enhancing school climate: 1) supportive school staff, 2) the presence of GSAs or similar clubs, 3) an inclusive curriculum, and 4) protective policies (Kosciw et al. 2020). A recent study conducted by Gower et al. (2018) maintained support for these suggestions. In this analysis, researchers surveyed school administrators to assess the presence of six specific practices intended to support LGBTQ+ students, including a specific point of contact to address LGBTQ+ related issues, visible displays of LGBTQ+ content, a GSA organization, professional development covering issues of relevance

to LGBTQ+ youth, professional development to develop more inclusive curriculum, and open discussions about bias-based bullying with students (Gower et al., 2018).

Students in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade were then surveyed regarding their involvement in various types of bullying, in the role of either a victim or a perpetrator (Gower et al., 2018). The categories included relational bullying (rumors, social exclusion) and physical bullying (pushing, hitting, kicking, threats of harm), as well as bullying specifically related to actual or perceived sexual orientation (Gower et al., 2018). The researchers discovered that students attending schools with more supportive practices experienced less incidents of each type of bullying (Gower et al., 2018). Moreover, these findings applied to *all* students, not just the LGBTQ+ population, therefore efforts to protect and support vulnerable students may serve to benefit the entire student body (Gower et al., 2018).

The four primary factors recommended by GLSEN to enhance school climate and culture for LGBTQ+ students will be examined in greater detail in the sections to follow, however it is important to acknowledge that the data is insufficient. An examination of participant demographics from the NSCS reveals that approximately 77.3% of those surveyed were high school students in 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, whereas a mere 22.6% of participants were in middle school (1.2% in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 6.9% in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and 14.5% in 8<sup>th</sup> grade) (Kosciw et al., 2020). This absence of middle school voices is a noticeable gap that must be addressed in order to effectively support LGBTQ+ adolescents of all ages.

### **Educators as Allies**

Educators can fulfill the role of ally or adversary in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. Allies are members of a majority group who offer support and advocacy for those who align with the minority (Fingerhut, 2011). In an examination of teachers who declared themselves to be allies,

Smith (2015) discovered a common description. These individuals sought to create a safe, welcoming space devoid of homophobic language, with clear boundaries set for expectations regarding the treatment of others (Smith, 2015). However, participants in the study also recounted incidents with adversaries, or colleagues who visibly demonstrated resistance to supporting LGBTQ+ youth, sending the message to these young people that they are abnormal, unwanted, and not worth learning about (Smith, 2015).

Supportive staff members can have an enormously positive impact on the well-being of the students with whom they interact. The findings from a study conducted by Kosciw et al. (2015) revealed that supportive adults had the most positive influence on both internal (self-esteem) and external (school climate) factors for LGBTQ+ students. Students who could identify a teacher ally in school were more likely to attend and reported greater feelings of safety than those without an ally (Shelton, 2019). However, despite the desire to create a safe and welcoming environment, many educators feel uncomfortable or unprepared to support their LGBTQ+ students. Resistance from school leaders, parents, and other stakeholders may serve as another obstacle. Consequently, it is necessary to determine what barriers exist in order to appropriately address them.

According to Marx et al. (2017), ally behaviors typically develop over time and through stages, especially for adults who may be engaging in a new learning process with a population they have rarely encountered. Consequently, professional development and training opportunities may help to equip school staff with the knowledge and understanding necessary to enhance this learning process and encourage their feelings of competence. Training opportunities can be a beneficial tool toward helping educators develop greater empathy and skills in their work with LGBTQ+ youth. Greytak et al. (2013) discovered that even brief professional development

sessions could have a positive impact, as demonstrated by the outcomes of two-hour workshops that were offered to certified staff members at several urban secondary schools in the Northeast. Following the trainings, participants generally reported a greater awareness of anti-LGBTQ+ behaviors taking place at school and acknowledged the importance of intervening when these incidents occurred (Greytak et al., 2013). They also expressed deeper understanding and empathy regarding the LGBTQ+ experience (Greytak et al., 2013). Conversely, however, Christensen et al. (2021) suggest that true transformative change will not occur through a “one and done” (p. 376) workshop, but through intentional, long-term practices and ongoing reflection.

The level of support offered by school principals is another variable that can serve as an impetus or obstacle in the endeavor to support LGBTQ+ youth. Payne and Smith (2018) conducted a study to assess this influence as they sought to examine the perspective of school leaders regarding their advocacy efforts for the LGBTQ+ population within their schools. Researchers contacted school leaders to share information about a professional development opportunity and discovered a great deal of “subtle resistance” and lack of knowledge during the conversations (Payne & Smith, 2018, p. 198). More specifically, Payne and Smith (2018) shared that a number of principals appeared uncomfortable with any terms related to sexual or gender identity and rarely uttered the words themselves. Some did not know the meaning of the LGBTQ+ acronym and seemed genuinely surprised to hear of the challenges experienced by these students. A few administrators also used words like “crossdressers” and “flamboyant” when describing their LGBTQ+ students (Payne & Smith, 2018, p. 199). This lack of understanding can lead to scenarios where school leaders tend to become reactive as opposed to proactive (DeWitt, 2018).

Results from the study by Payne and Smith (2018) revealed that the greatest resistance to LGBTQ+ professional development topics came from middle school administrators, who expressed that the content was not age appropriate and was only relevant to older students who were sexually active. On the occasion that those administrators did choose to implement professional development activities geared toward LGBTQ+ youth at the middle school level, it was commonly defended as a means of suicide prevention, as opposed to a tool to encourage acceptance and improve school climate (Payne & Smith, 2018). However, researchers did express appreciation that school leaders were concerned with reducing risk and felt that approaching the topic, even under this pretense, could eventually lead to more expansive discussions about inclusion and equity in the future (Payne & Smith, 2018).

Although Payne and Smith (2018) found a number of school leaders to be uninformed and unsupportive, Steck and Perry (2016) discovered the opposite in their discussions with administrators about the topic of GSAs. The principals interviewed by Steck and Perry (2016) viewed the organization as a tool for social change and a means to break the silence surrounding LGBTQ+ issues. They described the GSA as a safe place for students to obtain and share information, as well as a foundation for initiatives to create awareness and challenge heteronormativity (Steck & Perry, 2016). The consensus was that most GSAs continue to subsist on the periphery of the school culture, but the leaders were trying to be more intentional about bringing the work of the organization into daily school life and promoting its visibility (Steck & Perry, 2016). Despite their positive view of GSAs however, the administrators did admit to attempts to minimize conflict and confrontation regarding club activities and initiatives, thereby limiting possibilities for true social justice transformation (Steck & Perry, 2016).

Aside from principals, school counselors also have a prominent role in addressing the



needs of LGBTQ+ students, as well as setting expectations for school climate. School counselors have a professional and ethical obligation to advocate for each and every student, while striving to create a safe, accepting, and inclusive environment where all students can learn and grow. They are in a unique position to support and educate both students and staff, as well as families, consequently dismantling barriers to development, achievement, and success. Pollock (2006) listed several concepts that should inform the work of school counselors in their support for LGBTQ+ youth, including recognizing the existence of homophobia at both the individual and institutional level, potential lack of support from family, friends, and school, and the risks of violence, sexual abuse, and sexually transmitted disease. Furthermore, school counselors should be aware of the stages and struggles of identity development and recognize that some LGBTQ+ youth may remain isolated for fear of being misunderstood or mistreated by those in the counseling profession (Pollock, 2006).

While serving as allies, school counselors may also find themselves in various advocacy roles, such as student advocate, educational advocate, systems advocate, and social or political advocate (Gonzalez, 2017). Student advocacy refers to the individual support, counseling, and links to resources that school counselors provide to students or GSA organizations, in addition to the role they play in helping students learn to advocate for themselves (Gonzalez, 2017). Educational advocacy includes the education and training that school counselors provide to students, staff, or other stakeholders to enhance awareness and understanding of the LGBTQ+ population (Gonzalez, 2017). Also within this category is the knowledge and training school counselors seek for themselves (Gonzalez, 2017). Counselors engaged in systems advocacy utilize data to demonstrate a need for change and identify barriers that must be dismantled in order to promote student safety and improve school climate (Gonzalez, 2017). Lastly, through

social or political advocacy, school counselors may attempt to enact change outside of the school environment by working with local, state, or national organizations in the community (Gonzalez, 2017).

In the endeavor to support LGBTQ+ youth, collaborative efforts between principals and school counselors can be instrumental and highly effective (Beck, 2017; Beck, 2020). Results from two separate phenomenological studies highlight significant themes that can benefit principals and school counselors in their work together with LGBTQ+ students. In the first study, Beck (2017) focused on principal-school counselor teams who had been recognized for establishing safe and inclusive school climates for their LGBTQ+ populations. Through discussions about their experiences, four primary concepts were found to be most important in their work: 1) learning through storytelling, which promoted an understanding of the perspectives of others, 2) leading by example, by serving as a role model and educator regarding LGBTQ+ topics, 3) creating intentional partnerships with outside organizations who possess a shared vision and could offer additional support, based on an acknowledgement of the principal-school counselor team's strengths and limitations, and 4) pushing the system to challenge current structures that negatively impact LGBTQ+ students in an attempt to initiate change (Beck, 2017).

The second study of principal-school counselor teams utilized data from Beck's (2017) preliminary research, but instead focused on how educators find meaning through their experiences in working with LGBTQ+ youth. Participants first recognized the importance of reflecting on their own experiences, both personal and professional (Beck, 2020). The lack of safe, inclusive spaces during their own time as students was a common motivating experience (Beck, 2020). The second theme related to the development of their identity as an advocate, and

for some LGBTQ+ participants this meant coming out to their own student body as an authentic role model (Beck, 2020). Encouraging LGBTQ+ students to act as peer role models was also a powerful tool from which educators could learn and find meaning in their work as advocates (Beck, 2020). Taking a stand on issues of significance to LGBTQ+ students was also believed to be imperative, and discomfort and resistance were viewed as opportunities to educate others (Beck, 2020). The final theme encompassed the sense of credibility and confidence that stemmed from their recognition by state or national LGBTQ+ organizations, which reinforced their belief in the meaning of their work with and for LGBTQ+ students.

Interviews with elementary school principals in a study by Mangin (2020) revealed similar sentiments with respect to the meaning found in supporting LGBTQ+ youth. School leaders expressed their reliance on a child-centered approach when considering the needs of young transgender students, emphasizing the importance of a child's social and emotional well-being (Mangin, 2020). They described their experience of working with a transgender child and their family as "powerful" and "enlightening" and reflected on the profound meaning found in creating a school environment that could literally make the difference between life or death for a young person (Mangin, 2020, p. 275). The principals also stressed the importance of seeking knowledge and information in order to better educate themselves, school and division staff, and students, as well as the need to address and challenge personal bias and misconceptions (Mangin, 2020). Mangin (2020) was encouraged by the positive finding in the study but added a significant recommendation for future consideration. The principals interviewed primarily concentrated on the ways in which they could support individual students, however Mangin (2020) suggests a shift in focus to consider ways to establish a school climate and culture that supports *all* students, including those whose gender identity may be unknown.

Making the decision to become an ally for LGBTQ+ youth may lead educators to feel that they are performing a “balancing act” (Smith, 2015, p. 2015). As they offer support for this population, they may experience feelings of vulnerability, hesitation, and fears of “getting in trouble” (Shelton, 2019, p. 598). Another common sentiment expressed by teachers is that they often feel powerless and ineffective as they try to initiate change while “sandwiched between two layers of cultural norms,” specifically referring to both school leaders and the students whose behaviors and beliefs perpetuate the status quo (Shelton, 2019, p. 600). Therefore, according to DeWitt (2018) a sense of self-efficacy is a prerequisite for safeguarding and supporting LGBTQ+ students.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual’s belief about their ability to perform in a way that enacts influence or change (Bandura, 2000). If people do not believe that their actions will produce results, they have little motivation to try (Bandura, 2000). When school leaders and other educators acknowledge and advocate for this minority group, they are often faced with opposition from parents and other stakeholders. Depending on their level of self-efficacy, they may doubt their ability to make an impact or, conversely, seize the opportunity for a challenge. DeWitt (2018) emphasized that the collective efficacy of school leaders and staff members working in tandem may be a crucial step toward genuinely meeting the needs of LGBTQ+ students and serving as true allies.

### **The Impact of a Gender and Sexualities Alliance (GSA)**

The first GSA, or Gay-Straight Alliance, was established in San Francisco in 1998 with the intention of promoting peer support, leadership development, community collaboration, and advocacy efforts for LGBTQ+ students (GSA Network, 2022a). The National Association of GSA Networks was created in 2005 and approximately 4,000 clubs representing 40 states are

currently registered with the organization (GSA Network, 2022a). As terminology has evolved to encompass identities beyond the binary, the name was changed to Gender and Sexualities Alliance Network in 2016 (GSA Network, 2022a).

LGBTQ+ students who attend schools with GSA organizations tend to report a greater sense of belonging, less incidents of school victimization, and are less likely to engage in problematic use of alcohol than students in schools without a GSA (Heck et al., 2011). Attendance may also be positively impacted, as feelings of cohesion can lead to a greater sense of affiliation with school, effectually motivating students to attend (Currie et al., 2012). GSA members have also reported fewer symptoms of depression and psychological distress compared to their peers with no GSA present on campus (Heck et al., 2011). Regrettably, despite an increasing trend of students coming out at earlier ages, the majority of GSAs are present in high schools. As illustrated by GSA Network (2022a) records, in the year 2013 there were 1,100 registered GSAs in California, but only 40 were present in middle schools. Consequently, many elementary or middle school students are unable to benefit from this opportunity for support.

A study by Poteat et al. (2020) sought to understand precisely how GSAs impact the mental well-being of LGBTQ+ youth attending public, charter, and vocational schools. GSA members in various academic institutions throughout Massachusetts completed evaluations to assess their level of engagement in a GSA organization, along with corresponding beliefs about peer validation, perceptions regarding self-efficacy to impart social justice, and sense of hope, as well as symptoms of depression and anxiety (Poteat et al., 2020). The researchers found that greater levels of engagement in a GSA coincided with greater levels of empowerment related to peer validation, beliefs about one's ability to enact change, and feelings of hope. Although participation in a GSA was shown to enhance perceptions of peer validation and self-efficacy,

these factors were not found to directly impact mental health (Poteat et al., 2020). However, Poteat et al. (2020) did surmise that a sense of hope gained through involvement in a GSA could be instrumental in lowering rates of anxiety and depression in LGBTQ+ youth, regardless of the student's sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, or race.

According to the GSA Network (2022b), these school-based clubs fulfill at least one of three potential purposes, which may change from year to year based on the needs and interests of its members. First, it may function as a social GSA by allowing students to meet and make connections with other LGBTQ+ youth. A Pride Prom, as an alternative to the traditional prom, is one such example of an LGBTQ+ inclusive social event (Bain & Podmore, 2020). GSA members may also participate in field trips to make connections within the community and experience the culture, listen to visiting guest speakers, or simply spend time with one another while taking part in crafts, games, or other shared interests.

A GSA can also serve as a source of support by establishing a safe space where students can discuss personal issues of concern (GSA Network, 2022b). The GSA meeting room itself, which is typically a classroom, can be designed to establish an atmosphere of safety and inclusivity, utilizing rainbow colors and displaying affirming posters and messages (Bain & Podmore, 2020). A GSA sponsor in one study also shared details about their classroom library, which contained LGBTQ+ literature available to loan through an anonymous honor system (Bain & Podmore, 2020).

The final possible function is that of an activist or educational GSA, where students are committed to promoting awareness and encouraging change in relevant practices and policies (GSA Network, 2022b). GSAs often take the lead in promoting awareness days, such as LGBTQ+ History Month, Ally Week, Transgender Day of Remembrance and Resilience, World

AIDS Day, Day of Silence, Suicide Awareness Week, Mental Health Awareness Month, and Pride (GSA Network, 2021). During these awareness days, education is often a focal component. Posters, announcements, and other schoolwide activities create visibility and communicate information intended to increase understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. GSAs may also discuss pertinent policies and legislation that may impact them personally, in addition to their school or community.

A qualitative study conducted by Griffin et al. (2004) similarly outlined the primary roles that GSA clubs serve in schools. First and foremost, researchers discovered that GSAs offer a source of counseling and support, by creating safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students, as well as those who are allies (Griffin et al., 2004). Based on their findings, the role of the GSA as it relates to counseling and support, may vary based on interpretation (Griffin et al., 2004). In some schools, students informally consider the GSA to be the school counselor's office or a supportive teacher's classroom, where groups or individual students gravitate to safely meet and discuss issues primarily related to psychological well-being (Griffin et al., 2004). This particular system of support may often be "underground" instead of an "openly identified" club, which is usually attributed to a hostile school climate (Griffin et al., 2004, p. 12). GSAs in other schools were formalized organizations, however, a resounding theme still reflected the overall invisibility of the groups, demonstrated through ambiguous club names and meeting details that were not made public (Griffin et al., 2004).

Additionally, GSAs play a role in increasing visibility, raising awareness, and providing education regarding LGBTQ+ issues through school-focused and other more comprehensive efforts (Griffin et al., 2004). The roles and activities of GSAs among the different schools varied according to student interest, school climate, and administrative support, but a few school-

focused examples included attending Pride marches and GLSEN events, hosting awareness weeks, sharing information about LGBTQ+ history and issues of concern, coordinating speakers, gathering resources for school libraries, participating on committees to evaluate and formulate policy concerning school climate, and encouraging staff members to display “safe zone” stickers (Griffin et al., 2004). Griffin et al. (2004) also discovered that several GSAs took part in more expansive efforts, alongside other groups in the school or community such as task forces comprised of students, parents, and staff members. From these partnerships, a wide variety of programs and activities impacting multiple populations emerged, including diversity days, student climate surveys, parent attitude surveys, staff development and training initiatives, policies to address harassment, advocacy efforts to include benefits for domestic partners of LGBTQ+ staff, programs for LGBTQ+ parents, and the expansion of inclusive literature and curriculum (Griffin et al., 2004).

GSAs can also help to establish a sense of empowerment within members, compelling them to speak out against hatred or injustice (Mayberry, 2012). In a study conducted by Mayberry (2012), students shared that their GSA created a feeling of community, which led to a sense of responsibility to address inappropriate or harmful words and behaviors directed toward LGBTQ+ individuals. GSA members came to realize that silence would allow heterosexist and homophobic views to persist, but their collective voice could ignite the necessary changes to help those who may experience isolation and marginalization (Mayberry, 2012).

Unfortunately, regardless of their level of involvement and visibility, GSAs in the aforementioned studies were inherently limited in their ability to address the overwhelming heteronormative and gender normative cultures at their respective schools (Currie et al., 2012; Griffin et al., 2004). Currie et al. (2012) expressed a similar concern that administrators and



other school personnel often placed restrictive guidelines on GSA activities and preferred to maintain a “code of silence” (p. 58) pertaining to issues of homosexuality or gender nonconformity. A recent study conducted by Bain and Podmore (2020) further examined common obstacles faced by GSA leaders and members. Through interviews, researchers discovered that sponsors frequently faced resistance from administration, limiting their ability to promote the organization and its activities.

For instance, one teacher who advocated for creating a GSA encountered multiple barriers in her efforts (Bain & Podmore, 2020). The administration expressed concern about parent opposition, alluded that the teacher would be putting her employment at risk, and stated that the word “alliance” in GSA sounded as though she was attempting to “create gay soldiers” (Bain & Podmore, 2020, p. 1232). Although the GSA was ultimately formed, the sponsor was initially unable to display posters, or they were removed, and was required to gain permission from six different counselors and administrators to make announcements over the intercom (Bain & Podmore, 2020). In general, much of this resistance is believed to stem from a profound fear of opposition from parents and members of the community (Mayberry, 2012).

Students also face barriers to GSA involvement, albeit frequently self-imposed. Although GSAs are touted as safe zones, some students felt the opposite, fearing that participation in the club might result in “outing themselves by association” (Bain & Podmore, 2020, p. 1229). Club members reported that peers would often loiter outside the GSA room or show up to a meeting solely to see who was participating (Bain & Podmore, 2020). Moreover, efforts to organize advocacy events were stifled through a variety of limitations imposed by school administrators in their attempt to contain surplus visibility and avoid disrupting the overwhelmingly heteronormative and cis-normative school cultures (Bain & Podmore, 2020).

Additionally, it is important to mention that GSA members have rarely been consulted when schools are formulating school climate policy or creating professional development opportunities for staff, despite these issues having a direct impact on students (Mayberry, 2012). As emphasized by Mayberry (2012, p. 49), participation in a GSA could be “empowering,” but the organization itself was much less likely to be “empowered.” Mayberry (2012) proposed that building coalitions and cooperative relationships beyond the GSA club are necessary strategies to proactively initiate substantive change within a school.

### **Integration of LGBTQ+ Topics in School Curriculum**

During a 1990 meeting of the Association of Teacher Educators' Multicultural Education Special Interest Group, the non-profit National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) was formed, with the intention of promoting equity and social justice through the expansion of multicultural education practices (National Association for Multicultural Education, 2022a). According to NAME, in order to be impactful, multicultural education must be pervasive in all aspects of the learning environment, from foundational policies at the organizational level to daily school procedures and activities (National Association for Multicultural Education, 2022b). By acknowledging the significant role that schools play in shaping attitudes and beliefs, multicultural education places an emphasis on the value of cultural differences and the importance of affirming all identities, regardless of “race, ethnicity, color, national origin, sovereign tribal nations status, ancestry, gender identity and expression, sex, sexual orientation, religion, age, social class, socioeconomic status, marital status, language, disability, or immigration status” in an effort to challenge all forms of discrimination and create an atmosphere of acceptance (National Association for Multicultural Education, 2022a, para. 3).

The NAME organization firmly believes that “racism, sexism, classism, linguisticism,

ablism, ageism, heterosexism, religious intolerance, and xenophobia” should all be addressed through a school’s curriculum (National Association for Multicultural Education, 2022b, NAME's anti-discrimination statement section). Despite an increase in the inclusion of multicultural education practices related to diverse racial and ethnic groups, LGBTQ+ themes remain noticeably absent in most schools and classrooms (Flores, 2012). Opponents of multicultural education practices that address LGBTQ+ topics tend to focus on the belief that sexuality is not a relevant or appropriate concept in schools, however, LGBTQ+ inclusive themes expand well beyond the subject of sex, encompassing an appreciation for diverse families and gender roles (Flores, 2012). Accurate education can dispel myths and negate unhelpful stereotypes, leading to a safer environment in which students can better learn.

In a quest to learn about student opinions and experiences pertaining to LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum content, Snapp et al. (2015) utilized information obtained through GSA Network focus groups to examine their perspective. Students who had experienced an inclusive curriculum shared that the content was most often discussed in social science, social studies, health, and English courses, but rarely in others (Snapp et al., 2015). They reported learning about legal policies, marriage equality, terminology related to sexual orientation and gender expression, and history, such as the Stonewall Riots (Snapp et al., 2015). However, participants also reflected on potential opportunities for the inclusion of topics that were instead overwhelmingly ignored (Snapp et al., 2015). They felt that LGBTQ+ topics should have been incorporated into discussions of civil rights movements and sex education and they shared that, although there may have been LGBTQ+ content in a textbook, it was typically overlooked (Snapp et al., 2015). Some students further reported that attempts were made by peers to initiate a dialogue in class, but the teachers avoided the topic, most likely due to fear, according to the

participants (Snapp et al., 2015).

Overall, students conveyed feelings of positivity regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics into school curriculum, believing that it could enhance the feelings of safety and well-being within sexual and gender minority students, in addition to positively influencing their ability to learn and achieve (Snapp et al., 2015). They noted that when students feel a personal connection to a topic and see relevance to their lives, they are more likely to remain engaged and experience a sense of affirmation. Participants also believed inclusive topics could help the entire student body to develop empathy for others (Snapp et al., 2015). Moreover, students communicated the importance of visibility and representation for LGBTQ+ students as they consider their futures and possibilities for success (Snapp et al., 2015).

In spite of the positive feedback from students regarding inclusive curriculum material, many teachers may be hesitant to include LGBTQ+ topics in their classroom lessons. A survey administered by Page (2017) explored both levels of comfort and awareness of LGBTQ+ issues for English Language Arts (ELA) teachers of various ages and backgrounds. Although teachers reported high comfort levels, there was very little implementation (Page, 2017). The most common reason given was the fear of a negative response by parents or other members of the community, especially for older teachers and teachers in rural areas (Page, 2017). Furthermore, levels of discomfort were found to correlate with the strength of one's religious beliefs, as well as with particular denominations, especially evangelicals (Page, 2017). Teachers were more likely to have LGBTQ+ books available for students to read on their own, as opposed to integrating the content into lessons, however, this practice eliminates the opportunity to facilitate rich discussions and affirm visibility (Page, 2017).

Understanding the barrier of parental concern, Flores (2014) offered a list of potential

responses that may be utilized to explain the purpose and importance of LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum content. For instance, educators can emphasize the desire to combat bullying and hate crimes, reduce risk factors for LGBTQ+ suicides, and establish a safe learning atmosphere for *all* students (Flores, 2014). Additionally, teaching concepts related to history, culture, and civil rights movements reduces invisibility and fosters an appreciation for the accomplishments of LGBTQ+ leaders and role models (Flores, 2014). An inclusive curriculum can also help young people to develop positive character traits such as respect and acceptance of multiculturalism and diversity (Flores, 2014).

The prospect of integrating LGBTQ+ topics into the curriculum can undoubtedly lead to fear and discomfort for many educators, but it is vital to examine the underlying influences that sustain these barriers. The potential existence of personal bias and lack of knowledge should first be addressed. Miller et al. (2020) recommend that, as educators strive to move from inaction to action, they form discussion groups with peers to learn from one another, challenge bias, practice courageous conversations, and begin to create a coalition for change, emphasizing that individuals often find strength in numbers. Educators should also examine the reasons why it feels so difficult to incorporate LGBTQ+ topics, reflecting on the written or unwritten rules that may exist within their school and surrounding community (Miller et al., 2020). Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2015) recommend that teachers start where they feel they safely can and continue to build on that foundation. Ultimately, educators should strive to change their mindset from “whether” they can incorporate LGBTQ+ topics into their curriculum to “how” they can utilize creative, multimodal ideas and strategies to help all students feel included, visible, and safe (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015, p. 436).

### **The Implementation of Protective Policies**

Policies and legislation impacting LGBTQ+ youth and their educational experience can be divided into two primary categories: formal and informal (Murray, 2011). Formal policies encompass laws, mandates, regulations, and binding judicial decisions at the federal, state, or local level, whereas informal policies are based on the unwritten rules of a school's culture (Murray, 2011). In addition to the equal rights and protections afforded by the Constitution of the United States, the Equal Access Act of 1984 and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 are two federal policies commonly referenced with respect to LGBTQ+ youth in schools. The Equal Access Act of 1984 supports the existence of GSAs in schools, stating that any public secondary school that receives federal funding and has at least one additional non-curricular club may not “deny equal access or a fair opportunity to, or discriminate against, any students who wish to conduct a meeting...on the basis of the religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the speech at such meetings” (Cornell Law School, n.d., para. 1). The majority of laws and guidelines that directly affect other school policies impacting LGBTQ+ youth are typically mandated by state and local governments and school boards. Concerningly, many protections put into place for LGBTQ+ youth at any level can never be viewed as permanent, as they have been shown to change along with a vacillating political climate.

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, hereafter referred to as simply Title IX, was originally created to legally ban sex discrimination in any educational activity, program, or institution in receipt of funds from the federal government (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). In an effort to extend this protection to transgender or gender-nonconforming individuals, the administration under President Obama released a “Dear Colleague Letter” accompanied by guidance documents outlining proposed protections for transgender students in May of 2016

(U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In order to address the numerous inquiries received from parents, teachers, and school leaders regarding Title IX protections, the letter clearly confirmed that the “prohibition encompasses discrimination based on a student’s gender identity, including discrimination based on a student’s transgender status.” (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 1). For the purpose of compliance with Title IX, a student’s gender identity qualifies as the student’s sex and should be treated as such (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The documents attached to the letter included suggestions from other school divisions and athletic associations with exemplary practices in place to create a supportive school environment free from discrimination, such as addressing harassment and hostile climates, managing student names and pronouns, access to facilities, and privacy related to educational records (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Less than one year later on February 22, 2017, and subsequent to President Trump’s inauguration, the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education released yet another “Dear Colleague Letter” effectually rescinding the previous communication. Within the letter, the joint departments took the position that states and local school divisions should be empowered to devise and implement policies to meet the needs of their community and institutions (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2017). During that same year, the Human Rights Campaign administered a survey to 51,394 youth between the ages of 13 and 18 to assess their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions surrounding the change in political leadership (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2017). Nearly half of the youth surveyed shared that, following the 2016 presidential election, they felt nervous much or all of the time during the most recent 30 days and numerous others reported feeling a sense of

hopelessness or worthlessness that was attributed to the new administration (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2017).

Soon after the 2020 presidential election, President Biden issued an executive order emphasizing that “all students should be guaranteed an educational environment free from discrimination on the basis of sex,” again reinforcing that sexual orientation and gender identity are protected categories under Title IX (The White House, 2021, para. 2). Under the Biden administration, the U.S. Department of Education released a Notice of Interpretation stating that Title IX does indeed protect individuals from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The notice further stated that the Office of Civil Rights will “fully enforce Title IX” in order to prevent discrimination related to sexual orientation and gender identity (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, p. 32639). The department referenced the U.S. Supreme Court case of *Bostock v. Clayton County* to substantiate their position that treating an individual differently because of their sexual orientation or gender identity does in fact constitute discrimination based on sex (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). In addition, the document acknowledges that school policies that cause students to be treated differently because they identify as LGBTQ+ can inflict harm, including “emotional damage, stigmatization, and shame” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, p. 32639).

Throughout the years, these changing perspectives have created confusion regarding the enforcement of Title IX for members of the LGBTQ+ community. For example, although the most recent Notice of Interpretation states that the current document “supersedes and replaces any prior inconsistent statements made by the Department regarding the scope of Title IX’s jurisdiction,” it does not serve to reinstate previous guidance documents that were rescinded by other leaders (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, p. 32639). Therefore, although Title IX is



intended to protect all individuals regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, there is no concrete or permanent guidance outlining exactly how to provide these protections.

As of this writing, Title IX regulations are once again under review. Fifty years after the initial Title IX policy was enacted, the White House published a press release announcing proposed regulations to further the goal of the Biden-Harris administration to create and maintain “educational environments free from sex discrimination and sexual violence” (U.S. Department of Education, 2022, para. 2). The proposed changes include requirements that schools quickly identify and end any discriminatory practices or policies, appropriately respond to and address complaints of sex discrimination, provide support to those who have been impacted by sex discrimination, ensure protection from retaliation for those who choose to exercise their rights under Title IX, and openly share their discrimination policies with all stakeholders (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Additionally, the proposed regulations clearly state the requirement to “protect LGBTQI+ students from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics” (U.S. Department of Education, 2022, para. 4). Following this press release, a website for public comment was made available for 60 days, during which a total of 240,085 comments were entered by citizens (Regulations.gov, 2022). Based on the previous timeline of Title IX changes during the Trump administration which extended from November 29, 2018, through May 19, 2020, a final decision regarding policy implementation could take months or years, causing countless members of the LGBTQ+ community to remain uncertain of the protections afforded to them (Cohan et al., 2022).

State policy is informed by national policy; therefore, modifications to and interpretations of the federal Title IX policy decidedly influence decisions at both the state and local level.

However, the daily experiences of LGBTQ+ students in schools are most likely to be impacted by guidelines and policies developed and enforced at the local level, by either the school division or individual school. Although public schools are obligated to implement policies that improve school climate and protect the safety of students, many guidelines propose to be inclusive of all students without mentioning any particular identity or group affiliation. However, in recent years, a number of school divisions have begun to implement anti-bullying policies that clearly reference sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE) as protected categories, allowing researchers to assess the impact of these inclusive policies.

For instance, a study by Kull et al. (2016) analyzed anti-bullying policies in school divisions throughout the United States, classifying them into three distinct categories: no policy or no identifiable policy, a generic policy that does not specifically address sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, or a SOGIE-inclusive policy. Researchers then examined the study participants' perceptions of safety, as well experiences of victimization including verbal and physical harassment, physical assault, and social aggression. Findings revealed that students attending schools with SOGIE-inclusive policies conveyed greater feelings of safety and reported less incidents of social aggression or victimization (Kull et al., 2016). Interestingly, there were no differences in measures of safety or victimization for those with no policy compared to those with a generic policy (Kull et al., 2016). In other words, a generic policy may be just as ineffective as no policy at all.

Losinski et al. (2019) also suggested that programs such as school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports initiatives (SWPBIS) and social and emotional learning (SEL) opportunities, in conjunction with bully prevention and protective policies, could play an integral role in decreasing bias and discrimination in schools. SWPBIS programs create a framework for

defining behavior expectations within a school, along with systems to teach, monitor, and positively reinforce these expectations, thereby influencing the school culture and climate (Losinski et al., 2019). SEL programs, which focus on self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills, help students learn to identify and manage emotions, develop empathy for others, and make appropriate choices (Losinski et al., 2019). Schools can act as powerful change agents toward reducing attitudes of bias and acts of discrimination, as well as provide opportunities for students to celebrate diversity by learning about and interacting with individuals who are different from themselves (Losinski et al., 2019).

### **Microaffirmations and Resilience**

Research concerning LGBTQ+ youth has evolved through a variety of lenses over the last several decades, aligning with the social movements of the times. Prior to the 1970s, homosexuality in research literature was initially framed as a “social contagion” and focused on causes, prevention, and treatment (Kavanagh, 2016, p. 99). From 1970 until 1985, the topic was framed as a matter of “private identity” that should remain sheltered from public view, especially with respect to schoolteachers (Kavanagh, 2016, p. 99). Between 1985 and 2000, concern shifted to the “plight” of at-risk LGBTQ+ youth, with research solely focusing on negative outcomes within the population, such as suicide, depression, running away, homelessness, prostitution, substance use, truancy, and dropping out of school (Kavanagh, 2016, p. 99). Beginning in 2000, LGBTQ+ youth continued to be depicted as victims who lacked supportive relationships, however, from 2005 until the present day there is a growing emphasis on the concept of resilience and the existence of microaffirmations that demonstrate support for the LGBTQ+ youth community (Kavanagh, 2016).

Resilience is “the quality of being able to survive and thrive in the face of adversity”

(Meyer, 2015, p. 210) and, although research on the topic of resilience has commonly considered innate factors within an individual, the community that surrounds them has also been found to be impactful (Goffnett & Pacey, 2020). Through a series of interviews, Goffnett and Pacey (2020) examined the perspectives of transgender youth in a unique manner; participants were asked to offer supportive advice for other LGBTQ+ youth. First and foremost, participants overwhelmingly acknowledged that “challenges are real,” but also emphasized that these challenges were only one part of the experience (Goffnett & Pacey, 2020, p. 338). In order to transcend the difficulties, participants encouraged other young people to persevere, seek the positives in one’s daily experiences, and continue to optimistically look toward the future (Goffnett & Pacey, 2020). They also urged other LGBTQ+ youth to maintain a sense of pride, affirming that everyone’s identity is valid and that they should live authentically (Goffnett & Pacey, 2020). Lastly, they wanted other youth to know that they are not alone, recommending that they seek out support, resources, and positive connections with others, both within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community (Goffnett & Pacey, 2020).

The wise words of the young participants in the Goffnett and Pacey (2020) study instill a sense of optimism for the future of LGBTQ+ youth in America. Although “grown-up” legislators and educators may continue to promote a culture of heteronormativity, there is slowly but surely a flourishing climate of acceptance among young people who celebrate diversity and choose to demonstrate support for their peers no matter their identity. For decades, members of the LGBTQ+ community have endured countless microaggressions from all facets of society, but fortunately research is beginning to consider the enormously positive impact of the small acts of microaffirmation that “occur wherever people wish to help others succeed” (Rowe, 2008, p.4). In the eloquent words of Rowe (2008, p. 4) “micro-affirmations are tiny acts of opening doors to

opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening.” Accordingly, *this* is the foundation from which educators should frame and design their efforts to support the LGBTQ+ youth in their schools and community.

### Summary

The intention of this study was to address gaps in the literature by learning about experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents at the middle school level through the lens of the school counselors who provide them with support and advocacy. The primary research questions at the foundation of the study focused on specific incidents of microaggressions and microaffirmations experienced by LGBTQ+ students in the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. However, the researcher also sought to examine the types of affirming words, actions, and policies that encourage students to feel safe, accepted, and included at school. Young people are coming out at earlier ages and, in order to protect their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being, they must be embraced by support, especially words and actions that communicate messages of affirmation.

The purpose of gathering details about the microaggressions and microaffirmations impacting LGBTQ+ students’ perceptions and experiences of safety, acceptance, and inclusion was to contribute valuable insight that can be utilized when considering factors intended to improve school climate. Hearing from those in a role of support and advocacy can help policymakers and educators to understand what qualities and behaviors are believed to establish and maintain a safe, accepting, and inclusive school culture and climate for LGBTQ+ youth. Optimally, this information would encourage stakeholders to more effectively integrate these elements.

In an endeavor to improve school climates for LGBTQ+ students, Payne and Smith (2012) proposed that the questions ordinarily driving those efforts should be changed. Instead of

a primary focus on anti-bullying and anti-discrimination programs and legislation, they suggest that the emphasis should be on shifting the overall culture away from the expectation of heteronormativity and traditional gender norms (Payne & Smith, 2012). They also recommend that researchers consider ideas that might empower educators to prioritize the need for affirming, inclusive environments for their LGBTQ+ student body, striving to be proactive as opposed to reactive (Payne & Smith, 2012). This phenomenological study provided a platform for LGBTQ+ youth advocates to serve as the experts from whom colleagues, families, policymakers, and other stakeholders can learn and grow in their role of support.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The intention of this study was to evaluate the experiences of middle school LGBTQ+ students in an effort to discover the impact of microaggressions and microaffirmations on perceptions of safety, acceptance, and inclusion at school. This valuable information was gathered from the school counselors who support and advocate for them and are privy to insight regarding their daily experiences in the school building. Despite a general increase in societal acceptance and affirming practices, a large percentage of LGBTQ+ students continue to experience victimization in the form of microaggressions. Unfortunately, however, when addressing issues related to school culture and climate for LGBTQ+ youth, the experiences of students between the 6th and 8th grade are rarely solicited or considered (Kosciw et al., 2020). The current research provided a platform for school counselors to share the experiences and perceptions of this overlooked population of students.

The forthcoming chapter discusses the qualitative phenomenological design selected for the study, along with the research questions that serve as the foundation. Additionally, the chapter will outline the elements of the study, including the setting, selection of participants, detailed procedures, and the role of the researcher. A thorough explanation of the data collection and data analysis process will also be provided. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an examination of trustworthiness as related to the study, as well as ethical considerations.

### **Research Design**

In order to elicit a rich and comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences, this phenomenological study is qualitative in nature. A qualitative method is appropriate to use when a topic of concern warrants exploration and a thorough, comprehensive awareness of the

problem or issue is needed (Creswell, 2018). Participants are provided with an opportunity to communicate their voice and story, and the sharing of these details in an engaging literary format can create a sense of “being there” (Creswell, 2018, p. 49) for the reader, potentially cultivating a greater sense of empathy for the lived experiences of individuals or groups who may be different from themselves.

According to Gaudet and Robert (2018), seeking to understand a social phenomenon is quite different than an examination of causal relationships. They emphasize that “the social” is inherently complex and subjective, as it may take on a variety of meanings according to the viewpoint of each subject (Gaudet & Robert, 2018, p. 3). When exploring a problem through a qualitative lens, researchers are presented with a detailed understanding of the issue, as observed and experienced from the perspective of the individual’s lived experience. Furthermore, as described by Creswell (2018), a qualitative study can empower participants by providing an opportunity for “silenced voices” to be heard (p. 45). Considering the lack of research addressing younger adolescents within the LGBTQ+ community, it is imperative to learn from the those who can confidently share their voice. (Creswell, 2018). Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that there is no universal LGBTQ+ experience, therefore other qualitative methods such as a case study, focusing on one specific subject, or ethnography, examining a particular cultural group, were not sufficient (Creswell, 2018).

The roots of phenomenology can be found in the works of Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician, and the method of research has since gained popularity in the disciplines of sociology, psychology, nursing, and education (Creswell, 2018). Phenomenological studies were instrumental in combatting dehumanization in the field of psychology through the sharing of true human experiences (Wertz, 2005). The Journal of Phenomenological Psychology was founded in



1970 by Amedeo Giorgi, who also led an initiative to formalize the approach with a more defined methodology (Wertz, 2005). Giorgi also outlined several concepts integral to the phenomenological approach, including the descriptive nature of the method, the goal of discovering the relationship between individuals and situations, and the desire to comprehend the essence or meaning of human experiences (Wertz, 2005). The phenomenon explored in the current study is the day-to-day educational experience of LGBTQ+ middle school students as shared by their school counselors, particularly within the context of microaggressions and microaffirmations that impact their sense of safety, acceptance, and inclusion.

The specific phenomenological approach utilized in this research is hermeneutic. As phenomenology is the study of experience, and hermeneutics considers interpretation and meaning, hermeneutic phenomenology examines experience along with its meaning (Friesen et al., 2012). According to Friesen et al. (2012) a “phenomenological attitude” (p. 24), or an openness to “the other” (p. 24), is necessary to the undertaking of this approach in order to effectively consider the world from the view of another, while concurrently remaining aware of potential bias. Through this methodology, the experience of safety, acceptance, and inclusion for LGBTQ+ middle school students were explored through insight from the school counselors who support them in an effort to discover how they relate to other individuals and the world around them, as well as the meaning derived from these experiences (Emery & Anderman, 2020).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions identified below provided the framework for the study, which was designed to examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents in the middle school environment. Although GLSEN has defined four primary factors that enhance school climate for LGBTQ+ youth, including supportive school staff, the presence of GSAs or similar clubs, an inclusive

curriculum, and protective policies, the research overwhelmingly considers the perspective of high school age students (approximately 75%) over that of middle school students (approximately 25%) (Kosciw et al. 2020). Furthermore, although microaggressions contribute to minority stress for individuals of all ages (Nadal, 2019), research on these incidents in middle school has commonly been based on recollections years later (Nadal et al., 2011). Finally, a focus on microaffirmations, an area of minimal research, aspired to change the narrative of LGBTQ+ youth from victim to resilient.

RQ 1: From the perspective of school counselors, what factors related to school climate are most impactful in creating a safe, accepting, and inclusive school community for LGBTQ+ middle school students?

RQ 2: What incidents of microaggression have been experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in middle school, as perceived by school counselors?

RQ 3: What incidents of microaffirmation have been experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in middle school, as perceived by school counselors?

### **Setting**

Interviews were conducted via the Zoom virtual conference platform in order to ensure equitable access to participation for school counselors in a variety of states. Prior to scheduling the interviews, consent forms were shared through Jotform, which allowed the researcher to upload forms for potential participants to read, sign, and submit. The consent form may be found in Appendix E. Participants were informed that their identity would be held in confidence and a pseudonym would be used to share their interview data. They were also informed that they would be provided with an opportunity to review the interview content for accuracy prior to finalizing the dissertation.

### **Participants**

In an effort to examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, the primary research participants consisted of school counselors who support LGBTQ+ students enrolled in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. In order to qualify for the study, it was necessary for participants to serve as a school counselor in a middle school, therefore criterion sampling was used (Creswell, 2018). Initially, recruitment information was shared on an open forum hosted by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) called ASCA Scene, to which only school counselors have access. However, additional participants were referred through snowball sampling and social media, as not all school counselors are members of the ASCA organization (Creswell, 2018). Flyers were posted on several Facebook groups specific to school counselors, including K-8 School Counselor Network, School Counselors Connect, and Caught in the Middle School Counselors. The flyer is depicted in Appendix A and the template for the social media post may be found in Appendix B. Potential participants were asked to access a brief survey via Google Forms which asked for their name, email address, city, state, how they learned about the study, and a brief overview of the LGBTQ+ students they support. After receiving multiple fraudulent submissions, the researcher added a request for a school email address and the name of the school where they were employed for verification purposes, ensuring that this information would also remain confidential. The questions utilized in the form are outlined in Appendix C.

After participants were confirmed to meet the study criteria, they were then provided with the informed consent document via Jotform. Demographic information was collected via a Google Form, which can be found in Appendix D. This information included age, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation (if applicable), political affiliation, and level of education achieved.

Additional details regarding gender identity and sexual orientation were optional. Participants were also provided with an opportunity to select their pseudonym if they preferred.

There are no strict guidelines regarding sample size in a phenomenology; Creswell (2018) referenced studies ranging from one to 325 participants. Accordingly, researchers must make a “Goldilocks decision” to determine if their chosen sample is too small, too large, or just right (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 27). For the purpose of this study, the goal sample size of 6-15 participants was appropriate and achievable. Initially, 42 interest surveys were received and 20 potential participants signed consent forms; five failed to respond to scheduling requests. Ultimately, 15 participants completed the interview process in its entirety.

### **Procedures**

The first step in the research process consisted of approaching the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. After procuring the required approval from the IRB, the researcher then posted a flyer containing details about the study in several school counseling social media groups, as well as on an open forum hosted by the American School Counselor Association. Interested participants were directed to complete a short survey to capture their contact information, a brief overview of their experience supporting LGBTQ+ students, and the city and state in which they are employed as a school counselor. Official work emails were also collected to confirm that potential participants did indeed work in a school system. If the required criteria were met, the researcher shared a Jotform link for the participant to sign the consent form and made contact through email to schedule an interview.

At the onset of the interviews, which were conducted utilizing the Zoom platform, the researcher first provided psychoeducation regarding the terms microaggression and microaffirmation and addressed any questions related to these topics, so that all participants had

a clear understanding of the concepts before moving forward with the interview (Geroski, 2017;2016). The researcher also shared a brief synopsis of the purpose and background of the study and clarified any questions from the participant. Participants who completed the interview were immediately sent a \$25 Amazon gift card via email to show appreciation for their participation.

### **Researcher's Role**

The primary role of the researcher in a qualitative study is to gain insight into the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of the subjects through direct interactions and conversations with the participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). In order to obtain this valuable information, the researcher utilized the fundamental Rogerian skills of building rapport and trust, as well as engaging in active listening (Roller, 2015). The researcher was also observant and attentive to verbal cues, such as hesitating or redacting statements, as well as non-verbal communication that may hold additional meaning, in order to authentically and accurately portray the participant's experience (Roller, 2015).

As the researcher is the instrumental tool by which data is collected, another required role was to acknowledge any personal bias and assumptions that might surface during the process of gathering and analyzing data. As shared by Tufford and Newman (2012), qualitative information is inherently subjective, therefore preconceptions in the form of "assumptions, values, interests, emotions and theories" (p. 81) can influence the research process and impact the collection, interpretation, and presentation of the data. In order to prevent these preconceptions from altering the findings, researchers can implement the method of bracketing. Bracketing essentially refers to the process of self-reflection and the recognition of personal biases and perspectives

(Tufford & Newman, 2012), as well as “sorting out the qualities that belong to the researcher’s experience of the phenomenon” (Drew, 2004, p. 215).

Bracketing may take a variety of forms, but for the purposes of the current study, writing memos and reflexive journaling were utilized. Memoing is the process of writing brief notes during the process of collecting and analyzing data (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Observational notes can provide the researcher with an opportunity to examine feelings about the research process and the data collected, in an effort to consciously set them aside from the content and findings of the research (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Reflexive journaling is also a powerful tool that begins when the research topic is first conceptualized and continues throughout the study (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Through journaling, the researcher can consider any underlying reasons they chose the area of focus, preconceptions or judgments that may exist or arise related to the topic or participants, and potential conflicts with values and beliefs, among others (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

The researcher in this study has served as a school counselor for approximately 22 years, at both the elementary and middle school level. Over the last five years there has been a noticeable increase in discussions pertaining to sexual and gender identity, especially for students between 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade who assert that they are either bisexual or non-binary. As adolescence is the stage of identity development, it can be difficult to ascertain if students are passing through a phase or truly discovering that they identify on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Prior to commencing with the study, it was important to acknowledge this potential bias in order to avoid discounting any related experiences that might be discussed.

Lastly, throughout the entire study, it was imperative that the researcher prioritized maintaining the safety, well-being, and privacy of the participants, in addition to protecting the

data collected (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Following the data collection, the researcher was tasked with accurately interpreting the data, based on concise transcripts of audio and video files, combined with field notes capturing environmental factors, observed behaviors, and non-verbal cues that may be relevant (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The researcher then coded the data to discover common thoughts and experiences among participants that would formulate topical themes to describe the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, (Sutton & Austin, 2015). During this process, participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity. Video and audio files were stored in a password protected computer and paper consent forms, transcriptions, notes, and any other research material were stored in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's residence.

### **Data Collection Process**

#### **Psychoeducation**

The terms microaggression and microaffirmation may be unknown to participants, therefore it was necessary to provide background education about the concepts and how they apply to the research. This was done by providing psychoeducation at the start of each interview. The researcher outlined the meaning of the words microaggression and microaffirmation along with the three subtypes of microaggressions and fielded any questions for clarification. Examples of each category (microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations) were also shared.

#### **Individual Interviews**

Semi-structured individual interviews were held with participants in order to examine the factors that they believe enhance or detract from LGBTQ+ students' sense of safety, acceptance, and inclusion at school. Semi-structured interviews typically begin with questions intended to solicit the needed information from participants but allow for flexibility and adaptation as the interview progresses (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The researcher can probe deeper into pertinent

issues, while the participant can offer additional or related input when they so desire (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Furthermore, individual interviews can enhance the sense of privacy and safety in participants, which can be beneficial when discussing sensitive topics. Interviews with open-ended questions afford participants an opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in their own words without suggestions from the researcher. The sharing of these details and stories helps to create the rich descriptions that are an integral part of qualitative research.

Prior to the start of each interview, the researcher introduced herself and expressed appreciation for the participant's time and willingness to share, reminding them that they were able to discontinue the interview at any time, with no consequences. The researcher also explained the terms microaggression and microaffirmation to ensure clarity for the participants. The initial questions at the start of the interview were used to establish rapport and build a sense of connection with the participants. The remaining questions addressed the research questions serving as the foundation of the study. At the close of the interview, the participant was provided with an opportunity to share any other details or information that they believe to be significant or that they feel the researcher neglected to ask.

When conducting qualitative interviews, Patton (2015) suggests that six different types of questions be incorporated. These include questions about experiences and behaviors, opinions and values, feelings, knowledge, sensory experiences, and background or demographic questions. Within this study, questions 1-3 were intended to solicit relatively neutral but descriptive information from the participant and begin to build rapport. Questions 4-9 asked the participant to explore the concepts of safety, acceptance, and inclusion in their school environment, as well as how students experience those concepts, but were asked separately. As



recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), the interviewer should avoid asking multiple questions, but instead ask questions one at a time. These questions alternated between gauging the participant's description of the concept and then examining perceptions in greater depth. Depending on the response of the participant, their answer could fulfill one or more categories of questioning. Question 10 focused on specific challenges experienced by LGBTQ+ students. Questions 11-18 considered the elements that GLSEN suggests are impactful in creating a positive school climate to determine whether they were present in the participant's school, as well as how they might be improved, through the use of ideal position questions. Questions 19-22 focused on experiences of both microaggressions and microaffirmations, along with obstacles school counselors face when trying to create an affirming environment. Lastly, questions 23 and 24 asked participants to share the motivating factors that drive their support of LGBTQ+ youth, along with any other pertinent information they believed stakeholders should know or understand. The series of questions is listed below, as well as in Appendix F, along with the category of question, as identified by Patton (2015).

1. Please share a little about yourself, your background, and your experience as a school counselor, as well as your school. (rural, urban, demographics, etc.) (rapport building)
2. In your work with LGBTQ+ students do you find that most middle schoolers are dealing with gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, or both? (background or demographic question)
3. Approximately how many students do you work with who identify under the LGBTQ+ umbrella? (background or demographic question)

4. When you think about safety for LGBTQ+ students in school, what does that look like, sound like, and feel like? (experience and behavior question, feeling question, and/or sensory question)
5. How would you describe the level of safety for LGBTQ+ students in your school? (opinion and values question)
6. With regard to acceptance for LGBTQ+ students, what do you believe that looks like, sounds like, and feels like for students? (experience and behavior question, feeling question, and/or sensory question)
7. How would you describe the level of acceptance that LGBTQ+ students experience within your school? (opinion and values question)
8. When I say the word inclusion as it relates to school, what does that look like, sound like, and feel like for LGBTQ+ students? (experience and behavior question, feeling question, and/or sensory question)
9. What are your thoughts about the levels of inclusion LGBTQ+ students experience at your school? (opinion and values question)
10. What specific challenges or issues does this population tend to come to you about? (background or demographic question)
11. In an ideal school, what are specific things that staff members could do or say to show support and is this similar or different to what happens now? (ideal position question)
12. How do students know who and where the safe spaces are? (opinion and values question)
13. How are LGBTQ+ topics integrated into the curriculum, such as history, family life, literature, or library selections? (background or demographic question)

14. In an ideal school, how would LGBTQ+ topics be addressed in classes? (ideal position question)
15. Does your school have a GSA and, if so, can you tell me a little about it? (background or demographic question)
16. In an ideal school, what would a GSA look like? (ideal position question)
17. What current policies or guidelines (division or state level) impact your students in either negative or positive ways? (background or demographic question)
18. In an ideal school, what policies or guidelines would be implemented to help LGBTQ+ students feel safe, accepted, and included? (ideal position question)
19. What specific incidents of microaggressions can you share that LGBTQ+ students have experienced in school, from either peers or adults in the building, that impact their feelings of safety, acceptance, or inclusion? (opinion and values question, experience and behavior question, feeling question, and/or sensory question)
20. Shifting to more positive experiences, what specific microaffirmations have students experienced that contribute to their sense of safety, acceptance, and inclusion? (opinion and values question, experience and behavior question, feeling question, and/or sensory question)
21. What are the biggest obstacles you face when trying to create an affirming environment for your LGBTQ+ students? (opinion and values question and/or experience and behavior question)
22. How do you manage balancing these challenges with your ethical beliefs, either professionally or personally? (opinion and values question and/or experience and behavior question)

23. What are the most important reasons you feel driven to support your LGBTQ+ students?

(opinion and values question)

24. Is there anything else you would like to share that is important for other educators, administrators, community stakeholders, policymakers, etc. to know and understand? Or if you could be the voice of your students, what do you think they would want others to know? (opinion and values question)

### **Data Analysis**

At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher transcribed the discussions in their entirety, utilizing Dovetail, a virtual transcription service that imports video and audio, transcribes the content, and identifies patterns. The transcripts were then compared with the original recording and any necessary corrections were made.

After the transcripts were finalized for accuracy, the researcher read and re-read them without making notes in order to become immersed in the data and develop an overall sense of the study participant (Ulin et al., 2012). The coding process then occurred through two cycles (Saldaña, 2013). According to Saldaña (2013), a code refers to a word or phrase that “assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or attribute” (p. 3) for a segment of data. Coding can also be described as the identification of “meaning units” (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p. 106) that reflect common concepts found among the data. The act of decoding takes place when a reader reflects on the content to discover its meaning, whereas encoding refers to the process of determining what code to use and labeling the data (Saldaña, 2013). For simplicity, Saldaña (2013) utilizes the term coding to encompass either action. This process of analyzing the data for statements of importance is what Moustakas (1994) termed horizontalization.

During the First Cycle, the primary coding process includes Elemental and Affective Methods (Saldaña, 2013). The coding methods contained within the Elemental category include Structural, Descriptive, and In Vivo Coding. Structural Coding addresses content that specifically relates to a corresponding research question (Saldaña, 2013). Descriptive Coding identifies the various topics that are reflected in the data (Saldaña, 2013). Finally, In Vivo Coding is used to communicate the authentic voice of the participant, highlighting words or phrases that may be unique to the age group or culture (Saldaña, 2013). Affective Methods of coding can provide insight into the subjective experience of the participant, especially through the process of Emotion Coding. The combination of In Vivo Coding paired with Emotion Coding can greatly enhance the depth and richness of the participant's stories for the reader.

Following the first stage of coding, Second Cycle coding allows the researcher to reanalyze the initial codes and continue to reorganize the data (Saldaña, 2013). The intention of this Second Cycle is to further narrow down themes and concepts into clusters. For the purposes of this study, Pattern Coding will be used to group the common thoughts and experiences of participants into overarching themes. The development of these conceptual themes serves to make sense of the data and better capture the phenomenon of the participants' experiences.

After the data was coded and themes were identified by the researcher, the patterns outlined by Dovetail were reviewed and compared with those found by the researcher to determine if there were any concepts missed. No additional themes were identified. Using the data from the digital transcription can provide a level of objectivity in order to alleviate potential bias. However, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher ultimately defines, interprets, and conceptualizes the meaning of the data.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is considered through the lens of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In general, trustworthiness addresses the overall quality of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). The level of trustworthiness is dependent on the “systematic process” (Lincoln & Guba, 2016, p. 103) of the study and the confidence that may be found in both the findings and the interpretations. This rigor, or quality of being precise and accurate, parallels the characteristics of reliability and validity used in quantitative research (Cypress, 2017). According to Cypress (2017), “rigor and truth” (p. 254) is the ultimate goal of qualitative research.

Within this study, several techniques were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was assured through researcher reflexivity, triangulation of data, and member checks. Dependability was addressed through an audit trail and peer review or debriefing. Elements of confirmability included coding methods, along with further member checks and researcher reflexivity. Finally, the use of thick description increased the prospect of transferability.

### **Credibility**

Credibility refers to the degree of confidence in the findings of the research (Sutton & Austin, 2015) and whether they align with reality (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). However, in qualitative research, this reality is based on the “researcher’s interpretations of participant’s interpretations” (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 26). Consequently, researcher reflexivity is an integral component of the research process. Through reflexivity, the researcher can examine personal biases, assumptions, and judgments in order to minimize the impacts of such subjectivity on the findings of the study (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Member checking is another process that can improve credibility throughout the course of the study. After the researcher interpreted the data, member checking was conducted to validate that accurate inferences and conclusions were made, thereby ensuring that what was captured was what participants intended to communicate (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). At that time participants could offer suggestions for the researcher to better represent the thoughts and experiences they wished to share.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability is related to the concept of consistency and transparency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In order to ensure dependability, the researcher maintained accurate records and a detailed account of all steps of the study through an audit trail, which would allow for future replication (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This audit trail outlined a thorough explanation of all steps of the research process, including the setting, procedures, data collection, and data analysis (Creswell, 2018). In addition to the review provided by the dissertation chair, the researcher also collaborated and consult with a colleague so that they could evaluate the overall research process and substantiate the findings (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Similar to the concept of dependability, confirmability stems from a neutral analysis of the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The foundation of the findings must be focused on the information presented by the data, as opposed to being influenced by the interpretation and perspective of the researcher (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Within this study, the data was examined through an inductive coding approach, whereby important themes or topics were identified through the data, as opposed to making prior assumptions (Chandra & Shang, 2019). The coding was then re-examined by a colleague through a process of peer debriefing in an effort to ensure objectivity. Once again, researcher reflexivity was necessary to avoid integrating

biased assumptions into the coding process. Member checking also provided an additional safeguard to confirm that the data was analyzed and coded from a neutral standpoint.

### **Transferability**

Transferability suggests the likelihood that the findings of the study may transfer to other similar settings or populations (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Including school counselors from a variety of states in different areas of the country increased the plausibility of transferability, as there was greater diversity in representation. Additionally, participants were of various ages, genders, races, ethnicities, religious and political backgrounds, and included both cisgender heterosexuals as well as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Creating rich descriptions is another technique that strengthens transferability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Providing an extensive overview of the study's design and thorough reflection of findings allows readers to consider those details in other scenarios, leading to "case-to-case or user generalizability" (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 29). When the reader is provided with ample data and descriptors, they are better equipped to evaluate their personal situation within the context of the research and consider how the findings may be applicable to improve those circumstances.

### **Ethical Considerations**

When conducting research, following the ethical guidelines designed to protect participants is of utmost importance. The primary principles outlined in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) serve as the foundation for all research using human subjects in an effort to provide these safeguards. The three main principles set forth in the Belmont Report include respect of persons, beneficence, and justice.



Respect of persons is comprised of two expectations: individuals have the autonomy to form their own opinions and make their own choices without obstruction or coercion, unless those decisions may be harmful to others. However, this principle also acknowledges that some individuals lack autonomy due to factors such as maturity or mental capacity. Since this study included licensed professionals working in the field of education, it could be deduced that they were of sound mind to provide their consent.

The principle of beneficence refers to the obligation to “do no harm” (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979, para. 16), in addition to maximizing the benefits while concurrently reducing the risks. Potential risks for participants in the current study included the possibility of emotional distress caused by discussing negative experiences. A plausible benefit was feeling a sense of empowerment by sharing insight that could lead to positive change. Privacy was protected by conducting interviews in a location where participants were unable to be observed or heard.

Justice is the final principle outlined in the Belmont Report ((National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The researcher is obligated to treat participants fairly and protect their right to privacy. Measures were taken to provide participants with pseudonyms and any identifiable information was removed in order to maintain confidentiality and protect anonymity. The confidentiality of data was to be safeguarded by storing recordings, transcriptions, and notes in either a locked or password protected location to which only the researcher has access. Participants were made aware that data, per federal regulations, will be stored for a period of three years. After that time, all digital and material data will be destroyed via deletion and shredding.

### **Summary**

The purpose of the Methods section serves to outline the details of this study of middle school counselors as they shared experiences of microaggressions and microaffirmations that impact perceptions of safety, acceptance, and inclusion for their LGBTQ+ students. Using a qualitative approach and phenomenological design, the researcher endeavored to gain an authentic understanding of the lived experience of LGBTQ+ adolescents prior to high school. Insight was gathered through individual, semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher. After the process of data collection, the researcher transcribed, coded, analyzed, and verified the information, leading to the development of themes describing the participants' experiences and perspectives. The vital elements of trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were outlined. Additionally, the commitment to adhere to ethical principles was emphasized.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The proceeding chapter outlines a detailed summary of the thematic content revealed from the 15 interviews conducted with school counselors who support LGBTQ+ students at the middle school level. First, descriptive statistics and other pertinent information related to each participant will be outlined. Next, relevant content and excerpts from the interviews will be shared as they relate to each of the themes that emerged during the coding process. Lastly, the interview content will be evaluated through the lens of the three fundamental research questions in order to demonstrate how the data addressed each question.

### Participants

This section provides a descriptive overview of each participant interviewed for this study, along with demographic characteristics of the school in which they serve as a school counselor. A total of 42 interest surveys were submitted, but the pool decreased to 15 participants after ensuring the essential criteria was met. Each participant was required to be employed as a school counselor at a school within the United States serving students between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Additionally, it was necessary they had knowledge of and insight regarding students who identify as LGBTQ+ within their school. Potential participants were also required to read and sign a consent form prior to scheduling an interview with the researcher. To reflect the diversity among participants, each individual completed a demographic survey that included questions pertaining to age, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, political affiliation, and personal level of education, as well as whether they identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and how they would describe their sexual orientation or gender identity. Participants were provided with the opportunity to select a pseudonym to protect confidentiality or permit the

researcher to randomly choose a name. Table 1 below displays the demographic data related to the 15 participants:

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Name	Age	Race	Ethnicity	Religious Affiliation (if applicable)	Political Affiliation	Level of Education	LGBTQ+ Status	State
Audrey	27	Caucasian	Hispanic or Latino	Catholic	Liberal	Master's Degree		CA
Ava	50	African American	Not Hispanic or Latino	Christian	Slightly Liberal	Master's Degree		NC
Blake	42	Caucasian	Not Hispanic or Latino		Liberal	Master's Degree		SC
Charlie	43	Caucasian	Not Hispanic or Latino	Christian	Liberal	Master's Degree	Pan	NY
Charlotte	31	Caucasian	Hispanic or Latino	Christian	Moderate	Master's Degree		TX
Chase	48	African American	Not Hispanic or Latino		Very liberal	Master's Degree	Gay	CA
Dahlia	51	Caucasian	Hispanic or Latino	Catholic/Non-Denominational	Conservative	Master's Degree		FL
Jade	43	Caucasian	Not Hispanic or Latino		Slightly Liberal	Doctoral Degree		CO
Jeremy	30	Caucasian	Not Hispanic or Latino		Liberal	Education Specialist Degree	Gay	GA
Joy	53	Caucasian	Not Hispanic or Latino	Atheist	Liberal	Master's Degree		KS
Leslie	31	Caucasian	Not Hispanic or Latino		Very liberal	Master's Degree		NY
Liz	36	Caucasian	Not Hispanic or Latino	None	Liberal	Master's Degree		MA
Nia	37	African American	Not Hispanic or Latino	Non-Denominational Christian/Spiritual	Liberal	PhD Candidate, ABD	Pansexual	TN
Rebecca	38	Caucasian	Not Hispanic or Latino	Christian	Very liberal	Master's Degree		IA
Sabrina	29	Caucasian	Not Hispanic or Latino		Liberal	Master's Degree	Pansexual	CO

**Audrey**

Audrey is a 27-year-old Latinx female who, after completion of her master's degree, has been employed in her current position as a school counselor in California for two years. Her school, located in a suburban area, serves roughly 960 students in Pre-Kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade; Audrey primarily supports the students in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She shared that her religious affiliation is Catholic, and her political views are liberal. Audrey does not identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Audrey replied that:

I think personally, in my building, I feel like I am one of the only adults they can go to. And I know that this community, I know specifically from my students, that they struggle a lot. They struggle a lot with their mental health because they're constantly being attacked. What motivates me to support these kids is that I care about these kids. I want to make sure they know there is an adult. I think one of the scariest statistics for me was the percent of increase in suicide when students don't feel like they have a safe space. That, to me, is the scariest thing...that this kid feels so alone and that they didn't have a single person...that they were so lost and just gave up. I want them to become good human beings at the end of the day. That's all we're trying to do.

**Ava**

Ava is a 50-year-old African American female who worked in the field of behavioral health as part of an intensive in-home team, as well as in a day treatment program prior to transitioning to the school system. For the past five years she has worked at a middle school in North Carolina where there is one school counselor per grade level. Ava primarily supports students in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. There are approximately 750 students enrolled in her school, which is

predominantly suburban, but does encompass some rural areas. She estimated that the racial demographics include about 70% African American students, a little less than 20% Hispanic, and the remainder comprised of Caucasian, Asian, and multi-racial students. Ava described herself as a slightly liberal Christian. She has a master's degree and does not identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Ava simply stated that, "We're all different and middle school is hard enough. I just want all my kids to know that I support them."

### **Blake**

Blake is a 42-year-old Caucasian female who entered the field of education in 2004 as an elementary classroom teacher. She earned her master's degree and school counselor credential in 2013 and has been employed as a middle school counselor in South Carolina for the last 8 years. She is the only counselor on her campus, serving approximately 350 students in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Blake described her political views as liberal. She does not identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Blake shared that:

I'm driven to speak up if something happens...if they tell me if they're concerned about something, I'm the first one I feel like that has their back. They're middle schoolers...they're still trying to figure out who they are. I'm very concerned for their well-being and them having support. So, I feel like that really drives me to make sure that they feel safe too.

### **Charlie**

Charlie is a 43-year-old Caucasian female who just completed her third year as a school counselor in a suburban middle school in New York. There are approximately 1300 students in

the building and her caseload of about 430 students is comprised of students in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Charlie described her religious affiliation as Christian and expressed that her political views are liberal. She has a master's degree and identifies as a pansexual member of the LGBTQ+ community. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Charlie stated:

If I were a 12-year-old LGBT student and looked around, I would think, wow, the whole world hates me. I think the suicide risks...knowing that is always haunting. I would never want someone to choose that because they thought they were alone for their sexuality or identity.

### **Charlotte**

Charlotte is a 31-year-old Latinx female who has worked in the field of education and counseling since 2017. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) with a master's degree, serving as a school-based mental health counselor for a charter school network in Texas. The school where she has been supporting students in 5<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade for the last 4 years is located in an urban area. The population of 515 students is roughly 98% Hispanic with many "emerging bilingual" or English Language Learners. Charlotte shared that her religious affiliation is Christian, with moderate political views. She does not identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Charlotte mentioned the importance of giving "kids a safe space to question and figure it out...to explore different parts of gender identity or sexual identity."

### **Chase**

Chase is a 48-year-old African American male who has served in both schools and non-profit organizations for over 20 years, in either New York or California. Presently, he is

employed as a school counselor in California, where there are approximately 350 students at the middle level in his building. Chase described his school as urban with a diverse demographic, largely comprised of African American, Latinx, and Asian students. He also stated that there is a predominant Jewish population. Chase has a master's degree and shares that his political views fall into the category of very liberal. He also identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, describing himself as gay. When asked about his motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Chase reported that:

Aside from it being a personal thing, that is who I am. All throughout my career I've always been in some form of student advocacy to the point where I've had conflicts with supervisors because I was advocating for a student, and they weren't hearing me. I've always been a person that looks out for the underdog because I do think there is space for all of us. I do think that there are things to learn from every different person who comes from a different perspective, a different walk of life, a different background, a different everything.

### **Dahlia**

Dahlia is a 51-year-old Latinx female who has served students of all ages and in a variety of capacities, including social work and Headstart programs in both Texas and Florida. She has worked in the field of school counseling for approximately 13 years and has supported students at both the high school and middle school levels. For the past 6 years Dahlia has been employed as a middle school counselor in the state of Florida. Approximately 1,300 students are enrolled in her school, which she described as urban and diverse. She stated that the school is located in one of the "poorest counties" in Florida and is Title I, but the geographic area also encompasses wealthy families. Additionally, about 30% of the students come from military families. Dahlia



described her religious affiliation as Catholic and non-denominational, and her political views as leaning to the conservative. She has a master's degree and does not identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Dahlia explained that "I support my students because everyone deserves to have support, first of all. Some don't have anyone and feel isolated. I want my students to know my office is a judgment-free space for them. I accept them as they are."

### **Jade**

Jade is a 43-year-old Caucasian female who obtained her school counseling license in 2008 but worked in higher education for a period of time before entering the field of school counseling. Beginning in 2014, she served students in an inner-city Title I middle school in Colorado with a predominantly Hispanic population, of which approximately 95% were economically disadvantaged, eligible for free and reduced lunch. In more recent years, she has been employed in a more suburban environment that is still Title I, but more culturally diverse. Jade, who has earned a doctoral degree, described her political affiliation as slightly liberal. She also shared that she does not identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Jade cited the alarming statistics as a major factor:

I do not feel any student should feel unsafe or discriminated against. Our LGBTQ+ youth are no different. I feel more drawn to support this population of students because of the suicidal statistics associated with this population. It is much higher than any other population and therefore I feel strongly about ensuring their safety and mental well-being.

**Jeremy**

Jeremy is a 30-year-old Caucasian male who just completed his second year as a school counselor, following completion of both a master's and education specialist program. During his training he interned at the elementary and middle school levels, as well as in the university counseling clinic supporting college students. He has also worked in college admissions. The school in Georgia where Jeremy is employed has a population of close to 1,000 students, of which roughly 56% are Latinx, and he described the area as a mix of urban and suburban. He shared that families in the community range from the impoverished, residing in multi-generational homes, to those with extreme wealth "who buy you fancy bottles of champagne for Christmas." Jeremy described his political views as liberal and also shared that he identifies as a gay member of the LGBTQ+ community. When asked about his motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Jeremy communicated that he is driven by personal factors as well as professional accountability:

A big one, an easy one, is being a member of the community myself. Knowing that I missed out on a lot in terms of role models and people older than me that could show me what living your life as a normal human and being queer looks like because we lost a lot of them to the AIDS epidemic. There's a whole generation of us that don't know what it looks like to be who we are, where we are at 50 years old. So, that's one piece.

The second one is I guess more clinical, like the research that shows that affirming these kids is a life-saving measure. It will continue to baffle me how someone can look at our statistics and not begin to care about this population of kids. I don't really care if you support gay adults but support gay kids because they're going to grow up to be healthy gay adults. But they won't get there if we're not supportive because they will

do things that are going to potentially end their life, or they will engage in highly risky behaviors because they don't feel accepted in school. I don't know how you can look at those numbers and be like, eh, not a big deal.

### **Joy**

Joy is a 53-year-old Caucasian female who worked in social services and outside educational supports prior to obtaining her master's degree in school counseling. At the present time, she is employed as a middle school counselor in Kansas, where she has supported students in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade for the past 11 years. Joy described the area as urban with a population of primarily Hispanic, African American, Caucasian, Asian, and multi-racial families. Over 50% of the students are economically disadvantaged, qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Joy does not identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. She shared that her religious affiliation is atheist, and her political views are liberal. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Joy noted the importance of:

Making sure all my students feel supported. This is a marginalized group so how can I make sure I step up as an ally? I have a lot of family members that identify in the LGBTQ population and so wanting to make sure they know that I'm an ally all the time. Not just during June but all the time. I have a lot of friends that are LGBTQ. My personal beliefs are LGBTQ supportive, and I don't want LGBTQ students to feel desperate and want to hurt themselves because there's nobody to go to.

### **Leslie**

Leslie is a 31-year-old Caucasian female who began her seven-year school counseling career at the elementary level but moved to a middle school two years ago. Approximately 900 students are enrolled in her urban school located in the state of New York and she primarily

supports those in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Leslie has a master's degree and shares that her political views are very liberal. She does not identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Leslie explained that she feels "that every student's experience and truth is valid and deserves to be recognized and celebrated."

### **Liz**

Liz is a 36-year-old Caucasian female with a master's degree, who has worked as a school counselor for 11 years in the state of Massachusetts. She has been employed by her current school, which is located in a suburban area, for the past 6 years. There are approximately 600 students enrolled and she loops with her students, working with a singular cohort as they move through 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Liz described the school population as diverse, with a primary blend of Indian, east Asian, and Caucasian students. She claims no religious affiliation and communicates that her political views are liberal. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Liz explained that throughout her 11 years as a school counselor, she has had more and more students open up to her about their gender identity or sexual orientation:

Back then students didn't say anything, didn't know how to, or suddenly slip talking about a girlfriend, but it was so hidden. Now I'm seeing more students who are really open about it and I just want to make sure they feel like we are too. And we're okay with that. The other piece I have noticed with that population is more mental health concerns and part of that is we're not accepting or showing that we're accepting of them just as who they are. So, if they had more of a place where they just felt like they belonged maybe some of those mental health challenges would not have such a big impact on them.

**Nia**

Nia is a 37-year-old African American female who just concluded her 9<sup>th</sup> year as a school counselor in Tennessee. Her first five years were spent at a Title I, high poverty school in North Carolina, but the school where she is currently employed is affiliated with a college campus and encompasses a very different demographic. Nia has a caseload of approximately 70 and serves students across 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. She communicated that her religious affiliation is non-denominational Christian, and her political views are liberal. Nia is also a life coach and a PhD candidate. She is a member of the LGBTQ+ community and described her identity as pansexual. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Nia explained that she found inspiration by considering what she needed when she was younger:

I do what I know I needed...if only I felt as comfortable as these kids do today. My office is the safest of spaces. They can talk about whatever they want, and they know, of course, what my exceptions are and what I have to report, but they can say what they want, how they want to say it because they need that opportunity. So, I just give them that space...even if they may not have it in the classroom or feel comfortable to have it at home or just letting them word vomit...whatever they need to.

**Rebecca**

Rebecca is a 38-year-old Caucasian female with a master's degree who has served as a middle school counselor in Iowa for the past 11 years. There are approximately 1,100 students enrolled in her school, which is located in a "college town" with rural surroundings. Rebecca has a caseload of about 350 students and loops with them through all three grade levels. She stated that there are many well-educated families in the community, but there is a growing population emerging from surrounding states, as the housing is more affordable, therefore diversity is

increasing. Rebecca shared that her religious affiliation is Christian, and her political views are very liberal. Although she does not identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, she did communicate that she is a parent to two queer teenagers. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Rebecca acknowledged that the statistics related to mental health and suicide were initially the driving factor, but she then gained a greater awareness of the importance of support through the experiences of her own children:

Providing affirming spaces and relationships is lifesaving. I considered myself an advocate for the LGBTQ community for as long as I can remember and considered my spaces to be "safe spaces," but once one of my own kids came out as transgender, I realized there was so much more I could be doing to make the world a better, safer, more accepting space for LGBTQ youth, and that really drove me to be more intentional about advocacy on a bigger level.

### **Sabrina**

Sabrina is a 29-year-old Caucasian female who just completed her third year as a school counselor, working in a very small and rural community in Colorado, where the primary industries are tourism and gold mining. Her school serves about 200 students between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade and is designated as Title I, with all students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Sabrina shared that despite being in a "red area" that lacks racial diversity, there is a surprisingly sizeable, very open LGBTQ+ population. Sabrina herself identifies as a pansexual member of the LGBTQ+ community. She has a master's degree and describes her political affiliation as liberal. When asked about her motivation for supporting LGBTQ+ youth, Sabrina expressed the need for protective factors to balance out the potentially negative impacts of living in a rural, isolated area

with a great deal of generational poverty, and shared her desire to ensure that “when our kids come to school, they feel safe, they are fed, and they have a good relationship with adults.”

### **Results**

Each of the 15 interviews elicited rich details, in-depth insight, and valuable perspectives from school counselors who support LGBTQ+ youth in middle school. Following a thorough analysis of each interview transcript, several prominent themes were discovered. This analysis included a multi-step process to include coding and the identification of patterns. Finally, the interview content was examined within the context of the research questions to ensure that each question was appropriately addressed and answered.

Prior to the coding process, the researcher first compared each video with the written transcripts to confirm accuracy. The researcher then read a transcript without making notes to gain an overall sense of the content. During the next reading, significant words or statements that appeared meaningful were highlighted and brief words or phrases related to potential themes or patterns were written in the margins. Additionally, it was noted in the margin when content was found to address a specific research question. Each transcript was read multiple times, following the same procedure to make certain that all possible themes were discovered. Each of the themes and sub-themes are referenced in Table 2, displayed below.

**Table 2***Themes and Sub-Themes*

Themes	Sub-Themes
Emerging Trends	Diverse Identities Openness
Safety	Free to Be Me Physical Safety Emotional Safety Visibility and Representation Protective Policies The State of Safety in Schools
Acceptance	Acceptance Versus Tolerance Finding Community Within Community The State of Acceptance in Schools
Inclusion	Inclusion Defined The Power of Words Spaces and Places Curriculum and Content The State of Inclusion in Schools
Microaggressions	Experiences with Peers Experiences with Adults
Microaffirmations	It's the Little Things Educators Need Affirmation Too
Overcoming Obstacles	Administrators and Parents Legislation and Policy Unclear Expectations Dear Policymaker...

**Emerging Trends**

One of the most prominent trends that surfaced during the interview process was the recent surge in young people discussing sexual orientation and gender identity. Each of the 15 participants acknowledged an increase in this phenomenon over the past five years, particularly with respect to gender diversity, including transgender and non-binary identities. The school counselors also described a great deal of exploration before a student's identity was solidified. Although sexual orientation has always been a topic of consideration, the emergence in diverse



gender identities and expression is a fairly new trend, particularly the non-binary identity and the use of they/them pronouns. All 15 of the school counselors interviewed further indicated that they have noticed a trend toward greater openness regarding these topics, which can be instrumental in allowing students to seek out like-minded peer groups for support and belonging. Instead of solely relying on the school counselor while hiding their identity from others, they were more frequently turning to peers for support.

### *Diverse Identities*

During the interview process, school counselors were asked to estimate the number of students who identify somewhere under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Approximations ranged between 10 and 25% of the school's population or individual caseload. Jeremy emphasized that "It's not just individual needs. We can claim it officially as a population now." He also acknowledged that in addition to the students of whom he is aware, there are "also those kids that I can tell they're struggling with something." According to Jeremy, this struggle was more frequently related to gender identity as opposed to sexual orientation. He elaborated that:

The kids that I've seen struggle the most, it's been more related to gender identity. I'm 30 so I was in middle school early 2000ish. I feel like then people really struggled with being gay or lesbian...people weren't really talking about any other sexual identities. But now it's like the new gay struggle. The way that people struggled with being gay then is now what they're dealing with gender.

With respect to the increase in exploration, Charlie reinforced that the adolescent years are a time for trying on numerous identities in many different areas. For example, "today I want to be a rock star...I want a guitar and I want to play it...and then tomorrow I'll never touch that guitar again." Relatedly, she noted that "I have kids who I definitely think will stick with...if

they have changed their identity. And I have kids who I'm like, yeah, this is going to be a phase." This increase in exploration may be further explained by the expansive availability of information offered via technology. As Audrey shared, "They start learning more and then they're like, wait, like I thought I was this, but actually I relate more to this identity now. I think that's closer to how I feel."

### *Openness*

Not only is there an increase in the number of students exploring their sexual and gender identity, but there is also a greater sense of openness. According to Liz:

We have a really open population of students, especially in my grade, it's basically a group of students who hang out together and that is one of the things that connects them.

They identify very proudly a lot of the time...the students who are open about it are very open about it, I should say.

Jeremy shared a similar sentiment that "it's very normalized for them." This openness can even be observed in the manner in which they share details of their lives. Charlotte indicated that instead of "fully coming out and saying 'Hey, Ms. [Redacted], I'm gay or I'm bisexual or I'm X, Y, and Z, it's just like 'my boyfriend' and they're a male.'" Jeremy referenced similar scenarios, describing a conversation with a student where they mentioned their girlfriend and "I was like, did you just come out to me? And they're like 'I wouldn't call it that. I'm just gay.' And I'm like, oh okay, cool!"

However, in Jeremy's school he felt it was important to emphasize that many of the students who are open and out "are a lot of our gifted and accelerated and advanced students, a lot of our white students." He recognized that other students may face challenges related to "cultural ideals," clarifying that "this is a very white experience at my school."

Furthermore, Jeremy has become aware that when students struggle it is not necessarily related to issues with their own identity. Instead, it is often comments made by others that cause a student to feel uncomfortable.

Lastly, instead of relying on the confidential safe space offered by the counselor, this openness regarding one's identity permits students to identify peers as a primary source of support. Rebecca shared that:

They're finding communities outside of me, which is great. I don't even know all the kids that are exploring their gender identity or sexual orientation...kids are just coming out all over the place and some share, some don't. And it's not something they're wrestling with on the level where they need my support. Five years ago, I feel like I knew more about which students were because it was a thing they needed more support with. Now there's so many kids exploring and talking about it, they don't feel like they need to come to the counselor to talk about it.

### **Safety**

Throughout the interview process, several sub-themes emerged relating to the foundational theme of safety. As participants described the meaning of safety for their LGBTQ+ students, the overwhelming consensus by all 15 school counselors was that it meant students were free to be themselves, without fear of harm. They further outlined the elements of physical and emotional safety, which comprised two additional sub-themes acknowledged by all 15 participants. Each participant emphasized that emotional safety was of utmost concern, and only one expressed that physical safety had been an issue. The importance of representation and role models was also proposed by six school counselors as a significant theme that impacted sense of safety. Protective policies were also discussed, with three participants finding them to be

extraordinarily helpful, two claimed they were harmful, and the remaining 10 remarked that at times the policies could be beneficial, but often lacked concrete clarity or were not fully implemented. Finally, participants discussed the varying levels of safety experienced by students in their school building, with all agreeing that it was an area in need of improvement.

### *Free to Be Me*

This sub-theme captures the overall consensus regarding the meaning of safety for LGBTQ+ students and was mentioned by all 15 school counselors. For Ava, “immediately what comes to mind is protecting each student...allowing them the space to be who they are and feel okay about expressing that.” She stressed that safety was, of course, important for all students, “but specifically for our LGBTQ youth because there is so much stigma, so much unknown.” Dahlia defined safety as feeling protected, as well as having the opportunity to come to school and be free from judgment. As summarized by Jade, “student safety in the school means that students are able to express themselves however they choose without fear of discrimination, bullying, or bias from teachers and students alike.” Similarly, Nia stated that:

A student being safe in their school environment is having the ability to be themselves. Having the ability to explore, having the ability to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. And just feeling as if they belong as opposed to having to fit in.

In general, participants referenced both physical and emotional safety as significant factors related to school climate. Jeremy expanded on this concept, proposing that “it’s a balance of physical safety and psychological safety, where they feel like there’s no threat of something, even if it’s a perceived threat, that’s going to cause them anxiety.” From Chase’s point of view, physical safety would look like “people walking down the hallway, smiling, high fiving, those types of things that feel like community. And when I say community, I mean a well-connected

community as opposed to something that's a little bit more disjointed." With respect to emotional safety, he expressed that school would be "like a home outside of your home in terms of emotionally kind words and more supportive stances."

Audrey described multiple levels of safety, especially regarding the LGBTQ+ population. She relayed that "there is safety in the staff and then there's safety in their classroom environment and with their peers, and I think sometimes those levels don't always match." When assessing safety related to staff, she considers:

Is this a safe place for them to be? Are they going to be affirmed? If our student tells us, "No, these are my pronouns," are we actually going to be using the pronouns or are we going to be misgendering them all the time?

With respect to peers, Audrey stated that safety means that they are "literally physically and socially and emotionally safe in that community with their peers, being out as who they are."

Charlotte added that, when thinking of safety, she considers a student's "entire day from start to finish" including walking to school or riding the bus, and then walking onto campus. She described safety as the absence of "fear of what's going to happen today" and the ability for students to be themselves and "feel relaxed." Charlotte further expanded on this notion by acknowledging that safety also means that students are aware that:

If something is happening, I know who I can go to...I know I have safe and trusted adults that are going to first off, hear my concern, second, take me seriously about the concern, and third, come up with an immediate plan to address that.

Protecting the safety of students who were not completely out to everyone was also a topic of consideration for school counselors. Audrey suggested that:

When they're one on one with an adult, when they use their name, when they use their pronouns, they're not misgendering, I think that's a way that student feels heard and in the safe space. That's also a way to recognize that student and let them know I may not fully understand what you're going through, but I am consciously changing and making sure that I am saying the correct name when it's safe. So, they know that I'm constantly thinking of their safety.

Charlotte described the challenge of protecting students who were out at school, but not at home, particularly in meetings with parents or guardians when school staff is accustomed to using a different name than that used at home. In order to protect the safety of students, she has instituted a habit of referring to "the student, the student, the student."

Jeremy also explained his role in working with students who want to come out but are unsure how or do not know what to say. For some students, he realized "that our work together was about how to protect themselves, not knowing how their parents might react," explaining that:

We're not telling you to hide yourself, but we also want you to stay safe, and you being open about things is not going to keep you safe right now. So, it's unfortunate, but let's work on how to make sure we keep you safe.

### *Physical Safety*

Experiencing physical safety was explained by Charlie as "knowing you can come to school, and no one is going to hit you or hurt you physically." Jeremy added that physical safety would also include the ability to have spaces where students "can change and use the restroom and deal with things you need to deal with that are very normal needs, and not feel the physical or emotional or mental stress of having to be found out by somebody." Or alternatively:

Even if everybody knows that you're trans and they know what's going on, you don't want them to all stare at you when you go to a different place to change for PE...feeling a sense of I can just exist, and I don't have to worry about anything.

In general, participants shared a common perspective that physical safety was not a primary concern in their school building. As Joy stated, "In terms of physical safety, I think that's high." Charlie agreed, sharing that:

My students are definitely physically safe. We don't have physical violence in my building hardly ever. But I definitely think my LGBT students deal with a bit, a fair bit of microaggressions and plenty of word usage and unwillingness on the part of others to show understanding.

### *Emotional Safety*

Unlike physical safety, emotional safety was documented as a major concern for all participants. According to Charlie, emotional safety relates to the concept that "Who you are as a person is not going to dictate how people treat you...it's going to be your actions, not your identity." Rebecca described emotional safety as a student's ability to "walk the halls without being harassed or without anyone saying anything rude to them or teasing them," as well as "being able to come out to their teachers or their community." Likewise, Sabrina offered that emotional safety means that "kids are feeling comfortable to just be themselves at school" and are able to express themselves without the fear of others causing them discomfort. She further shared that:

Especially as a school counselor, I think that's very important for kids to be able to express themselves, especially in this critical period of development. I think they need to

be comfortable walking in and know that they're going to be supported by their teachers, supported by their peers.

Jeremy shared that he would “consider a kid safe at school when they feel comfortable, just existing...comfortable being themselves, talking about their life in a very open way, who their crushes are, who they think is cool...same way a straight kid does.” He further added that when students feel they have the ability to email or send messages to the school counselor about teachers who may be causing them problems, that contributes to their sense of safety. Jeremy expressed that “they at least know who their safe adults are in the building, which I think helps a lot.”

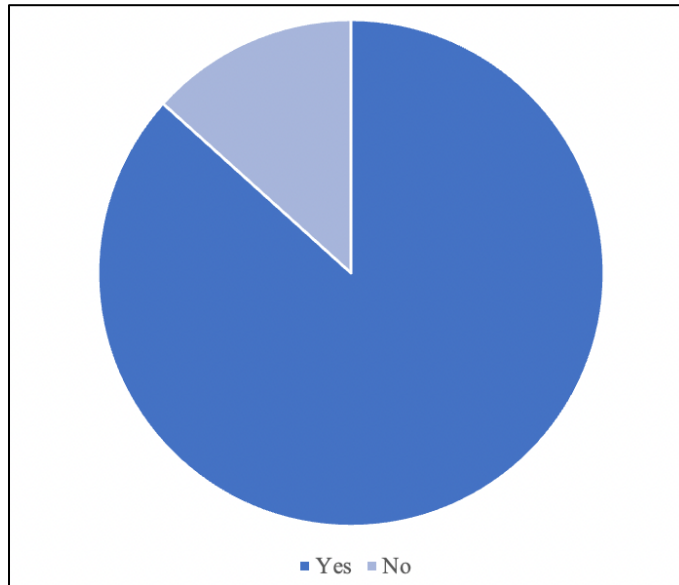
Another element of emotional safety mentioned by Liz also related to opportunities for students to openly communicate and discuss their concerns. She shared that, “Over the past year I'm hearing more about students who are hearing these hate terms and feeling understandably really impacted by them.” As a result, her school initiated intentional dialogue pertaining to the issue and focused on “making it a comfortable place to talk about it.” Despite her desire to “think all the students feel safe, I think there's definitely more openness to sharing now, so I think if they feel unsafe, we're hearing about it more.” The next step, Liz then emphasized, was to consider “what to do with all this information” and how to properly address the issues of concern.

GSA clubs were also mentioned as organizations that create a sense of safety for students. When participants were asked if there was an active GSA in their building, the majority conveyed that there was such a club. Only two of the 15 school counselors reported the absence of this organization. The results are displayed in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1**

*Presence of a GSA Organization*



When asked about the role of a GSA in middle school, Audrey noted that:

It serves multiple purposes. I think, ideally, it's just like a safe haven. It's a safe place for our students. It's an accepting and inclusive area in our school. And I think it's also a great way for other students who aren't sure to just learn and ask questions and feel safe enough to ask questions. A lot of these students can't ask these questions at home. It's giving them the community of knowing like, hey, I'm not alone. Or hey, I might not be LGBTQ, but I am an ally.

Some schools took additional measures to protect the safety of students who wished to participate in a GSA. For example, in many schools the GSA meets during the school day, so they do not have to make transportation arrangements or receive permission from parents to stay after school. Joy explained that:

We do it during the school day because some kids might not be out to their parents. We don't tell parents, "Hey, your kid is involved in this club." We don't tell them about any of the other clubs. Why would we tell them about this one? And we let them decide if they want to be in the yearbook picture.

Chase also mentioned that, until his school and local community achieves a greater sense of acceptance, he would prefer that his GSA members "remain not necessarily quiet or hidden, but discreet" in order to protect their safety.

School counselors also noted the importance of preserving student safety at home. As Liz explained:

We have students who, their name in school is a different name and pronoun than it is at home. And they tell us, I want this name here, I don't want it at home. So, we never tell the parents. I change names in emails and stuff per the child's wishes. It's nice that they feel safe with us...they're like, I'm going to tell you guys, which is the opposite of how it should be. I wish they felt safest at home because that would be better for their overall everything.

### *Visibility and Representation*

Six participants highlighted the significant impact of representation on student safety. As mused by Leslie, "Do they see themselves in other people? Do other people make them feel seen and heard?" Charlotte mentioned that two teachers in her school had disclosed that they were a part of the transgender community and other faculty were fully out about being bisexual or gay. Reflecting on the importance of this visibility, she noted:

That's just a part of who they are. And so, I think that helps our students feel safe and feel like, well, if Mr. X is fully out and proud and is able to be himself and yet come to

school and be accountable and teach me all the things that I know to pass 6<sup>th</sup> grade, then I can come and feel confident in his classroom that I'm going to feel safe. We do a really good job of not having it be a secret at our school. We openly talk about it. We are a school of teachers and educators and support staff who look like our kids, have come from the same neighborhoods as our kids, who speak the same language, and then who also identify and self-disclose that they are part of the LGBTQ community.

Jeremy maintained a similar perspective, stating that, "we, being me as the counselor, the grade level administrator, and our principal, who is also queer and is very open about him and his husband and their life...we do a really, really good job" of providing students with representation. He mentioned another staff member who is very open about being non-binary, using he, she, or they pronouns, and explained how the students easily demonstrate respect:

It's funny to see the kids correct each other and then they're like, actually no, we can use any of them. And they're like, yeah, but you should use they, or no, we can use she. So, it's good conversation. Very open.

Nia reported a similar experience in her school with a teacher who is non-binary, sharing that "the students refer to them as Teacher as opposed to Mrs. So-and-So. They see that we are able to be ourselves, which makes them better able to be themselves" and feel safe in doing so.

### *Protective Policies*

The impact of protective policies on student safety was addressed by each of the school counselors, but they differed in their perceptions of that impact. Three counselors reported that protective policies were instrumental in their efforts to protect students, however two others noted that policies recently introduced by state legislators would actually be harmful. The

remaining participants felt that some policies were helpful, but many were ambiguous or not used to their fullest extent.

Jade reported that, in her building, both state and school policies protected students from discrimination:

Students in the LGBTQ+ community are very protected by these laws and policies.

Students are allowed to use the bathroom of their choice depending on how they identify.

They are not to be discriminated against on the basis of their sexuality or identification.

Students can also play on all sports teams without discrimination as well.

Joy noted that her “district actually has really good policies in place for especially trans students. Sexuality is included in our district discrimination statement, so there is stuff in there that’s very helpful and supportive for students.” Joy also commended her principal for listening to her concerns and suggestions and being proactive with respect to initiatives that enhance safety.

However, many other school counselors remarked that state or school guidelines were often unclear. In California, Audrey explained that “We have a lot of protections for our LGBTQ students. We do not out our students. Legally we have to follow the students’ needs.” However, the path to meet these needs was sometimes ambiguous. For example, Audrey emphasized the importance of gender plans to protect students:

That is the whole point of the gender plan. Like if they’re not out at home, what do you want us to call you when your mom is here to pick you up? Which name do you want us to use when we call on the phone? With a gender plan, everyone’s on board. Especially the front office...like maybe secretaries who don’t really know everything that’s going on, but they’re the ones who call out a kid from class. Just all those little moments of misgendering or potential moments of, oh my gosh, did my mom catch that they used a

different name is really, really stressful. We want them to feel that school is their safe space, especially if home's not a safe space.

Audrey stressed her belief that gender plans should be a mandatory policy, but "we only do it if our students ask for it and most students don't know about it." She further explained that "I feel like it's just the best way to support the student and really make sure that their voice is heard, but our district doesn't have one. I had to come up with our own for our school." According to Audrey, having a concrete plan in place would be "structured and organized...there's a routine and a policy for it because that's the best way to keep up with it and really protect our kids."

Many policy decisions were made at the school level, which meant that they could be fluid and subject to change based on the administrator in charge. In Sabrina's school "if a student is asking to be called by a preferred name, you're just going to respect and call them that. That's just kind of the stance we've taken." Jeremy agreed, stating that:

It is kind of left up to schools to decide how they handle things, which is good and bad.

It's great for a school like us where we're trying to do the right things. Could be not as great for a school where you have an administrator who doesn't really buy into it and there's no check system to check their bias.

Regarding state policy, he explained that although "there's no policy in place that's causing significant harm yet, there's also not a lot to protect. There's no policy against it, but there's no policy backing it."

Rebecca described her school as progressive and supportive but shared that recent state legislation would now make it difficult to respect student requests related to names and pronouns. She elaborated, sharing that:

This is causing a lot of anxiety for my students and our staff who don't want to out students to their parents, but also aren't sure what's going to happen if they decide not to follow the law that just got passed that says we have to out students to their parents.

The new policy also specified that students could only use the bathroom aligning with their sex assigned at birth. In response, Rebecca's school "had to get creative with allowing access to single occupancy restrooms in the nurse's office and converting staff restrooms." She further remarked that "I'm really terrified that we're going to lose good educators too, that are going to say I don't want to be put in this position." Rebecca, who has two trans children of her own, discussed the necessity of her own personal income and health insurance and the ethical dilemma of knowing that "standing up for one kid could put some other kids at risk."

In states with concrete protective policies in place, school counselors believed that those protections helped them to do their jobs more effectively. According to Leslie:

It's been helpful because at least if somebody is not agreeing with me on a humanity level, I can be like, well this is legally what we have to do. Like allowing students to use the bathroom of their choosing, that sort of thing has been a topic that comes up and we can always just refer back to the legal aspects which is helpful.

Others shared that, even though protective policies were in place, they were not always used to their fullest extent. Liz noted that staff in her school:

Talk a lot about whether or not something is a civil rights violation, as far as when a student hears, or something is said to them that falls under civil rights or hate speech. So, I do feel like these policies exist but it's not super common that we go that route. Now, we haven't had something awful like someone assaulting someone...it's more people using terms they shouldn't be using. And usually, it's not directed at one person and it's

not bullying. It's usually kids saying, "that's so gay," which we address, of course. It's not meant to inflict harm on another student, although it does. Having that in place though, or the ability to I guess, go that route is helpful.

However, Liz also remarked that:

Our assistant principal, who has slightly old school views at times...sometimes he'll be like "but it's freedom of speech still." Which, okay that's also true, but let's not say that to the kids. That's obviously his policy, but I feel like that's kind of thrown around sometimes in a way to not go as far as we should with some of these situations or take the action we should.

Conversely, however, some schools were removing protective policies or instituting legislation that would make it much more challenging to address LGBTQ+ issues and topics. For instance, Dahlia reported that book banning was currently in progress in her state of Florida. Additionally, recent legislation would also place school counselors in the precarious position of having to "out" students to their parents or guardians if they expressed that they were a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

### *The State of Safety in Schools*

When considering whether they believe that students feel a sense of safety in their buildings, school counselors offered a spectrum of opinions, but all 15 shared Leslie's perspective that there "is definitely room for improvement." Leslie expanded on this comment by saying:

They have to find those people that they know they can be safe with and that is a safe space for them. I try and make myself available to be one of those spaces, which is definitely known, but it's definitely a thing across the board we're not seeing.

Blake offered a similar point of view, stating that “they can find safety, they just don’t get it everywhere.” Jade noted that she felt her students were physically safe but acknowledged that they do “deal with microaggressions from fellow students.”

Dahlia asserted that she believes students “have some sense of safety” but “don’t think that they feel like they have a full-blown sense of that.” She added that some students would “rather be a bystander instead of an upstander,” choosing to “go along with this person so I don’t seem like I’m gay too and they start making fun of me.” However, she expressed that “in my office they do know that is a safe spot for them.”

Reflecting on the end of the school year, Charlotte shared that there were definitely some students “feeling this sense of dread, like I’m not going to be here with my people...even if it’s one friend or one teacher...I’m not going to be here with them for these next couple of months.” Regarding safety she stated the importance of “fostering that culture in our school and I think we do that really well.”

Rebecca reported that if there is an issue regarding student safety in her building, she believes the adults take it seriously, but also expressed that:

I think that my LGBTQ students feel less safe than the straight students. They do report that there will be some kids that give them a hard time or tease them a little bit or hear the F-slur...I’m hearing that more than I ever have before. So even though the community as a whole has shifted toward being pretty inclusive and progressive, there is also more space for people to voice opposite feelings too. I am hearing more hateful language, but it is taken very seriously, and I know our students, they come to the adults because they know that we’re going to do something about it.



Rebecca also recounted a story from their recent 8<sup>th</sup> grade promotion ceremony, during which one of the speeches was delivered by a trans student who openly discussed their positive experience at the middle school. She emphasized that “the administrator chose their speech out of several 8<sup>th</sup> graders they could have chosen, so when I think about ‘do I think our students feel safe?’ I want to say yes.”

Sabrina estimated that students in her building are about “85% safe,” adding that “there are some adults in our community that still haven’t quite figured out how to be that supportive person.” However, she also added that:

Our admin is a super great support for the LGBT kids at our school. Earlier this year he came to me to find research for protective factors for LGBT youth that he could give to faculty and say, “here’s why we need to be calling this student their preferred name.”

Although he stated that “I hate to say that because it sounds harsh,” Jeremy recognized his inability to guarantee student safety, as the actions of others are not in his realm of control. He acknowledged that:

Students are students, kids are kids, and they say things, or they do things. Teachers are teachers and they don’t quite know the bracketing skills that counselors know and it’s really difficult for some of them to keep their personal beliefs outside of the classroom. So, while I say we do a really, really awesome job of ensuring their safety, I will never tell a kid that they’re safe at school. I won’t say the words because I don’t want to let them down. I tell them that I will do what I can to make sure that they are as safe as possible.

Blake expressed similar frustrations with colleagues who negatively impact a student’s sense of safety when “they just kind of brush things off,” adding that “I just feel like a lot of them don’t

stand up for these kids in the classroom and what they need in order to feel safe.” However, like other participants, Blake shared that, “Luckily, I’m a person that they feel safe with. I do have a lot of those kids that come and eat lunch with me or spend time with me in my office because they do feel safe in there.”

Lastly, two of the school counselors interviewed also noted that they believed that, at times, there were discrepancies between a student’s perceived sense of safety and the reality. For example, when asked if she believed that students were safe being who they are in her building, Ava stated “I’m saying no in my head, but I think it’s also what they’re telling themselves.” She then proceeded to share an anecdote about a student who did not want the school counselor to share information regarding their identity with others, but “would get upset when someone would use the wrong pronoun,” which created a challenging situation. When asked the same question, Chase shared that:

On a scale of one to 10, I would have to say day to day it would probably range from a five to a six in terms of their beliefs. The reality is, it’s a bit higher, but I would not go up to like nine or 10 because we do serve families that come from a little bit more of the conservative spectrum. And particularly because of the political events that have been occurring as of late, that has become a much more tense and heated issue, particularly surrounding the idea of pronouns and self-identification.

### **Acceptance**

When discussing elements of acceptance for LGBTQ+ middle school students, there was a great deal of overlap with factors related to safety, particularly the freedom to be themselves. However, several additional sub-themes surfaced, specifically pertaining to the general theme of acceptance. Participants elaborated on the difference between acceptance and tolerance, with

eight noting that the latter seemed to be a more prominent practice in many schools. Twelve of the school counselors interviewed described the tendency for acceptance to be found in communities within the larger school community, particularly for their LGBTQ+ students. Lastly, much like safety, participants unanimously reflected on inconsistent experiences of acceptance that students were likely to encounter within school buildings.

### *Acceptance Versus Tolerance*

Each of the 15 participants discussed common characteristics related to the meaning of acceptance. Audrey stated that, “Acceptance means this person really loves me and is completely okay with me just based off of who I am, regardless of what identity or anything that I said I am.” Liz expressed a similar sentiment, sharing that, “Acceptance is letting them be exactly who they are and feeling like people are okay with that.” Charlie succinctly stated, “You can be yourself. That’s it. You can just be yourself.” In addition, she shared, “No one is going to tell you you’re not worthwhile or of value.”

Leslie offered that, “Acceptance is being able to be free to be who they are.” She also added that she does not feel that her students are necessarily looking for others to “celebrate” who they are, but rather “just not care,” meaning that they do not wish for special treatment, but just to be treated like anyone else. Jeremy made a comparable statement that:

Being accepted makes you feel safe in a way. So, I think for them, it’s you accepting who I am...that’s foundational, that’s basic. It’s like you walking in on the first day of school and asking my name and then using the right name the rest of the year or knowing where my seat is. That’s just a basic thing. Like this is who I am, this is how I exist, this is the space that I take up. We move on.

As summarized by Ava, “Acceptance would mean no judgment and being respectful. I can still respect you and your individuality. We tell our kids all the time, no two people are the same, not even twins. So, let’s celebrate what makes us different.” Demonstrating acceptance does not necessitate grand gestures. Instead, it can be a simple act of respecting others as they are without question.

Like the other participants, Nia asserted that acceptance means “just being able to be who they are.” She continued to expand on this idea, adding that students should be able to explore their identity with support and acceptance. Nia indicated that:

We have some students who identify as non-binary...well at the beginning of the year they identified as non-binary, and now they identify as trans. And they felt comfortable with not just their friends, but with the teachers and with everyone around them, to share those things. Not fearing that they would not be accepted. A lot of these students, the majority of these students, also have strong parental support as well. So that makes a world of difference.

Charlotte offered a similar perspective, emphasizing the importance of “being open to the fact that they are going through such a confusing time, and we just have to ride the wave with them and be open and accepting.” She added a reminder that even though “we’re confused, imagine how they’re feeling in their 10, 11, 12-year-old bodies. I would like to see staff having open conversations, vulnerable conversations.”

Additionally, Nia stressed the importance of demonstrating acceptance when making mistakes, recounting what she says to students: “I’m like, okay, if I ever make a mistake, please correct me. Don’t let me do it. And you be okay with it,” emphasizing that acceptance works both ways, especially when mistakes are made but rectified. Nia maintained that “Allowing them

the ability to feel comfortable advocating for themselves I think helps them to be more willing to share themselves with others.”

Jade and Chase noted a lack of derogatory language that accompanies acceptance. With the understanding that middle school students naturally joke and tease, Jade remarked that:

Acceptance would look like students getting along with each other just as middle schoolers do, despite orientation or gender. This could look like mild teasing regarding typical middle school things, but not based on sexual orientation or gender. Acceptance would feel like being among trusted peers at school, feeling safe to be yourself without fear of dirty looks or nasty words.

Relatedly, Chase said that acceptance would involve “fewer issues over social issues, specifically related to identity. So, no F-words, no gay, no racial slurs even in jest...that type of thing. That would be a healthier community.”

Whereas acceptance promotes a sense of equity and mutual respect, tolerance refers to an individual’s willingness to merely endure the opinions or behaviors of others, even though they feel disdain or do not agree. Eight of the participants remarked that they would describe their school as tolerant as opposed to accepting. Chase offered his perception that the school population:

And even to a great extent, the faculty, exercise tolerance as opposed to acceptance. Like, you’re entitled to whatever and that’s fine, just as long as I don’t have to engage with it or see it or acknowledge its existence. We are predominantly a tolerant community as opposed to accepting. The words are there, but the earnestness, the genuineness, the authenticity is not always there.

As Joy compared the two, she noted that tolerance involves the mindset that “I’m going to tolerate you, but I know I’m right. Whereas acceptance is you can be you and I can be me and we’re going to accept that there are differences and still coexist.”

Although acceptance is the ultimate goal, in some cases tolerance may serve as the first step. According to Ava, acknowledging differences “can be the start of a conversation where you learn about someone, but again, even if you don’t understand or don’t agree, you need to be respectful.” Similarly, Audrey expressed that it was important for educators to ensure that students understand that “I’m invested in you no matter what. I’m accepting of who you are” even if they do not “fully understand the community.” Jeremy stressed that, while his school does “a really good job with diversity and acceptance and safety on paper,” he wonders if they are doing enough “to really push the teachers to challenge themselves and their biases” in an effort to move from tolerance to genuine acceptance.

#### *Finding Community Within Community*

School counselors expressed that a sense of belonging was connected to acceptance. For instance, when asked what acceptance looks and feels like for LGBTQ+ students at school, Joy stated, “That you’re a part of it. That you can find your group of people.” Dahlia also communicated that, “Acceptance is more so a belonging, fitting in, getting along.” However, 12 of the participants maintained that most LGBTQ+ students identified smaller communities within the larger school environment where they could experience acceptance.

Blake stated that, “There are pockets of places where they feel accepted...where they are included and know that they have a voice and that they are respected.” Likewise, Rebecca shared that “they find each other, but they’re still kind of separate from other groups.” She continued by saying:

It's easy to find other kids like them and be accepted in those spaces, but I wish it was more included as a whole community. It tends to be like, oh, there's a huge group of gay kids that sit in this one part of the cafeteria and they take up several tables...they're a very large group and they have a sense of community, but there is still a divide between them and the other students. There's not a lot of crossover between students that are generally held in high esteem by their peers...I'm going to use some cliches...like the athletes. I do feel like they find community and they find acceptance in their space or in their community with each other.

Despite the lack of acceptance schoolwide, Charlie noted that, "They're accepted because they find their people and they have a school family." Dahlia agreed that the LGBTQ+ students tend to seek out their own group, stating that, "I feel like they can be themselves around each other." Jade added that LGBTQ+ students are often "accepted among their peers who are struggling with similar issues as themselves. They have become their own sub-group of students, which is unfortunate." Jeremy concurred, saying that, "There are spaces for them, but I think, big picture, it's hard for them to say this school is accepting."

In addition to safety, the presence of a GSA club was also identified as an organization where students could find acceptance. Jade leads the GSA in her building and described their activities:

We talk about personal issues the students are facing and, as a group, come up with solutions that provide support for the students. We speak about issues facing the students within the school as well and how we, as a group, can promote change. Sometimes we just hang out and have fun. It is just a space where kids feel they can be themselves and not be judged.

Students themselves were often instrumental in forming the GSA clubs in their school, advocating for their own need for acceptance and sense of belonging. Liz recalled:

That's what prompted the [Redacted] Club. I had a student come to one of our other counselors and was like, "do we have a pride club?" She was a 6<sup>th</sup> grader. And we were like, we don't. And then we're like, why don't we? So, we started talking about it...like do we think we would have kids be interested? We were like, alright let's see what happens. And we've had, in and out, like 30 kids and pretty much 20 who come to every meeting.

According to Leslie, the overall acceptance of LGBTQ+ students in school communities frequently follows a pattern that mirrors societal and cultural norms. She further explained that:

I have found that in our school's population there are different subgroups that are more accepted than others. So, we have students that have transitioned to being a male and that's accepted but I do not see the other way, a trans female being accepted. And I think you also see that reflected in society and statistics...like a lot of female and female relationships, not really male and male. And I think that people would have a really strong negative response to that...some of the students would.

Charlie noted a similar experience, explaining that the only boys in her GSA were trans boys, which she believed to be very typical. She added that, in middle school, "I don't think a lot of boys are comfortable coming out. I know there's a few boys that I am convinced will, but in the last year I think I had one."

Social and cultural norms were also a factor for many students who found it challenging to fulfill their need for belonging at home. Charlotte shared that:



So many kids can't be their full selves in their homes. With our population being 98% Hispanic, within the Hispanic community the LGBTQ representation is still really not there. It's very much taboo...we're not talking about that...that's not who you are. And so, our kids, I think, are able to come to school and really just feel like I can be whoever I want to be.

### *The State of Acceptance in Schools*

With respect to the state of acceptance for LGBTQ+ students in schools, each of the 15 school counselors interviewed shared the viewpoint of Rebecca who noted that “there’s still a lot of room to grow as far as not being othered” or Jade who remarked that “there is still a lot of work to be done.” In every school represented, students struggled with acceptance at some level. Some believed that their school was doing a fairly good job of demonstrating acceptance for LGBTQ+ students, such as Sabrina who shared that, “For the most part our community is very good about respecting pronouns and names for our students who go by something different.” Charlie concurred, stating that, “Because of the adult effort there is a stronger feeling of acceptance here.”

School counselors also acknowledged that a student’s experience of acceptance was likely to vary between encounters with different individuals in the building. Audrey commented that she was aware that:

There are students who are out to me and out to some of their teachers, not all of their teachers. Because with some of their teachers they’ve tried and they’re like, I don’t really feel like they paid much attention to it or were accepting of it. I think that student felt safe enough to go to that adult, but after going to that adult they didn’t feel accepted by them.

A negative experience with one person may then lead to future hesitation with others. Dahlia suggested that students may face uncertainty about opening up:

Simply because they think they're going to be judged and they don't know where and whom or where that line is. If some of them have already come out to their parents and they've gotten negative judgment or negative consequences from home, then they're definitely knowing that, if I do this, this is the kind of reaction I've gotten from home, then what type of reaction am I going to get from the school?

The same reluctance can apply with respect to other youth, such as the case of a transgender student described by Audrey who “was out at home, out with staff, but not at school with their peers. And it's usually the complete opposite. This student really did not feel accepted or safe with their peers.” Conversely, however, Leslie acknowledged that there were often unexpected demonstrations of acceptance among peers. She described a conversation with a “tough inner-city kid who was just like ‘and then *she*’...using the right pronouns,” noting how that intentional act of acceptance melted her heart.

A student's sense of acceptance can be further compromised by other variables, such as gendered spaces in the school building. Liz recalled a recent conversation with a student who:

Was telling me the difficulties of using the bathroom because this student identifies as he/him and was born biologically he/him, but physically has very long hair and wears dresses. I wouldn't say he feels accepted because kids are always saying, “Why are you in this bathroom?” I don't think the student would say that all the kids accept him exactly how he is because he's always being met with these questions.

On the other hand, Charlotte shared several stories reflecting positive experiences of acceptance and support. For example, she mentioned a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student who was new to the building last year and:

Came in being a little bit reserved, but then was able to figure out the culture of the school and would come to school with the manicure, start to put on makeup with his friends in class and come, at the very end, with full eyelashes, full...the whole she-bang. She offered another anecdote about an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student in their second year at the school who “wanted to be called a name that was not their legal name, wanting to identify as a transgender male and their class just full-on accepted them. Like no ifs, ands, or buts, like ‘but aren’t you a girl?’ Lastly, Charlotte shared one final story of unexpected acceptance:

This year there was a situation where we had another student come in, a new student who wasn’t familiar with our culture, came into this classroom and students, who I never thought would be defensive, they just full-on rallied around their student who identified as trans. They were just totally shutting down any negative comments. And it was boys that are on our soccer team...fully masculine young men, defending their [trans] male classmate. It was just one of those moments where, you know we don’t always, especially in middle school, get to see the fruits of our labor. But I think that since 5<sup>th</sup> grade they have been taught acceptance...acceptance and love...and that really showed it.

### **Inclusion**

During the interview process, school counselors were asked to consider factors related to inclusion for LGBTQ+ students in their building, along with their personal definition of the term. Inclusive language was mentioned by all participants, along with physical spaces, such as restrooms and locker rooms. School activities and events were also discussed as areas of concern

by nine of the school counselors, including spirit days, field trips, and cultural celebrations. Additionally, participants considered the impact of day-to-day representation in the building, from curriculum and library materials to staff transparency. Lastly, school counselors offered their thoughts regarding their school's level of success in creating inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ students, along with their families.

### *Inclusion Defined*

Inclusion, according to Jade, "is simply being included within the culture of the school regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, or preference. It means equal opportunity to everything within the school." In order for students to fully feel included, Nia stated that, "They are able to do whatever they want. They are able to participate in whatever activities they want to participate in. They are able to withdraw themselves from activities because that is their choice." Additionally, when working with students, Nia shared that she stresses:

To them at the beginning of the school year that I don't want them to fit in; I want them to belong, as themselves. I don't want them to have to change any part of themselves to feel that they are enough...just understanding that everyone has a space everywhere and we need to allow everyone to experience and explore every space just as we would want to for ourselves.

Chase offered a comparable definition, explaining that:

For students, I just feel like everybody gets a turn. Everybody gets to try, you know, try every little thing. Particularly in middle school when they're shifting from identity to identity, to kind of try on and find their personality. Inclusion to me in the middle school setting is just about accepting that one day somebody's going to come in with blue hair and it's going to be okay, right?

Sabrina explained that inclusivity would also mean that students “don’t have to go fight to get different things changed, like their name or being called something different...they don’t have to ask multiple times.” She also recognized the importance of advocating on behalf of students, noting that she has “had to go to bat for a lot of our kids to make sure that teachers are calling them what they need to be called or using the proper pronouns,” acknowledging that could require “more education on my part as the counselor.”

Creating an inclusive community may not only benefit students, but their families as well. As Audrey shared:

Even for my families...because I mean, obviously we have LGBT families...I make sure that I affirm LGBTQ staff, family of students. I want to make sure my parents also know that it’s okay for them to come in and tell me, hey, it’s me and my partner, yeah, it’s two moms. And I’m like okay! I don’t want you to feel like, is it okay if I tell this person that my kid has two moms? Are they going to be confused? And I want to make sure it’s fine...it’s okay here...it’s safe.

Charlotte elaborated on the positive impact of an inclusive environment on students with parents or guardians who are members of the LGBTQ+ community by helping them to feel more at ease during school events. Students may feel nervous that “if my moms show up to the parent-teacher conference together, if they show up to an award ceremony, am I going to have to explain?”

Charlotte shared her desire for “kids to be able to be like, this is my family, and this is cool.”

### *The Power of Words*

In each of the 15 interviews conducted, preferred names, pronouns, and gender-neutral language were prominent topics of discussion relating to inclusion. Jeremy shared that “I’ve really been encouraging our admin team, when they push out a survey, to put preferred name as a

question. We pull preferred name every time we do a certificate or an award or an announcement.” He also mentioned that many students go by a nickname, so the policy should be the same for the LGBTQ+ students as well.

Students themselves were often the impetus for change, by bringing awareness to the language being used. Joy recalled that “we have a [Redacted] survey and it used to say gender or boy and girl, and our students said, hey, can we add to this? And we did. The survey was adjusted to reflect non-binary or other.” Joy further conveyed that, “We have worked hard on our language so we’re not binary with how we talk about things.” Ava also reflected on the role of students in initiating change, noting that “there are a lot of areas where the inclusion is not there, and I don’t think it’s intentional. I think it’s habit.” She proceeded to share that experiences with a recent 6<sup>th</sup> grader had introduced conversations and policies of change in her school.

The conversation only happened because of him. So, if he wasn’t here this year, or didn’t start with us, I believe that teachers still would have been saying he, she, boys’ bathroom passes, girls’ bathroom passes. But because he was in this space, teachers were saying alright everyone, here’s one pass. It’s not color specific.

Many of the school counselors acknowledged the challenge of adapting to name and pronoun changes but emphasized that it was imperative for all educators to do their best. Charlotte recognized that “there’s going to be a learning curve, especially for some of our older teachers or staff members who just need a little bit more time to get used to it.” She reinforces with them that “if you make a mistake, just own it and try to be better next time.” Liz remarked that:

There’s a lot of conversation, like we need to avoid saying boys and girls, but teachers still say it. And we have a lot of students whose pronouns are ever-changing. That’s been

challenging for some teachers more than others. So, we've had teachers who were like, I don't know...who are they...what do I say now? And it's really good, good-intended people.

Carter offered a similar perspective:

So, specific to the naming of pronouns we, as adults, grew up in a completely different generation and it's hard to make that transition. I make the mistake all the time and I find, me personally, that when I make the mistake and I'm like "oh, I'm sorry," because I guess that I'm coming across as genuine, it's not really an issue. Practice-wise we've said it and gone over many times in faculty meetings that we're going to use phrases like kiddos, folks, good people, just completely gender-neutral names or the students themselves, whatever name they're comfortable with.

Audrey reported that her school was also "trying to say away from guys or ladies and gentlemen and boys and girls...we're very much like friends, or 2<sup>nd</sup> graders even at the elementary school level." She also described a creative practice to promote inclusivity, by which students collaborate and create a class name during the first weeks of school:

So, that will be the name that...the word that's being used when they need the whole class attention. For example, because my name is [Redacted] my class might choose we're the O's...we're the Cheerios. And so, I would be like "okay Cheerios" and that's the call instead of saying "okay guys, let's get to task." The kids love it, right? Because they get to vote, they get to come up with the names. They are the ones choosing their name for the class so it's a great way for them to have ownership over that name...it's the thing they want to be called. A lot of teachers do that, which I love because I feel like we're moving into that inclusive language.

School counselors were also intentional about their own language when working with students or delivering classroom lessons. Leslie referenced a lesson taught on healthy relationships and boundaries stating that, “When I talk to my 8<sup>th</sup> graders, I purposely use the word partner or, when I’m reading scenarios, it will be a girl with a girl...so just being mindful of trying to be inclusive of all relationships.” She also expressed the importance of initiating conversations regarding the use of inclusive and appropriate language. For instance, she noted that when she meets a new student she asks, “what do you like to go by?” and they “take a step back for a second, like wait, you really asked me that?!” because they are “used to having to be the ones to initiate that conversation.”

The participants interviewed also recognized that the use of inclusive language was not just important for LGBTQ+ students, but for the school as a whole. For instance, Joy remarked that “it’s like when they do moms and muffins and dads and donuts...not every kid has a dad, not every kid has a mom.” She further shared that her intentional area for growth during the past year was to use “ask your adults...not ask your parents. It’s not ask your mom and dad, it’s ask your adults at home. And I’ve gotten pretty consistent with it.” Relatedly, Nia mentioned that she also has students with parents who are gay or lesbian, explaining that:

It even makes a difference for them. I have a student, he’s a 7<sup>th</sup> grader now, and he has two moms. On our orientation night I went up, did my spiel...I had my pin on and one of the moms came to me after almost in tears, like ‘Oh my God, thank you.’ And it was just like, I’m just doing what I do, but it meant so much. And when they’re able to see that it just makes a world of difference.



In Audrey's school, education about the power of words was also delivered in a peer-to-peer format, by which middle school GSA members created lessons for younger students in the building:

They presented this lesson, and it was honestly just about words and how words can impact our feelings and our emotions, but I feel like teaching them from that young age...and from middle schoolers because it's like the coolest thing that the big kids want to hang out with the little kids...was a great way to build that community through the whole campus. And even if that kindergartener probably isn't questioning their identity yet, they're going to remember that someone taught them like, hey, words matter. They'll be more mindful and also, they're going to be like, hey, well this person, my buddy, was really cool and I don't know...were they a boy? Were they a girl? Like yeah, did it really matter?

Finally, when discussing the concept of names and pronouns, Charlie presented her beliefs and expectations regarding future progress related to gender norms and stereotypes.

I think there will just become more cultural habits of asking "oh, what do you go by?" I'm not assuming, because I know I have an elementary school kid coming up who very much appears female but identifies as male and is male but likes dresses. And I'm like, but why does that make someone...why does our mind go, long hair, dress, girl? Like someday we won't do that.

### *Spaces and Places*

Restrooms were referenced by each of the participants as historically gendered spaces; however, many described the practices their school were putting into place to promote inclusivity. Two schools continued the practice of using gender-specific restrooms aligned with

biological sex, but the remaining 13 acknowledged efforts to increase inclusivity by creating gender neutral restrooms, allowing students to use the restroom where they felt most comfortable, or providing the nurse's restroom as an option. Jeremy asserted that "The inclusivity piece is one that we say we do it well and we actually do it fairly well." He explained that:

We removed signs from all our staff bathrooms. They don't say staff restroom, they're just gender-neutral restrooms or private stall restrooms. There are only two, but it's because we couldn't get the signs off the wall somehow! So, there are two "staff" bathrooms in the whole building, but our trans kids and non-binary kids know they can use those, and teachers are told not to ask if a kid comes out of that bathroom...don't stop and ask if they're one of the trans kids that can use it. It's not your business. We don't ask you what you did when you were in the bathroom, so don't ask a kid.

Despite positive progress toward change, school counselors indicated a variety of challenges related to restroom inclusivity. Joy's school has continued to maintain gendered restrooms, stating that:

We have a boys' restroom and a girls' restroom. We can't get around that. We have a boys' locker room and a girls' locker room. But our nurse's office has a restroom, and anyone is available to use that. Our trans students can use the restroom that they identify as, if they feel comfortable doing that. Or they can go to the nurse's office.

She also explained the policy in place if a cisgender student expressed concerns about using the restroom with a transgender student: "If we have a trans student...a male trans student...go into the men's room and a male student is uncomfortable, then the male student...the other male student...is offered the nurse's restroom as an option."

The nurse's office was cited by several other school counselors as the alternative restroom space for trans or non-binary students. Sabrina shared that:

We've had lots of conversations about gender-neutral bathrooms and where we need to go with that. And so, we've had students who just use the restroom in the nurse's office, which isn't super great, but it's better than nothing. And we've put that in place for multiple students. Beginning of this past year we had a new transgender student move into our community, and we met with the dad and the student and just kind of talked it through. And we've had a couple students who just come up and say "hey, like I don't feel comfortable going to either of the bathrooms, can I just go to the nurse's office?" And so, we've always been pretty able to accommodate that.

Considering the age and structural design of many school buildings, creating inclusive restroom space could be difficult due to space constraints. As Liz indicated:

We have a gender-neutral bathroom, but it's one...well it's one on each floor. Which is... we've come a long way in the few years...but there's like two single stall bathrooms, the teacher bathroom and then the gender-neutral bathroom. But it's right in the hallway where all the classrooms are, so to enter it you're kind of in front of two classrooms so the kids still don't want to use it. They can use the nurse's bathroom, which is a little more discreet, but it's at the other end of the building. I hope they feel like there are strides being made, but honestly a lot of it is like, we don't have more bathrooms!

Charlotte's school also had limited restroom facilities: "We only have two restrooms for the entire school! Yes, it is a crazy nightmare." She continued to elaborate on her concerns:

There are only a few stalls and we had some of our kiddos say, hey, I just don't feel comfortable in there. I'm having to wait a really long time. I don't want to spend any

time I don't have to in the restroom. But obviously, you know, nature calls. And when I have to go, I'm waiting long periods of time...I feel sometimes unsafe, or I worry that something might happen. We had our staff restrooms, which only the staff could access with a key. So, for specific kiddos, we allowed them access to the staff restrooms, which are gender-neutral, just to feel like they were more safe and more included in being able to use the restroom.

Despite trying to accommodate students, some avoided the facilities altogether. As Charlotte explained, "I had a kid be like, I just don't use the restroom on campus. And I'm like, you're here for almost nine hours! How are you just not using the restroom?"

Aside from restrooms and locker rooms, schools have traditionally been known to create other heteronormative, homogenous spaces and activities, such as physical education and health classes, spirit days (boys wear one attire, girls wear another), and field day events. Joy also declared that her school "got rid of the snowball dances where they had all the boys on one side and girls on the other." According to the school counselors interviewed, addressing inclusivity in these areas often involved last minute discussions and plans, as opposed to proactive approaches. For example, Carter described a recent field day at his school:

We had field day where there were some complaints from the students in regards to, well, the boys are stronger than the girls and so it's not fair in tug-of-war and things like that. So, what did he do? Our assistant director made sure that every group had...it was groups of four...every group had two female-identified and two male-identified. And those who felt that those categories didn't apply to them were allowed to...well, four of them made their own group and then the other two, I think they chose their own group. So, it was

more of a hand-on, like this is how we're going to handle it as opposed to a systemic thing.

In recent years, some schools have discovered that it has become necessary to consider overnight field trips through a different lens. Although not all schools host overnight field trips, Audrey, Carter, and Liz's schools were faced with this issues. Carter detailed the experience at his school:

Organizationally, programmatically we've come across this issue...in our overnight field trip we had one or two kids that did not feel comfortable with their biological gender to be in a group with them. So, we are fortunate enough, and have parents that have financial means enough to make that a non-issue. All of the students had cabins; we grouped cabins by gender. Those who wanted not to be or to be in the opposite, had the opportunity to either go to the other cabin with those who said that they were comfortable, or their parents would just rent them an additional cabin and they could have their own additional...their own private sort of area.

Realistically, of course, not every school population would have the means to secure extra spaces, as Carter acknowledged.

Audrey outlined another concern related to overnight field trips and the inherent difficulties in navigating the issue:

For our students that are transitioning...since they're not out...obviously placing them in a different cabin would have outed them. I think some of that stuff is still missing. I think it's really that communication piece of like, hey, where do you feel more safe or where do you want to be? I think that part is still missing a little bit even though I know our

teachers did obviously take into consideration students and situations and who was the safer roommates for that student.

Liz discussed how her school handled the challenge as well. Students were asked to identify potential roommates with whom they were comfortable and staff members compared lists to determine placements. For instance, a trans male student was placed in a room with two other males, after confirming that all parties were amenable.

Prior to the start of the most recent school year, Ava, who participates in her district's LGBTQ task force, recalled the introduction of a gender support plan designed to proactively address concerns related to some of the aforementioned topics of discussion. She remarked:

It was great. And then it just...there was no follow-up to it. And it was like, what do you want us as counselors to do with it? Because there were questions like: What's the child's preference? What happens on field trips? What happens when you take a bathroom break? And it is things we had never thought about. Do we give the student the preference to use any bathroom? Those were things we didn't know. And unfortunately, when I asked about the follow-up, it was like oh, we'll get back to you. And nothing ever happened.

I want us to figure out what to do because I do feel like those students are forced to make a choice. You know, will I have to pick either the boys' bathroom or the girls' bathroom? But I don't identify as either one. But I have to because there's no other choice. And I know that things like that will evolve over time, but there's definitely room for growth.

A lack of concrete direction, or attempts to be proactive with no follow-through, were common concerns shared by other school counselors, as well.

Charlotte described another situation related to inclusion at her school, with respect to their advisory block, that ultimately produced an effective outcome. Advisory block, she explained:

Is kind of like a homeroom every single morning that our kids start off in as a way to come in, eat their breakfast, and then usually have like a topic of conversation or games, team builders, what have you...just to kind of ease into the first 30, 45 minutes of class. And so, we, for the past few years, have had our advisories be gender specific. However, last year we had some students...some male students...say, you know, I really just don't feel comfortable in my male advisory. I feel like I just don't click with a lot of the guys. I just don't feel safe. I don't feel comfortable being in there.

We had a lot of pushback from teachers with wanting to allow students...not all students, like, not just going to do a free-for-all and mix everybody up...but like specific cases and specific students who say, I feel...I identify as being male, right? But I'm biologically female or I identify as being non-binary or I just identify as being gay and I don't feel comfortable with the boys, or the girls, or whatever. So, we just kind of went for it and said, we're going to try this out and just see what happens. I think we didn't have anybody mix in 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade, but in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade we had a few students decide to go against the advisory they were already in. And we moved them to an advisory where they felt more comfortable, and we had zero pushback. We had zero issue. And so, we decided to go with that this year as well and I think we had about six or seven students. So again, it wasn't like, well, I want to move advisories because I want to be with my best friend. It was like real, genuine concern. Our kids really took it seriously. This is a real concern for inclusivity.

Finally, GSA organizations were also described as a space where students are likely to experience a sense of inclusion within the larger community. Sabrina shared that her GSA organization has participated in local parades, acknowledging that:

The first year we did it we were very worried about how it would work, but we had so many people reach out to us and say that was so great...we are so excited that you're doing this for our community. And so, it's given our kids a place that they feel...they know...that there are some adults that really care for them in our small community.

Next, Sabrina would like for her group to connect with other LGBTQ+ youth and be more active in the community to increase that sense of inclusion.

### *Curriculum and Content*

Throughout the interview process, school counselors took the opportunity to reflect on the level of inclusion found in daily practices at their school, such as curriculum content and library materials, as well as representation through role models. Progressive states, like California, mandate that LGBTQ+ concepts are integrated into public school curriculum. Audrey noted that, "It is part of our school code, so it is covered in sex education...it has to be taught in history too...any important contributions the community did to help the United States." Despite mandates such as the one Audrey described, none of the participants described their school's curriculum as fully inclusive of LGBTQ+ topics, history, or identities.

Charlie noted a few areas of success in her building sharing that, "I think our library specialists do an amazing job" including resources for "LGBTQ and every other intersectional group. Every time I ask them for a title on anything they're like, here you go, here are titles that are all age appropriate, which is lovely." Joy offered similar praise for her librarian, explaining that books with a focus on LGBTQ+ topics or characters have "a certain sticker on the spine so



that kids that are looking for that can find it.” She further elaborated that the librarian “comes to our GSA and does a library talk about new books that are out,” adding that “our GSA actually started because of the book *This is Jazz*. They all had to do projects related to that and one of them wanted to start a GSA. We were like, absolutely!”

Additionally, Charlie acknowledged that, “I definitely know there are some teachers who make a great effort to have books that they use be representational. Even things like names in math problems. But I do think gendered language sneaks in a lot.” Audrey mentioned strides that her school had made to increase inclusivity, stating that, “Last year we had a whole committee basically focused on revamping our library, making it more inclusive. So, we bought all these books that are inclusive of different cultures, languages, family structures.”

Chase indicated that levels of inclusivity in classrooms or lessons fluctuated based on individual staff members. For instance, he reported that in English the concept was more tangential, such as literature that includes a gay character “but the story is not necessarily about them or their relationship.” However, when considering the social studies department, he stated, “No, sorry, I just know that team.” Chase did praise a math teacher who:

Does a really good job in creating problem solving scenarios that apply to his math that include diversity. Now specifically, does it include LGBTQI? That I’m not sure about, but I’ve seen quite a number of his lesson plans which involve ethnic diversity, and he will create this story where it’s culturally appropriate. Not like Tango from Nigeria who wants to share his fried chicken recipe. Like no, that’s not culturally appropriate. He makes sure it’s culturally in line, which I’m appreciate of.

The overall consensus among school counselors was that inclusive curriculum materials were lacking but, as Leslie suggested:

There are so many opportunities to naturally build that into topics. I try and do it with the social emotional curriculum...build it in naturally, not trying to force anything...especially when we're talking about mental health and statistics for this population, how risks are often higher.

Additionally, school counselors emphasized that the act of including LGBTQ+ content did not have to be overt, but just acknowledged as a part of the norm. For example, Liz reported that "I think, when teachers don't shy away from it so much that makes it helpful. One of our reading teachers...she's really open about it." She recalled "This one book...I can't remember the name of it...but it's just a gay couple. And it's not about that. It just happens to be there. Doing things like that helps the students to see this is okay."

When discussing inclusive activities, Jeremy recognized that there were inconsistencies in recognition events for different groups within his school community.

We go really, really, really freaking big for Hispanic heritage month. Like, we have a music festival, we have all of our parents offer to cook food and do a big dinner for the whole school community. We do all kinds of stuff. We do trivia every week. I mean a ton, a whole pep rally. We do a ton for black history month. We don't do shit for LGBTQ history month in October. We don't even do like facts on the morning news...like the first gay person to be an out politician or kids don't know who Harvey Milk is...those little things.

I always have to check myself, like how much of this is me advocating for kids and how much of this is my own experience, which I think a lot of counselors who also identify as members of the community probably feel at some point. But the fact that kids don't know the history of this really big identity that you hold...because teaching the

history is so stigmatized. We're not teaching them about when trans women first started getting medical procedures, we're just teaching them about the civil rights of queer people and what they had to do to get to the same place that all these other groups of people have. So that's one thing I think we could do a little bit better on in the inclusion space. That would be schoolwide...that would really amp up feelings of safety and visibility on campus.

Similarly, Liz noted a lack of awareness of LGBTQ+ history, sharing that “In our club we were talking about why June was Pride month and what it had to do with Stonewall. I asked the students ‘have you ever learned about that?’ and they were like, no.” Jade also mentioned that her GSA learned “about various influential LGBTQ+ figures within society” and, in turn, shared their knowledge to educate others within the school community

If LGBTQ+ topics were integrated into curriculum content, it was often student led. Liz explained that:

Our 8<sup>th</sup> grade history class is called civics and they do a lot of projects around human rights. A lot of students choose to do projects on forms of human rights and that often falls within the LGBTQ community. So, it’s usually student driven but it’s very accepted that it can be done.

She also acknowledged that, although it would ideally be part of the curriculum, she was unsure about how the school and stakeholders might respond if they were to intentionally teach it. Liz mused that:

I want to say it would be okay, but to teach it is different than having the kids pick their projects around it...we would never discourage that. But I do wonder what the view would be if we said we’re going to teach about different types of relationships and one of

them is same sex couples. I don't know how that would go over. There's currently a 7<sup>th</sup> grader in our building who their family will not allow to participate in any curriculum that is in any way related to the LGBTQ community. I'm sure there's more who don't love that we're doing Pride Day and all that, but when we talk about terminology and even why it's not okay to say certain things and the way to say certain things, that student doesn't participate in any of that.

### *The State of Inclusion in Schools*

Much like safety and acceptance, creating a school atmosphere inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community was described as a work in progress, with much room for growth, by all participants. According to Leslie, inclusion takes place on an individual level, in specific classrooms, but is “not systemic in any way.” Jade further explained that:

At my school, my LGBTQ+ students voice that they feel a sense of inclusion in school as a whole, especially amongst staff, but still feel a sense of non-belonging when it comes to students outside of their group. They feel like students are being forced to include them and only do so because of adults in the building.

Although inclusive content was not described as universal in any school, school counselors generally shared the perspective of Chase who acknowledged positive strides toward transformation:

The fact that discussion is happening at all says growth, right? So, I feel like we're moving in that direction. Will each side be happy? No, but there's movement. There's growth. And there's conversation around it. Hopefully at some point in time there will come a resolution, but even at that, as time progresses and changes, there will be more

challenges and more conflict. So, I really think we should settle into the...and accept the idea that this is the new normal...this uncomfortability is the new normal.

### **Microaggressions**

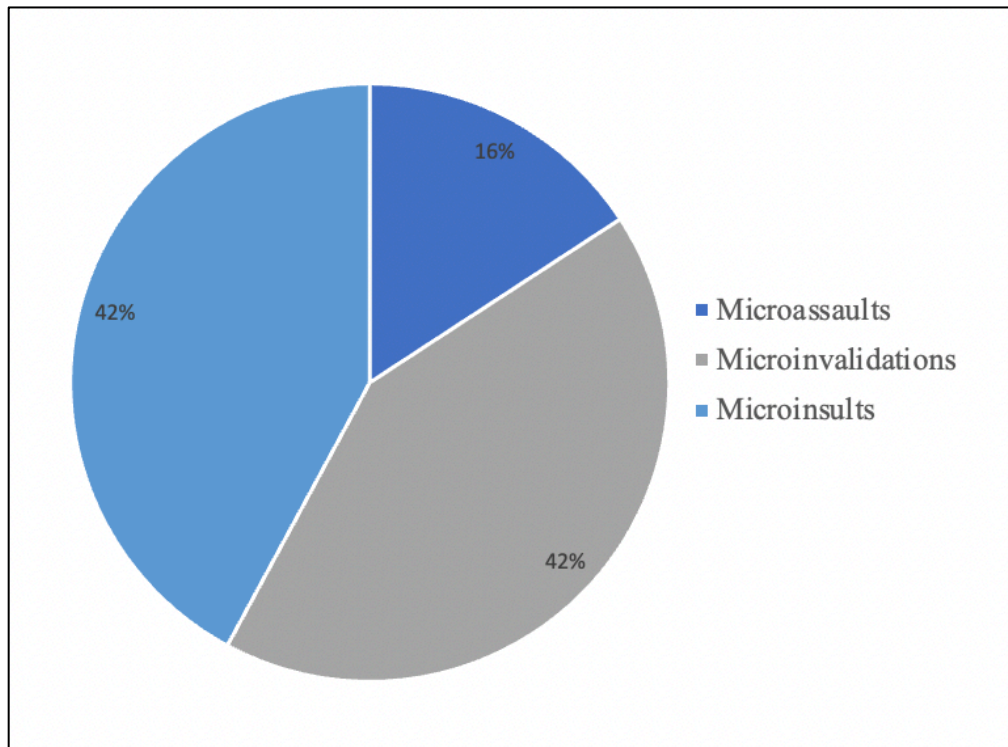
Overall, school counselors shared an overwhelming consensus that the most common microaggressions experienced by LGBTQ+ middle school students aligned with the categories of microinsults and microinvalidations. Each of the 15 participants shared examples of both microinsults and microinvalidations, however microassaults, most commonly in the form of hate speech or similar aggressive language, was also mentioned by three of the school counselors. For example, Dahlia explained that she has had to support two or three students who “someone else has told them they should kill themselves,” which can undoubtedly be described as a microassault. The most prominent microaggressions were related to names and pronouns, along with insensitive questions and comments. Another common microaggression was evident in the use of expressions such as “that’s so gay.”

As Sabrina noted, “The biggest thing they come to me about is their pronouns not being respected by peers or by other adults.” At times it was unintentional, but in other cases it was a deliberate choice. For example, Charlotte recalled scenarios where students would say “no, you’re not [Redacted], we’re not going to call you this name.” With respect to the adults, Sabrina explained that “Some of it is just being misinformed...not understanding how critical we are in the lives of students. Some of it is political and some of it is religious that they don’t feel comfortable doing that,” but she did express appreciation for her administrators who would step in and remind staff that “we’re a public school, so we serve the public and we can’t let our own values get in the way of what’s best for the population we serve.” Although peers and adults were sometimes guilty of committing the same microaggression, school counselors did convey

that there were certain experiences that were more likely to be attributed to either one group or the other. Figure 2 below displays school counselor perceptions regarding the most common microaggressions.

**Figure 2**

*Most Common Microaggressions*



*Experiences with Peers*

According to all 15 school counselors interviewed, microinsults were the most common form of microaggression endured by peers. LGBTQ+ students, particularly those with diversity in gender identity or expression, were frequently faced with inappropriate questions or comments. For instance, Audrey shared that students might be asked a question like “Hmmm, why are you wearing that?” or others would comment that “so-and-so is so weird.” According to Liz, LGBTQ+ students might hear things like “why are you in this bathroom?” or “why are you

wearing a dress?” Audrey pointed out that they are often “not trying to be mean, but they are mean.” Nia emphasized that the “unintentional ones hurt just the same, especially when the students have just recently come and let us know that they’ve transitioned into a different name or pronouns.”

Charlotte offered the perspective that questions asked by peers often stemmed from genuine curiosity, however they could easily evolve into harassment:

If they’re not talking about it openly in their home, I feel like they’re really trying to come from an earnest place where it’s like, I’m just asking questions, but then there’s a line between like, okay, you’ve asked the same question five times and let’s move on. You have the answer. You’re not being ignorant anymore and I’m educating you...now you’re actually just being a pain. And you’re wanting to see me get frustrated with you.

Jade offered similar examples, such as students who “point to another student and say, ‘that’s so gay’ or ‘you’re such a faggot’” or post a photo of a specific student in the LGBTQ+ community displaying the caption “what a freak.” Dahlia described incidents of students being “called out” for the clothing they wear, as well as long hair or makeup. She was aware of comments like “you’re different looking now” or “aren’t those girls’ boots?” directed to a boy wearing heels. Sabrina referenced frequent comments of “you’re gay for this or that or you’re gay for touching me,” but added that “we are really good about, if we have those kinds of conversations, we really try to shut it down.” She also stressed that “they’re maybe not intentionally...they’re just being silly and stupid...not to be hurtful, but you know, they’re not acting very maturely.” Charlie added that, in middle school, comments and behaviors are sometimes simply a repetition of what they view on TikTok or parents passing down homophobia, and the students are not really thinking about whether they truly believe what they

are saying or if it is appropriate. However, Sabrina did recall an incident where students were insisting that a female student with short hair was a lesbian, which made the student very uncomfortable and ultimately led to a Title IX investigation.

Chase referenced unintentional insults as the most common microaggression experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in his building, explaining that “from the peers, it’s definitely like ‘haha, but I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,’ but they were being really rude and insensitive and not really thinking before speaking...weren’t processing appropriately in that moment.” He also noted an increase in “trolling,” or comments designed to deliberately upset, attack, or insult someone via group text chains and chats. Chase shared that he has noticed a trend in:

Kids thinking that it’s funnier than kids did in the past...or maybe funnier is not the word, but more attractive. I feel like if you saw a fight there would of course be a mob of kids that would be like “yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,” but there were always groups of kids that were either trying to stop it or moving away. Now I feel like everybody’s there and, if they’re not participating in it, they’re holding a camera. So, it’s like that type of energy...it’s very attractive to them.

Microaggressions also came across in tone or actions according to some school counselors. For example, Liz shared that students who may have changed their name several times were asked questions like “what name are you now?” in an annoyed or insulting tone. They were “not saying it with kindness, like ‘what did you want to be called?’” On these occasions, Liz recognized that regardless of intention:

Impact is everything, so we talk to kids about, I know that’s not what you intended. Sometimes I’ll say to a student, here’s how that must have felt, and they’re really taken aback, like oh my gosh, I didn’t mean for it to feel that way.



Jeremy noted that microaggressions “may come in the form of choosing not to work in a group with certain people...not engaging with them at all. They’re going to be very polite, but they will sit at the opposite end of the table.”

Expressions, such as “that’s so gay” and “no homo” were brought up by nearly all the school counselors as a common microaggression encountered almost daily. Liz remarked that:

Kids are still saying “that’s so gay,” which, I’m like...kids said that when I was a kid. How is this still happening? Like, really? I didn’t think kids still said it. I remember thinking, oh that doesn’t happen anymore and then we started doing all this stuff and I’m like, oh my gosh, they do. They know they’re not supposed to now though because they don’t say it in front of me.

Charlotte offered a similar perspective, admitting that “kids are never ever going to stop using the phrase ‘that’s gay’ or saying that everything ‘is so gay’ so I have to have conversations pretty much three times a week.” Charlie described an incident in which a student was outside her office shouting “no homo” and that she was quick to react, however she noted that when incidents like this occur, she frequently sees other adults walk by and ignore the behavior because “they say they don’t know how to address that and I’m like, like a person!” She also explained that she uses these opportunities to educate:

I pulled the kid in, and I was like, do you understand what that means? He’s like, not really, and I don’t a hundred percent believe him, but I was like, you’re saying that you’re not gay because that would be a bad thing. Or you think of the gay word as synonymous with stupid. When I hear “that’s so gay” I’m like, nope, that’s not what you’re meaning to say. You mean to say that’s really dumb so don’t use the word gay. I

often think, how does that hit if you're walking by, and you are gay or you're questioning?

As in the example above, Charlie stressed the importance of education when addressing microaggressions. She shared that she was intentionally exploring a better system of consequences because "What do we really learn from detention? Not very much." Charlie explained that she was trying to assemble a library of educational activities so that students could learn about Stonewall or the suicide rates among LGBTQ+ youth. Her goal in handling microaggressions is to be more purposeful in helping students develop the empathy to "think about how you would feel in the situation."

### *Experiences with Adults*

The type of microaggression displayed by parents and other adults most often fell into the category of microinvalidations, as agreed upon by all 15 participants. Jade remarked that "at least 80% of my LGBTQ+ students have told me their guardians will say 'it's just a phase.'" School counselors primarily attributed these microinvalidations to a lack of knowledge or understanding, as well as fear. Audrey explained that:

We are very predominantly a Latino community and then our next biggest population is Pacific Islander, like Filipino, or Asian. Those communities are just more culturally conservative. Especially with those parents, I think there's a big pushback, if they're not very aware or...I think a big part of it is...parents are scared. They know if that is the identity you end up being that it is a hard life out there. It's not like the world is very accepting right now. So, I think a big part of it is fear for parents of, is this a safe thing for my kids? I think a big part of it is that there's so much misinformation and not enough information. I think parents are misinformed, confused, and scared.

She went on to state that “we also have some very supportive parents, but like everything there’s a spectrum.” Similarly, Liz noted that some parents outwardly demonstrate support for their child, but invalidate them in discussions with others by making comments such as “how can they even know?” Concerningly, she wonders “does that that come across in some way to the child?”

Even the most affirming adults were guilty of microaggressions on occasion. During a presentation to prepare students for an upcoming promotion ceremony, Rebecca’s principal said “Gentlemen, it’s going to be really hot outside, so if you’re wearing a suit, you might want to think about whether you want to wear a suit or polo shirt.” She proceeded to share that a student raised their hand and said, “Can’t girls wear suits too?” Despite the error, Rebecca was pleased that her principal responded by saying “Yes, you’re right. Thank you so much.” Similarly, when addressing the student body as “ladies and gentlemen” on the intercom, Jeremy reminded his principal that some of the students “were neither ladies nor gentlemen.”

At times, the invalidations occurred when students changed their name or pronouns more than once. Leslie explained that “You find them trying on different identities and seeing what feels right...what feels like me. And people will sometimes invalidate that because they’re like well, you know, two weeks ago they were saying this.” Charlie commiserated that unintentional invalidations were more likely to occur when names or pronouns were changed multiple times, but most educators tried to do their best. She would inform students that:

We will try, but I can promise you if you come to me in the morning and you’re Steve, and you come to me in the afternoon and you’re Carl, I will probably still call you Steve until you correct me. But feel free to correct me. And I think most of my teachers would say the same thing.

The emerging trend of openness with respect to gender diversity in young people may contribute to the confusion expressed by older generations. According to Liz, adults have asked “do you think there’s really more gay people or transgender people now?” to which she offers the explanation that “now it’s accepted as part of the exploration...their gender identity or sexual identity...whereas before it was like, no, you’re born a male, so you are a male and if you feel differently, you’re wrong.” She recalled conversations with parents who have shared that “my child thinks they’re a different gender, whispering it to me over the phone” but Liz tries to reassure them, explaining that it is “actually really common.”

This lack of understanding and fear was also demonstrated in the outlandish comments shared by Blake who recalled a student who wanted to attend a GSA meeting, but parents did not allow her to go: “The mom was saying something about the teachers that were leading it and how it was going around that they were pedophiles or something.” Leslie also noted that:

Parents have said things to me...they haven’t gone to the level of trying to go to the Board of Education...but saying, well you know, my student came home and told me there’s a girl in his locker room. And then just trying to unpack all of that...it’s like, how much are we getting into this? Am I getting on a soapbox? Am I trying to build empathy? Like what are we doing, you know, in a matter of five minutes?

Microaggressions committed by staff were also observed in discussions among colleagues about students. For example, Liz recalled that at times when staff came together, such as during staff meetings, teachers would jokingly reference students as “he, she, they, whatever.” Although she believed they may have had good intentions, she wished they would be more apt to ask questions in order to get it right. Liz explained, “If we could just make it part of the norm...if we don’t know we ask the student, we ask another teacher...do you know what they prefer?”

Ava conveyed a similar observation. Despite an outward display of support toward students, staff members have been heard expressing their belief that a student is just confused when conversing with colleagues.

Finally, a less common microaggression was described by Charlotte who shared the story of a staff member who was actually trying too hard to demonstrate acceptance:

We had a teacher whose tone and body language would change when they were talking to LGBTQ students. I was like, you don't have to talk to them any certain way, right? I want to you to be yourself and just talk to them how you would talk to any student. You don't have to change inflection in your voice and then all of a sudden be like "yasss girl" and all this extraneous. That's trying too hard. That's being stereotypical. But even having that small conversation, things changed.

## **Microaffirmations**

### *It's the Little Things*

School counselors mentioned several microaffirmations that they believe to be most impactful for their students. Each of the 15 school counselors emphasized that acts of affirmation to help LGBTQ+ youth feel safe, accepted, and included do not have to be grandiose. Instead, small, intentional efforts can be quite impactful. According to Jade:

All teachers and staff have inclusive flags in our rooms and safe space visuals which indicate that the area is free from judgment or discrimination based on gender, race, culture, etc. We also survey all students at the beginning of the year and one of the questions addresses how students want to be addressed...do they want to use a different name than what is on the roster? We also use inclusive language...we avoid using boys and girls. Instead, we say scholars, students, friends.

Jeremy suggested similar practices “without being over the top, because kids don’t necessarily like attention being brought to themselves.” Simply posting a safe space logo and avoiding the use of gendered language can have a great impact. For example, “when you’re asking about kids and their relationships, saying ‘are you dating someone?’” as opposed to “what boy are you going to the dance with?” Jeremy also noted the importance of validating a student’s experience by “hearing them and listening to them and not shutting them down.” Audrey further reinforced that:

I don’t think staff realize how small it has to be. You don’t have to put a giant rainbow flag up. It can be little things. Like, I wear my pronouns pin and the kids who need to notice it, notice it. The kids who don’t need it don’t notice it. It’s just these small little things that show that hey, this is a safe space. I am a safe adult. I think it’s really that simple, honestly. I think sometimes we try to overcomplicate things. These kiddos are looking for the people ...they are scanning to see who is a safe adult.

Not only do these small symbols signify safety, but they can also initiate conversation. Nia remarked that her laptop has an ally hand sticker on it, and she displays a Pride flag in her office. She also shared that, even before she was openly out, she always had a rainbow pin on her lanyard and “day after day” a student commented “‘Ms. [Redacted] I really like your pin.’ It was almost every day. And then when she finally came to me and was like, ‘I think I’m a lesbian,’ I was like, it all makes sense.” Audrey added that these small affirming symbols can also be a simple way to provide education. She shared that an elementary student had asked about her pronoun pin and Audrey replied:

Oh, it’s my pronouns. And they’re like, “what are those?” And I was like, what I like being called when you talk about me...I like it when you say her or she. And she was

like, “oh, okay.” And that was it. It’s not a big deal. It’s not like I’m indoctrinating them...we’re just teaching them what’s out there in the world.

Sabrina also cited the affirming act of not making a big issue of things like name changes. She remarked that students in her school feel a general sense of ease when they approach a teacher with “Hey, you know, I’m not Madison this year, I’m Elliot. And then they’re like, okay cool..hi Elliot, welcome to class.” Nia concurred, sharing that “I have one student who I think we’re on the third name now. So, I’m just like, okay, where are we at now? Alright, cool. We’ll see where we are next year when we start back.” Leslie expressed the importance of allowing students the opportunity to try on “different identities and seeing what feels right” without others creating an uproar.

Addressing microaggressions when they occur can be another affirming act according to school counselors. Ava commended a particular teacher in her building, explaining that “If something were to be said it’s addressed immediately. She does not allow hurtful comments in her classroom at all. Towards anyone.”

Chase explained that students are perceptive and aware of where they feel affirmed, emphasizing that:

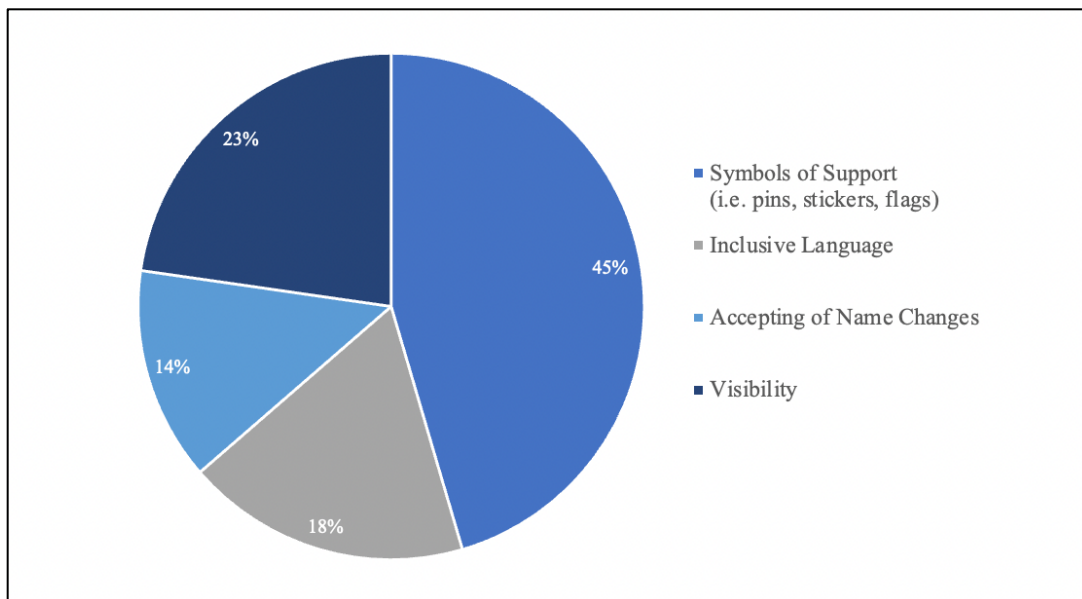
Kids vote with their feet, right? So, they will go to or gravitate to where they feel most comfortable, where they’re getting the most value, where they’re having the most fun, where they’re feeling the most connected, where they’re feeling the most grounded. In other words, they gravitate toward the things that support them the most.

The microaffirmations most frequently referenced by school counselors are identified in Figure 3 below. Nearly half stressed that symbols of support were most instrumental. Others

agreed that inclusive language, staff demonstrating acceptance toward name changes, and visibility were also significant acts of affirmation.

### Figure 3

#### *Most Impactful Microaffirmations*



#### *Educators Need Affirmation Too*

In order for teachers and other staff members to affirm their LGBTQ+ students, it is vital for them to have their efforts affirmed as well. Ten of the school counselors interviewed specifically noted that, despite good intentions, educators in their building often felt ill-equipped to properly support their LGBTQ+ students. Several suggested that empowerment through education would be impactful. For instance, Audrey indicated that:

California has a lot of progressive and foundational laws to help protect our students, but teachers are still scared. So, we had experts come in and just kind of explain like, this is how you're supposed to act, this is what you can say...just really the statistics and the laws behind it. And like I feel like it really empowered our teachers to be like, oh



okay. Like no matter how old, no matter if it's a 1st grader or a Kindergartner and they're like, no, I want you to call me Rebecca now, we have to. And I think that was really empowering for our teachers to realize how many rights our students have and how much we really have to protect those rights.

I think the PD is something that I feel like our staff really benefited from and I want to make sure that we keep doing stuff like that to keep empowering them and making them feel safe. I think a lot of the times people are scared and don't know what to say or what to do in certain situations and how to help a student and they think these are just uncomfortable conversations because they've never had them before. And so, I think the more you educate the adults, the more comfortable they're going to be with having these conversations and navigating those situations that come up in the classroom all the time.

Jeremy also acknowledged the value in providing more training for teachers. He mentioned one teacher who expressed that she wanted “to understand trans issue saying that ‘I’m happy to do what I can, but I don’t know what to do.’” Jeremy explained that:

Then she doesn’t engage with those kids because she feels really uncomfortable, and I know it’s not about her. But if we can step in and provide some coaching and training to help those teachers move from tolerance to acceptance, and then move from just being accepting to being full-on supportive adults, that would be great.

In dealing with parents, Leslie also acknowledged the importance of affirming “staff capacity to have those tough conversations with parents so that when that topic comes up, they’re able to support and advocate for students and not just rely on the counselor or other support staff to do so.” Cassie made a similar statement, sharing that staff are often “like I don’t know how to

answer that question...go see Ms. [Redacted].” However, she clarified that “I’m not doing anything special. I’m just having an open conversation with kids and I’m being vulnerable when I don’t know something and allowing the kids to educate me.” Cassie further reinforced that she would like for her staff to feel:

Confident enough to have these open conversations with kids and if you don’t know, say thank you for bringing this to me and entrusting me but I don’t know how to answer your question so let’s figure it out together.

Administrators and other school leaders were mentioned as instrumental in providing affirmation to school counselors that they were doing the right thing in their efforts to support students. Liz reflected that “our superintendent is very, very open about be who you are, and we’re going to do this, and I don’t care what people say. That has been really great because we know from the top that we’re supported.” Charlotte commended her principal for being “a total badass in the fact that he’s like, listen, you guys are saying that we have to do all these things, but we’re not, and you’re saying that we can’t do these things, but we’re going to.” She added that “if it’s good for the kids, we’re just going to do it.”

Lastly, six of the school counselors explicitly asserted that educators who are members of the LGBTQ+ community should also feel that their own identity is affirmed by school leaders and colleagues, giving them permission to fully be who they are. Charlotte emphasized how this could be important to both staff and students, sharing that in recent years her school has hired teachers that have been able to say, “I’m fully out and proud.” She described a teacher who would come to school:

In a fully masculine outfit with super bright pink nails and maybe some eyelash extensions. It’s just things like that that I think make a difference for kids. And it’s like, I

don't outwardly have to say it, right? I don't have to, the first day, say hi, I'm Mr.

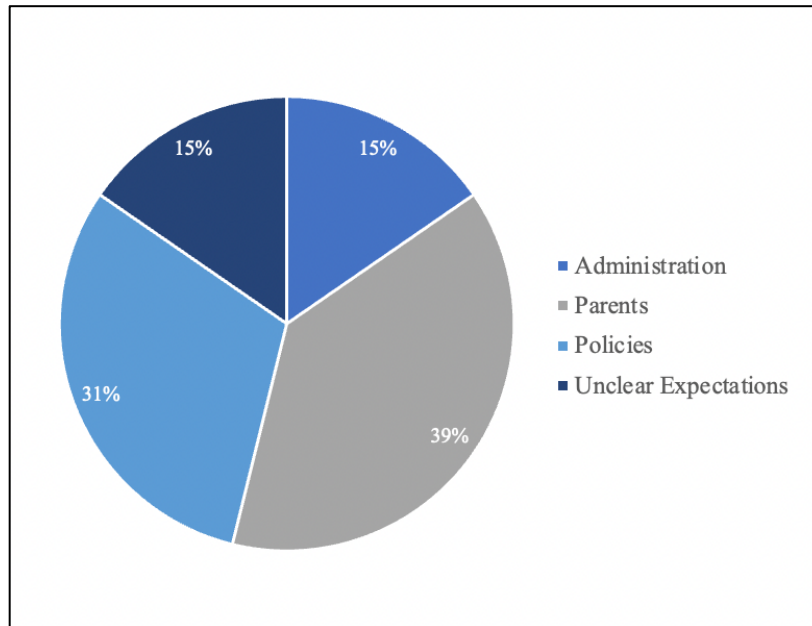
[Redacted] and I'm gay, right? I think that is a big impact with our kids just feeling like, okay, I can really be whoever I want to be and feel safe doing that.

Charlotte acknowledged that the ability to be a visible LGBTQ+ educator is a fairly new concept that may not have been possible five or 10 years ago. However, she did stress the significance in normalizing the LGBTQ+ experience. She offered another anecdote about a colleague:

She had a picture of her engagement for her and her fiancé, who's a woman on her lock screen, and one of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys saw it and kept looking at it and looking at it and wanted her to acknowledge it. She's like, do you want to see the picture? And he was like, yeah, and so she showed him and was like this is my fiancé, her name is [Redacted]. It wasn't like, yes this is my fiancé and she's a woman and I'm bisexual. We just made it normal. And for him, he was just like "that's cool, it's a really pretty picture." And that was it.

### **Overcoming Obstacles**

In their effort to create a safe, accepting, and inclusive school environment to affirm LGBTQ+ youth, eight school counselors identified school leaders and parents as their biggest obstacles. The remaining participants suggested that the lack of, or confusion about, protective policies were also areas of concern, as well as the overall sense of vagueness that existed in many school buildings. School counselors, along with other staff members, were not always clear on what they could or could not do to support students, including how open they could be in discussing the topic or whether they could serve as a visible role model. These obstacles are ranked in Figure 4 below.

**Figure 4***Greatest Obstacles**Administrators and Parents*

Audrey explained that the obstacle of leadership and parents were often intertwined with one another:

I think for administrators, they're scared of the pushback from parents. Sometimes it's hard because we have to educate the staff and our administrators so they can fight for our students and fight for us and fight for what we're trying to do for our students. Our GSA club...we couldn't call it GSA because of the fear of pushback from parents. But at the end of the day, I always think my role is not for the school. I'm not here to serve anybody else but the kids; the kids are who I work for. And so that is my priority. That is why I'm here.

Nia recalled a story of a recent activity she intended to host for International Transgender Day of Visibility that was challenged by parents and her administration. She explained:

I created an advisory lesson for all of the teachers to do with their students using Trevor and GLSEN resources and shared it with my administrator. She suggested some changes. I made the suggested changes. I guess her higher-ups, I don't know if they suggested that she share it with the families the day before or not, but she did. That evening at 7:00 my phone rang, and shit had hit the fan. Ultimately it was not shown whole school, which was disappointing. But my win for that was that the parents who wanted their children to see it saw it, but not all of the children who needed to see it.

Later in the interview, she added that "I did fail to mention that we were also threatened to have grants removed" as a result of the event.

Blake, who elected to move to another school in hopes of working for a more supportive leadership team, clearly stated that:

The biggest challenge for me is leadership. I really feel like it comes down from leadership in the way they want to address these issues. They just blow me off or if they don't see it that way, then there's nothing you can do to make them see it in a different way. It's like tunnel vision...if they don't see it a certain way, then that's it.

She further explained that:

Our admin actually had all of our teachers take down the Pride flag out of their classrooms. I mean, not all of them had it, but the ones that did, our leadership made them take it down out of their class. And I kind of feel like it's gotten worse since that happened last year. Having the Pride flag meant a lot to those kids because when it happened last year a lot of them were very torn. It affected the kids a lot when they had our staff take it down.

In an attempt to continue to demonstrate support for the LGBTQ+ population, teachers tried to display a less obvious rainbow picture or a sign that says, “you’re all accepted here,” but Blake still believed that the removal of the supportive symbols was very damaging.

According to Chase, his biggest obstacle in supporting LGBTQ+ youth is parents, explaining that:

I can create the space, but if your children are mimicking your poor behavior from home or what you allow them to view, absorb, and bring to the school, that presents challenges. I feel like it always trickles down to the parents, the parents, the parents. We have a parent that, mind you is wonderful and super supportive in other capacities, and yet she wants her daughter to not learn about trans people, not learn about gay people. I’m just thinking to myself, so what you’re saying is you don’t want her to learn about the world. Not saying she has to be any one of those things, but like, let’s not have her walk down the street and go, oh, I’m a 32-year-old woman and I don’t know what that is. Let’s not have that because that’s not called good education, that’s not called good parenting.

He further conveyed that:

You don’t want to discount or demean their individual faith, but yet you still have to advocate and assert that you have that space, but this person also has this space and somehow, we need to have these spaces bump up against each other and connect without causing a great deal of friction.

Charlotte offered a similar perspective with respect to the desire to maintain a balance between student and adult needs and trying to “be respectful of all parties.” Consequently, she often refers to all students as “they” because:

I want to be respectful of the kiddos who have the bravery to come forward and say, “this is who I am, this is what I want to be called.” And even if that’s just for right now and it changes next week, that’s okay. But then I also want to be respectful and mindful that for parents it’s a difficult transition.

From Jade’s perspective, she also cited parents as the biggest obstacle, but rather “other non-LGBTQ+ students’ guardians not agreeing with what is being portrayed, taught, messaged, etcetera.” However, she also noted that she would continue to be an advocate, despite any challenges:

I believe all students should feel included, supported, and safe regardless of race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, etcetera. And I do not have any qualms explaining this to parents who do not agree with how our school supports the LGBTQ+. We are a public school and if they are looking for something else, they have various choices for their students.

Jeremy concurred, emphasizing that supporting students and keeping them safe was his priority, regardless of policy:

Maybe I’m awful, but even if there was a policy [deferring to parent wishes regarding names or pronouns], if that kid is in my office, I’m respecting the kid over the parent because the parent’s not in there. I would probably reach out to the teachers that knew and were supportive and let them know this is some of what we’re struggling with...when you talk to them one-on-one, please do what you can to affirm them.

Remind them that you’ve got their back.

Joy described a recent incident that took place when she presented at a national conference. Her topic was creating a LGBTQ+ friendly school and her principal proudly posted a photo on social

media. She shared that “Right after that we got an open records request on anything related to GSA. A parent got mad, but my principal has my back every time.”

Charlie also added that parents and guardians sometimes placed unreasonable demands on school counselors and other staff. For instance, she recalled a parent who emphasized that they did not want their child using the other gender’s bathroom. Charlie admitted that her automatic thought was:

I’m not following your child around the building and seeing where they pee. That is not in my job description. So, thank you for sharing with your child that you want them to use that restroom and hopefully they listen to you if that’s what you think that they’re doing.

### *Legislation and Policy*

For Rebecca, the new legislation put in place was identified as her greatest obstacle. She explained that:

They’re literally making it impossible for us to do what’s best for kids and to support kids and to do the practices that we know can be lifesaving. I’ve reached out to ASCA. I’ve reached out to my state. I’ve reached out to the leaders in my district. What are we going to do? This feels like a crisis. I cannot...I’m not going to out students and I also do not want to lose my license. What guidance can you give us? And nobody has any answers right now. How can we use other symbols to show that still in my office this is going to be a safe space without putting a target on our backs for people to file complaints against us?

Likewise, Dahlia elaborated on the negative impacts of policy in her state with respect to addressing LGBTQ+ topics, explaining that “Everything is kind of on the down-low right now



because of the book banning. So, for right now, because of that, we're probably not going to talk or touch on those subjects." She also expressed concern about the ethical dilemma she might face if a student comes out to her, clarifying that:

There is a policy that we as counselors cannot even see a student on an ongoing basis if they tell us they're gay or trans. We have to ask them, have you spoken to your parent about this? And if they say no, we have to inform the parent.

Dahlia conveyed that she has not yet had to do that, reporting that "every time they say something their parent does already know, thank God, because I don't want to have to deal with that." She also acknowledged that students who are aware of the policy would likely avoid seeking support from the school counselors. Additionally, Dahlia shared that in order for students to participate in a GSA, a parent or guardian would have to give permission.

#### *Unclear Expectations*

Confusion about acceptable practices was also mentioned by several counselors. Ava conveyed that one of her struggles was not knowing:

How to approach or let my students know outside of the sticker and things like that, that I'm a safe person. I feel like there may be a whole lot more students at our school and we don't know. I don't know the best way to meet their needs because I don't know who they are.

Jeremy agreed, acknowledging that "We're fortunate that it hasn't gotten too bad in Georgia, but a lot of them [teachers] are really scared about what they can and can't say. Teacher fear is an obstacle" Joy shared that one of her biggest concerns was wondering "What can we do? What are we allowed to do?" and Charlotte commented that "I don't really know what is appropriate

conversation that we should be having and what is inappropriate and what is maybe crossing the line.”

Relatedly, Charlie noted that lack of representation and visible role models was another obstacle, but there were no clear guidelines on how this could be improved. She emphasized that educators are overwhelmingly white women and, although there is a lot of discussion about increasing minority representation, this can be challenging for members of the LGBTQ+ community. Either they do not want to cross boundaries by sharing details of their personal lives or they do not feel safe. Charlie elaborated by saying:

I really wish that wasn't an issue or that it wasn't so heteronormative that you would assume...I've only worked with one trans educator in my career and they were not safe in that school. I think it's hard for kids to not see adults that represent them and we're paying attention to that when it comes to race. But I don't know if there's a way to pay attention to that when it comes to sexuality and gender. There's that sticky thing of, you're not really supposed to overly share with your kids and tell them all about your lives and your families. How do you share those parts of yourself? Welcome this new teacher...they're gay. Like, you can't do that.

She illustrated an example of an interaction with a student who, during a discussion of various scenarios related to marginalization, asked ““Are you in the LGBTQ community?” And I was like, ah shit. I don't not want to answer this, but I also don't want to answer this.” However, after informing the student that it was not an appropriate question to ask of anyone, “I said yes and that was all she wanted to know.”

*Dear Policymaker...*

To conclude each interview, school counselors were provided with the opportunity to share what they wish other educators, stakeholders, and policymakers would know or understand in order to improve safety, acceptance, and inclusion for LGBTQ+ youth, as well as minimize microaggressions and increase microaffirmations. Here are the heartfelt sentiments they believe would help to remove obstacles and barriers to support.

From Audrey:

I don't think people realize how scary it is for this community. How likely they are to commit suicide and how likely they are to commit self-harm...to be our homeless population. I think if people just honestly stopped and cared and realized it could be your kid, I think we would be having more supportive and protective laws and policies in place for these kids, especially in all these different states that are honestly attacking these students. And so, I think that's one of the things that I wish...it could just click for people to realize, at the end of the day, even if it goes against your beliefs, we are trying to keep these kids alive and safe and that is what these laws do. They protect these kids. They make sure that they have a safe space. Just look at the numbers...just look at the data. If your kid feels accepted, you are reducing the risk of suicide by this much. And I know you care about your kid enough, right? I know you love your kid.

From Ava:

Awareness is the key in educating. We can't fix it if we don't know about it. And I think, when we don't know something, there's that fear, that anxiety, the judgment. Having an open dialogue is important. If I could tell the powers that be what to do, it's awareness. Just being aware that our world is so diverse now that you can't expect to do things the

way you did 20, 30 years ago because nothing is the same. And as much as our kids are changing, we have to change too.

From Blake:

Just listen and even if you don't agree, just listen and just try to look at it from a different perspective. Because I feel like a lot of what is impeding change in schools is because a lot of people just don't want to listen, or they can't understand. So, I feel like it's just trying to listen to someone else's experience and learning from it. I think it really helps if people educate themselves too on what the real issues are and actually see it, or try to see it, from a student's perspective. Because I feel like a lot of times people that are making these rules and laws, they're sitting in an office somewhere and they don't really understand what's going on in the school.

I feel like if you just had like a month at a school where you could just follow these kids and talk to them and actually listen, I think that would really help a lot because I don't think people really know, especially the ones making the legislation. I feel like they don't really know what's going on and they're just listening to people that don't necessarily have the right perspective, but also that don't really know what's going on either. So, I feel like it would help to actually talk to people that are in the middle of it.

From Charlie:

It is not a choice. I feel like a lot of times kids still feel like people think that they're making a choice. Nobody would choose to lose their family. Nobody would choose to feel outside. It is not a choice. And even if it was, it's still their choice, not for one person to dictate for another person. I don't tell you who you have to love or how you have to identify so then you shouldn't.

From Charlotte:

I think my message is just trust. First and foremost, trust the people that you hired to be the support system to kids. Trust these counselors. We are not people who are trying to hurt children. None of us got into this field to hurt children. We are here to help. A lot of times we are helping by helping our LGBTQ students just be who they are. So, I would say trust your educators and trust your counselors that we are not doing harmful work. We just want to help further the lives of our students and help further acceptance in our communities overall.

And then also trust your students. There is so much rhetoric around sexualizing kids and even having conversations about sexuality or gender identity is sexualizing students. That is not the case at all. These kids are already having these conversations. They're already looking up things online. So, if we could give a safe space to educate them and have safe, open conversation then we're doing a service to them. These kids have surpassed the social intelligence that middle schoolers had 10, 20, 30 years ago. And kids know that, when I make a big change, changing my name, changing my pronouns, deciding I am gay or bisexual or whatever...that's a big deal. They don't take it lightly. They're having really tough conversations with themselves. They're sitting on this and thinking about this for a long time. It's real. So, trust that, if they want to make a giant change in their life, it's for a reason and just be respectful of that change.

From Chase:

What I hear a lot from kids is just basically, why can't you just leave me alone? In terms of teachers and faculty, I feel like we are the key to making a great deal of change. But it's the galvanization piece and everyone getting together and being on the same page,

and really just pushing, pushing for these things because we all know if we just stop working this whole country will fall apart. So that's power, right? We need to use that power more and be like, hey you can't treat kids like this. How about having equal rights for folks?

From Dahlia:

Personally, I feel like if they could put themselves in the teacher's shoes, the counselor's shoes, the student's shoes, the school's shoes, and see what could be done. To see it from our point of view is what I would like them to do because all they do is see things from their perspective. And if they don't know someone that has been or may be affected by this at some point in their lives, then they have no clue how to deal with this and so, it's just another thing on their list. Or, I don't want to say that they're so old, but they don't remember what it's like. Times change, first of all, and the things and problems that even when I was in school are not the same kind of things and problems the kids face today versus what the kids may face 10 years from now. However, there are some things that won't change, and one thing is the development that the kids in middle school experience, simply because that's the age they go through certain things. Middle school is already going to be a difficult age...don't make it worse for them.

From Jade:

I feel as educators we not only have a duty to ensure all students have access to an education; we have a duty to ensure all students have a safe, secure, inclusive, and positive experience while in school. We need to ensure students are socially and emotionally healthy, otherwise there is no hope for their intellectual education. We need to be the voice for our students and be an advocate for our students regardless of our

personal beliefs. In my experience, the LGBTQ+ community is not unlike any other community of students. They want to be heard, understood, loved, and accepted for who they are. In the end, isn't that what we all want?

From Jeremy:

The argument that people have now with just let kids be kids is in direct opposition to a queer kid just being themselves. It's not just wanting to let kids be kids. You want kids to be straight kids and if you'll just own that, that's fine. Own that you are anti-queer and trans youth, so we know who our safe people are and who our unsafe people are and how to better attack this problem going forward. I know that sounds kind of petty, but don't sugarcoat things if you're anti-trans youth. Just say it because I think our kids deserve better and I think the generations after them deserve better. I do not want for us to get to a point where we have another crisis situation where another generation of kids loses out on older role models because our kids didn't make it there. Which is heavy, I know, but you have to think about these things.

From Joy:

Personal beliefs don't matter when you are working with students. You meet students where they are, not where you are. My job is to be there for my students. I could be as anti-LGBTQ as whatever, but I would still...ethically I have to be there. It's just like for my students who are not LGBTQ, I meet them where they are and talk with them about where they're at and why they're frustrated and things like that. So, your beliefs don't matter. They're your beliefs, I totally get that, and it's hard to separate it out, but you have to.

From Leslie:

For my students, they particularly just want people to believe them...validate that this is who they are. The other thing is that they don't want anything special. They just want to be normal middle school kids and treated as such and that would be their ideal world. They just want a normal experience. They want to have normal relationships, go to normal prom one day. Like normal, normal, normal everything. That's what they're striving for. And I think that the biggest thing is that people just have to accept...accept the reality. It's not your experience and you don't have to agree with it, and you don't even have to really comprehend it. That's okay if your brain cannot wrap around any of this subject matter, but you've just got to accept it for what it is.

From Liz:

They're not going away. You're not going to silence the gay out of them. It's part of our culture and it just is going to be. It always has been, and it always will be. So, they can fight it and these kids are going to suffer or we can at least accept it, if not embrace it, and allow people to be who they are, and everyone is going to be better off.

From Nia:

School is literally life or death for some of these kids and we hold the ability to change everything for them. It literally takes one person listening, one person validating, one person supporting that could change their life forever. Like, the number of students that after they came out to me and we walked through what this plan looked like for them from 6<sup>th</sup> grade year to 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, they were a completely different person...just to see how feeling that they are genuinely them, and that someone sees them, changes their life.



We literally have the ability to change these kids' lives. And save their lives. That's the biggest thing...we can literally save their lives if we're willing to allow them just to be.

From Rebecca:

These students just want to live, they want to be happy, they want to be accepted. We need to provide spaces that allow them to explore who they are and where they will be accepted while they go through that process. Nobody is trying to turn kids gay; we just want our queer kids to be accepted. I took a group of students to a LGBTQ youth conference a few years ago and the love and freedom they experienced there was palpable. On the ride home, there was a sense of grief about having to return to the real world. Ever since then, my goal has been to do what I can to change the "real world" to make it more like the space they experienced that day. What if all spaces were loving, affirming, and accepting?

From Sabrina:

They're kids. Just because they like the same sex doesn't mean that they are any different than any other kid out there. And they want to just be treated like the kid that they are. They don't want to be different. They don't want to be singled out. They just want to be kids. They don't want to have to worry about anything happening. They just want to be able to exist and not be a target for anything,

### **Research Questions**

This section considers the interview content within the context of the three primary research questions that provided the foundation for the study. The research questions include: 1) What factors related to school climate are most impactful in creating a safe, accepting, and inclusive school community for LGBTQ+ middle school students from the perspective of school

counselors? 2) What incidents of microaggression have been experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in middle school as perceived by school counselors? and 3) What incidents of microaffirmation have been experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in middle school, as perceived by school counselors?

Table 3 outlines the research questions, along with the relevant themes and sub-themes.

**Table 3**

*Research Questions*

Research Questions	Themes and Sub-Themes
RQ 1: From the perspective of school counselors, what factors related to school climate are most impactful in creating a safe, accepting, and inclusive school community for LGBTQ+ middle school students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I. Emerging Trends               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Diverse Identities</li> <li>B. Openness</li> </ul> </li> <li>II. Safety               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Free to Be Me</li> <li>B. Physical Safety</li> <li>C. Emotional Safety</li> <li>D. Visibility and Representation</li> <li>E. Protective Policies</li> <li>F. The State of Safety in Schools</li> </ul> </li> <li>III. Acceptance               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Acceptance Versus Tolerance</li> <li>B. Finding Community Within Community</li> <li>C. The State of Acceptance in Schools</li> </ul> </li> <li>IV. Inclusion               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Inclusion Defined</li> <li>B. The Power of Words</li> <li>C. Spaces and Places</li> <li>D. Curriculum and Content</li> <li>E. The State of Inclusion in Schools</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
RQ 2: What incidents of microaggression have been experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in middle school as perceived by school counselors?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>V. Microaggressions               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Experiences with Peers</li> <li>B. Experiences with Adults</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
RQ 3: What incidents of microaffirmation have been experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in middle school, as perceived by school counselors?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>VI. Microaffirmations               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. It's the Little Things</li> <li>B. Educators Need Affirmation Too</li> <li>C. Overcoming Obstacles                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Administrators and Parents</li> <li>2. Legislation and Policy</li> <li>3. Unclear Expectations</li> <li>4. Dear Policymaker...</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>

*Research Question One*

The initial research question inquired about factors related to school climate that school counselors believe to be most impactful in creating a safe, accepting, and inclusive school community for LGBTQ+ students in middle school. Each of the participants acknowledged the increase in and openness about exploration of sexual orientation and gender identity, reinforcing the inherent value in this topic of research. As stated by Jeremy, “It’s not just individual needs. We can claim it officially as a population now.” During the interview process, school counselors offered their perspective regarding the meaning of safety, acceptance, and inclusion for this growing population and then offered additional insight related to each element.

With respect to safety, all 15 participants asserted that students are more likely to feel safe when they are able to be themselves without risk of harm. Participants distinguished between physical safety and emotional safety, emphasizing that the former was less of a concern than the latter. In general, they expressed that students were physically safe in their buildings but did experience incidents of microaggressions that impacted their emotional and mental well-being. The significance of visibility and representation was mentioned by six school counselors as an additional factor, as students were more likely to feel safe when adults in the building who mirrored their identity could experience safety. Policies to protect LGBTQ+ students were also noted to be important, but many agreed that the policies were often unclear or not utilized effectively. More specifically, three found policies to be helpful, two felt they were harmful, and the remaining 10 said they could be beneficial but frequently lacked clarity. Lastly, participants considered the level of safety experienced by LGBTQ+ students in their building with each of the 15 school counselors recognizing that there was definitely room for improvement.

When addressing acceptance for LGBTQ+ students, eight participants believed that, in most cases, their school community leaned toward tolerance, as opposed to genuine acceptance. Twelve of the school counselors also suggested that LGBTQ+ students would often seek out a community of acceptance within the larger school community, such as a particular peer group or GSA organization. As school counselors considered the state of acceptance in their schools, they shared a unanimous belief that, much like safety, there was significant room for improvement.

Inclusion was the final element discussed by participants. Nia summarized inclusion as a student feeling as sense of belonging as themselves, as opposed to adapting their identity or personality to better “fit in.” The power of words was discussed at length by all participants, including preferred names, pronouns, and the impact of gender-neutral language inclusive of all identities. Each of the 15 school counselors also discussed traditionally gendered physical spaces, such as restrooms and locker rooms, and nine participants specifically referenced field days, field trips, and single gender classes. They also evaluated the level of inclusivity in curriculum and content, including classroom lessons, historical role models, and cultural recognition activities. Again, all participants agreed that creating an inclusive environment was a work in progress.

#### *Research Question Two*

Research question two encouraged participants to share their perceptions regarding incidents of microaggressions experienced by LGBTQ+ students in their school. School counselors concurred that microassaults were the least likely to occur, however microinsults and microinvalidations were common according to all 15 participants. At times they were intentional, but on other occasions they resulted from a lack of forethought or a lack of understanding regarding the potential impact. Participants further admitted that age and habit were often a

factor when microaggressions were committed by adults who meant well but struggled with adapting to the new trend of identity exploration. Each of the participants expressed that microinsults were most often received by peers, whereas adults were frequently guilty of microinvalidations. All of the school counselors stressed that providing education and allowing open dialogue could be helpful in reducing incidents of microaggression.

### *Research Question Three*

The final research question focused on the role of microaffirmations in establishing a safe, accepting, and inclusive climate for LGBTQ+ students. School counselors unanimously agreed that small gestures, such as Pride symbols or pronoun pins, were highly impactful. Additionally, they noted the value in respecting names and pronouns, even if they changed several times during this universal stage of exploration. In order to confidently create an affirming environment, participants emphasized that staff members benefitted from affirmation as well. Ten participants emphasized that educators should be provided with training to help them better understand and support their LGBTQ+ students. Furthermore, six school counselors shared that LGBTQ+ educators should also experience affirmation of their own identity so they could feel comfortable serving as a visible role model.

Lastly, school counselors shared their perspective regarding the primary obstacles they face when striving to create an affirming climate. Eight of the participants conveyed that administrators and parents were their greatest obstacles, with the remaining noting a lack of, unclear, or unenforced protective policies. School counselors asserted that ambiguous expectations act as a barrier because many educators are unsure about what is and what is not appropriate or acceptable in their building, their school division, or their state. Finally, at the close of each interview, each of the participants offered suggestions that they believe would

enhance their ability to support LGBTQ+ youth, as well as provide an affirming environment that could vastly improve the mental and emotional well-being of this student population.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the experiences and perceptions of school counselors who support LGBTQ+ middle school students, specifically with respect to safety, acceptance, and inclusion, along with microaggressions and microaffirmations. A total of 15 school counselors from 12 different states participated in the study. Their perspectives were gathered through semi-structured interviews utilizing open-ended questions. From these interviews, seven primary themes surfaced, including emerging trends, safety, acceptance, inclusion, microaggressions, microaffirmations, and overcoming obstacles. The theme of emerging trends incorporated the sub-themes of diverse identities and openness. The theme of safety explored sub-themes related to the freedom to be oneself, physical safety, emotional safety, the importance of visibility and representation, and protective policies, as well as the current state of safety in schools. The theme of acceptance integrated the sub-themes of acceptance versus tolerance and finding communities within community, in addition to the state of acceptance within schools. The theme of inclusion elicited sub-themes concerning the definition of inclusion, the power of words, spaces and places, curriculum and content, and the state of inclusion in schools. The theme of microaggressions incorporated sub-themes of experiences with peers and experiences with adults, whereas the theme of microaffirmations encompassed the significance of the small gestures and the value of affirming educators. Lastly, the theme of overcoming obstacles was addressed through several sub-themes, including the obstacles of administrators and parents, legislation and policy, and unclear expectations. Suggestions for effectively overcoming these barriers were provided through the sub-theme titled Dear Policymaker.

The research questions providing the foundation for the study were also revisited in this chapter. The first research question was answered through participant input related to the elements of safety, acceptance, and inclusion. The second research question was addressed through interview content related to specific microaggressions endured from both peers and adults. The final research question was answered through feedback pertaining to microaffirmations, along with suggestions for managing the obstacles that interfere with an educator's ability to affirm the LGBTQ+ population in their school.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ middle school students through the lens of the school counselors who support and advocate for them. The insight generated can be instrumental toward improving elements of school climate related to safety, acceptance, and inclusion for LGBTQ+ youth. Additionally, this study can inform future endeavors to reduce incidents of microaggression and increase acts of microaffirmation for this vulnerable community of students. This chapter delivers a concise summary of all findings related to the study, integrated with a discussion of the research within the context of the theoretical framework and supporting literature detailed in Chapter Two. Empirical, theoretical, and practical implications will also be addressed in order to provide suggestions for relevant stakeholders. Delimitations and limitations will be acknowledged and explained, along with recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of Research**

The intention of this study was to evaluate the experience of LGBTQ+ middle school students from the perspective of school counselors. Three primary research questions were formulated including 1) What factors related to school climate are most impactful in creating a safe, accepting, and inclusive school community for LGBTQ+ middle school students from the perspective of school counselors? 2) What incidents of microaggression have been experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in middle school as perceived by school counselors? and 3) What incidents of microaffirmation have been experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in middle school, as perceived by school counselors? Through open-ended, semi-structured interview questions, each research question was addressed, and themes were elicited from the data.



The initial research question considered the factors that school counselors perceive as most influential in creating a safe, accepting, and inclusive school atmosphere for LGBTQ+ middle school students. The majority of participants acknowledged a growing trend regarding exploration of sexual orientation and gender identity. They also noted that in recent years students have become more open to sharing their personal journey of exploration with others, including supportive peers and adults. Throughout the interviews, school counselors further elaborated on concepts impacting safety, acceptance, and inclusion for their LGBTQ+ students.

In relation to safety, there was a general agreement among participants that students felt safe when they could express their authentic selves without fear of harm. Physical safety and emotional safety were both mentioned, but school counselors felt that LGBTQ+ students struggled with emotional safety most. Visibility and representation were identified as significant elements, as students tended to feel safe when they saw adults in their environment who reflected their identity also feeling safe. Although protective policies for LGBTQ+ students were considered important, many participants felt these policies were often ambiguous or not effectively implemented. Finally, participants reflected on the level of safety experienced by LGBTQ+ students in their school with each one acknowledging a need for improvement.

When addressing the acceptance of LGBTQ+ students, participants suggested that the majority of the school community was more likely to demonstrate tolerance rather than genuine acceptance. They also indicated that LGBTQ+ students frequently sought out accepting communities within the larger school environment. When assessing the level of acceptance in their schools, the counselors universally acknowledged room for growth.

Inclusion was first defined by participants. They then proceeded to share insight regarding elements that detracted from or enhanced feelings of inclusivity. Participants stressed

the power of language, including the use of preferred names, pronouns, and gender-neutral language. They also examined physical spaces and traditional gender-normative school activities, discussing their impact on LGBTQ+ students. Furthermore, they evaluated the inclusivity of the curriculum and content. Once again, all school counselors agreed that creating an inclusive environment is a continual process.

The second research question prompted participants to share their views on the frequency of microaggressions faced by LGBTQ+ students in their schools. The counselors agreed that while microassaults were less common, microinsults and microinvalidations were prevalent. These were sometimes intentional, but often stemmed from thoughtlessness or a misunderstanding related to their potential impact. Participants admitted that age and habit often played a role in microaggressions perpetrated by well-meaning adults who struggled to adapt to the new trend of identity exploration. They stressed that providing education and fostering open dialogue could be effective in reducing incidents of microaggression.

The final research question concentrated on the role of microaffirmations in fostering a safe, accepting, and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ students. Counselors strongly agreed that small gestures, such as supportive symbols on pins, stickers, posters, and flags, made a substantial difference. They also highlighted the importance of respecting names and pronouns, regardless of how frequently they changed. Additionally, school counselors emphasized that staff members needed affirmation themselves. They argued for the provision of training to help educators better empathize with and support their LGBTQ+ students. Moreover, they stressed that LGBTQ+ educators should also experience affirmation of their own identity to feel at ease serving as visible role models.

Finally, school counselors discussed the main challenges they encounter when striving to create an affirming environment. They indicated that administrators and parents tended to create the most significant barriers, along with the absence, vagueness, or ineffective enforcement of protective policies. The school counselors asserted that unclear expectations were another obstacle, as many educators are uncertain about what is or is not permissible in their interactions with students. As each interview came to an end, participants were offered the opportunity to provide recommendations to stakeholders that they believe would enhance their ability to support LGBTQ+ youth and create an affirming environment for all students regardless of their orientation or identity.

### **Discussion**

The upcoming section addresses the research findings as they relate to the theoretical framework and literature review discussed in Chapter Two. With respect to the minority stress model and microaggression theory described in the earlier chapter, elements of both were found in the data generated from interviews with middle school counselors in the present study. The current research also substantiates the main concepts that were explored in the expansive literature review.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The minority stress model proposes that members of a marginalized population are likely to experience stressors directly related to their identity (Rich et al., 2020). Consequently, the strain of a “hostile and stressful social environment” (Meyer, 2003, p. 674) can negatively impact mental health and emotional well-being. Research further indicates that minority stress in the LGBTQ+ community may be compounded by incidents of microaggression, such as microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007). Nadal et al. (2011)

outlined common microaggressions experienced by the LGBTQ+ community, many of which align with the current research findings. As noted in the present data, an expectation of heteronormativity or the endorsement of gender norms in school was mentioned by all of the interview participants, as they described the gendered spaces and activities and gender-specific language that was prominent in their buildings. School counselors also shared examples of LGBTQ+ students being exoticized or treated as objects with little regard for their feelings while other students caused them great discomfort by asking inappropriate or invasive questions, like “why are you wearing a dress?” as mentioned by Liz. Participants also reported that peers and adults commonly expressed discomfort or disapproval related to LGBTQ+ topics or individuals, either through direct statements or indirect invalidations. Jade recalled incidents of students pointing at a peer and saying, “you’re such a faggot,” whereas others had family members invalidate their experience by assuming that “it’s just a phase.”

### **Literature Review**

The primary topics introduced and examined in the literature review of Chapter Two include the societal evolution of sexual orientation and gender identity norms, risk factors related to LGBTQ+ youth, perceptions of school climate specific to the LGBTQ+ community, the significance of educators as allies, the impact of GSA organizations, the integration of LGBTQ+ topics in school curriculum, the implementation of protective policies, and the importance of microaffirmations. In general, the information discovered in the examination of the literature aligns with the findings of the current study. It is noteworthy to mention, however, that the vast majority of prior research focused on teens in high school or young adults. Therefore, the current study adds to this growing body of research by contributing insight related to a younger population of middle school adolescents.

*Evolution of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Norms*

The societal evolution of sexual orientation and gender identity was referenced by school counselors who described an increase in students openly exploring those factors. This concept aligns with Robertson's (2014) assertion that, in recent years, young people are more frequently rejecting "compulsory heterosexuality" (p. 390). The trend toward gender exploration described by school counselors also reflects previous research findings indicating that gender is "fixed" at times and "fluid" at others (Losty & O'Conner, 2018, p. 48). Additionally, the multiple name and pronoun changes mentioned by the majority of participants embodies the findings of Matsuno and Budge (2017), who found that gender identity may fluctuate from day to day, as well as Losty and O'Conner (2018), who suggested that feelings about gender may actually change throughout the course of the day. Lastly, school counselors in this study shared that a greater number of students are open about their LGBTQ+ identity, compared with previous years. This mirrors the trend described by Allen et al. (2022) that recent generations are more likely to be "pro gender neutral, let them be what they want to be" (p. 654). This openness further demonstrates that the concept of "surplus visibility" has begun to replace the idea that the LGBTQ+ community should remain "invisible and silent" (Patai, 1992, p. 35).

*Risk Factors for LGBTQ+ Youth*

Risk factors for LGBTQ+ youth were explored in Chapter Two, with prior research revealing various incidents of victimization, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyber bullying, as well as physical and sexual assault (Sterzing et al., 2019). Russell and Fish (2016) explained that incidents of victimization increase the risk for emotional distress, mood issues, anxiety, and self-harm, and Wozolek et al. (2017) introduced the phrase "school-to-coffin pipeline" (p. 392) to accentuate the concerning suicide statistics for LGBTQ+ youth. In general,

the school counselors interviewed for the current study primarily expressed concerns related to the different forms of bullying. Fortunately, their experiences did not include extreme incidents of victimization, self-injury, or suicidal ideation.

### *Perceptions of School Climate*

The literature review examined perceptions of school climate by LGBTQ+ youth, noting the high percentage of students who did not feel safe at school (Kosciw et al., 2020). During interviews, school counselors shared similar safety concerns, but suggested that students were more physically safe than emotionally safe. Research by Kosciw et al. (2020) discovered that LGBTQ+ students often endured hostile comments, homophobic and transphobic comments, and cyber bullying through social media and text messages. Additionally, 98.8% of climate survey respondents indicated that they frequently heard the word “gay” in a negative manner (Kosciw et al., 2020), echoing the concerns of school counselors in the current study who emphasized that they often had to intervene when students used the phrase “that’s so gay.” For example, Charlotte conveyed that “kids are never ever going to stop using the phrase ‘that’s gay’ or saying that everything ‘is so gay’ so I have to have conversations pretty much three times a week.”

### *Educators as Allies*

The presence of supportive adults is one of the four primary elements recognized by GLSEN as an instrumental factor in positively impacting school climate for LGBTQ+ youth (Gower et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2020). According to Smith (2015) supportive staff are intentional about creating a safe, welcoming space that does not allow homophobic language or mistreatment of others. These qualities were mentioned by all of the school counselors interviewed in the current study as important contributors to a student’s sense of safety, acceptance, and inclusion. Furthermore, a review of the literature accentuated the importance of

staff professional development and training activities to increase feelings of competence in supporting LGBTQ+ youth. Again, this concept was reinforced by study participants such as Audrey who explained that “the more you educate the adults, the more comfortable they’re going to be with having these conversations and navigating those situations that come up in the class all the time.”

A review of the existing literature also suggested that the level of support offered by school administrators directly impacts the staff’s feelings of self-efficacy related to supporting LGBTQ+ youth (DeWitt, 2018). This definitively aligns with the beliefs of the school counselors interviewed in the current study. They conveyed that administrators either empowered them in their efforts to support LGBTQ+ youth or served as obstacles. For instance, Charlotte commended her principal for being “a total badass,” whereas Blake elected to seek employment in another school division with the hope of working with a more supportive administrative team.

#### *The Impact of GSA Organizations*

GLSEN also acknowledges the positive impact that GSA organizations make on school climate (Gower et al., 2018; Kosciw et al, 2020). According to the GSA Network (2022b), a GSA club may serve three primary functions depending on the needs of the students, including social interaction, support, and advocacy. During the majority of interviews, school counselors in the current study mentioned their GSA when discussing each of the elements of safety, acceptance, and inclusion. Participants conveyed that their GSA served one or more of the functions described by the GSA Network (2022b). Jeremy referenced the social aspect when discussing his time hosting the organization, noting that it was just him and “eight cool lesbian middle school girls talking about life.” Audrey offered her perspective that the GSA is a “safe

haven” where students experience acceptance and support, but also added that members engaged in advocacy efforts by providing lessons for younger students in the building.

### *Integration of LGBTQ+ Topics in School Curriculum*

Throughout the country, different states have taken different approaches with respect to incorporating LGBTQ+ curriculum and content in schools. As mentioned in the literature review, a handful of states, like California where Audrey and Chase are employed, mandate that LGBTQ+ content and history is included in various subjects. Alternatively, other states such as Florida where Dahlia serves as a school counselor are in the progress of banning books along with any reference to LGBTQ+ topics. Others found themselves somewhere in between, with several counselors noting that it was often students, not teachers who included the topic in their work. For instance, Liz shared that students in her school have focused on LGBTQ+ issues when creating projects related to human rights, but she is unsure what the response would be if similar material was initiated and taught by teachers.

### *Implementation of Protective Policies*

The literature review found in Chapter Two considered the impact of protective policies, along with an overview of current federal guidelines. As discussed by school counselors during the interview process, protective policies were known to fluctuate on several levels. For instance, Rebecca shared recent legislative changes in her home state of Iowa, which negated the school policy that had been in place regarding bathroom usage. The updated law prohibits students from using a bathroom of their choosing, instead requiring them to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender assigned at birth. According to Rebecca, they are also no longer allowed to “provide any accommodations including requests for names or nicknames or pronouns without written permission from the parents.” Interview participants also expressed that policies were subject to



change at the school level depending on the leadership in charge at either the school or division level. As explained in the literature review, the federal policy of Title IX has been under scrutiny for years and the continual changes in wording or intent have caused confusion. Overall, both research and interview content revealed that protective policies are not concrete at the federal, state, school division, or school level. School counselors overwhelmingly agreed with the findings of Kull et al. (2016) that SOGIE-inclusive policies specifically addressing sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression are most effective, but they were also aware that there was no policy on which they could truly rely to remain in place permanently.

### *The Importance of Microaffirmations*

Microaffirmations are characterized as “tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening” (Rowe, 2008, p. 4). According to the school counselors interviewed in the current study, acts of affirmation can have an enormous impact on the well-being of students. Furthermore, participants conveyed that these acts did not have to incorporate huge gestures; instead, it could be as simple as displaying a Pride poster or wearing a pronoun pin. School counselors suggested other affirming acts, such as listening and validating a student’s experience, striving to use appropriate names and pronouns, correcting mistakes, using gender-neutral language to include all students, displaying safe space stickers, addressing microaggressions when they occur, and not making a big deal about name or pronoun changes, even if students change them more than once.

Many of the school counselors conveyed the importance of administrative leaders affirming the efforts of staff. This could be done by providing training to increase feelings of competency and confidence. Affirming staff could also mean joining in their advocacy efforts instead of acting as an obstacle, as well as supporting them when they are challenged by parents

and guardians. Lastly, school counselors stressed the value in affirming the identity of LGBTQ+ educators, encouraging them to be themselves so that students can have more visible role models as they seek to discover who they are.

### **Implications**

The rich data gathered from the interviews in the current study may have implications for a variety of individuals and institutions. The findings may provide helpful insight to educators in school buildings, administrative leaders at the school and division levels, school board members, policymakers at the local, state, or federal level, and professional educational organizations. However, the greatest and most significant benefit may be to LGBTQ+ youth themselves. These implications will be evaluated from a theoretical, empirical, and practical perspective.

#### **Theoretical Implications**

The current study examined issues related to safety, acceptance, and inclusion for LGBTQ+ middle school students, along with their experiences of microaggressions and microaffirmations as perceived by school counselors. Accordingly, these concepts were considered within the context of the minority stress model, as well as microaggression theory. The minority stress model suggests that members of minority populations will experience unique distal and proximal stressors specifically related to their marginalized status (Goldbach & Gibbs, 2017). The model originally focused on homosexual adults, but for the purposes of the current study it provided an adequate framework to address the experiences of adolescents with diverse gender identities as well.

Nonetheless, it is important to document that the minority stress model does not address specific circumstances and experiences that may be unique to the adolescent population. According to Goldbach and Gibbs (2017), there is minimal research that considers the stage of

identity development as a potential stressor. The model focuses on adults with an established LGBTQ+ identity, therefore it does not encompass the possible stressors that may accompany identity exploration. Goldbach and Gibbs (2017) further suggest that an increase in societal acceptance may also impact an adolescent's experience of identity exploration or coming out, as the public opinion is more positive in general and young people are more likely to have greater access to coping resources compared to previous generations. Ideally, theoretical concepts related to the minority stress model will continue to evolve to integrate these aspects and consider them within the context of social factors, such as school, peers, family, racial and ethnic community, religious community, and the LGBTQ+ community, as these elements can have an enormous impact on the experience of adolescents (Goldbach & Gibbs, 2017).

Microaggression theory was also used as a framework for this study. Originally emphasizing race, microaggression theory has since expanded to incorporate any marginalized population (Berk, 2017; Pierce, 1970). Incidents of microaggression can compound an individual's experience of minority stress. Nadal et al. (2011) outlined common microaggressions endured by the LGBTQ+ community, many of which were represented in the interview findings of this study. Insults, invalidations, verbal assaults, and other hostile acts have been described by members of all marginalized groups regardless of age. Accordingly, this model offered a relevant foundation for the current study. However, as new identities and orientations continue to be identified and discussed, it will be important to consider similarities and differences in the experiences of unique groups categorized under the LGBTQ+ umbrella.

### **Empirical Implications**

The empirical implication of this work augments current phenomenological studies by filling a gap in the research related to the LGBTQ+ population. Considering the perspectives of

school counselors through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach provided a platform for them to share the experiences, along with the meaning found in those experiences, of LGBTQ+ middle school students in their building. Despite the large body of research related to the LGBTQ+ experience, there is currently very little that focuses specifically on the younger adolescent population. Instead, the majority of research has incorporated members of the LGBTQ+ population who are of high school age or older. As adolescence encompasses the stage of identity development, it is vitally important to examine the experiences of this age group during this extremely vulnerable and turbulent time.

Additionally, as societal perceptions of and support for the LGBTQ+ community continue to evolve, young people are openly exploring their identity and coming out at much younger ages than in previous years. For instance, an examination of the 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health, conducted by The Trevor Project (2022), revealed that survey participants between the ages of 13 and 17 came out at the age of 13 on average, whereas participants between the ages of 18 and 24 came out around the age of 16. Unfortunately, the same study also indicated that young people who came out prior to the age of 13 were at an increased risk for suicide. The Trevor Project (2022) noted that 56% of young people who came out before the age of 13 had seriously contemplated suicide compared to 42% who came out beyond that age. Consequently, it is necessary to gather extensive details about both the challenges and triumphs of this population in order to understand how to best support them as they resolve the task of identity versus role confusion. The current study contributes to this worthy endeavor.

### **Practical Implications**

This study has practical implications for a variety of populations, including educators, administrators, and other staff in school buildings, school division leaders and board members, professional organizations related to the field of education or mental health, and policymakers at the local, state, or federal level. The insight gained from the interviews with school counselors can lead to increased support for LGBTQ+ youth, through a greater understanding of their experiences, as well as the ways in which these experiences negatively or positively impact their daily lives at school. School counselors serve as an instrumental figure of support for many students in their buildings, but they communicated numerous challenges related to their work with LGBTQ+ youth. Becoming aware of these challenges is one of the first steps toward positive change.

Educators, administrators, and other staff in schools can utilize this information to be more intentional in their support of LGBTQ+ students, leading to improvements in school climate. Learning about negative experiences can better prepare teachers and other staff members to address microaggressions by knowing what to look for, so that they can reduce the incidents or intervene when necessary, such as when other students casually use insensitive phrases like “that’s so gay.” Educators can also use this insight to become more affirming, by respecting names and pronouns, using gender-neutral language, and displaying supportive symbols, for example.

Administrators and leaders at the division level can learn about the importance of affirming their school counselors, teachers, and other staff by providing them with support and education so that they can feel more confident in supporting LGBTQ+ youth. As noted by Greytak et al. (2013), even brief training opportunities can promote a sense of competence in

educators, increasingly the likelihood that they will address negative interactions when they occur. Better understanding the needs of LGBTQ+ students can lead to increased levels of support which, in turn, can lead to a greater sense of safety and belonging, increased academic success, and decreased absenteeism (Greytak et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2020).

Policymakers at any level, from individual schools to the federal government, may consider this information when creating policies and other guidelines designed to increase student safety and improve school climate. Policies that explicitly consider sexual orientation and gender identity or expression are associated with an increased sense of safety and improvements in attendance (Greytak et al., 2013; Kull et al., 2016). Additionally, inclusive policies are more likely to lead to a reduction in homophobic language and incidents of victimization, as well as lower suicide and substance abuse risks (Kull et al, 2016; Ream, 2019). Lastly, professional organizations, such as national and local school counseling associations, can share this research with others in the field, along with suggestions for implementation. The details learned from colleagues in this study can also help to initiate or enhance advocacy efforts intended to improve school climate, along with the overall well-being of students.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

#### **Delimitations**

Delimitations describe the parameters that the researcher selected and maintained for the study in order to gather the most relevant information related to the topic (Flamez, 2017). A primary delimitation of the study was that participants were school counselors working with students between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Furthermore, they had to have specific insight regarding experiences of LGBTQ+ students in their school. School counselors are ethically bound by confidentiality; therefore, students often share more with them than anyone else in the school. A

second delimitation was that school counselors had to be working at a school in the United States as the literature review focused on schools and policies within the country. A final delimitation of the study was the selection of a phenomenological approach. Stories that capture thoughts and feelings related to experiences are best gathered through discussions led by open-ended questions. These rich details are more likely to elicit deeper empathy and a greater understanding of the experiences of another.

### **Limitations**

As in any research study, limitations are inherent, and these weaknesses may impact the outcomes (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). One of the greatest limitations in this particular study was that school counselors served as interview subjects as opposed to the students themselves. Reservations on behalf of institutional leaders overseeing this study led to the request that students not be interviewed. However, learning from the students directly about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings would have produced the most authentic results. Unfortunately, the voices of LGBTQ+ students have rarely been included when stakeholders collaborate to formulate policies and guidelines and, on the occasion that they are involved, the invitation is most commonly extended to high school students whose experience may be vastly different than those of their younger peers. According to Murray (2011), it is imperative that LGBTQ+ youth join the dialogue in order to educate others about their personal experiences and provide details about their daily lives at school (Payne & Smith, 2012).

Another limitation relates to the potential for bias among study participants. The school counselors who volunteered to take part in the interview process all asserted that they were a visible and vocal source of support and advocacy for LGBTQ+ students in their school. Nevertheless, LGBTQ+ issues can be a sensitive topic for some people, especially for those who

feel that the concept conflicts with their values or beliefs. Therefore, it is very plausible that school counselors who struggle with supporting LGBTQ+ students did not choose to share their voice. Incorporating this alternative perspective could have led to valuable insight when considering barriers to support for this population.

A final limitation is the lack of representation from every state. A total of 15 participants from 12 states were interviewed, therefore voices from 38 states and the District of Columbia are missing. Regions of the United States included the West, Southwest, Midwest, Southeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Northeast, but the Northwest was not included. Many states have vastly different cultures and policies related to LGBTQ+ youth, but they were not all reflected here. Moreover, there was some diversity in gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, but the majority of participants were cisgender, heterosexual, Caucasian women.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

A primary recommendation for future research stems from one of the limitations described above. In order to truly examine and evaluate the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in schools, it is imperative to learn from those students directly. Although they often share details of their lives and experiences with school counselors, missing pieces still remain. Furthermore, it would be helpful to compare the perceptions shared by school counselors with the authentic insight of the students in order to determine where there are similarities and differences. Based on their interactions with LGBTQ+ students, school counselors were able to hypothesize their needs, but it would be beneficial to confirm with the young people who are actually impacted. Additionally, as young people are exploring gender identity and sexual orientation at earlier ages, it would also be impactful to expand this research into the elementary grades.



In an effort to better understand the stage of identity versus role confusion specifically related to sexual orientation and gender identity, it would be worthwhile to conduct a longitudinal study to determine how this stage is eventually resolved. According to The Trevor Project (2022), youth are coming out at much younger ages than in the past, therefore the long-term impact is currently unknown. Additionally, as mentioned in the literature review as well as participant interviews, adolescence is a time of exploring new identities to see what fits. Because of the increase in visibility regarding LGBTQ+ concepts, language, and labels, young people have yet another identity to try on. As many of these terms and labels are new and continue to evolve, there is a lack of research regarding how these young people will identify in later years. Learning more about the “desisters” and “persisters” described by Steensma et al. (2011) can offer greater insight when supporting young people during this stage of development. For some, it may indeed be a phase of exploration, however the alarming statistics reveal that it is not up to others to presuppose. Supporting young people throughout this journey, whoever they might be in the end, is what is most vital. It may potentially be lifesaving.

### **Summary**

This hermeneutic phenomenology examined the perceptions of school counselors who support LGBTQ+ middle school students, with specific considerations for safety, acceptance, and inclusion as related to incidents of microaggression and microaffirmation at school. The minority stress model and microaggression theory served as the foundation from which the research was designed. Through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions, the researcher sought to answer three fundamental research questions pertaining to the elements that impact a student’s sense of safety, acceptance, and inclusion, as well as the microaggressions that negatively impact them and the microaffirmations that support them.

Throughout the interview process, seven general themes were discovered, including emerging trends, safety, acceptance, inclusion, microaggressions, microaffirmations, and overcoming obstacles. From these primary themes, a number of sub-themes also emerged, which addressed each of the research questions mentioned above. School counselors provided insight and examples of an increase in diverse identities and openness regarding this stage of exploration. They discussed elements of safety, such as the freedom for students to be themselves, differences in physical and emotional safety, the significant role of visibility, representation, and protective policies, and the state of safety in their building. With respect to acceptance, they outlined the differences between tolerance and acceptance, the tendency for students to find a community within the larger school community, and the state of acceptance in their school. School counselors offered their perspective on the meaning of inclusion for LGBTQ+ students and expanded on the power of words, levels of inclusion in various spaces, places, curriculum, and content, in addition to the overall state of inclusion in their school. When considering microaggressions, participants delineated the differences in LGBTQ+ students' experiences with peers and adults. Conversely, school counselors explained the value in small affirming acts that were needed not only by students, but by educators as well. Lastly, they shared the greatest obstacles they encounter in their efforts to support LGBTQ+ youth and offered suggestions for improvement so that other stakeholder may reflect on how they can more positively impact the lives and well-being of this growing population.

Current statistics show that 56% of young people who came out before the age of 13 seriously contemplated suicide (The Trevor Project, 2022). Even more alarmingly, 22% of this cohort actually attempted suicide in 2022, compared with those who came out at a later age (12%) (The Trevor Project, 2002). To compound those concerning statistics, young people who

experienced victimization were found to be at an even higher risk (The Trevor Project, 2022). When considering these dismal statistics, the most vital concept to note is that these risks do *not* inherently accompany a LGBTQ+ identity; instead, it is the environment that surrounds them that is most impactful. Educators are tasked with creating and maintaining a safe, accepting, and inclusive environment for *all*; therefore, it is critical to understand the needs of each and every student in the building, including those who are out and proud, as well as those who may be silent and struggling. Acting with intention to reduce microaggressions and increase microaffirmations is the only solution to disrupting the unspeakable and unacceptable “school to coffin pipeline” (Wozolek et al., 2017).

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

# RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!



Study Title: The Impact of Microaggressions and Microaffirmations on Safety, Acceptance, and Inclusion for LGBTQ+ Middle School Students: A School Counselor's Perspective

**ARE YOU A SCHOOL COUNSELOR WHO SERVES STUDENTS IN GRADES 6, 7, OR 8?**

**DO YOU SUPPORT LGBTQ+ STUDENTS IN YOUR SCHOOL?**

If you answered yes to both of the questions above, you may be eligible to lend your valuable voice to a research study!

### WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT?

The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ middle school students, specifically with respect to microaggressions (words or actions believed to be hostile or derogatory) and microaffirmations (words or actions believed to be affirming and supportive), and how these experiences may impact their perceptions of safety, inclusion, and acceptance at school.

### WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

Participants will be asked to participate in an individual interview conducted via Zoom (1 hour). Participants will also be asked to verify the accuracy of the interview transcripts.

### WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Aside from compensation for your time (\$25 Amazon gift card), you will be sharing insight that could lead to positive changes in the school climate for LGBTQ+ youth!

### HOW DO I SIGN UP?

If you would like to participate, please scan the QR code in the bottom right corner or visit [bit.ly/lgbtresearchstudy](https://bit.ly/lgbtresearchstudy) to indicate your interest. A consent document will be provided in a separate email if you are interested in participating.

Sheila Barnhart-Ramirez, a doctoral candidate in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, is conducting this study. Please contact Ms. Ramirez at [REDACTED] with questions or to request more information.

Liberty University IRB - 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515



### **Appendix B: Social Media Recruitment Post**

ATTENTION MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSELORS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an Educational Doctorate at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ middle school students, specifically with respect to microaggressions (words or actions perceived to be hostile or derogatory) and microaffirmations (words or actions perceived to be affirming and supportive), and how these experiences impact their perceptions of safety, inclusion, and acceptance at school.

Eligible participants are school counselors who work with students in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, or 8<sup>th</sup> grade who identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ population (gay, lesbian, non-binary, transgender, questioning, etc.). Participants will be asked to take part in an individual interview to share their perspectives regarding experiences that impact feelings of safety, inclusion, and acceptance for students at school. Participants will also have an opportunity to outline the characteristics they believe would create an ideal school climate for LGBTQ+ students. Participants will also be asked to verify the accuracy of the interview transcripts.

If you meet the study criteria and might be interested in participating, please send me a message here on FB or email me at [REDACTED] so that I can verify your eligibility, provide you with the consent forms, and answer any questions you might have. Participants will be compensated for their time (a \$25 Amazon gift card to be distributed at the conclusion of the study), but most importantly they will have an opportunity to share the insight that could contribute to a greater sense of safety, inclusivity, and acceptance for LGBTQ+ youth!

(A photo of the recruitment flyer was also posted)



### Appendix C: Research Participant Interest Form

If you are interested in participating in a research study to share your thoughts and experiences related to safety, inclusion, and acceptance for LGBTQ+ youth in school, please complete the form below.

(Please note that, although you must submit your name to express interest, identities will be protected through the use of pseudonyms in the dissertation text.)

1. Email address:
2. First name:
3. Last name:
4. I am a middle school counselor who works with LGBTQ+ students in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade and have significant insight about their experiences (negative or positive) in school pertaining to safety, acceptance, and inclusion.

Yes    No

5. If you answered yes to the previous question, please share in just a few words a brief synopsis of the students you support (age, identity, general strengths, successes and/or struggles).
6. In what city and state do you serve as a school counselor?
7. Where did you learn about this research study?
8. For verification purposes, please enter your work email and the name of the school where you are employed.

If you are found to be eligible for this study based on this initial screening, the researcher will deliver the consent form via e-mail. You will be contacted directly to schedule an interview, which will be conducted on the Zoom platform. In the meantime, you may email Ms. Ramirez (the researcher) at [REDACTED] with any questions.

### Appendix D: Research Participant Demographic Survey

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in my dissertation research. I am hoping to create a table of demographics to show the diversity in participants and would be grateful if you could complete the questions below:

1. Email address:
2. Age:
3. Race: African American  
American Indian or Alaska Native  
Asian  
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander  
Caucasian  
Multi-Race
4. Ethnicity: Hispanic or Latino  
Not Hispanic or Latino
5. Religious affiliation (if applicable)
6. Political affiliation: Very liberal  
Liberal  
Slightly liberal  
Very conservative  
Conservative  
Slightly conservative
7. Education level: Master's degree  
Education Specialist degree  
Doctoral degree  
Other
8. Are you a member of the LGBTQ+ community? Yes  
No  
Prefer not to disclose
9. If you answered yes to the previous question, how would you describe your identity?
10. When this research is published, a pseudonym will be used for each participant. Do you have a request for the name that I use for you? If so, please fill in below.

## Appendix E: Research Consent Form

### Consent

**Title of the Project:** The Impact of Microaggressions and Microaffirmations on Safety, Inclusion, and Acceptance for LGBTQ+ Middle School Students: A School Counselor's Perspective

**Principal Investigator:** Sheila Barnhart-Ramirez, Doctoral Candidate, School of Behavioral Sciences, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a school counselor who works at a middle school and with 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>-grade LGBTQ+ students attending your school. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ middle school students, specifically with respect to microaggressions (words or actions perceived to be hostile or derogatory) and microaffirmations (words or actions perceived to be affirming and supportive), and how these experiences impact perceptions of safety, inclusion, and acceptance.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in a virtual, individual interview that will take no longer than one hour. Interviews will be audio/video recorded via the Zoom platform.
2. Review your individual interview transcript to check for accuracy or confirm your agreement with the researcher's interpretations and findings.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include improving the school climate for LGBTQ+ middle school students by sharing details about their experiences related to feelings of safety, inclusion, and acceptance. This important information can be shared with educators and policy-makers when making decisions about issues related to school climate.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

**How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked filing cabinet to which only the researcher has access. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. Only the researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

**How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card electronically at the conclusion of the study.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Sheila Barnhart-Ramirez. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Tracy Baker, at [REDACTED].

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

#### **Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date

Liberty University  
IRB-FY22-23-1259  
Approved on 5-2-2023

**Appendix F: Interview Questions**

1. Please share a little about yourself, your background, and your experience as a school counselor, as well as your school (rural, urban, demographics, etc.)
2. In your work with LGBTQ+ students do you find that most middle schoolers are dealing with gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, or both?
3. Approximately how many students do you work with who identify under the LGBTQ+ umbrella?
4. When you think about safety for LGBTQ+ students in school, what does that look like, sound like, and feel like?
5. How would you describe the level of safety for LGBTQ+ students in your school?
6. With regard to acceptance for LGBTQ+ students, what do you believe that looks like, sounds like, and feels like for students?
7. How would you describe the level of acceptance that LGBTQ+ students experience within your school?
8. When I say the word inclusion as it relates to school, what would that look like, sound like, and feel like for LGBTQ+ students?
9. What are your thoughts about the levels of inclusion LGBTQ+ students experience at your school?
10. What specific challenges or issues does this population tend to come to you about?
11. In an ideal school, what are specific things that staff members could do or say to show support and is this similar or different to what happens now?
12. How do students know who and where the safe spaces are?
13. How are LGBTQ+ topics integrated into the curriculum, such as history, family life, literature, or library selections?
14. In an ideal school, how would LGBTQ+ topics be addressed in classes?
15. Does your school have a GSA and, if so, can you tell me a little about it?
16. In an ideal school, what would a GSA look like?
17. What current policies or guidelines (division or state level) that impact your students in either negative or positive ways?

18. In an ideal school, what policies or guidelines would be implemented to help LGBTQ+ students feel safe, accepted, and included?
19. What specific incidents of microaggressions can you share that LGBTQ+ students have experienced in school, from either peers or adults in the building, that impact their feelings of safety, acceptance, or inclusion?
20. Shifting to more positive experiences, what specific microaffirmations have students experienced that contribute to their sense of safety, acceptance, and inclusion?
21. What are the biggest obstacles you face when trying to create an affirming environment for your LGBTQ+ students?
22. How do you manage balancing these challenges with your ethical beliefs, either professionally or personally?
23. What are the most important reasons you feel driven to support your LGBTQ+ youth?
24. Is there anything else you would like to share that is important for other educators, administrators, community stakeholders, policymakers, etc. to know and understand? Or if you could be the voice of your students, what do you think they would want others to know?